Accursed Ones

by TheThirdAmell

Summary

"Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him. Foul and corrupt are they who have taken His gift, and turned it against His children. They shall be named Maleficar, accursed ones. They shall find no rest in this world, or Beyond." Anders knew the verse. Every mage did. But Anders was a runner. He ran from the Circle. He ran from the Templars. He ran from relationships. So what did he care? He was never going to rest anyway.

Notes

Hello new reader. This story is meant to connect Awakening Anders to DA:2 Anders. In Awakening, Anders could be specialized in Blood Magic and laugh about it, so I thought I would play with the forces that could have influenced (or corrupted) him. Unfortunately, not
all events line up with WoT2, as I read WoT2 after starting this story, but for the most part there are not many differences.

Accursed Ones is a dark horror story, and includes gore, death, and many other things that are not tagged to avoid spoilers. If something is triggering for you and you would like to know if it is in this story, please feel free to contact me on my tumblr and I will clarify. This story ends with Anders alive and well.

That aside, I would love any and all feedback, whether it is kudos, comments, criticisms, or corrections. Thank you for reading!
9:31 Dragon 17 Ferventis Early Morning
In the Dungeons of Vigil's Keep

"Wake up, mage." Anders felt the words before he heard them. A force of malice and metal hit him upside the head, and he opened his eyes to a sea of spots, and Biff's ugly mug.

"Is it morning already?" Anders asked. His left ear was ringing from the kick, and the cold stone floor of his cell had left his back a mess of knots. All in all, an average morning. With a bit of struggling, Anders managed to sit up without the use of his hands. The noble lodgings and Biff's stellar bedside manner aside, Anders could have done without the manacles. "I'll have two eggs, over easy, a spot of ham, and a biscuit with honey." Anders said.

Biff was already holding a wooden bowl Anders guessed contained a much less flavorful breakfast. The templar looked at him, and then at the bowl, and then very purposefully dropped it. Half the contents splattered across the floor, and the other half across Anders' robes. It was oats. Again. How refreshing. "Oops," came Biff's belated apology.

"Don't worry about it." Anders said lightly, cleaning off his robes as best he was able, "Accidents happen, or you wouldn't be here."

Biff scowled; he was one of the unlucky templars who looked better with his helmet on. Big nose, big ears, small eyes, no chin. Anders figured he would be cross too if he had to wake up to that face every morning. The templar knelt, and Anders put on his most charming smile. He refused to give Biff the satisfaction of seeing his fear.

"You think you're really funny, don't you?" Biff asked. Anders pushed aside the memory of the holy smite Biff had brought down on him just two days ago when he'd been captured. In his mind, he made it so Biff wasn't a templar, or his jailor. Biff was just a bully, and Anders could make fun of bullies.

"I think I'm hilarious." Anders said, "I think it's your face that's funny."

Biff ignored him, "You know, you're lucky you're so funny, Anders. It's the only reason you're still alive. Everyone knows you're nothing but a joke. The First Enchanter knows it, the Knight Commander knows it, all the templars know it. We all know you're not a threat. You run away, you get caught, you run away again. You're like a fucking yo-yo, Anders. We take turns playing with you. Sending out the green recruits whenever you make another run, but I think it's getting old, don't you? How was that year in solitary huh? You want another?"

Anders tried to think of a retort, but all he could think of were four cramped walls, not even enough space to lie flat. A small food hatch just big enough for a cat to fit through, praying today the cat came so he wouldn't go mad talking to himself. Anders swallowed and said nothing.

Biff grinned. "That's what I thought. Now shut the fuck up and eat. I'm sick of listening to your shit." Shoving off the floor, Biff kicked the bowl into his lap and left his cell, locking the door behind him.

It wasn't that bad, all things considered. His cell made up the corner of a room, with plenty of space to stretch out. A wall of bars separated his cell from a rather cosy observation area where Biff was eating his own breakfast. There were windows, and plenty of wall sconces for light. It could be worse.
Anders picked up his bowl. The oats must have been thick, because more than a few spoonfuls were still inside. Not enough for a proper meal, but it was something. His last proper meal had been two days ago. Part of Anders didn't want to eat at all, but he knew he should. They were setting out again today, to bring him back to the Circle, and he didn't know when he'd get another chance for food.

Eating with manacles on was difficult, but Anders had a method. If he pinched the side of the bowl with one hand, and scooped food into his mouth with the other, he could eat without making too much of a mess. Not that it mattered now. His robes were going to stain. That was a shame. He liked these robes. At least his mantle was clean. Missing a few feathers, but clean.

Anders set the bowl down when he finished, rubbing his dirty fingers together with a disdainful grimace. What a mess. Everything was such a mess. His robes, the cell, his life. Sighing, Anders struggled to his feet and shuffled to the waste bucket in the corner of his cell for a piss.

He'd been so close. All he had to do was find Namaya, find out where the templars were keeping his phylactery, and destroy it. Freedom had been right there. It was probably still there, waiting for him in a tavern in Amaranthine, but here he was, celled and shackled at Vigil's Keep, calling it an achievement when he managed not to piss on his robes. Two days in captivity had certainly lowered his standards.

Shaking himself dry and fixing his robes, Anders wandered back to the other side of his cell and sat against the wall, watching Biff eat. How to escape this time. A sleep spell would have been his first choice, but the manacles were more than just a fashion accessory. Runes on the inside of them weakened his connection to the Fade. Wearing them made Anders feel fatigued, unfocused. Helpless. It wasn't a fun way to feel.

Anders thought he heard thunder. He blinked, and looked to his cell's window, but the skies outside were clear. "Did you hear that?" Anders asked.

"Shut up," Biff said.

The sound came again, louder. Biff looked up, and third rumble knocked a torch from its sconce on the wall, and set the furniture to dancing. Biff leapt from his chair and drew his sword from its scabbard, leveling it at him through the bars. "I swear to the Maker, Anders," Biff threatened him.

"You think I'm doing this?" Anders laughed, too incredulous to think twice about provoking the templar.

"You put these on me!" Anders shook his manacles at him, "You really think I can channel a full earthquake through these?"

Biff lowered his sword and brought up a sneer in its place. "Habit. I'm used to mages being dangerous."

"Words hurt, Biff." Anders said.

Biff ignored him. The rumbling continued, rattling doors on their hinges and even knocking over Anders' waste bucket. Repulsed despite the fact that he was on the other side of the cell, Anders stood up. He had to grab the bars to stay upright throughout the tremors, "Biff, let me out."

"Kiss my hairy ass, Anders," Biff said, grabbing the bars along with him.

"We can work up to that. Maybe start with dinner. Just let me out." Anders said.

"Shut up," Biff's beady little eyes glared daggers at him. They weathered the rest of the quake
together in silence. When at last the tremors stopped, Biff gave him a questioning look.

"What, you still think I did it?" Anders frowned. "I don't know what just happened any more than you do. All I know is there's piss and shit all over the floor. Let me out, Biff."

"It's your piss and shit," Biff said, turning his back on him to start picking up the toppled furniture. "Stew in it."

"My mother was right about you," Anders quipped. Biff ignored him. The man had no sense of humor. Or basic human decency. Sighing, Anders stood in the clean corner of his cell, fighting back his gag reflex at the smell of feces mixed with Biff's breakfast of bacon and eggs. At least he had a clean corner to stand in. It could be worse.

"I'm going to go see what happened." Biff announced after he'd finished righting the furniture and picking his breakfast up off the floor. "Stay here."

"No promises," Anders said. Biff didn't laugh.

With Biff gone, there was nothing left for Anders to do but wait. He was standing in his cell, watching the clouds roll by through the window to pass the time, when he heard the shouting. It started far away, and he took it for no more than a scuffle in the courtyard.

But the shouting grew until it became a thunder to rival the earthquake, and Anders started to worry. The sounds of fighting followed, steel on steel, explosions, doors slamming, gates dropping. Anders even heard a few bellowed orders at one point, and hoped futilely someone would pass by his cell and take pity on him.

He had no such luck. Eventually Biff came back, his fellow templar with him. The young initiate was wide-eyed, his sword drawn and bloodied. "Monsters!" The initiate squealed; he couldn't have been a day over a twenty. Biff must not have been lying when he said they sent green recruits after him. "There are monsters out there!"

"Darkspawn." Biff corrected the boy, "Pull yourself together, man. You're a templar. You've faced demons."

"N-no I haven't," The initiate squeaked, his face ashen. "I've only been to one Harrowing and it was c-clean. Those monsters—they're coming out of the ground. And eating people! What do we do? What are we going to do?"

Biff slapped him. "We fight them."

"We can't! You weren't in the courtyard. You didn't see!" The initiate looked at his bloodied sword, and started as if he'd never seen it before. In a fit, he threw it away and it clattered against the floor. "The Grey Wardens fight darkspawn! Not templars, but the darkspawn killed all of them! We're going to die in here."

Biff knelt and picked up the boy's sword and thrust it back into his hands. Anders had to give him points for balls, but then dicks usually came with those. "We're not going to die. They closed the gates behind us. They'll hold for at least—"

An ominous thud sounded through the Keep. Another torch fell from its sconce on the wall, and a second thud followed the first. Then a third. The initiate fell to his knees and started sobbing, "Oh Maker, hear my cry: guide me through the blackest nights."

"Well that's helpful." Anders snorted.
"Shut up." Biff snapped.

The initiate abruptly stopped praying, and looked up at him with wild eyes. "The mage! He could help us! The Knight Commander, he said he wasn't dangerous! We could take his shackles off. He could fight them."

"His words, not mine," Anders said when Biff glared at him. "But if you ask me-"

"No one is asking you, mage." Biff cut him off. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"This is a trick question isn't it?" Anders asked.

"The second we let you out, you'll run." Biff said, "And if you do stay and fight, you'd only be in the way. You're not a battle mage, you're a spirit healer."

"See, the funny thing about that is-" Anders started to say.

"Shut up. Stay in there where it's safe. We," Biff grabbed the initiate by his collar, and wrenched him to his feet. "Will protect you. Because that's our job. Now ready yourself."

Somehow, the little initiate found his courage. He picked up his sword and raised his shield. The thuds had stopped.

If Anders had to hazard a guess, he'd guess they had been from a battering ram. The fact that they'd stopped could only mean there was nothing left to batter. The sounds of fighting drew nearer, until Anders could hear clearly what was happening in the hall.

It didn't sound good. The sound of metal on metal had stopped long ago, replaced with panicked screams and the thud of running footsteps, of doors slamming, of the initiate pissing himself and Biff's angry curse when the door burst open, and darkspawn poured in.

The initiate hesitated. A creature that might have been a man with the flesh peeled from his face took the boy's head off with a single stroke from his broadsword. The head bounced off the bars of Anders' cell, and the look of terror frozen on the boy's face was sure to haunt his nightmares.

Maker damn Biff. He wouldn't have run. He could have helped. Instead Anders watched from his cell as Biff ran the darkspawn through, and turned to face another. The second creature looked like a rat the size of a man, and it let out a piercing wail. Anders tried to cover his ears, but his manacles made it impossible. The sound was deafening, like a dagger being dragged down his spine. Biff flinched, and it undid him. The creature lashed out with bladed hands, and pierced his throat.

Biff gurgled, and blood rushed forth in a fount from his throat. The darkspawn that had killed him drank it, lapping at Biff's face and gnawing off his large nose. Anders dry heaved.

The darkspawn turned on him with another unholy wail. It threw itself against the bars and wailed in fury when it realized it couldn't reach him. Or at least, Anders assumed it was still making some sort of noise. The last wail had deafened him completely, and all he could hear was a dull ringing.

Think, Anders. He could still hear his own thoughts, which was a small comfort. Brain over brawn. Sure, it had never worked for him before, but maybe today was his lucky day. He couldn't do anything shackled. Biff had the keys to his manacles, but there was no reaching him with the darkspawn clawing through the bars beside his corpse. If he could kill it...

The initiate's sword was on the ground, near the bars. If he could pull it through, he could probably kill the darkspawn with it. Anders crept towards the sword, but as soon as he was near enough to
reach it the darkspawn lunged at him. He needed to distract it. Looking around for inspiration, Anders eyes settled on his food bowl.

He threw the wooden thing through the bars, out towards the hall. The darkspawn screamed at him. "Okay. So you're not that stupid. Good to know." Anders said to himself. Something else then. He needed a spell, but he didn't know what he could cast wearing these accursed shackles.

His access to the Fade was so weak it may as well not have existed. With the mana they'd left him he'd be lucky to summon a simple light. Anders paused; a light actually sounded doable. Taking a deep breath, he fought past the runes that crippled him and conjured a small orb of light no bigger than his palm.

To his surprise and utter delight, the darkspawn screamed and recoiled. "Hoho! We don't like light do we?" Anders laughed, kneeling and grabbing the hilt of the initiate's sword. Twisting it so it fit through the bars, Anders stood up and gripped the sword as best he was able with his manacles.

"Andraste's knickers, this is heavy," Anders muttered. How did templars carry swords and shields about in full armor? Focus. Anders shook himself. It wouldn't be hard. All he had to do was hold the sword steady, and the darkspawn would impale itself on it. Hopefully.

Anders did a test lunge on a spot between the bars, and decided he could do it. If he couldn't... well, he didn't really need his arms anyway. Taking a deep breath, Anders let his orb of light go out. The darkspawn dove at him, and he thrust the sword forward. It took the creature square in the chest, and took the sword right out of his hands. Anders leapt back, and was glad he did when the creature took one last, vengeful swipe at the spot he'd been standing in before toppling over.

"Alright," Anders let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Easy. Now... keys." Anders knelt beside Biff and gagged. He'd never understand romanticizing death. Biff was a mess. His big nose had been chewed down to a more reasonable size, his head lulled back unnaturally with his slit throat, and the smell. Maker's breath, Anders thought his kicked over waste bucket was bad.

Biff kept his keys at his waist, and Anders had to squeeze his arms together to fit them through the bars, and work the key ring off his belt. The struggle was a contortionist's nightmare, and getting his manacles off was even worse, but Anders managed. He kicked them into a pile of shit when they were off, feeling vindictive, but within minutes of unlocking his cell and letting himself out, he could feel the Fade again, the whispers of wisps and spirits, and felt better.

Compassion was there, just beyond the Veil, ready if he or any survivors were in need of healing. Anders hated being cut off from her. She was his spirit; the reason anyone called him a spirit healer. For the better part of his life, she had quite literally been the woman of his dreams. While he might not have been able to summon her for anything more than healing, he felt better knowing he could at least do something.

Admittedly, a spirit of Valor or Fortitude might have been a more helpful companion when a stout little darkspawn, almost like an evil dwarf, wandered down the hall outside his cell and spotted him through the open door. It cried out, a low, garbled thrum that sounded almost like words, and two more darkspawn appeared. "Please don't be too much like dwarves," Anders said to himself, drawing on the first element that came to him.

A cone of flame erupted from his hands, burning the creatures as they charged him. He heard decidedly more human shouts from the hall, and desperately hoped someone was coming to help him. Two of the darkspawn fell to the flames, but the third kept charging. Anders backed up, forcing more energy into the spell, and contemplated locking himself back in his cell for safety when the creature finally seemed to realize it was on fire, and act accordingly. It snarled in agony as it's skin
began to slough off, and collapsed at his feet just as two warriors came charging into the room.

"Er," Anders said eloquently.

"Mhairi, the door," The first warrior ordered, ignoring Anders to barricade the far door while Mhairi barricaded the other door behind them.

"Unbelievable!" Mhairi gasped when the room was secure, taking off her helmet. She was a vision of loveliness beneath it, even with her hair tousled from her helmet. Eyes like the ocean spray, skin as clear as the sky on Summerday. Anders couldn't have imagined a more fortunate rescue. "The Keep has been completely overwhelmed!"

"The Wardens should be mounting a better defense," The warrior with her agreed, unlatching his own helmet and setting it on the table. A mess of black hair spilled out, and when he pushed it out of the way of his eyes, he finally spared Anders a glance. There was something familiar in them, the thin almond shape and russet color.

"I agree," Mhairi muttered. She pulled up a chair and eased herself into it, and Anders wondered if she was injured. "Where are they all? For the darkspawn to have ambushed the keep so effectively," Mhairi unbuckled her left boot, and pulled it off with a pained hiss. She was injured then. "I didn't know they were capable of such a thing."

"... Anders." The warrior startled him out of his skin. Anders jumped back a pace, wondering how he could possibly know his name. "You're a healer, aren't you?"

"I-" Anders hesitated, and suddenly it clicked. "That's it. I remember you from the Circle. The armor threw me off. Did you decide being a mage wasn't all it's cracked up to be?"

"Not exactly." The mage-turned-warrior said vaguely. "Can you see to her?"

"Of course. Hey, I know what they've been saying about me back at the Circle, but this," Anders gestured to the dead templars, "Not my doing. You know how it is, templars catch apostate, darkspawn catch templars."

"An apostate?" Mhairi said warily, "At Vigil's Keep?"

"You weren't here when we arrived," Anders gave her a little bow, "I'm sure I would have remembered such a lovely woman as yourself. Proper introductions, then? I am Anders. Apostate, yes, but I also happen to be a very talented healer. May I?" He waved a hand at her leg.

Mhairi nodded reluctantly, and Anders knelt to inspect the injury. Something had hamstringed her, and left a gaping wound the back of her leg. Anders set about healing it, "This is awkward," Anders said, with a glance to the other mage, "But I don't remember your name."

"Amell," Amell said.

"Warden-Commander Amell," Mhairi corrected him, squaring her shoulders proudly, "The Hero of Ferelden, new Arl to Amaranthine and Lord of Vigil's Keep."

"Oh. Well, congratulations." Anders said, unable to help his sarcasm given the current state of the Keep. It probably wasn't the smartest response he could have given, but Amell snorted. Well... good. He could stand to be around someone with a sense of humor again. He looked back at Mhairi, "And you are?"

"Mhairi. I was a knight in the King's service, but when the call came for volunteers to rebuild the
Order..." She flushed a little, and looked to Amell, "You're a hero, Commander. I feel so honored to be fighting at your side."

"Well," Anders stood, feeling a little awkward interrupting the hero worship, "All healed."

Mhairi gave her leg an experimental kick and nodded before putting her boot back on. "Thank you, Ser Anders."

"Just Anders, my dear lady." Anders assured her. He wondered if Amell needed healing, but the man had wiped the sweat off his brow and was already putting his helmet back on. "So... I suppose you're off to fight darkspawn, being the Warden Commander and all?"

"Indeed." Mhairi answered for him. "We don't have a lot of time, and there may still be other survivors."

"I also don't suppose you'd be willing to let me go?" Anders hazarded, wishing he wasn't covered in oatmeal and blood if he was going to be begging favors, "I know they'll just send more templars after me. They always do, but..."

"They won't if I tell them you died." Amell said simply.

Anders rubbed at his ear. The darkspawn must have done a serious number on his hearing after all. But Mhairi was staring at her Commander, aghast, so he must have heard right. "You'd do that for me?" Anders asked. Amell nodded. "Well that's... rather marvelous of you, to be honest. So I'll just... slip out the way you came in? All clear?"

"You would just leave?" Mhairi demanded. "There are men in the yard who need healing, survivors who might need help-"

"Recruit." Amell interrupted her. "I'm going to need your help here." He gestured to the barricaded door that led deeper into the Keep.

Mhairi looked at her Commander, and then back to him with a glare, but Anders had been getting glares all his life. He gave her a winning smile in return, and she looked away in disgust. "Of course, Commander. You can count on me." Mhairi said, pushing the table out of the way of the door.

"Well... Good luck to you then." Anders said to Amell. "Have fun slaughtering the darkspawn. Maker knows they could use it."

Neither the Warden-Commander nor the Warden-Recruit answered him. They threw open the door, and charged forward into the fray, leaving Anders alone again. He heard the sounds of fighting in their wake, which was a welcome reprieve from panicked screams, the fall of running feet, and the wicked laughter of darkspawn. It was good someone was making a stand. Not him, but someone.

Anders turned around fled out the way they'd come in. His cell let out into a hall, which led out into the inner courtyard. It was largely abandoned by the living, but littered with corpses both human and darkspawn. Toppled carts, tables and chairs had been made into makeshift barricades. The signs of a lost battle were all around. Including a woman's screams.

On the opposite end of the courtyard was a young woman Anders hadn't noticed, who look to just come out of hiding. And at the entrance to the courtyard, two human-shaped darkspawn, who heard her screams and charged. "Another twenty steps, another batch of deaths. Today is not a good day," Anders muttered to himself, reaching into the Fade. "Here!" He yelled to the woman, "Over here!"
Fortunately, she heard him, and ran in his direction, putting him between her and the darkspawn. When she was safely past him, Anders loosed his spell, and his fingers erupted in a cone of frost. It was sloppily, without his staff to channel the spell through, but there were only two of the creatures. The frost ate at them, starting at their stomachs and spreading over their chests, down their thighs, and into their legs, until they were still as statues with only their eyes still moving.

"Get yourself to safety, quickly!" Anders ordered the woman, looking around for something to shatter the darkspawn with. He found a beam of wood about the length of his arm, and picked it up. It was a poor excuse for a staff, but it made an admirable bat. Planting his feet firmly, he drew back his make-shift weapon and struck the first darkspawn in the head. It shattered. Congealed blood, chunks of brain, and all manner of bits sprayed across his face. The smell was unbearable. Rot and waste, in his nose, on his lips, stuck in his hair. Anders doubled over and retched.

His oatmeal tasted no better going out than it had coming in, and he'd ruined his boots on top of everything. Today was not a good day at all, Anders thought, taking up his stance again and shattering the second darkspawn's head. It exploded again, and Anders threw up again. He couldn't begrudge the poor templar initiate his fear of darkspawn. The creatures looked like story book nightmares: vile and twisted versions of man, elf, and dwarf. Anders couldn't wait to be free of this place, but no sooner had he taken another step than he heard another scream.

It wasn't in the courtyard. The sound had come from somewhere up on the battlements, too far away for him to help. Shielding his eyes against the sun, Anders scanned the ramparts, and a moment later wished he hadn't. A body fell over the edge, toppling end over end until it hit the ground on the opposite end of the courtyard. He hoped it was a darkspawn, but he knew it hadn't been.

It was tragic, but it wasn't his fight. He was free. For some indiscernible reason, Amell had promised to tell the templars he'd died. He might have been a mage, but he was also the Hero of Ferelden. Anders didn't think the templars would doubt him. He should run now, fast and far away. Go to Amaranthine, find Namaya, destroy his phylactery to be extra certain, and then take ship. Head to Rivain, or anywhere but Ferelden.

"You run away, you get caught, you run away," Biff had said of him, but Biff was dead. Anders didn't care what Biff thought. Anders didn't care what anyone thought. Anders cared about Anders, and Anders needed to get out of here. He took a step towards the gates. Behind him, people were screaming, fighting, dying. Was he really that much of a bastard to just leave? Yes, Anders thought, but for some reason he turned around, and decided to help.
9:31 Dragon 17 Ferventis Afternoon

Vigil's Keep

Anders found himself wishing he had stayed with the Warden Commander and his recruit when he'd come across them. He had no staff, no armor, no potions, nothing but his rapier wit and dashing good looks, and only one of those things came in handy against the darkspawn. As to his looks, they were hardly dashing at the moment. Anders was a mess. His robes were bespeckled with blood and stale oats, he was sporting bits of brain as hair accessories, and he had vomit on his shoes. Then again, Anders thought, maybe his looks were useful. Looking like this, he could probably blend in with the darkspawn.

It wasn't a theory he wanted to test. Yes, he wanted to help, but he wasn't a fool. If he could find survivors without any darkspawn about, Anders would be happy. He was a healer, first and foremost. Anders knew enough primal magic to survive, but his bond with Compassion was what made him an exceptional mage.

The last he'd seen of the fighting had taken place on the ramparts, so that was where Anders headed. He took the stairs, hoping to avoid darkspawn while simultaneously hoping to encounter them. On the one hand, if he was fighting darkspawn, that meant they weren't chasing young damsels in distress, but on the other, he liked living. One or two darkspawn at a time would be doable.

He was never so lucky. On his way up the ramparts, Anders spotted a half dozen darkspawn. Definitely not the sort of thing he wanted to tangle with, but one of the darkspawn was dragging a woman along by her ankle, and judging from her screams she was still very much alive.

Anders didn't have to fight them. The darkspawn were out on the second story battlements, facing away from him. The stairs continued up. He could just keep going. After all, the Warden Commander had been headed to the third story. Anders could meet up with him, and pick smarter fights.

But how would he sleep at night, knowing Compassion would see his dreams, and that this poor woman would be in them? What would he say to her? What kind of healer was he?

A stupid one, Anders decided, reaching into the Fade. He conjured a sleep spell, and with a deep breath and a prayer, cast it in a wide net over the darkspawn. They dropped like stones, and Anders crept out from his hiding place. The woman had been caught in the spell as well, there was no helping that, but he could carry her out before the darkspawn woke.

She was an older woman dressed in a fine silk gown, with her long grey hair done up in braids that
had doubtless been impeccable before the darkspawn attack. They were frazzled now; her gown was torn, and she bore cuts and bruises all along her face. Anders looped his arms under her knees and shoulders, and picked her up.

Maker save him, he was pathetic. Anders grit his teeth to keep from grunting with effort and potentially waking a darkspawn. Why was everything so bloody heavy? The little old lady couldn't have been more than eight or nine stones, but Anders' arms and lower back ached in protest. As soon as this was over, he was going to start doing presses. What kind of healer couldn't carry his patients?

Anders made it back to the relative safety of the stairwell and set the woman down. He still had to deal with the darkspawn. Fire had been effective so far, so Anders conjured a large swath of grease, and flung it over the sleeping darkspawn. His held his breath with a few of them twitched, but none woke. Calling forth a ball of flame, Anders held the spell until it swelled to the size of his torso, and loosed it at the darkspawn.

It was spectacular. The half dozen beasts woke, screaming in agony as the grease caught fire. Burning oil slid down their faces, their arms, dragging the skin along with. The smell of burning flesh filled the air, and reminded Anders of the bacon Biff had had for breakfast. His stomach rumbled, and then turned when Anders realized the smell of burning darkspawn was almost appetizing.

Fortunately, his stomach was empty, which meant no more vomiting. Anders watched to be sure none of the darkspawn survived his spell, and was about to turn away when one of the human-looking darkspawn toppled over the ramparts, and landed in the stables below. A gout of flame leapt up into the sky as the structure caught fire.

"I'm an idiot," Anders said. The structure collapsed a moment later, and from the wreckage burst a handful of burning darkspawn who must have been taking shelter in the stables. "I'm a genius." Anders revised.

Turning back to the woman he'd rescued, Anders dispelled the veil of sleep he'd cast over her. With a groan, she sat upright. Her eyes were a shade like warm brandy; Anders was glad he'd saved her, "What-? What happened? Who are you?"

"Your rescuer, my fair lady," Anders said.

"Fair lady," The old woman rolled her eyes, but Anders swore he saw a blush. "Too fair to be of any use, it seems. Maker's mercy, the Wardens... Those poor men. They were doing a demonstration in the yard when the darkspawn attacked. I saw Keenan dragged away... Tell me, Ser, do you know if any yet live?"

"I do indeed." Anders assured her, "The Warden Commander was alive last I saw. Sturdy looking fellow, I'm actually trying to get back to him. Strength in numbers and all that."

"I sincerely hope not, or we are doomed." The woman said grimly. "Should you find him, there was a darkspawn leading them, the likes of which I've never seen. I swear he spoke. Not the usual grunts and groans of darkspawn, but the common tongue. The Warden Commander must be warned."

"Talking?" Anders repeated, "Actually talking? 'Hello, I'm a darkspawn, how do you do?' and all that?"

"This is no laughing matter, young man." The old woman scowled at him. The frown wrinkled her features something fierce, which was a shame considering she had a rather pretty face.
"Oh no, I'm shaking in my knickers, trust me," Anders promised. The woman eyed him dubiously, but Anders didn't really care what she thought of him so long as she was safe. "The way back down is mostly clear. You should head to the outer courtyard; I heard there's more survivors there."

The old woman nodded, "Thank you, then, Ser. You may call me Mistress Woolsey. Should we both survive this, find me, and I will repay you for saving my life."

"Oh you don't need to-" Anders started to say, but the sprightly old gal was already running back down the stairs. "Do that." Anders finished anyway.

Well. On then. Standing from his crouch, Anders hurried up the stairs to the next level of the Keep. The third story ramparts were empty, for the moment. From where he was, two doors led into the Keep. Anders tried the one on his left, but it was barricaded from the other side. The door on right opened up into a hallway.

There were sounds of battle further on. Anders broke into a light jog, hoping to find either the Vigil's shoulders or the Warden Commander, and made a terrible mistake. The hall opened up into a small circular chamber with two other exits. The room's furniture had been stacked up against the exit furthest from Anders, but there must have been too many entries to barricade.

The room's inhabitants lay dead in the sunken seating area in the center of the room. The poor buggers had taken few darkspawn with them, but not all. Five darkspawn were still alive, and were eating the dead bodies of human and darkspawn alike. They looked up at his entrance and screamed.

The sound of fighting was still there. It was coming from down the hall. Anders could run for it and hope he met up with help, or he could stand and fight. Anders decided to stick to what he knew, and ran, flinging a sloppy fireball into the pit as he bolted past the feeding darkspawn. The smell of charred meat followed him, making his stomach rumble again. No more fire spells, Anders decided queasily.

He ran into more darkspawn, but at least this group was engaged with something other than eating. The Warden Commander and his recruit were there, fighting side by side with sword and shield, and a dwarf looked to have joined them. There were four darkspawn still standing, and Anders threw out a frost bolt at the one engaging the Warden Commander.

It froze, and a blow from the man's sword shattered it. Anders waved when Amell glanced at him, not quite daring to look over his shoulder to see if the darkspawn were following him. Amell sheathed his sword and ran to meet him, so Anders assumed they must not have been.

He guessed very wrong. Amell reached out and grabbed his arm, wrenching him forward. "Behind me," Amell ordered, as if Anders had a choice. Anders turned around in time to see the darkspawn that had been chasing him stop abruptly. Lifted off their feet, they started seizing and twitching erratically. Their veins grew twisted and bulbous, and then burst, blood gushing from their ears, their eyes, their every pore.

Anders... didn't know that spell. He took a cautious step back as Amell drew his sword and re-engaged them. To his right, a darkspawn went crashing through the wall, and reminded him there was still a battle going on. Redirecting his focus, Anders found Mhiari fending off two darkspawn, and froze one. She took down the remaining offender easily enough, and in a span of a few breaths the fight was over.

The hall was stuffed with dead darkspawn, and the blood was nearly up to Anders' ankles. They had to climb over more than a few bodies to regroup away from all the death. The dwarf in particular looked to be having trouble navigating the graveyard, stumbling over one of the larger corpses that
blocked the hall. Anders gave him a helping hand, and immediately regretted it.

Sweat and blood could make anyone rank, but the dwarf smelled overwhelmingly of alcohol. Anders was glad he hadn't cast any fireballs. A match and the dwarf's breath could have brought down the whole Keep. The dwarf grunted his thanks, and Anders managed a light headed nod.

"Ser Mage," Mhairi spoke up, taking off her helmet to grace him with her pretty eyes, and a lovely smile, "I thought you had fled."

"I know, I know," Anders said, "I'm really bad at the whole 'fugitive from justice' thing, but you were right. I can't just leave without helping. And I can't help without killing darkspawn, so here we are."

"Well I for one appreciate your help," Mhairi said. She really was terribly pretty.

"Well, thank me later," Anders winked. "Trust me, you'll be mighty grateful I came back. I'm really good."

The dwarf laughed at him, taking off his own helmet. He was a walking stereotype. Bright red hair rolled off his head and tangled into a massive beard, and he carried a tankard at his hip and an axe on his back. Anders felt racist just looking at him. "Mage comedian, huh?" The dwarf said, pulling another flask out of his armor and taking a long swig, "That's a useful specialty, I'll bet."

"About as useful as smelling like whiskey vomit, I imagine," Anders shot back.

The dwarf threw back his head and let out a roar of laughter, elbowing Amell in the hips. "Oh, he's a keeper. Let's make him dance."

Amell looked at him for a long moment and Anders tried not to fidget under his stare. Amell still wore his helmet, but it made the scrutiny no less bearable. Anders wasn't a fan of helmets, especially full helms. Templars wore full helms, and in Anders' experience, the anonymity could lead men to do things that would make even monsters hesitate.

"Stay close," Amell said eventually, apparently accepting him.

"Try and stop me," Anders said lightly.

The three armored warriors re-donned their helmets and took the lead, which was just fine with Anders. He followed them down the hall and back into the circular room he'd fled from to reach them. The pit of bodies was still there, and the dwarf gave it an appreciative whistle. "I'm Oghren, by the way," The dwarf volunteered.

"Anders." Anders said back. Before the barricaded door, Amell had sheathed his sword and was lifting away the rubble and debris with telekinetic magic. That was a neat trick, Anders decided. He should probably be helping. He looked back to the dwarf instead. "Do you always smell like a brewery?"

"I'm not sharing, if that's where you're going with this." Oghren said.

"I was just wondering if it would be safe to cast any fire spells around you." Anders explained, "I'm a little worried your breath might make them explode."

"You and me, we're gonna be friends." Oghren decided, grinning at him. It was a horrid grin of yellowed teeth, knotted beard, and foul breath, but Anders returned it. This was definitely a marked improvement from running through the Keep alone.
Amell cleared the door, and they made their way into the next hall. As soon as they turned the corner, Mhairi screamed. "Rowland!"

On the ground before them was a soldier, or what was left of one. "Mhairi?" The man coughed, spittle and froth forming on his lips with the effort it took to speak. Standing would have been the end of him; a gash in his stomach had severed him nearly in two. The only thing keeping him alive was the hand he kept to the wound. Every few heartbeats, a spurt of blood would spray from between his fingers.

"Rowland, I'm here," Mhairi fell to her knees beside the man, her hands hovering anxiously over his injury. "I'm here, Rowland. We have a healer. We can help you. Anders-you can heal him, can't you?"

Anders was a mage. Not a miracle worker. He could pull men from death's doorstep, but Rowland was already in the door and taking off his coat. "He's beyond healing magic," Anders said sadly, "Maybe a shot of whiskey for the pain?"

"I like the way you think," Oghren snorted. He pulled out his flask and even seemed ready to offer it when Mhairi yelled at them.

"Stop it! Both of you! This isn't funny!" She looked pleadingly to Amell, "Commander-please, we can do something, can't we?"

"The... the commander?" Rowland coughed again. It wasn't sounding good. Anders didn't give him more than a few minutes to live.

Amell knelt down beside Rowland. He took off his helmet, and set it on the floor beside him. "I'm here, Rowland."

"We only had a moment's warning before they were on us, Commander. The seneschal ordered a counter-attack, but they came out of nowhere. There's one with them, a darkspawn who talks; his magic is powerful. He took the seneschal-and I was-in pursuit-" Rowland coughed again, and another spurt of blood came from between his fingers.

"I met a woman who said something similar," Anders said. "She said a talking darkspawn led the attack. I'm not much of a gambler, but what do you suppose are the odds it's a coincidence?"

"Please, Commander, can't we do something for him?" Mhairi begged again.

"We can give him a clean death." Amell said.

"What!?!" Mhairi stared at him, "No!"

"It's okay, Mhairi," Rowland smiled at her; there was nothing reassuring in his smile. A pink froth still painted his lips, and the pool of blood in his mouth overflowed and spilled down his chin when he spoke, "I'm not getting any better. It was an honor to meet you, Commander. I wish I could have fought at your side, just once."

Amell drew a dagger from his boot, and held it in his left hand. His right, he held out for Rowland to shake, "You still can, if that's what you want."

"Oh boy. Here we go," Oghren muttered.

Anders couldn't look away from what was unfolding. Rowland looked at the Commander's outstretched hand, and back up at his face, and seemed to slowly process he was offering some sort
Amell slit his throat. Anders didn't know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't that. The air around them grew cold, and Anders felt the pull of the Veil, heard the distant whispers of excited wisps, and watched in a mixture of horror and fascination as dark energy flowered from Amell's outstretched hand and into Rowland's body.

Oblivious to the fact that he had died rather recently, Rowland stood up. His guts spilled out when he did, and made a rather sickening splash when they hit the ground. Uncaring, Rowland picked up his sword and his shield, and stood ready to fight.

Mhairi was horrified. "You-You! Blood mage! Maleficar! What have you done? What did you do to him!?

"What he wanted." Amell said simply. He picked up his helmet and stood, "And this is necromancy, recruit, not blood magic. The two are different."

"This is unholy!" Mhairi screamed. "Let him go!"

"And replace him with what?" Amell asked, putting his helmet back on, "You've seen the bodies we've passed. Rowland was the first in any form to fight."

"Rowland is a man! He's not a corpse for your magic!"

"He is now." Amell said. Anders felt a sudden chill in the air. "This is the sort of magic I practice, recruit. I'm sorry no one warned you, but we have darkspawn to fight, and I'll use whatever I can against them."

Amell turned around, and continued down the hall with Rowland at his side. Mhairi sucked in a rickety breath, and dug the heels of the her palms into her eyes.

"It doesn't get any easier, kid." Oghren said to her. "Did you think it was gonna be rainbows and butterfly farts? That guy's a Warden. You think you know what that means, but you don't." Oghren took a long drink from his flask, and stuffed it securely back in his armor. "You really don't." He muttered, and followed Amell down the hall.

"If you need a shoulder to cry on-" Anders started to say. Mhairi scowled at him, and stormed down the hall after Oghren and Amell.

Anders followed her. On the one hand, he was horrified, but on the other, he was fascinated. Necromancy was spirit magic. Gruesome, disturbing, horrible spirit magic, but spirit magic none the less. It was also almost unheard of outside of Nevarra, and Anders would probably never get another chance to see it again when this was over. Which was honestly just fine with him, but he may as well sate his curiosity now.

Jogging up ahead, Anders fell into step beside Amell and tried to ignore the smell radiating off Rowland. "So... what kind of spirit is that?" Anders asked. Amell cocked his head at him, and said nothing. "Hello?" Anders joked, "Anyone home? Is the Warden-Commander in?"

"I'm sorry." Amell collected himself, "I thought I misheard you. I'm not used to that kind of reaction. It's a wisp, not a spirit. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I am a spirit healer." Anders said, "I'm sort of fond of them. Do you ever call on spirits?"

"Now isn't really the time to discuss magical theory, Anders," Amell pointed out. "But... I can tell
you anything you want to know when we're done here, if you'd like."

Anders didn't plan to be around when they were done here, but he nodded rather than say as much to the Warden Commander. As they made their way deeper into the Keep, Anders understood why the man had been so keen on reanimating Rowland. It was impressive magic. A band of dark blue energy was twisted around Amell's shield arm and tied him to Rowland. The two fought together so well it was like having an extra sword of the living, breathing variety on their side.

Mhairi hated it. Anders could see it in the poor woman's face every time they paused. Anders felt sorry for her. Anders knew he wouldn't have been able to stand seeing any friend of his walking around moments after their death, but Amell was right. The way the dwarf fought, there were no suitable corpses left for a necromancer. Every swing of his axe cleaved darkspawn into two or more pieces, and the ones Anders froze tended to shatter.

Mercifully, one the larger darkspawn ended up taking Rowland's head off, and Amell didn't bother trying to bring him back a second time. It didn't seem to be a spell he could employ off hand, the way Anders could with frost or fire, so they followed the darkspawn without any further necromancy taking place.

The trail of death and destruction, toppled barricades and mutilated bodies led further up through the Keep, and soon they were out on the ramparts again. They were on the fourth story, and the wind hit them something fierce. Anders had spent his life in the Circle tower, and had no problems with heights, but the dwarf took one look out at the courtyard below and wheezed.

"Wait, wait," Oghren said, standing with his back firmly planted against the Vigil's walls. "By the stones of my Ancestors, we're high up. Just give me a minute."

"I could use a rest as well," Mhairi said weakly.

"Catch up," Amell said. He continued out along the ramparts, and Anders decided to follow him. There was no reason for the dwarf to be afraid; a stone banister ran around the ramparts, and would keep all of them from an errant spill. Amell stopped where the wall ended, and held out a hand for Anders to stop as well. There around the corner were four darkspawn, and a man. The man was on his knees, and a darkspawn stood behind him with a wicked looking sword to his throat. "What's the plan?" Anders whispered. No sooner had the words left his lips than the sound of a door slamming open drew his eyes to the opposite side of the ramparts, where a lone soldier appeared.

"Seneschal!" The soldier yelled, running forward with his sword drawn. The first darkspawn the brave, stupid man encountered parried the blade so deftly it flew clear of his hands. The darkspawn picked the poor sod up by his collar and laughed.

"It has ended just as he foretold!" The darkspawn spoke. Actually spoke, actual words. The darkspawn sounded like he was gargling rocks, but Anders understood him. The darkspawn walked the soldier to the edge of the ramparts, and proved just how effective the banister was by throwing him clear over the edge.

Beside him, Amell drew his dagger from his boot, and set it to the inside his arm, where no armor was between skin and blade. He made a quick cut just above the inside of his elbow, and ruined what looked like a very fine tunic. Blood flowed from the wound, and formed into a fine mist that wrapped around Amell's fingers. "You will not mention this," Amell warned him.

Anders gave a quick shake of his head. He wasn't about to argue with a blood mage. Amell flung the
spell towards the darkspawn holding the seneschal, but as Anders watched, nothing seemed to happen. "Protect the seneschal when the fighting starts," Amell ordered.

"I'll try," Anders promised. There was time to be terrified of Amell later. The darkspawn were worse. Probably.

"Be taking this one gently," The talking darkspawn said, gesturing to the captive seneschal, "We are wishing no more death than is necessary."

"Necessary?" The seneschal laughed. "As if your kind has ever done anything else."

A hand touched Ander's shoulder, and he jumped, almost screaming until he realized it was just Mhairi, crouched beside him and craning for a better look with Oghren at her side. They both nodded to the Warden-Commander, who had since sheathed his dagger and no longer looked so much the maleficar.

"You are thinking you know of our kind, human?" The darkspawn chortled, "It is understandable, but that will soon be changed."

"Others will come, creature!" The seneschal said fiercely. Balls a plenty on that one. Anders doubted the man would need his protection if someone could get a sword into his hand. "The Grey Wardens will stop you!"

"Is that our cue?" Anders wondered.

"Oghren, the alpha." Amell said.

The dwarf drew his axe from off his back, and seemed to forget his fear of heights at the prospect of battle. "Aye, I'll shut him up." Oghren grunted, charging out from behind the wall without any further warning. "Hey ugly!" He screamed as his battle cry.

Amell followed him, and Mhairi went with him. Anders thought it was a death sentence for the seneschal, until he finally saw what Amell's spell had done. The darkspawn holding the seneschal had quite inexplicably decided to let him go. Around Amell's arm was the same band of magic that had tied him to Rowland, only this one was a deep red instead of blue. The darkspawn under his thrall turned on his fellows, and Anders had a clear path to reach the seneschal, and pull him out of the fighting.

"Capture the Grey Warden!" The leader screamed, parrying a blow from Oghren's axe. "Kill these others!"

"Arm me," The seneschal demanded. Anders held out his arm, and the seneschal stared at him.

"All I've got, I'm afraid." Anders shrugged, "I think they've got it, though. Look,"

The leader was being forced back by Oghren's vicious onslaught. Mhairi was engaging one darkspawn, while Amell and his puppet quickly dispatched the last. Anders threw out another frost spell to help Mhairi, and the beast shattered beneath her sword. As soon as it did, Mhairi turned on Amell's puppet and lopped the thing's head clean off. Amell nodded his thanks at her, as if he hadn't had the creature safely under his thrall.

Anders supposed that was one obvious downside to necromancy and the sort of magic Amell apparently used. It made it hard to tell friend from foe. And it was against Chantry Law, and the Maker's will, and brought forth demons and all other manner of evil. Just a few things. Nothing trivial. Definitely no compelling reasons not to use it. Anders watched the rest of the battle play out,
Another suspicious spell from Amell made the darkspawn leader double over, and cough up blood. Oghren used the break in the creature’s defense to cleave his axe up into its chest. A shower of black blood poured down on the dwarf, and the creature seized once, and then died. Oghren kicked it off his axe, and over the edge of the banister with a victorious laugh.

"Does anyone need healing?" Anders asked. The seneschal gave him a long look, and Anders regretted opening his mouth.

"I know you," The seneschal realized, "You're the apostate who was brought in yesterday. What became of the templars who brought you in?"

"He claims not to have killed them," Mhairi answered for him. Well. That would teach him to trust a pretty face. It wouldn't, Anders knew, but he may as well pretend he'd learned something.

"They are dead then," The seneschal deduced. Now that Anders had the chance to look at him, he decided he didn't like him. He had a grandfatherly look to him, grey hair and downturned eyes, and a know-it-all tone that reminded Anders a bit too much of the First Enchanter.

"It was tragic." Anders said flatly, knowing he should probably shut up, but his mouth wasn't listening, "Really. But I didn't do it."

"You were outside your cell when we came upon you." Mhairi said. Traitorous bitch. "Is it such a stretch to assume they might have freed you to help fight the darkspawn, before you turned on them?"

"Hey, look-" Anders began, not quite sure what he was about to say, but he doubted it was going to be pretty.

"I saw the wounds. They died to darkspawn." Amell said. "Which are still our concern at the moment. Seneschal."

"Varel, Commander." The Seneschal introduced himself with a nod, "Thank you for your rescue. I owe you my life."

"Seneschal Varel, do you know where else the darkspawn might be concentrated?"

"In the yard, but you would have had to clear them to get this far." Varel paused to think, "Captain Garevel was gathering survivors in the throne room. I imagine you'd have had to fight your way through the Keep, but you're right, we should be certain. If we can regroup with Captain Garevel, we can have the surviving soldiers do a sweep of the Keep."

"Lead the way to the throne room, then," Amell said. Varel nodded, and turned towards the door his would-be rescuer had come through. The warriors all moved to follow, and Anders supposed there was nothing for it but to go with them, but it was getting harder and harder to picture himself escaping now.

"Commander," Anders said, drawing Amell's attention. Amell hung back, and Anders waited until the others were out of earshot to talk to him. "Thank you. I'm not used to people looking out for me. I-um..." Won't tell anyone you're a crazy blood mage? "I hope you know I'll return the favor."

Amell took off his helmet, and held it under his arm. He held out his hand, and Anders couldn't help but hesitate. The last time Amell shook hands with someone, he'd slit their throat. If nothing else, at least Amell hadn't done it under the veil of anonymity his helmet provided, the way a templar would.
Amell had looked Rowland in the eye, as he looked Anders in the eye now.

What choice did he have, really? Anders shook his hand.

Chapter End Notes

These past two chapters from Amell's perspective.
Conscription
Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

9:31 Dragon 17 Ferventis Late Afternoon
Vigil's Keep Throne Room

The seneschal led them to throne room with no further darkspawn encounters. Crowded within were the survivors of Vigil's Keep, all ecstatic to hear the siege had been broken. Amell was promptly dragged to the front of the room, and a cheer started up in his name. It would have been the prime time to escape, but someone grabbed him and pushed him towards the front with Oghren and Mhairi, and hailed all of them as heroes.

It was probably the second most uncomfortable thing that had happened to Anders that day. He wanted nothing more than to slink away, and escape in all the pandemonium, but it wasn't happening. When the cheers died down, the captain of the guard came to speak to Amell and inform him that the darkspawn had started retreating as soon as their leader died.

That was the last of what Anders heard. There was a lot of talking going on. Consequently, Anders probably should have been doing a lot of listening, but he wasn't. He wanted to get out of here. Of all people, Oghren noticed his discomfort, and had his wrist a tug to get his attention. "Hey. You fought pretty well back there, for someone not doing any real fighting. I think you've earned a taste of Oghren's special brew."

"If that's a euphemism, I'm going to have to decline." Anders said, "Reluctantly, of course."

Oghren snorted, fishing his flask out from inside his armor. "You aren't going to want decline this, trust me. It puts hair on your face,"

"Is that what that is? I thought a wild animal was attached to your face." Anders joked.

"You think you're so funny don't you? Sparkle-fingers," Oghren said.

Oghren handed over his flask, and Anders took a drink. Maker knew he needed it after the day he'd had. Whatever Oghren's 'special brew' was, it didn't have a taste to it. It felt like swallowing fire, and burned the back of Anders' throat all the way down to his stomach. It made him cough like a fool, and went straight to his head. Anders loved it.

He also liked Oghren rather a lot. Sure, he was dirty, he had a nose that looked like it could break a brick, and he smelled like death incarnate, but looks weren't everything. Anyone who was good for a laugh was alright in Anders' book. "So, you and the Commander? Seems like there's some history there."

"Eh, you could say that." Oghren said. "Fought the Blight together, named the nugget after him, so I guess there's that. My turn for a question then. So, Circle mage. What's it like?"

"To have all this power at my fingertips?" Anders guessed.
"No," Oghern giggled, his voice pitching up several octaves at his own upcoming joke. "To always have to wear a skirt?"

"Oh, you don't know the story behind the robes?" Anders raised his eyebrows at him, "You know how strict things are in the Circle, right? Of course you do. Well, the robes make quick trysts in the corner easy. No laces or buttons. You're just.... well, you're done before the templars catch on."

"Really?" Oghren asked.

"Just ask anyone," Anders glanced at where Amell was still talking to his men; the other mage was wearing full armor, head to toe. "Well, maybe not him. Mind me asking what the story behind the armor is?"

"Piss if I know," Oghren snorted. He offered his flask again, and Anders took it. He didn't usually count himself a lightweight, but whatever Oghren was holding onto was vicious stuff. It probably wasn't a good idea to be drinking it on an empty stomach, but then Anders had never claimed to be smart. He took another drink and came up gasping.

"Not bad." Oghren said in approval, "Alright, lemme think. I guess it started about a year ago. We're in some elf ruin, right? And he finds this... mage thing. Little vial of blood."

"A phylactery?" Anders supplied for him.

"Sure. Anyway, he does some magic shit with it, and gets knocked flat on his ass. Out for hours. When he wakes up, he's babbling elf speak, and suddenly wants a sword and some armor. Starts asking everyone about how to fight like a real warrior should. Who was I to say no?" Oghren shrugged.

Amell's conversation with his men ended, and he came over to join them, carrying his helmet under his arm. It seemed such a hassle to wear, putting it on for every battle and taking it off for every conversation. And it mussed his hair something terrible. Anders didn't see the appeal.

"I basically taught him everything he knows." Oghren said at Amell's approach, offering the man his flask.

"It's true," Amell said, taking an easy drink and handing it back, "Anders, a word?"

"Knickerweasels?" Anders supplied. Amell exhaled hard through his nose; Anders thought he'd deserved a sensible chuckle, at least. "Sure." Anders said seriously. Amell gestured for him to walk with him, and led him out of the throne room.

The throne room was the only part of the Keep that had been relatively untouched by the darkspawn. As soon as they passed through the great doors, Anders was brought back to the jarring reality of the attack. There were still bodies, human and darkspawn, scattered throughout the main hall. Tapestries lining the walls had been burnt, statues had been knocked over, and there didn't seem to be a single piece of furniture that wasn't upside down and shoved against a door. It was downright depressing, really. Anders tried not to think about it.

"We need a healer." Amell said. No foreplay at all with this one. "The Vigil has a standing physician, but supplies are low. Bandages, poultices, and the like. Can you spare a few hours to see to the worst of the wounded?"

"Just like that?" Anders asked, "Not even going to butter me up first? No promise of a pony for little Anders if he stays?"
"I can spare a few sovereigns if you've need of them." Amell said seriously.

"It was a joke. I was kidding. Laugh." Anders said. Amell smiled. Close enough. "Of course I'll help. But I could use a few lyrium potions, and something to eat. I don't have anything in me but whatever Oghren was drinking, and it's burning a hole in my stomach."

"...Did the templars not feed you?" Amell asked, looking at him with an expression akin to pity. Well, that was new. Anders didn't know how to feel about that.

"Oh, you know, if you want to call a bowl of oatmeal a day fed." Anders shrugged. "I don't, but some people might. Very thin people, I imagine."

"I don't know how hard the kitchens were hit, but I'll find you something." Amell promised.

The right side of the outer courtyard held two buildings, and the blacksmith. A stairwell between the two buildings led up to the outer walls, but they didn't need to climb it for Anders to see that was where they were keeping the wounded. Men and women were littered all the way down the stairs, some bandaged, most not, all moaning in pain, begging for water, or praying for death.

"You weren't kidding." Anders said. He couldn't walk away from this. This was what magic was for; it was why the Maker had made him a mage. "This is bad. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you," Amell said. "I'll be right back with lyrium potions, and food. Do you need anything else?"

"Now that you mention it, I could do with a harem, a few bottles of wine, and that pony. But seriously, I'll be alright..." Unless he starved penniless on the streets of Amaranthine when he left, unable to afford a boat to escape Ferelden. But that wasn't Amell's problem, and Anders wasn't a beggar. He was, however, rather terrible at guarding his expressions, and Amell noticed his hesitation.

"Ask me," Amell said encouragingly.

"Were you serious? About those sovereigns?" Anders asked. "I mean, I'll help anyway; I'm not a bastard, but the templars took everything I had."

"I was," Amell assured him. "Does three sovereigns sound reasonable?"

"It sounds like you're terrible at haggling," Anders laughed, "Or you want me to do a lot more than just heal. I'm warning you right now, I don't do eye contact, and no kissing on the lips."

"I can work with that." Amell said easily, looking him over. Anders couldn't tell if he was joking. He had to be. Anders was a mess, and Amell soon left him with the injured, "Let me go get you those potions."

"And food!" Anders called out after him. "Food is important!"

Well then. Time to get to work. Anders stepped over a few of the wounded blocking the stairwell, and found the Vigil's physician on the wall, trying to get a patient to drink. He was an older looking fellow, stern faced, and he scowled at Anders' approach. "Oh no. If you can walk, you go to the barracks. Only the grievously wounded here."

"Well you're here, so I'm guessing that must be more of a guideline than a rule." Anders said. "Or healers are exempt. Which I am, but if you think you've got it under control-"
"What are your qualifications?" The physician demanded.

"Well I'm pretty and my voice is dreamy, so I've got pretty good bedside manner. Oh, and I can do this," Anders held up a hand and conjured a low flame about it.

"A mage." The physician said with a sneer. "Very well. The worst of the injured are down the way. If you can do anything for them, do it."

Lovely fellow. Very friendly. Anders left him to dribble more water down his patient's face, and crossed the wall to where the worst of the injured were lying, sprawled out on makeshift cots and gurneys, blankets, or in some cases nothing more than the cold hard stone.

He found a girl with a rather grievous looking head wound, and knelt to see to her. Head wounds always looked worse than they actually were, but that didn't mean they could be ignored. Anders reached for his magic, and spread it over the unconscious girl. He could sense that her skull was cracked, and her brain was swollen. Not the sort of thing he could tackle without Compassion.

The spirit was there, waiting just beyond the Veil. Anders called on her, and channeled her energy into a cleansing wave. It washed over the girl, and slowly brought down the swelling, before knitting the crack in her skull back together. It also took a great deal out of him. Anders sat down beside the unconscious girl, suddenly realizing how tired he was.

He'd been casting non-stop for hours. Anders liked to think he had a strong connection to the Fade, but everyone had their limits. Anders had heard rumors of mages killing themselves over-exerting their mana, and decided not to risk it. Leaving the rest of the wounded for later, Anders found an open spot at the base of the stairs, and sat down to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. Amell returned carrying a small crate full of lyrium potions under one arm, and a tray laden with bowls in the other. The crate Amell set at his feet, and the tray he handed to Anders before taking a seat beside him.

It was the most beautiful thing Anders had ever seen. There were two bowls full of a thick stew of beef, potatoes, and carrots, a whole loaf of bread, two dark green salads garnished with cranberries, two bowls of rice, and two tankards of ale. Keep it together, Anders. No tears. Don't let him see you cry.

"Will that work?" Amell asked.

"It's beautiful," Anders said. "There's no way I can eat all of this, but it's beautiful."

"I'll eat what you don't," Amell said, taking a spoon and one of the soup bowls off the tray, "I assumed you wouldn't mind if I ate with you."

"I honestly didn't think you'd have the time," Anders admitted, unable to decide where to start. The salad seemed safe. No reason to push his stomach. "Don't you have wardeny things to do?"

"I do, in fact, have wardeny things to do." Amell said, "But I also have to eat. Were you still interested in hearing about reanimation?"

"I am indeed." Anders tried a bite of his salad. It was delicious. There were crumbles of blue cheese and almonds, and he didn't have to eat it with his hands. Today was finally starting to turn up. "So the necromancy, you never call on spirits? Just wisps?"

"Just wisps," Amell said. "They're drawn to death. I can feel them beyond the Veil, waiting for it to thin so they can cross, and I bind them. I studied necromancy at the Circle, but it was all just theory
and conjecture until the Wardens recruited me."

"Lucky you," Anders said.

"Lucky me." Amell agreed. "Should I assume you rely on spirits as a spirit healer? Do you use just one or...?"

"That's me, putting all my eggs in one basket." Anders grinned, ripping off a piece of bread to dip in his stew. The stew was also delicious. He was going to end up overeating and making himself sick. Well, there was no helping it. He certainly couldn't be expected to pace himself after the day he'd had, "You can see how well it's worked out for me so far,"

"Would it be too forward to ask what kind of spirit you rely on?" Amell asked.

"Compassion." Anders said.

Amell measured him for a moment, "I can see that." He decided.

"Well I mean, what else are your choices, really?" Anders shrugged, "What am I going to do, run around healing people with Justice and Faith?"

Amell said something in response that Anders didn't catch. A commotion in the courtyard distracted him. A rather large procession of important looking people had arrived, all in very official looking armor. The seneschal had come out to greet them, and of course, there was a templar with them. "Well that's... well shit." Anders sighed.

As was his luck, the seneschal gestured towards where they were sitting, and the whole procession trotted over. Amell stood up to receive them. Anders wondered if anyone would notice if he crawled away.

The man leading them was in gold and silver full plate, and stood with his hand on the pommel of an extravagant sword. Anders guessed he was someone terribly important, but he was more concerned with the templar he was with. Rylock. Why did it have to be her, of all people? Hadn't she gone ahead to Denerim the day he'd been caught? What was she doing back?

The man leading the procession started talking while Anders was tried to become one with the stairwell. "So... this isn't what I was expecting. I'd wanted to come and give the Orlesian Wardens a formal welcome, but I heard you were ambushed? Care to give me the full story?"

"If you heard we were ambushed, you heard the full story," Amell said.

"I suppose so," The man said, taking in the many wounded piled on the stairs behind them, "Seneschal Varel tells me the rest of the Wardens are unaccounted for, but I see you're still alive and well."

"Try not to sound so disappointed." Amell said.

"I'll get over it, I'm sure." The man grinned.


It didn't happen. The man turned to survey the destruction of the Keep, and once he moved, there was nothing keeping Anders out of Rylock's line of sight. The look on her face was terrifying. Surprise, but also malice, and beneath that, glee. "King Alistair! Your majesty, beware!" Rylock pushed to the front of procession, "This man is a dangerous criminal!"
"Oh, I don't know about that-" The King started to say.

With quick steps, Rylock strode past both the King and Amell and grabbed Anders by his arm, wrenching him up from the steps and knocking over the lovely tray of food Amell had brought him. The stew spilled on his boots, and rice went everywhere. "This is an apostate who we were in the process of bringing back to the Circle to face justice! Where are Biff and Harold? What did you do to them, murderer?"

"Murderer?" Anders repeated. He made a rather feeble effort to pull back from her, more for the show of it than anything else. Her grip was like a vice. This was what he got for staying to help. This was why Anders first concern should always be Anders. "We're jumping to that, are we?"

"I swear, if they are dead, I will see you hang." Rylock hissed. She reached for a pair of manacles hanging from her belt, and Anders sighed. Everyone was staring at him. The King. The Seneschal. The whole procession of soldiers... Amell.

"Your templars died to darkspawn, not Anders." Amell said in his defense. Anders knew he was wasting his breath, but he gave him a smile for trying.

"This is Chantry business, Warden. It's no concern of yours." Rylock snapped, shackling Anders' wrists behind his back.

"It's every concern of mine." Amell said. "This man was instrumental in saving the Vigil, and has been an asset to the Wardens."

Now he was just lying, Anders thought. Well.. it was sweet of him. No one had ever lied for him before. Not to a templar, at least.

"Maybe he should be shown a little mercy?" The King offered up.

"Aeonar will be a mercy to him, if he's not hung for his crimes." Rylock said. Anders felt sick. The Veil was thin in the mages' prison, and any mage with a strong connection to the Fade was found guilty when spirits and demons sought them out. A spirit healer's connection to the Fade was almost as strong as a blood mage, but... no. No reason to think that far ahead. Think about something else. The stew had been good. He had that.

"You know nothing of mercy." Amell actually sounded angry. It really was sweet. "I hereby conscript this mage for the Wardens."

"What?" Anders said.

"What!?" Rylock screamed, giving his manacles a yank that pulled him away from Amell. "Never!"

"I believe the Grey Wardens still retain the Right of Conscription, no?" The King said. The King himself was speaking for him. Any minute now Anders was going to wake up from this dream and find himself back in his cell in solitary, going mad and arguing with Mr. Wiggums about the nuances of creation magic. "I will allow it."

"This-! I-!" Rylock sputtered. Her hand had such a fierce grip on his arm Anders winced.

"Get those shackles off my recruit," Amell glared. The King shrugged his deference to Amell, and Rylock finally yielded.

"If... if your Majesty feels it is best." She muttered. A moment later, and the shackles were off. Rylock gave him such a shove it sent Anders stumbling. Amell caught him and righted him as
Rylock stormed away.

"Six months, Alistair." Amell said. Whatever significance there was to the number, Anders didn't know. He was still having trouble processing what had just happened. "This shouldn't still be happening. Anora promised us autonomy."

"And you promised me revenge." Alistair grinned ruefully, "I guess we're both pretty disappointed, aren't we? Ah... look. I can see we're not going to be sitting down for tea and crumpets any time soon. You've got a lot of work ahead of you, dealing with the vestiges of the blight, and I've got to deal with the throne. I won't stay.

"Ferelden's still relying on you. I don't know what's behind all this trouble in Amaranthine, but I'm sure you can handle it. I can't help you with the darkspawn, but you know where to find me, if you need me for... you know, king stuff. Good luck, Amell. May the Maker watch over you."

And just like that it was over. Anders watched the procession leave as quickly as it came, his head spinning. He definitely going to be sick. Locking his hands over his head, Anders took a deep breath and tried to relax.

"We have a new recruit then?" The seneschal spoke first in the awkward silence that followed the King's departure, "Excellent. The Wardens will need to replenish their numbers. Whenever you're ready to see the Joining, you can come and see me. I know where the Wardens kept their supplies."

"Thank you, Varel." Amell said, "You're dismissed."

"Commander." The seneschal nodded and left.

"So," Anders let out the breath he'd been holding, but felt no better. "That was a thing that just happened. Me, a Grey Warden, huh?"

"I need to talk to you." Amell said.

"Right. Sure." Anders mumbled, letting Amell lead him past the stairs, and into the house beside them. Apparently, it led down into the Keep's cellar. Which was a lot cozier than a cell, but Anders still had to wonder. "What are we doing in here?"

"We're talking," Amell said, reaching into a pouch on his belt. He pulled out three sovereigns and pressed them into Anders' hand. "If you're going to go, go now. While the Keep is still in disrepair and we're still searching for survivors. This is the only chance I can give you."

"Are you serious?" Anders asked. His life had turned around so many times in one day it was making him dizzy. "Is this some kind of test? Because I am terrible at tests."

"It's not a test." Amell promised, "I can't be expected to keep an eye on one apostate when the Vigil is like this, and I've got talking darkspawn to worry about."

"Why are you telling me this? Why are you doing all this for me?" Anders asked. "You don't even know me."

"It's not about you," Amell said. "It's about me. It's about every mage. We deserve a choice."

"A choice, huh?" Anders mumbled, staring down at the sovereigns Amell had pressed into his palm. "Can't say I've had many of those but... look. I'm not an idiot. I know, looks and brains, too good to be true, right? I know if I run, they'll just find me again. And you seem... well, you seem alright, honestly. If it's all the same to you, I think I'll have a go at being a Grey Warden."
"... even knowing what you know about me?" Amell asked hesitantly.

"Oh, you mean the whole," Anders mimed stabbing at his hand. "No, that's terrifying, and I'm shaking in my knickers just thinking about it, but you know. No one's perfect."

"I need your silence on this, Anders. Whether or not you stay."

"You have it. Really, you can trust me." Anders promised. "We shook hands on it, remember?" Anders couldn't tell if Amell trusted him. He had an impressively enigmatic face; Anders made a mental note never to play Wicked Grace with him.

"... thank you." Amell said eventually. There we go. Progress. Trust was the basis of any relationship, after all.

"So... do you want these back, or?" Anders tossed the coins in his hand.

Amell shook his head, "Keep them, in case you change your mind."

"Me? Change my mind about something at the last second? That doesn't sound like something I'd do." Anders joked, pocketing the coins. Amell made an amused sound. It was a sort of huff that didn't part his lips, and barely moved his head. Why was it so hard to get him to laugh? It was going to drive Anders mad until he managed it.

They left the entrance to the cellar, and waiting for them at the base of the stairs was the crate of lyrium potions, and tray of food Amell had brought him. Except the tray was upside down, rice scattered in the dirt, salad mixed with the grass, stew turning the dirt to mud, and his lovely loaf was being eaten by ants. Rylock's visits were always nice.

"I'll get us another." Amell promised, kneeling to pick up the mess.

Anders bent to help him. "Do you suppose recruiting me like that is going to get you in trouble with the Chantry?"

"Very probably." Amell shrugged. When everything was balanced on the tray, he carried it back to the Vigil. He passed Mhairi on his way in, and the recruit gave him a nod before heading straight to Anders.

"Ser mage, I hear congratulations are in order." Mhairi said, "Seneschal Varel announced you'd been recruited into the Wardens."

"Did he?" Anders asked, unable to help his icy tone. For all he'd helped her throughout the attack on the Vigil, the woman had jumped on the first chance she had to condemn him for a murderer. Maybe he was petty, but it was a little hard to forgive and forget.

"I was hoping to talk to you." Mhairi continued. Anders considered picking up the crate of potions and hiding from her in the make-shift infirmary. Surely that surly physician would chase her off if she tried to follow him, "I wanted to apologize for my earlier conduct. You fought admirably, and I fear I misjudged you."

"You... wait, what?" Anders blinked.

"You have to understand, the term 'apostate' carries with it several connotations."

"Yes, mages who want a bit of freedom," Anders said glibly, "We're wicked things, I know."
"It's not that," Mhairi shook her head, brushing a few stray pieces of rice off from the bottom step and inviting herself to sit. "It's the way apostates are portrayed by the Chantry. Not as healers, but as evil. As blood mages... or necromancers. After Rowland... I was distraught. I couldn't place the blame where it really belonged, so I took it out on you. I shouldn't have, and I apologize."

What did he do here, Anders wondered. Did he jump nobly to Amell's defense, or did he avoid any and all conflict, accept her apology, and slink away as quickly and non-confrontationally as possible? It was a tough decision, really. "No harm done." Anders smiled.

"I just... I heard all the stories. When they speak of him... it's always as a hero. He united Ferelden. He brought together the dwarves, the elves, the mages. He won the Landsmeet, all through diplomacy. He wasn't supposed to be like this.

"I guess that's the trouble with stories, isn't it?" Mhairi sighed when Anders didn't answer. "No one says they have to be true."
Joining

Chapter Summary

I was always a bit bothered by Varel performing the Joinings in Awakening. I feel like that should have been for the PC.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 18 Ferventis Sometime Somewhere

The setting sun cast strange shadows throughout the Keep. Anders' didn't give the sepia tones and far off floating spire in the sky much thought. He had patients to heal, after all, and Amell had wanted to stay to watch him summon Compassion. One woman on the infirmary-wall had need of such powerful healing; a darkspawn had scalped her, and she had third degree burns all along her arms. Anders healed her, while Amell knelt beside him and watched.

Anders remembered the woman had smelled of burnt flesh and rot the first time he'd healed her. She had no such smell now, which was a relief. No one ever stopped to think about the gritty side of being a healer. The way open wounds, burns, and a person who spent hours lying in their own sick could smell. The way your hands always ended up covered in blood, loose hair, and shit. What was that saying? The healers' hands were the bloodiest? Anders wondered how a blood mage would feel about that. Would he laugh?

Anders looked up from the woman. Off the in the distance, the rest of the courtyard was floating on an island. There were templars there, shaking their swords at him, unable to reach him across the chasm. "I'll tell them you died." Amell promised. "You can go."

Anders shook his head, "I have to help."

"I know," Amell smiled proudly. His eyes were the wrong color, Anders noticed. They weren't their usual russet, but a soft gold.

"Compassion." Anders realized. The scene from the infirmary melted away. The woman turned to smoke beneath his hands, the templars turned to demons, and all the structures turned to dust. He sat not up on the courtyard wall, but on the ground amidst a cluster of reeds. This was the Fade. He must have fallen asleep. "What are you doing?"

Amell gave himself a shake, and his form fell away. His hair was went from black to gold, his skin glowed white, his armor turned to flowing robes, and he was gone. Compassion sat in his place, looking as always a little like Anders' mother. She'd pulled that memory from his head years ago, but
Anders didn't mind. His mother had been a lovely woman. Compassion suited her.

"I like him," Compassion explained. "He's been so kind to you. Not since Ferrenly have you
dreamed of such a thing, and even Ferrenly never showed you true Compassion."

"That's not fair," Anders said, "Ferrenly was the first friend I made outside the Tower. He gave me
an amulet for saving his life, remember?" Anders pulled the fox pendant out from under his robes
and showed it to her. It wasn't really here, but his will could make it manifest. He was wearing it in
the real world, after all. "I still wear it."

"You wear it as a warning. Not as a symbol." Compassion said, seeing into his heart. "To you, it's a
reminder of the dangers of trust and friendship. He still turned you into the templars, after all you did
for him. The man you were dreaming about kept you from them. He offered to let you go."

"His name is Amell," Anders told her.

"I like him." Compassion said, not for the first time.

"Should I be jealous?" Anders mused, "I feel like I should be jealous. You're not going to leave me
for another mage, are you?"

"So long as you do not leave me for another spirit," Compassion teased. That was his doing, and
Anders was proud of it. It had taken years for her to learn what a joke was. "We healed so many
today. I'm glad their dreams will still shape the Fade."

"Me too." Anders smiled. "I'm not overtaxing you, am I? Amell gave me a crate of lyrium potions to
work with, and I'm kind of making myself sick going through them. I can only imagine how you feel
being channeled for hours."

"Compassion is limitless." Compassion said.

"I find that hard to believe," Anders admitted, thinking of the day he'd had. "What most people know
of compassion could fit into a thimble."

"You know me," Compassion pointed out. "And I know you. Together we are limitless." She leaned
forward and kissed his forehead, in the same loving way his mother had for twelve years. And then
she smiled, and her face fell away, and the Fade along with it.

"Wake up, mage," Anders felt the words before he heard them. A force shook his shoulder roughly,
and Anders jerked upright, bringing his hands up to protect his face.

No one kicked him. There weren't any shackles binding his wrists together. Anders was still on the
outer walls, his back propped up against the banister. He'd fallen asleep beside a patient. The Vigil's
physician was there, scowling down at him. Not a pretty sight to wake up to, but infinitely better than
a templar, to be sure.

"Good morning to you too," Anders said. He guessed it was still morning. The sun was in the
eastern sky behind the Keep, casting long shadows over the courtyard. Anders had never been very
good at telling time, but it wasn't too hot out, so it couldn't have been afternoon yet.

Anders took it, hating everything. "We lost six in the night. Two are relapsing. Eat quickly, I need
your help."

At least no one had thrown the bowl at him, Anders allotted, eating as quickly as he dared without
upsetting his stomach. There was even a spoon for him, and the first bite revealed there was a touch
of cinnamon to the oats. The kitchens must have splurged for warden-recruits; Anders was living like a king. He set the bowl up on the banister when he finished, and decided he needed a piss.

He found a spot to relieve himself over the wall, and was more or less relaxed until he decided to start thinking. What was he still doing here? Namaya was out there, somewhere in Amaranthine, looking into his phylactery for him. He couldn't really expect to be a Grey Warden and fight darkspawn all his life, but suppose Namaya never found his phylactery? Suppose he ran now, and Rylock was there waiting to take him to the hang man's noose, or worse, Aeonar.

He couldn't risk it, Anders decided, shaking himself off. It wouldn't be so bad. Amell was a swell sort of fellow, blood mage or not. And Compassion liked him. Anders could stay and fight darkspawn a while, and decide what came later... Later. Feeling better, Anders found the physician on the wall and healed the two patient's he was concerned about.

Afterwards, Anders busied himself doing the sort of tasks no one wanted to talk about. Sure, in the Circle everyone envied the healer all the pretty lasses ran to with their paper cuts, but outside it? No one envied the healer changing bandages and bed pans, moving the dead to make way for the living, bathing the sick, or turning them over so they didn't develop bed sores. It wasn't a wonder there were so few spirit healers.

Anders took a break around midday to stretch. He smelled about as bad as his patients. He hadn't bathed in three days, and his robes were shot. Working the makeshift infirmary left them stained with every bodily fluid imaginable, and Anders hands? It didn't matter how many times he dried them off or washed them between patients. The filth was there, under his nails, and Anders could smell it every time he scratched at the growing stubble on his face.

Anders was most certainly not feeling pretty when Amell came and found him. The Warden Commander had changed out of his armor and into a blue and silver Warden doublet with black trousers, and Anders felt more than a little unsightly in comparison. He must have been, because Amell commented on it when Anders met him at the base of the stairs. "Did you sleep out here?"

"Guilty," Anders said. He could have looked worse, he supposed. At least he had a tie to hold his hair back, "Seems I've been missing out on my beauty sleep a lot lately."

"We have quarters for you," Amell said. "Did no one tell you? I sent a messenger last night."

"Afraid not." Anders shrugged.

"I can show you where they are, then." Amell said, waving for him to follow, "We're going to see to the Joining soon, and you'll probably want to have a bath and change first."

"Into what? My small clothes?" Anders joked. He was wearing everything he owned. "It's that kind of joining, is it?"

Amell grinned. "One of the Orlesian Wardens might have something that could fit you. Or I might. I know I have a razor you can borrow."

"What, you don't like the unwashed apostate look?" Anders joked, as if he'd had any say in his hygiene for the past few days.

"I didn't say that," Amell said playfully. "I just thought you could use a chance to look your best before the Joining, in case... Just in case."

"In case what?" Anders wondered, "Anything I should know ahead of time? Any special way I
"No," Amell mumbled. He seemed suddenly distant, which was a shame considering Anders thought they were getting on rather well. "Nothing like that."

The Warden's barracks were inside the Vigil proper, to the right of the throne room. They reminded Anders of the apprentice quarters in the Circle. There were three rows of bunks, each with their own clothes chests, armor and weapon stands. A few writing desks were pushed up against the walls, and a table took up the middle of the room. There weren't a lot of options for privacy, but it could have been worse. There could have been templars.

Amell pointed him towards a door on the far side of the room. "The wash room is through there. I'll bring you a razor and some clothes."

"Do you have anything in green or teal?" Anders asked, "I think it really compliments my complexion,"

"I'll see what I can do," Amell almost laughed. Anders could see it in the shake of his shoulders, and was thoroughly disappointed when the man left without so much as a chuckle.

The wash room was your typical sunken stone basin, big enough to fit four grown men, not that Anders ever wanted to try something like that. There was a cabinet filled with towels and soaps, and a few benches and a vanity. All in all, a great deal better than the wooden buckets apprentices were given. Anders would be happy if he never had to take another sponge bath sitting on a bench with five other apprentices ever again.

The basin was empty, but that wasn't a problem for a mage. Anders summoned the water for his bath, and heated it to a comfortable steam with his magic. Stripping out of his ruined robe, he took out his hair tie, removed his necklace and his earring, and grabbed himself a bar of soap before climbing into the bath.

If a proper meal made him want to cry, a proper bath made him want to moan. Anders actually did moan, quite a bit. The warm water on his aching muscles and dirt-caked skin was incredible. He would have welcomed drowning as a happy death. He was washing his hair when Amell came back, a bundle of clothes in one hand and a razor in the other.

"This is incredible," Anders said, "I can't tell you how much I love having a real bath and not just those old buckets. Did you hate those things as much as I did?"

Amell gave him such a queer look Anders wondered if he'd stepped on something sharp. "I'll leave these here for you. Come to the throne room when you're done." Amell set the clothes down on the bench and fled.

"Well. I guess we're done talking then." Anders said to himself. He felt much better after a long soak and a deep scrub. He found a brush in the vanity, and had a chance to do his hair properly, shave his face, and all in all look like a little less of a savage. The clothes Amell had brought him were a decent sort, except for the trousers.

Anders hated trousers. If ever there was an evil, it wasn't blood mages or magisters or darkspawn, it was trousers. There was nothing worse than having your manhood smashed up into a tight pair of pants or sticking to your thighs, and or the way the fabric chaffed something unmentionable whenever you sat down or bent the wrong way. Anders much preferred his robes, but if it was trousers or nothing, he guessed it was trousers.
They were rather spiffy, if nothing else. Black and woolen, they went well the green doublet Amell had found for him. The poor fellow was far too nice. Anders was willing to bet if he actually pressed him, Amell would have gone out and found him that pony. Tying back his hair and putting on his necklace and earring, Anders spent a few extra seconds admiring himself in the mirror before he went out to the throne room.

It was empty, save for Amell, Oghren, and Mhairi. They were gathered around a small end table, which held a silver chalice and several vials. Anders had been expecting a lot more pomp and fromp, just based on Amell's suggestion that he bathe and shave. Maybe the fromp came later, Anders decided, coming over to stand with them.

Amell gave him a small smile, and then turned to address all of them. "What happens here is a secret known only to Grey Wardens. One of many. You will tell no one." That sounded familiar, Anders thought. Amell uncorked one of the vials, and poured it into the chalice. Anders smelled blood, and rot. "This is-"

The door to the throne room creaked open. Amell set the vial down, and while his expression didn't change, Anders saw his hands clench. The seneschal poked his head into the throne room. "Forgive me, Commander,"

"I said no interruptions," Amell said.

"I know, Commander." The seneschal said, "Forgive me. I'd hoped you'd not yet started."

Amell let out a long breath, and seemed to deflate. "Touch nothing." Amell warned them, stepping around them to address the seneschal, "What is it, Varel?"

"The Howe is back." Varel explained, "I would have turned him away, but he's asking to speak with you. He claims he wants to be a Grey Warden. I thought if you were interested, it would save you the trouble of two Joinings."

"The who?" Anders asked.

"Send him in." Amell said.

"The Howe." Oghren repeated. "Rendon Howe's little blighter. While you were playing nurse maid last night, me and the Boss here paid the dungeon's a visit to see if we could find any more wayward mages. Instead, we find out this little bugger was sitting pretty in his cell during the whole attack. Turns out he was here to kill the Commander, so what does the Commander do?" Oghren frowned up at Amell. For whatever reason, the dwarf seemed to cheer Amell immensely. He was listening to the lecture with a smile. "He lets him go, free as a fart. If you're not careful, this guy is gonna go all Zevran on you, mark my words."

"You think so?" Amell wondered quietly, "He didn't seem the type, but maybe if I ask him nicely."

"What do you-wait-Ehehaha! No! I meant the trying to kill you part, not the-ah sod it," Oghren doubled over giggling.

Anders was hopelessly lost. Fortunately, Rendon Howe's little blighter was shown into the throne room a moment later. He was all angles and shadows, with a nose like a hawk, and a dark patch of stubble beneath his lip. He was in full leather armor, and while he carried no visible weapon, Anders was all for the assessment that the man was a killer.

"Nathaniel." Amell greeted him rather civilly for someone who'd apparently tried to kill him, "I heard you wanted to join us. Can I ask why?"
"If I can ask you a question first." Nathaniel said. His voice was all smoke. Anders didn't know what to make of him. "You set me free, despite what I said or what I might do. I want to know why."

"You're not your father, Nathaniel," Amell said. "What you do now is your own responsibility."

"That's just it. When you let me go... I didn't know what to do. I thought I was going to die in there. Maybe I even wanted to, but you're right. I need to do my part to fight the darkspawn. It's what my father should have done. Let me join you. Please, let me try. I have nowhere else to go."

"There's no turning back from this," Amell warned him.

"I know." Nathaniel said, and apparently that was enough. Amell waved him to a spot beside Anders.

Out of all of them, Mhairi seemed the happiest at his inclusion. "Congratulations, ser,"

"Thank you, my lady." Nathaniel said.

"Are you always like this?" Anders asked Amell, "Forgive everything, trust everyone? I get mercy, but I'm sensing a knife in the back in your future. Just saying."

"This is not a mercy." Amell said. Anders felt a chill run up his spine. "We were just starting. We can start over. What happens here is a secret known only to Grey Wardens. One of many. You will tell no one."

Amell returned to the chalice, and uncorked a second vial. It was lyrium. Anders would know the tell-tale blue and minty smell anywhere. Mixed with the smell of blood and rot, it was almost unbearable. Amell poured the rest of the vials into the chalice, and Anders felt the sudden pull of the Fade as magic touched the air. The blood and lyrium mixture lifted up from the goblet and slowly wrapped itself around Amell's hand as he worked a spell the likes of which Anders had never seen before. Which didn't mean much, really, considering Anders had never seen blood magic before meeting Amell.

"This is darkspawn blood," Amell explained while he cast, "Drinking it prepared in this way... mastering the corruption in it, gives a Grey Warden the ability to sense darkspawn. From this moment on, you are all Grey Wardens... no matter what happens."

"Traditionally, these words are spoken before a Joining." Amell said when the spell finished, "Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten. And that one day, we shall join you."

Amell picked up the goblet, and finally hesitated, as if he couldn't decide who to offer it to first.

"Give it here," Oghren saved him. "We gotta split this four ways, huh? Shouldn't have used the sampler size."

Amell handed him the chalice, and Oghren drank. He stumbled as he swallowed, but rather than catch him, Amell caught the goblet. Oghren's eyes rolled back into his head, and he coughed wretchedly, as if he'd swallowed a shot of spirits that was too strong for him. He beat a fist against his chest, hacking, and after a long minute of struggling, belched loudly.

"Eugh," Oghren groaned, "That it? That all you got?"

"That's it," Amell smiled, but Anders saw genuine relief in place of his usual enigmatic expression,
and started to worry. If they were going in order of their lineup, Mhairi was next.

"Mhairi," Amell confirmed Anders' guess, holding out the goblet to her.

Mhairi nodded stoically, accepting the chalice and taking a long drink. She stumbled as Oghren had, clutching her head in her hands as she coughed. Anders saw the whites of her eyes as she looked around, blind, and her coughs turned ragged. She clutched at her throat, as if suffocating, and fell to her knees. A few breaths later, and she collapsed.

Amell knelt beside her, and set his fingers to her throat. He must not have found a pulse, because he sighed and closed her eyes.

Suddenly, Amell allowing him a hot a bath and a change of clothes made a great deal more sense. It was the sort of thing any decent person did for a man who might be about to die. "So, I'm guessing darkspawn blood isn't something you serve at dinner parties." Anders mumbled.

"It's not," Amell smiled; it was a reassuring smile, Anders thought, trying to let it reassure him. "Anders," Amell handed him the chalice.

Anders forced a grinned, feeling queasy. Part of that had to be the chalice. The mixture of darkspawn rot and lyrium was nauseating. "Bottoms up, then. If I wake up two weeks from now on a ship bound for Rivain in nothing but my small clothes with a tattoo on my forehead, I'm blaming you." Very clever. Anders wasn't even listening to what was coming out of his mouth at this point.

Pinching his nose against the smell, Anders tipped his head back, and drank.

He must have died. There was no other explanation for the feeling. Fire rotted his tongue, caught in his throat, and finally fell into his stomach. He saw Amell watching him, and then he saw nothing. He might have fallen. He wasn't sure. All he felt was pain, like every muscle in his body was seizing. Then he felt nothing.

The darkspawn were screaming. Deep beneath the earth, they wreathed and roiled, crawling over one another, bursting forth from thick sacks of flesh and blood. They were a number immeasurable, creatures of mindless hate and rage. Anders felt their essence like claws on the inside of his skull, digging ever deeper, chasing after a song too beautiful to comprehend. There was nothing in them but corruption, and it was eating away at him. Filling him up from the inside out until every part of him was wrong, black, and Void. Far away, he thought he heard Compassion crying.

Anders woke up screaming. Hands caught his shoulders, and they were neither malicious nor rough. The only explanation Anders had for that was that was he was still dreaming, and Compassion was with him. But when he opened his eyes, Amell was sitting beside him. "Anders. Wake up. It's over."

"Hey-you..." Anders managed. He was lying on one of the bunks in the warden barracks. The nice clothes Amell had lent him were completely soaked through with sweat. His stomach flipped over, and he swallowed down his breakfast before it tried to escape. "I'm mad at you."

"I know," Amell said, pressing a cup into his hand, "Here, have some water. Sit up slowly, and don't drink too fast."

Sitting up proved easier said than done. Anders felt like he was recovering from the worst hangover of his life. Pulling himself into some semblance of a sitting position, Anders brought the cup to his lips and took a drink. After his first sip, Anders was more likely to believe he was drinking the tears of Andraste than water. Water couldn't soothe his aching throat so easily, as if he hadn't just drank the very essence of darkness.
"You might have warned me, you know," Anders said; his voice was a mess. His throat felt scratchy and his tongue was swollen. He had no idea how Oghren hadn't passed out.

"I did give you a chance to run," Amell reminded him. "That was more than Duncan ever did."

"Who?" Anders took another drink, wondering how long his headache would last.

"The Warden who recruited me, and two others," Amell fished a necklace out from beneath his tunic; the small vial of blood looked suspiciously familiar. "The first recruit died. The second got scared, and tried to run. Duncan killed him to keep the Joining a secret."

"Cheery," Anders said.

"Very," Amell agreed. "Thank you for not running. This is yours," Amell pulled a matching pendant of blood from his pocket, and draped it around Ander's neck.

"Are we married now?" Anders asked.

"Not exactly," Amell said, "You can call me Brother if you want, but I'd rather you didn't."

"Ouch," Anders finished off his water, and handed the empty cup back to Amell, "I see how it is."

"I doubt that," Amell grinned, before speaking seriously, "The amulet contains some of the blood that was part of your ritual. It's meant to be remind us of the sacrifices we make in our eternal vigil against the darkspawn."

"Real cheery," Anders said, lifting the amulet to stare at it. It was a grim little thing; Anders could almost swear the blood was pulsing to the beat of his heart. It reminded him all too much of a phylactery. He stuffed it under his shirt so he didn't have to look at it. "Did the other recruit survive?"

"Nathaniel?" Amell supplied for him, "Yes. He woke about an hour before you. Oghren took him out for drinks."

"That's what I get for being a late bloomer," Anders sighed. "No free drinks for Anders. How long was I out for?"

"Around six hours. And I'd be more than willing to share a drink with you, if you want." Amell said. "There's a lot I need to tell you, now that you're officially a Warden."

"Well, I'm not about to pass up free drinks." Anders decided, standing up, and promptly sitting back down. Hangover was an excellent description of whatever he was dealing with at the moment. But everyone knew the cure for a hangover was to keep drinking, so Anders made an attempt to stand again. He managed it with a helping hand from Amell, and grinned. "Point the way, fearless leader."

"Are you hungry at all?" Amell asked, leading him out of the barracks and to the kitchens. They was just down the hall. Convenient, that.

"Starving, now that you mention it." Anders admitted. Amell smiled ruefully at him, "What's that look for?"

Amell shook his head, "Let's get that drink first."

"This isn't going to be pretty, is it?" Anders asked. Amell didn't answer, which Anders supposed was answer enough. The kitchens were busy with servants and cooks preparing dinner for the Vigil, but the Warden-Commander warranted special treatment. They were given a counter in the corner of the
kitchen, and brought out a bottle of wine and a plate of fried something that Anders ate without tasting.

"So, do you want the good news or bad news first?" Amell asked.

"There's good news?" Anders asked, taking a drink of wine. He could feel his headache receding almost as soon as he swallowed.

"No." Amell said.

Anders laughed. He couldn't help it.

"I'm kidding. There is," Amell said. "Tempered, the corruption allows us to sense darkspawn, makes us immune to Blight sickness, and provides a sort of... natural stamina and endurance."

"I don't know about darkspawn, but I'm sensing a huge 'but' coming on," Anders noted.

"Not exactly." Amell assured him. "The hunger should stop eventually, but the nightmares are forever, and they only get worse as the corruption spreads."

"Corruption spreading sounds bad." Anders noted, reaching for another ball of fried meat and closing his fingers around thin air. He hadn't even realized he'd eaten them all. Amell noticed, and signaled for a servant to bring them another tray.

"It is." Amell said once the servant was gone. "Under normal circumstances, most Wardens only have ten to thirty years after their Joining before the corruption consumes them."

"And under abnormal circumstances?" Anders dared.

"You won't believe me," Amell warned him.

"Try me." Anders said.

"Two-hundred years." Amell said.

"You're right," Anders laughed, "I don't believe you. So. Nightmares. Insatiable hunger. A premature death. All in all, it could be worse. I suppose I could be tranquil, or locked away in Aeonar. Or I could dead. Dead's bad."

"Perspective is good," Amell said.

"If I didn't have perspective, I'd still be sitting in a templar dungeon drooling on my small clothes." Anders laughed to himself. Amell was quiet. Anders glanced at him, and found him staring at him with a sympathetic expression.

"Anders, for what it's worth, I am sorry." Amell said, "I know there was a lot of risk involved, but I hope you think it's worth it. After all, being a Warden is the closest thing to freedom a mage can hope for."

"You certainly don't seem afraid to exercise it," Anders blurted before he could help himself. Mercifully, Amell didn't seem to be offended, but he did check to see if anyone was listening before he spoke.

"The Wardens don't forbid blood magic, Anders. I could even teach you, if you wanted."

"Then why tell me not to tell anyone?" Anders asked.
"You know why," Amell frowned at him for the question, "The stereotypes, the prejudice. It's magic. Nothing more."

"So you're telling me you didn't deal with a demon to learn it?" Anders doubted the man had simply cut his hand and realized the power that lay within the blood. Even if he had, it wouldn't have taught him how to utilize it to cast some of the complex spells Anders had seen him use against the darkspawn.

"I never said that," Amell said, "And you never said if you wanted me to teach you."

"Let me think about it," Anders said flippantly. He knew he should have been more respectful whenever he was addressing the Warden-Commander, but he'd always had a problem with authority. Even if he didn't have a problem with Amell, it was a hard habit to break.

As usual, Amell didn't look offended. He took a drink of his wine, and his teeth were stained red when he smiled, "I'll wait."

Chapter End Notes

An optional Apples and Apostates Chapter to provide some color on the following inside joke:

"He lets him go, free as a fart. If you're not careful, this guy is gonna go all Zevran on you, mark my words."

"You think so?" Amell wondered quietly, "He didn't seem the type, but maybe if I ask him nicely."
Amell hadn't been kidding about the hunger. Anders was starving. More often than not, he found himself sneaking in and out of the kitchens for an extra biscuit, a few apples, a third helping of soup, and once an entire pie. So far, he hadn't been caught. Anders wasn't entirely sure whether or not there was anything to catch. A warden might have been allowed the extra rations, but it was easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission, so sneak he did.

He was out on one such thieving venture six days into his stay at Vigil's Keep, a handful of ill-gotten goods in his arms and a muffin stuffed into his mouth, when he was finally caught.

"There you are, young man," The stern voice reminded Anders of Senior Enchanter Leorah and made him jump. Anders bit off his mouthful of muffin and swallowed hastily before he turned. It took him a minute to recognize the old woman frowning at him as Mistress Woolsey, the woman he'd saved on the battlements of Vigil's Keep.

"You know, the way you say that, you make me feel like a teenager," Anders said. Nevermind that he was sneaking food like one at this very moment. "I'm twenty-six, by the way. I'm not exactly young."

Mistress Woolsey laughed at him, "And I am sixty-three. Everyone is young to me,"

"Well, you know they say age is just a number." Anders said.

"I am this arling's treasurer. Numbers are my life," Woolsey said haughtily; she paused, and evaluated him with a frown, "... were you flirting with me just now?"

"Maybe a little," Anders grinned.

"Well stop." She was blushing. No one was immune. Anders was fairly confident he could charm anyone, templars excluded. "I'll have none of that nonsense. I'm far too old for it."

"Well that's just ridiculous. The only reason a lovely woman should stop hearing she's lovely is if she goes deaf," Anders said.

"You-" Woolsey shook her head bemusedly, "You are going to be trouble. I pity the poor ladies of the Vigil. In any case, if anyone is going deaf, it is you. I recall giving you specific instructions to seek me out when the battle was over for a reward."
"Oh, right. That." Anders went back to eating his muffin, relieved he wasn't in trouble, "It was nothing, really. I don't need a reward. Unless a kiss is on the table."

"A kiss on the forehead, perhaps. I am old enough to be your mother," Woolsey frowned, "Now listen. I spoke with the Commander, and I am told you lost everything to the templars. So I have spoken to Ambassador Cera, and I have commissioned a staff on your behalf. She should have it ready if you go and speak with her. You will need it, I suspect. I am told the workers have finished clearing away the rubble in the cellars, and you're to clear the Keep of the last of the darkspawn today."

Just what Anders wanted to hear. Honestly, who didn't look forward to fighting corruption given form, especially when said corruption haunted your dreams and terrified the spirit you'd been with for fourteen years into receding so deep into the Fade you hadn't spoken to her in days? Anders was just champing at the bit to fight more darkspawn, really. In fact, he'd probably eat the damn bit if it weren't an idiom just to stave off his ravenous hunger.

"That's so sweet of you." Anders said. Woolsey didn't need to hear him complain. He did need a staff, after all. "You shouldn't have."

"I most certainly should have," Woolsey said, "We can't have our wardens going into battle unless they're outfitted for it. I should offer my congratulations on that, as well. It is a high honor to be recruited into the wardens. Higher still to warrant conscription, before representatives of the Chantry and the King himself. I trust you deserve it."

"Oh, definitely not," Anders grinned to hide how startled he was by the praise. "Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are. It's going to be really embarrassing when everyone realizes I'm just making this up as I go."

"Well I for one have every confidence in you." Woolsey said. She turned to go, and hesitated a moment. Anders wondered if the old girl actually wanted a kiss when she tapped the corner of her lips. "You have crumbs on your face, ser. Just there."

Anders wiped his face off, which was rather redundant, considering he planned to keep eating. A stolen meal later, and he made his way through the walls of the Vigil to find Ambassador Cera. He hadn't actually met the Circle Ambassador yet, and to be perfectly honest he wasn't eager to. He didn't know the woman, but he knew his reputation as a troublemaker and escapee. The fact that Amell hadn't cared was a wonder; he doubted he would be so lucky twice.

The Circle Ambassador had a room on the second story of Vigil's Keep, beside the library. It smelled like the Tower. The cloying scent of lyrium mixed with the musty scent of old parchment was familiar in the worst of all possible ways. Anders wrinkled his nose, but promptly unwrinkled it when he saw the young beauty sitting behind the desk in the center of the room. She was an elf with fiery red hair and matching hazel eyes, and-ah yes. Of course. There it was. The glare that every Circle Mage he'd ever known donned when they met him. It just wouldn't be right without it, really.

"You must be Anders." Cera said. Her voice was tight and clipped. "Your staff is just there. You may take it and go."

Anders found the staff in question leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. It was a simple thing. Ashwood, with a leather grip, and an iron blade at its base. Set atop the staff was a basic amplifying rune. Anders gave the staff an experimental spin, and Cera's frown deepened.

"Not in here, if you please." Cera said.
"I like the balance," Anders said.

"How nice." Cera said flatly. "Please leave."

Anders should have left. He really should have. He knew it, and even as he opened his mouth he wondered what was wrong with him that he could never leave well enough alone. "I'm getting the feeling you don't like me much. It's a really sad feeling, you know. I think I might cry."

"I would never disrespect the Warden Commander by speaking ill of his recruits." Cera said. That was a yes.

"It could be our little secret." Anders said.

"... Very well." Cera set her quill aside and steepled her hands together. "No, Anders, I don't like you. You are irresponsible, inconsiderate, and wholly undeserving of the honor to serve the Wardens."

"Is that all?" Anders asked. "Whew. For a second there I was worried I'd done something wrong."

"You have no idea, do you?" Cera frowned. "It's tradition that the Wardens only recruit one mage from a Circle at a time. When the late Warden-Commander Duncan came to the Tower almost two years ago, everyone knew that mage would be Amell. He was Irving's own apprentice, a prodigy who mastered the summoning sciences at thirteen. He is undeniably exceptional, but you?"

"You're the reason the lower levels of the tower are off limits without escort. You're the reason apprentices are no longer allowed outside for exercise and fresh air. Your ridiculous rumors and countless escape attempts have made the Tower a nightmare for the rest of us."

"I think you're confusing me with the templars." Anders said. "You know, the ones who made all those rules."

"Because of you!" Cera snapped. "You act as if your actions have no consequences, and they don't. Not for you. It's the rest of us who suffer for your arrogance. By all rights, you should be in Aeanor right now, but the Warden-Commander broke tradition and conscripted you. An apostate. I competed with five other enchanters for this position, but you?"

"You have no idea how lucky you are. You didn't earn this. You don't deserve it. And I have no doubt you will squander it. So no, I do not like you. But I am the Circle Ambassador, and I will serve accordingly. If you need lyrium potions or enchantments, I will provide them. But otherwise, I have no wish to see you. Ever. Please leave."

"Well now you're just playing hard to get." Anders said. Cera scowled at him, so he gave her a flourishing bow and a mocking, "My lady," and left.

Anders didn't know why he bothered. He knew why she hated him before he asked, but he supposed it never hurt to be sure. After all, what if he'd broken the heart of one of her friends, or her heart back in the Circle? With the right sort of anger, the air could have been sizzling with chemistry, but it was the same thing it always was. Just once, Anders wanted to hear a pretty girl agree with him when he called the Circle an injustice.

At least Amell seemed to agree with him. That was something. Anders didn't think he could have buckled down and served a Warden Commander who didn't. Authority was bad enough. Authority you didn't agree with? Well that was no authority at all, if Anders had anything to say about it.

Anders found Amell out in the courtyard. He and the other Wardens were already waiting for him.
Amell was speaking to a soldier, while Nathaniel stood off to the side, and Oghren sat on a crate, drinking. Anders wandered over, glad the courtyard was finally clear. Enough of the injured had finally been taken care of that there was room for everyone in the infirmary. It was summer, and warm enough, but sleeping outside never did anyone any good.

"Heyyyy, Sparkles." Oghren slurred at his approach.

"Getting started early, I see." Anders noted, picking a spot upwind, "Weren't we supposed to fight darkspawn today?"

"Oh aye." Oghren said.

"And you're going to do this drunk, are you?" Anders asked.

"You always ask stupid questions?" Oghren asked.

"Only when I'm expecting stupid answers," Anders said. Oghren laughed uproariously, and while it was a welcome reprieve from Amell's quiet huffs, Anders didn't think it had been quite that funny. He turned to Nathaniel when Oghren turned back to his drinks. "So, Nate. Can I call you Nate?"

"I would rather you didn't." Nathaniel said.

"So, Nate, you're a Howe." Anders said.

Nate sighed. "Do you have a point, Mage?"

"Hey, I'm fond of the Howes! I'm also fond of the Whos the Whys and the Whats." Anders joked. Oghren hooted, and laughed so hard he fell off the crate he was sitting on.

"How clever." Nate sounded thoroughly unamused, which was just plain rude considering how hard Anders had worked on that joke.

"It's shameful how long it took me to come up with that." Anders chuckled.

"Five days, apparently," Nate noted. "I hope your spells come to you quicker than your jokes."

"Why Nate, do my ears deceive me, or was that, in fact, a joke? Do you, perhaps, have a sense of humor?" Anders wondered.

"No." Nate said with so little inflection Anders honestly couldn't tell if he was serious. He decided to laugh, and swore he saw the shadow of a smile on Nate's face.

"Are all of you ready?" Amell interrupted them. "We'll be heading down into the cellars to clear out the last of the darkspawn. Sergeant Maverlies claims not to know how deep they go. Nathaniel, this was your home. Do you have any insight?"

Nate shook his head. "No. My mother always forbade us from playing in the wine cellars, and as we got older my brother was the one who frequented them."

"Fun fellow to have around then, your brother?" Oghren asked. He'd picked himself up off the ground at some point.

"He could find his fun almost anywhere," Nathaniel agreed. "And then he would vomit on your shoes."

"Ah, good times," Oghren chuckled, trotting ahead into the cellar. Amell followed him, along with
Nate and Anders. Sergeant Maverlies, the solider Amell had been speaking to, took up the rear.

"You seem familiar," Anders said, trying to place her, but the brown hair and brown eyes were terribly nondescript. "I never forget a pretty face. How do I know you?"

"Ah, I am Sergeant Maverlies, ser mage." The solider nodded politely, never taking her eyes off Amell's back. "You healed my wrist, not two days prior, for which I am grateful."

"You're quite welcome, then. Are you going to be fighting with us?" Anders asked.

"No, ser." Maverlies shook her head. "I'm not to risk Blight sickness engaging the darkspawn. I'm here only to observe, unless any make it past you. In that case, I'll make sure they don't reach the surface." She looked at Amell again, stars in her eyes, and Anders took the hint. "I'm sure none will."

The hall was a wreck where the rubble left over from the attack had been cleared away. The stairs had collapsed, and ladder had been put up in their place. The floor was littered with pebbles, dust, and other debris. The ceiling was sunken dangerously low in several places, the beams straining under the weight.

Not only that, but it was pitch black. The only light came from the torch Maverlies carried. She lit what torches they came across, but not every sconce was full. Amell had him summon a ball of mage light, and expected him to hold it. Possibly for hours. Anders felt decidedly unsafe.

In the very first room of the cellar, they came across several corpses and a collapsed mabari. The poor mutt's fur was covered with blood, most of it his own, and he looked terribly gaunt from nearly a week buried under the rubble with no food or water. The only explanation Anders had for his survival was the fact that one of the bodies had fallen in front of the door, barricading it against the darkspawn below.

Amell looked surprisingly stricken. He knelt beside the dog and scratched its ear, and the blood in the dog's fur seemed to melt away at his touch. A rather sentimental way to use blood magic, Anders thought. "I'm just guessing, but I don't think there's anything I can do for him."

"No," Amell said, still petting the dog. "He's tainted. There are some flowers, toxic to humans, that can help with recovery. They grow in the Korcari Wilds,"

"Not exactly a stop next door, then," Anders said.

Amell ran his fingers beneath the dog's collar, and frowned. After a moment of fiddling, he retrieved a small piece of parchment rolled up in the collar. He unrolled it, and spent a moment reading before he looked up at Nathaniel. "Does the name Adria mean anything to you, Nathaniel?"

"She was my governess," Nathaniel said, taking the parchment from Amell. "She was like a mother to me. She claims to have taken refuge in the lower cellars... She could still be alive! We must save her."

"... You may not want to accompany us, then," Amell warned him.

"What are you talking about?" Nathaniel demanded, "I have to try to save her if she's down there."

Amell stared at him for a long moment, but ultimately turned away without explaining. He drew his blade from his boot, and hesitated. "Anders, could you put the dog to sleep for me?"

That was new. Amell hadn't asked for help with his mercy killings before. Anders cast the spell
without any quips, and Amell slit the dog's throat once it was asleep. When he stood, he looked terribly upset, but said nothing. A telekinetic spell from him lifted the body blocking the door out of their way, and they proceeded deeper into the cellar.

Anders felt much safer with a staff in his hands, knowing they were going to be fighting darkspawn, but the cellars contained surprisingly few darkspawn. What they contained were a lot of were people. Or things that had been people once.

"Ghouls," Amell called them.

They were the stuff of nightmares. Blight sickness had twisted them. Their skin took on an unnatural pallor, and a multitude of sores gave them a blotchy look that made them seem half darkspawn. Their eyes were sunken into their skulls, and covered with a sort of cataracts, but they weren't completely empty, and that was perhaps the most terrifying part.

There was something human left in the ghouls they found in the cellars. The first group they came across were a cluster of men and women crowded about the corpse of a soldier. They were eating him, but when they look up from the body, Anders could see hints of who they once were in the fear and anger that lay in their eyes. When they screamed, it was almost in confusion, as if they couldn't understand what had happened to them or why.

For that first fight, Anders cast a protective ward, and little else. Nathaniel fired perhaps two shots. It was Amell and Oghren who fought for them, desensitized to the horror of it all. Mercifully, the ghouls weren't hard to fight. They were unarmed and unarmored. Amell grabbed the first ghoul that charged him by its throat. She was a woman, with brown hair, green eyes, and a pretty yellow dress.

Anders felt the Fade swell around them as Amell cast something that corrupted her skin outward from where his hand held her throat, engorging her veins until Anders was sure they were going to burst. Then Amell threw her back into the rest of the ghouls, and Oghren swung his axe and cleaved her in half through her shoulder, and down to her waist.

She exploded. The corrosive blood and poison she'd been filled with splashed across the remaining ghouls, and melted their flesh from their bones. They ran in random directions, screaming in pain. Human screams. Sad sobs, terrified wails, enraged shouting. Oghren went through the survivors almost lazily, cutting off the heads of any that yet twitched with brutal efficiency.

"This is Blight sickness." Amell said when the last ghoul had fallen. "Everyone who comes into contact with darkspawn has a risk of catching it. We have it, in a lesser form, but this is what becomes of a Grey Warden if they hold off going to their Calling. Nathaniel... you don't have to come with us."

"Yes I do." Nathaniel said, resolute. That man had guts, Anders had to give him that. If it was his mother... Anders didn't want to think about it.

Anders did not like fighting ghouls, but somehow he managed. He was no Amell, lost in the thick of battle and a haze of corrosive blood magic, but he was there and he was helping. Anders laid down wards and barriers, and frost magic when it was needed. No fire. He knew better than to use fire.

Then they came across a scene that shook him. A level deeper, and the cellars became dungeons. Inside the cells were men and women, all dead. Starved to death, or more likely lost to thirst after nearly a week buried under ground. It could have been him, was all Anders could think. If the templars had decided he wasn't worth the trouble, and lumped him in with all the other prisoners, he'd be dead now too.
It could have also been Nate, if he hadn't been given a special cell for the trouble he'd caused. Anders couldn't tell if Nate had come to the same conclusion. His face was grim, but it had been since they'd found Adria's note. Then again, maybe that was just Nate's face. There was no need to be morbid, after all. Some people could live up to a week without food or water. Maybe Anders would have been fine. Maybe it didn't matter because he was fine now. Yes, that was the spirit. Nevermind the could have beens.

Apparently, Amell didn't agree. "Sergeant, do you have the key to these cells?"

"No, ser," Maverlies said. "I did not even know prisoners were being kept down here."

Amell stood in front of the cells, and sheathed his hands in a deep blue magic. He held the spell for what seemed like an eternity to Anders, and finally wrenched his hands back. The cell door was ripped from its hinges by the telekinetic magic. "Anders," Amell said. He sounded winded. It was good to know there was a human man in there somewhere. "Come and see if any are alive."

Anders stepped over the bent metal of the ruined cell door and set about to the unpleasant task of checking the bodies. He hoped none of them were ghouls, lying in wait for him to roll them over so they could bite off his nose. He rather liked his nose.

"You know next time, you might just ask me to pick the lock." Nathaniel said quietly.

"I might just." Amell agreed, finding a stool for himself and sinking onto it.

"Eh, don't mind him." Oghren said. He fished a flask from his armor, and thrust it out at Amell. "He gets all uppity when he can't play the hero."

Amell took a long drink and said nothing.

"I'll see if I can find out who they were when we get back to the Vigil, Commander." Sergeant Maverlies said.

"Thievin' dusters and men who murder little boys, prolly." Oghren said with a shake of his head. "Wouldn't bother. Ain't nobody gonna miss 'em."

"We're more than our crimes, Oghren." Amell said.

"Got one!" Anders yelled. Only one, but it was better than none.

He was a middle aged fellow, of a strapping sort. Magic was no substitute for food and water, but a bit of healing did wonders for the man. He recovered from his unconscious state and sat up with a groan, smacking his lips together. "What... are you?"

"It's a little early in the morning for an existential crisis, wouldn't you say?" Anders joked.

"Be careful, ser mage." Sergeant Maverlies said. "Starved or not, this man is a criminal."

"Was." Amell corrected her. "Give him a torch. Let him go out the way we came. Being buried alive is punishment enough for whatever he did."

The sergeant obeyed him. She must have been suffering from an advanced case of hero worship, because she did it without hesitation and without judgment. The prisoner looked appropriately stunned. "You're letting me go? They said they were going to flog me, they did... And then there was the earthquake..."
"That's the surfacer punishment for thieving, isn't it?" Oghren said. "He's no threat. Let him be."

"Go. Make smarter choices." Amell said.

"Ser, yes, ser," The little thief said, running off down the hall.

"Remember that knife I predicted in your back?" Anders asked, "I think it might just hit you in the face."

"You were in a cell when I met you, Anders." Amell said.

"Technically, I was standing just outside of it." Anders corrected him, "So you see I'm exempt to this rule that it's probably a bad idea to let prisoners go, no questions asked. No offense, Nate."

"Some taken." Nate said. "We should keep moving. I haven't seen Adria yet."

Keep moving they did. They fought their way through a patch of darkspawn, and a quick lecture from Amell taught Anders they had names. Not 'Joe' or 'Carol' type names, which would have been hilarious, but appropriately creepy ones. Hurlocks were the human type darkspawn, genlocks were the dwarf type darkspawn, and the shrieking type darkspawn were called, imaginatively, shrieks. There was a fourth type, ogres, which Anders hadn't encountered yet. To be perfectly honest, he could have done without ever doing so.

Deeper still into the cellar/dungeons, they found Adria. She was sitting in a small storage room, the back wall of which had collapsed and opened up into the Deep Roads. Nathaniel... Anders didn't have a joke that could have survived in the face of the poor man's grief.

The woman might have been fine, were it not for the purple sores on her face. And the fact that her jaw was broken, and hung limp at her neck when she screamed. It was a mindless scream, almost completely darkspawn. Her fingers... Maker's breath, she'd eaten them. The skin fell away where her knuckles ended, and all that was left was bone and sinew. She reached for Nathaniel with those horrible hands, and Amell did something that was becoming rather common place for him. He slit her throat.

It was fortunate that the small storage room dead ended into the Deep Roads. Boulders blocked them from going any further, but they were no barricade to the darkspawn given time. The Vigil's workers would have to clear the way so they could find a single entrance to block off.

But whatever the future held, they were done with their little venture, and Nathaniel was free to mourn. They left him a torch for light, and Amell spoke with him for a few minutes, before they all decided to leave him alone with his foster-mother's body.

They waited in the next room over, milling about on crates. Anders didn't know what to say. Nothing felt appropriate. Maverlies filled the silence. "You hear stories about you and the Wardens... but nothing really compares to seeing it first hand."

"Did the other Grey Wardens not inspire you?" Amell asked.

"They did, of course. They took a slew of darkspawn with them when they were ambushed, but you? You're something else. I've never seen a man so skilled with magic or blade before. You're incredible." Maverlies said.

"I'm a Warden." Amell said.

"I think it's more than that." Maverlies said, looking Amell over. It was almost painful to watch,
really. If only Amell would look up, he might notice all the flattery flying over his head. "You're a remarkable man, Commander. Could I convince you to... spar with me someday?" By her tone, Anders guessed 'spar' meant 'bend me over a table and fuck me silly.'

"Someday. If I have the time. Sergeant." Amell gave the woman a nod. On the opposite side of the room, Oghren was sitting on a crate drinking and Amell went to join him. Anders was all for the dwarf, but he never would have chosen him over such a lovely woman. However, seeing as the lovely woman had no eyes for him, Anders walked over to sit beside Amell.

"You are something else, you know that?" Anders said.

"Am I?" Amell raised an eyebrow at him. If he'd been half as receptive to the sergeant he might have already had the woman on her knees.

"Are you really that thick? You know if you'd given that lass the same look you're giving me now you'd-oooooh." Anders stopped himself when it suddenly clicked. Oghren started laughing. Amell smirked at him. "Well, my foot tastes lovely, thanks for asking."

"It's fine, Anders." Amell said.

"Well now I just feel silly," Anders said. "Here I thought you were just terribly oblivious. I was all set to take you under my wing and help you with the ladies."

"The day this guy hops borders is the day nugs fly." Oghren snorted.

"I'd never leave you, Oghren." Amell said.

"Hey, settle down." Oghren chuckled. "I like you, but not like that."

"He's in denial." Amell said. "Did he tell you he named his son after me?"

"Oh that's what he meant by nugget!" Anders snapped his fingers. "I thought... Well, better left unsaid. Wait a minute, if you have a son, that means you actually got a woman to touch you. How is that possible?"

"Hey, the ladies love Oghren. They pronounce my name Ooooh-gren." Oghren moaned.

Anders laughed, until he remembered they were three when they should have been four. "... Are we bastards? I'm all for levity, I just... Do you think Nate's going to be alright?"

"He's a tough son of a bitch. He'll live." Oghren said.

Amell nodded in agreement, and Anders remembered something that had made him curious.

"So, not to belittle what Nate's going through, but you seemed pretty upset over that dog." Anders said. "I know no one likes to see animals die, but is there a story there if you don't mind me asking?"

"Isn't there enough sad shit today without bringing the mutt into it?" Oghren said, hopping off the crate. "I'm gonna go see if that gal wants a taste of Oghren's special brew." He tossed his flask to Amell, who caught it. "Finish that off if you like, because that was a euphemism." Oghren chortled as he left.

"I had a mabari once." Amell explained, taking a drink.

"What was his name?" Anders asked.
"You have to promise not to laugh." Amell warned him.

Anders crossed his heart. "On my honor."

"Barkspawn." Amell said.

Keep it together, Anders. You promised. Crossed your heart and everything. A snort escaped him, despite his best efforts, and Anders bit his lip to keep it from becoming a guffaw.

"You can laugh." Amell said.

"Oh thank the Maker." Anders laughed. "So what happened to...?"

"Barkspawn?" Amell supplied. Anders giggled. "The King... requisitioned him for the kennels, after the Blight."

"Ah." Anders said knowingly, "I got the feeling there was some bad blood there. Me? I'm a cat person myself. I think that's the only thing I miss about the Tower, really. Do you remember that old mouser? Mr. Wiggums?"

"Vaguely," Amell said.

"There were days that damn cat was the only person I saw." Anders shook his head ruefully. Amell handed him the flask, and he took a drink. "Not that, you know, he was a person."

"What happened to you, Anders?" Amell asked. "At the Circle?"

"Oh, you know." Anders shrugged. He didn't want to think about that room. The cramped space. The horrible silence. The unbearable dark. Anders amplified his spell so the mage light he was conjuring burned a little brighter. "The usual apostate treatment, nothing trivial. I spent a year in solitary after my last escape attempt. It could have been worse."

Amell reached out and squeezed his hand. He was still wearing his gauntlets, so the contact was muted, but Anders rather liked the sympathy. "It could have been better."

Chapter End Notes

An optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter on Amell's recruitment into the Wardens.
"Yeah, I can fit all of Kal'Hirol into one chapter. It's not that big." ~ Me, 3000 words ago. Thank you again everyone for all your wonderful kudos and comments. As always, I really appreciate it.

9:31 Dragon 1 Solis Mid-Morning

Knotwood Hills

"Stay alert," Nathaniel whispered, "Rock slides and sinkholes are common here."

Nathaniel had the lead, his steps light and soundless. His bow was in a case strapped to his back, but he had a pair of wicked looking knives on his belt if Amell warned them of darkspawn. Apparently, learning to sense darkspawn wasn't something that happened overnight, or even over a fortnight. For the new Wardens, sensing darkspawn was still a primitive tingle in their fingers, a shiver down their spine, a sudden unexplainable irritability. According to Amell, it "got better."

Amell heard the darkspawn whisper. Saw their shadows in the corners of his eyes. Felt their intent like it was his own. That didn't sound better to Anders. He wasn't looking forward to it happening to him, but worrying never did anyone any good. It was better to keep a positive outlook, and focus on the present. All in all, today...

Today was shit. Anders had had his robe washed and pressed, and gotten up at the crack of dawn to trudge halfway across the arling and ruin it. His skirt was constantly catching on brambles and thickets, or sharp rocks and jagged outcroppings. Nathaniel was having an easy go of it, but apparently the man had squired in the Free Marches, and was an accomplished hunter and tracker. Even Amell and Oghren were faring better than Anders, and they were in full armor. Sure, Oghren had fallen flat on his face at least twice now, but Anders was tripping over every little bump in the metaphorical road. They were searching the craggy slopes of the Knotwood Hills for a darkspawn breeding ground, and of course the chasm they were searching for was well out of the way of any proper road, if the words of the two half-brained hunters who'd found it were to be trusted.

But that was Amell: taking everyone for their word and single-minded his pursuit of darkspawn. Sure, they had to get the bottom of the attack on Vigil's Keep, but there had to be better ways than wandering through a barren wasteland to find a crumbling chasm and climb down into it. Anders set his foot down on a loose rock, and the ground slipped out from underneath him. He pitched forward with a squeal both manly and dignified.

Amell caught him. Amell was practically carrying him, after two hours in these hills, which seemed a terrible burden considering Amell was already carrying his helmet. Anders would have used his staff to help him walk, but the bladed end made it terribly impractical if not dangerous, so he kept it strapped to his back. "Are we there yet?" Anders whined.

"Nathaniel!" Amell called ahead. "How much further?"
"Not long." Nathaniel said unhelpfully, checking his map. "Keep your voice down. We don't want to start any rock slides." He ranged on ahead, bounding nimbly over the rocky terrain until he was out of ear shot.

"So..." Anders lowered his voice, "How's he doing? You know, with what happened?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Amell asked.

"That's not really my thing," Anders picked a thicket out of his robes, "I'm good at the touchy part of relationships, not the feely."

"He's... coping," Amell said. "We had a few drinks and talked about his family. Adria meant a lot to him."

Anders thought of his own mother. "... They took my pillow."

"Your pillow?" Amell asked.

"My mother hand-embroidered a pillow for me. It was the only thing I was allowed to keep when I was sent to the Circle. Have you ever slept on an embroidered pillow? Bloody uncomfortable things. Horribly itchy. I just remembered the templars took it when they caught me. Sent it along to Denerim with Rylock and the rest of my things."

"I could write to the Circle and have them send it back," Amell offered.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother," Anders waved him off, "I doubt they'd give it to you anyway. Probably already threw it out now that I'm a Warden."

Amell let it drop, for which Anders was grateful. He didn't want to think about that damn pillow: his mother's lousy but heart-felt stitching of silly little patterns. It was better it was gone, really. It was always a little inconvenient to drag around wherever he was running from the templars.

"Well, now that you're a Warden, I should probably see about commissioning you some travel leathers." Amell said.

"Hey, I like my robes," Anders said, disregarding the fact that he'd been tripping over them for the past two hours. "They're Tevinter style, you know. The spaulders are made from crow feathers, and just look at this embroidery. I think they make me look rather fetching."

"I don't think the robes have anything to do with that." Amell said.

"And people call me a charmer." Anders laughed.

Amell smirked, and Anders belatedly recalled the man's preference for men. Well, what did he care? Anders knew he was attractive. If Amell felt like pointing it out, he wasn't about to argue.

"I'm not saying you can't wear them at the Keep," Amell continued, "But when we're out you could probably do with something more practical. And maybe a pair of gloves so you can pick all the rashvine nettle you keep staring at."

"Well aren't you observant," Anders said. "Can't keep your eyes off me, eh?"

"Not if you keep tripping." Amell grinned.

Anders laughed. And then he tripped. The ground was all gnarled roots and loose rocks, and as soon as Anders put his weight on the wrong one, it slipped out from under his heel. He hit his knees, and
finally got something close to a laugh from Amell. It was closed-mouth, and restrained, but it was more than a little infectious. Anders couldn't help laughing when Amell pulled him to his feet.

"Definitely can't take my eyes off you." Amell said without releasing his arm.

He smelled nice, Anders couldn't help thinking. There was two hours of sweat from a march in full armor, sure, but beneath that was the clean scent of copper and the crisp touch of the Fade that clung to every mage. After a lifetime of quick trysts in the Circle Tower, it was a provocative scent that reminded Anders of dark corners, of hastily undone laces, of breathless moments free from the templars' prying eyes.

Nathaniel returned to find them like that. Anders cleared his throat, and Amell let go of his arm. "The chasm is just ahead, Commander."

"Thank you, Nathaniel." Amell said.

Anders wondered if he should say something to clarify he wasn't interested in men, but Amell was already walking on ahead. To be perfectly honest with himself, Anders wasn't sure if there was anything to clarify. He'd never been with a man before, so how could he really know if he was interested or not?

Anders turned his thoughts to the ground. There would probably be time to worry about Amell's apparent interest in him later. Watching where he put his feet, Anders followed the rest of the Wardens around a bend, and came upon the chasm. Anders would have called it a ravine. It was as wide as a river, and a bridge was spanning the length of the divide.

Within it were dwarven ruins. The stones and boulders that made up most of the ground of the Knotwood Hills gave way very suddenly to runic architecture; patterns in squares and triangles lined an expansive pathway that vanished deep below the ground. Leading down into it was a collapsed stairwell. The stairs led perhaps halfway down into the ravine before they became a sudden drop about ten feet high.

Nathaniel, Oghren, and Amell were already standing at the top of the stairs, staring down.

"I fell down a flight of stairs once, when I was a boy," Nathaniel mumbled. "They looked very much like this particular set of stairs."

Oghren put his hand on the small of Nathaniel's back and shoved. Nate stumbled and flailed, and twisted about to grab onto Amell in a panic. Amell helped him to his feet, though he didn't bother keeping hold of his arm once Nate was righted, Anders noticed.

Oghren roared with laughter. "You should have seen your face! Oh, Ancestors. I'm gonna piss myself!"

"Like you don't already." Anders said.

"Hilarious." Nathaniel muttered, looking frazzled.

Amell started down the stairs, and the rest of them followed him down to the final platform. "So, do we jump, or?" Anders asked, looking at the drop. "Because I think I'm going to be healing a broken ankles if that's the case."

"I'm not jumping." Oghren snorted, "No way, no how. Looks like this section of the Deep Roads fell in. Whole thing is probably unstable, this close to the surface."

Oghren took a step back from the edge of the platform, scowling, "Funny story: dwarf attacks mage. Dwarf wins."

"Give me a few minutes." Amell said. An ethereal blue ensorcelled his hands, and several boulders, broken planks of stairwell, and other bits of debris lifted into the air. They floated to the base of the stairs, and stacked themselves in a jumbled heap of rock holding up plank and plank holding up rock.

Oghren spat over the edge of the stairs, eyeing the makeshift staircase Amell had created. "That... is a mess. Voldrik sure wasn't kidding about human architecture. I take it back. I'll jump. You can heal broken legs, right Sparkles?"

"I second jumping," Anders said.

"I'm sure it will hold." Nathaniel said.

Oghren snorted. "You keep kissing the Boss's ass and he's gonna get the wrong idea, boy."

"There's nothing wrong with having an admirer or two," Nathaniel said, testing his weight on the first plank. When it didn't snap under his foot, he climbed nimbly down and was waiting for them at the bottom in the span of a few seconds. Amell followed him, albeit at a much slower pace. Oghren eyed the boulders and planks dubiously. Anders was right there with him.

"Not even a handrail or two?" Anders asked.

Apparently coming to a decision, Oghren sat at the base of the stairs, and scooted all the way down the planks and boulders on his ass. It seemed like the right idea to Anders. Sitting down, he climbed down the boulders and planks backwards on his hands and knees.

"Easy." Anders said when he was safely on the ground.

"Stay on your guard ahead," Amell said. "The Deep Roads are a maze of underground tunnels. Some of them are lit with magma channels, but most are dark, and the darkspawn burrow to make their own tunnels we might have to go through. Anders, you're in charge of the light. Don't leave each other's sight."

"Right." Nathaniel said. Oghren grunted, and Anders nodded.

They all set about to rather dull business of unpacking. Nathaniel had to take his bow from its case and string it up. Oghren and Amell had helmets to put on, swords and axes to draw, shields to wear. Anders unstrapped his staff from his back, and untied the leather case that kept the blade secure. Reaching across the Veil, he found an eager wisp to hold a light spell for him, and let it hover about his staff.

"So are we just going to wander around underground until we stumble upon this darkspawn breeding ground? Is that the plan?" Anders asked.

"That's the plan." Amell agreed.

"Oh good. Just checking." Anders snorted. For all his sass, he didn't have a better plan. They stowed their empty cases on their backs, and set off down into the Deep Roads. Anders wouldn't have called them a maze just yet. The ravine had only the one path that led down underground, and they followed it for a time before the hall split off in two different directions.
Amell hesitated for a moment, and turned left. Anders guessed he could sense which direction the darkspawn were in, which was certainly something because Anders couldn't feel a thing. He didn't like the Deep Roads, Anders decided quickly. It felt like walking through a giant tomb, and as they passed further underground the sunlight became muted, and cast queer shadows in every corner. Anders ducked under a toppled pillar and collided with Amell’s outstretched arm.

"Darkspawn." Amell warned them.

Weapons ready, they edged around the corner and found the darkspawn in question. There were at least a half dozen, dragging a dwarf by the heel. The little warrior was flailing madly to no avail, spewing a multitude of very colorful curses.

Amell cut the inside of his arm with his sword. There went another tunic, Anders thought, watching Amell weave a hasty spell and fling it at the hurlock holding the dwarf. The darkspawn's hand went slack, and the dwarf scrambled free. Surprised, the remaining darkspawn turned on the little warrior with shrieks of rage. Amell and Oghren put themselves between the darkspawn and the dwarf, and the fighting started.

Anders much preferred fighting with a team to being on his own. Laying down glyphs and wards and keeping up a cleansing aura was much easier than coming up with battle strategies on the fly and trying to finish a frost spell before a darkspawn overtook him. If he had to be part of a battle, he'd much rather have a supportive role than an offensive one. And it was always a little satisfying to see a darkspawn charge headlong at Nathaniel, walk over Anders’ paralysis glyph, and promptly freeze for the archer to line up a perfect shot.

Biff could shove it, wherever in the Void he was. Anders was damned useful in a fight, and damned useful after it was over. The little dwarf they'd rescued was sitting with her back against a pillar, half-helm off to reveal two pretty pigtails, bright blue eyes, and a face covered in tattoos. "Well," She wheezed at their approach, "That was close."

Anders knelt next to her, "Do you need any help?"

"No, no..." She wheezed again, and sucked in a pained breath, "I'm fine. I just need to... catch my breath."

"I know I'm handsome, but I don't think it's me taking your breath away," Anders joked, "I'm a healer, why don't you let me see if anything's broken?"

"Yeah... alright." The dwarf agreed. Anders reached into the Fade and set about to sensing her injuries. She had a handful of cracked ribs, several abrasions, and a sprained shoulder.

"This shouldn't take more than a few minutes," Anders said, summoning Compassion across the veil and using her to channel a cleansing aura.

"Well. Thanks," The dwarf said, "For a moment there I thought I was really about to join the Legion of the Dead."

"The what?" Anders asked.

"Bunch of grim warrior-types," Oghren said, taking off his helmet and resting his bloodied axe up against the pillar. He pulled his flask from his armor and offered it to the girl, but she shook her head. He took a drink instead, "Single-minded darkspawn killers."

"We are warriors already dead to our people. We're sent into the Deep Roads to battle darkspawn till the Stone claims. Which it did-with great efficiency-today." The dwarf said. "My name is Sigrun. I...
I was with my battalion, investigating Kal'Hirol. It's an old dwarven fortress not far from here. There's been so much darkspawn activity in the area lately, our Corporal thought they were breeding an army. I think... I think he was right.

"Kal'Hirol was more than a massacre for us. The darkspawn took some of the women in my battalion, and they've... changed, somehow. They're smarter, more dangerous. I swear I heard some of them talking."

"Well, good news is you're not crazy," Anders said. "Turns out they can do that now."

"Are you serious?" Sigrun asked. "Then I definitely have to go back and figure out what the darkspawn are doing. Scout out the place."

"So you're a scout?" Nathaniel asked, "That explains how you survived then."

"...No. It really doesn't." Sigrun said quietly. "When I saw my friends cut down in there...I got scared. I fled. I'm only alive because I'm a coward."

"And this is bad because...?" Anders asked. "Look on the bright side, at least you're still alive."

"I'm a member of the Legion of the Dead," Sigrun frowned, "Maybe the name is a little vague, but being alive is sort of the opposite of what we're going for. We're supposed to die out in the Deep Roads, unmourned and forgotten."

"Really? They let you do all that?" Anders joked. "I can see the appeal. Remind me to sign up next time I'm in Orzammar."

"It's not like the Wardens, Sparkles," Oghren said. "No one signs up to join the Legion."

"You're Wardens?" Sigrun asked excitedly. "Of course! That explains why you're here. You're looking for the darkspawn breeding ground, aren't you? The ancestors must have had a hand in this. I can show you where Kal'Hirol is. With you destroying the darkspawn nest might not be impossible... just... improbable!"

"Aren't you the optimist." Anders laughed. "All done. You can stand up now. Everything should be in working order."

Obediently, Sigrun stood, flexing her arms and legs. "That's amazing. Two minutes ago everything hurt, and now I feel incredible. Magic really is magic."

"You're welcome," Anders said.

"Thank you." Sigrun grinned, picking up her half-helm and stuffing her head back into it. "So how about it? Can I come with you?"

Everyone looked to Amell. "You'll need a weapon." Amell said.

"I had a pair of axes... I know where I dropped them. It's just a little ways down the hall." Sigrun said excitedly, and took off running down the hall.

"If you don't let that spicy little kumquat come with us I will never forgive you." Oghren said.

"I already said she could come, Oghren." Amell said.

"If you can get so much as a compliment out of her I will pick up your tab for a week." Anders said.
"You're on. Oh you're on." Oghren muttered, taking a long drink from his flask. He grinned lecherously at Sigrun when she came back, axes in hand. Anders wasn't terribly worried.

"Let's go then." Sigrun said.

"One minute," Amell said. He knelt next to one of the more intact darkspawn corpses, and channeled a spell that soon had it back on its feet and tethered to his will.

"Woah!" Sigrun said. "You're a mage too? And a... what is it called?"

"A necromancer." Amell supplied.

"Nice," Sigrun grinned, "Kind of creepy, but nice. May as well make the darkspawn good for something."

"Thank you." Amell said sincerely. "My name is Amell. This is Anders, Nathaniel, and Oghren."

"Yeah, but the ladies pronounce it Ooooh-gren." Oghren grinned.

"I... won't be doing that." Sigrun said, taking a spot next to Amell. "Kal'Hirol is this way," She said, leading them further into the Deep Roads. "I don't know much about it, except what the others from the Legion told me. It used to be important, a center of learning for the smith caste. When the fortress was lost, a lot of what the smiths had learned was lost with it. They've never built anything quite like Kal'Hirol since."

"Hopefully Orzammar's golems will help insure no more of your culture is lost." Amell said.

"Hopefully." Sigrun agreed.

Oghren was pouting. Anders nudged him, chuckling. "Cheer up. At least you still have a chance with your hand."


"Something else wrong?" Anders asked.


"Well that's a little harsh," Anders said. "To be fair, your pick-up lines are terrible."

"What? No. Not her. I was thinking about-nothing," Oghren put his helmet back on and shifted his axe on his shoulder, "Just-go away, Sparkles. Go walk with the Boss for a bit."

Well that was odd. Anders made a mental note of it, and skipped ahead to walk next to Amell. Amell glanced at him, but with his helmet on Anders had no idea what expression he was making. Troublesome things, helmets. On, off, on, off. No expressions. Bad hair. Anders was not wearing one if it came with the travel gear Amell wanted to commission for him.

They followed the road out into a massive underground cave. An underground waterfall roared off to their right, and poured into a river that divided the cave in two. Also off to their right was a dwarven city carved into the cave wall, and them with no way to reach it. The road had continued into a bridge at one point, but it had since collapsed into the river. "We head down here," Sigrun said, pointing to a steep decline to their left. "There's another bridge further on we can use to get into the city,"

"Do you need a hand?" Amell offered.

"I'm a big boy. I can do it." Anders waved him off, climbing off the road and onto the hill. He took it at a crouch, one hand on the ground, the other holding his staff, and somehow managed to get to the bottom without tripping over his robes. "Easy." Anders said to himself, but he was feeling a little more open about that travel gear.

Oghren, Amell and his darkspawn followed him, and the six of them continued. They followed the river for a quarter hour before they found the bridge, and guarding it, a lone dwarf, near death.

"Jukka!" Sigrun yelled, running forward. The scene was all too familiar to Anders. The dwarf even had the injury in the same place. His armor was cleaved open at his stomach, and he was holding his guts in with one hand. The dirt beneath him was muddy with blood, and he'd sunken into it at least an inch. Draped over his legs was the body of a hurlock, a sword that must have been Jukka's protruding from its back.

"Sigrun?" Jukka coughed. Blood poured out of his mouth and painted his beard a deeper shade of red.

"Yes, it's me. Be still and try not to talk. I met a healer, Jukka. A real live mage! He can save you. He's magic." Sigrun glanced up at him hopefully, "You can save him can't you?"

Anders shook his head. "He's beyond healing." At least Amell already had a puppet at his command, so he probably wouldn't reanimate Jukka the way he had Rowland.

"Listen," Jukka grabbed Sigrun with his free hand, and pulled her closer, "The broodmothers... breeding. Saw... an army... stop them, and-beware the children."


"Can't... talk..." Jukka wheezed, "Forgive me."

"Please," Sigrun looked up at him again, tears in her eyes. "Please, can't you just try? Try a little? Maybe... maybe it will work. It's magic after all."

"I'm sorry," Anders said.

Amell knelt beside her and drew the dagger he kept in his boot. Sigrun stared at it, and held out her hand. Amell handed it over. Jukka managed a nod, and Sigrun slit his throat. She handed the dagger back, tears running down her face. "Ancestors look kindly on you brother."

They continued, the mood noticeably more somber. Anders hated it. He wasn't a somber sort of person, but the Deep Roads were nothing if not that. Everything was dark and dull, and what little color there was was muted. The place seemed to forbid light and laughter, and no one spoke as they crossed the bridge and made their way into the city.

The darkspawn were there, and the fighting that followed was endless. They fought through alleyways, they fought up stairwells and down them, they fought through a market place, they fought through slums, and they fought through noble districts before they finally reached Kal'Hirol, and stood in the fortress' courtyard, and then they fought even more.

There they found the children Jukka had spoke of. They were horrid grubs the size of a man with the
face of a child. For the most part they moved in a mindless crawl, until they were near enough to lunge. Anders watched one launch itself off the ground and onto Amell's shield, knocking him over. Anders froze the ugly blighter for him, and Amell threw the grub off him and climbed back onto his feet.

Anders was just glad it wasn't him. Not only was he not wearing armor, and not only did he not have a shield, but he was tired. So maybe he hadn't been doing the presses he'd told himself he'd start doing. And maybe running away from the Tower didn't always necessarily mean he was actually running. And maybe he could use a break in-between fighting endless hoards of darkspawn.

But Anders didn't get the break everyone else did when Amell called for a halt in the courtyard, and Sigrun ran off to look for a hidden side entrance so they didn't have to walk balls first through the front door. While Oghren got to drink from his hip flask, Anders got to drink a lyrium potion and a stamina draught from his pack, and heal everyone's various wounds and injuries.

And so it continued throughout the entire mission. They'd fight for an hour and rest for a few minutes, but Anders never got to participate in the 'rest' part. Someone was always sporting an open wound, a broken bone, or a crushed limb after every battle. After one hour, he was exhausted, but after two he was dead on his feet. After three, he felt like one of the golems Amell was so excited to find in Kal'Hirol, but no one had a hand on Anders' 'control rod', as it were, so there was really nothing to make up for how grueling the fighting was.

Apparently, one of the golems in Kal'Hirol still worked. One of the darkspawn had been holding its control rod, and now that that particular darkspawn was dead, they had their own personal golem. It was much needed, considering Amell's undead hurlock had fallen ages ago. The find made the fighting easier for the rest of them, Anders especially. With the golem taking the lead, there were less injuries for him to heal, and he could actually rest during their rest breaks.

It seemed especially important he rest, because the Veil was ridiculously thin in Kal'Hirol, and Anders did not want any demons coming through when he was this exhausted. Echoes of the last battle before the fall of Kal'Hirol were all around them, repeating over and over, brought to life by the memories of the dead and the spirits who mimicked them in the Fade. Sigrun called it 'the memories of the Stone,' and Anders wasn't about to correct her. Let her believe whatever made her happy; he was too tired for anything else.

The deeper they went into Kal'Hirol, the more obvious it became they were heading in the right direction. Corruption was everywhere. The floor and the walls were covered with what Anders could only describe as rotten meat, in one giant mass. The smell of it was everywhere, and it made the ground ridiculously unstable. It stuck to his boots as he walked, and seemed to undulate whenever they fought atop it. More than once he slipped and fell on the stuff, and he couldn't help throwing up the first time it happened.

If nothing else, he wasn't alone. Everyone was gagging, dry-heaving, and having a generally horrible time. Green gas filled the air, and one of the halls was even filled with queer white sacks, the size of grown men. Anders guessed there might actually be men inside, wrapped up in spider silk and being held for a snack by the horse-sized spiders they'd encountered, and had he mentioned he hated the Deep Roads? Because he did. A lot.

He hated them even more when one of the sacks blew up on him. Fetid vomit-colored liquid coated him from head to toe, and one of the children fell out of the sack with a squeal. Then all of the sacks exploded, and they were fighting again. Anders was fighting with his gag reflex. He didn't have time to throw up. He had to lay down a glyph of paralysis in front of Nate, he had to keep Sigrun sheathed in a offensive aura, he had to keep up a barrier on Amell and Oghren.
He had to pay attention. A darkspawn fell on him. Anders had no idea where it had come from, but it was on him, and it was heavy, and it had the face of a blubbery child. It wasn't one of the Children, except that it was. The thing was nearly twice the size of the grubs, with countless crab-like claws double the length of Anders' own arms that made up its arms and legs. It screamed at him, and it's face split open, jowls flapping away from two full sets of teeth.

Anders screamed back, terrified. He was lying on his back in a pile of rotten meat and ooze, with a giant darkspawn on top him. He grabbed the first element that came to him and cast without thinking. His fire spell ignited the green gas in the air around them momentarily, and the creature atop him howled in pain. It reared back, and in the seconds between seconds Anders hoped it would fall off him. Then it fell forward, claws thrashing into his chest, his shoulders, his legs. Anders screamed again, but in agony.

He lost his hold on the light he'd been conjuring, and the corridor plunged into darkness. Grabbing for where his staff had fallen, Anders fingers found the hardwood, and brought it up to protect his face. In the dark, the creature beat against his staff again and again. Anders arms buckled twice, and then the staff snapped in half in his hands. He brought up his arms in its place, trying to summon a barrier, a force field, anything. Compassion answered him when nothing else did, and a blinding white light pierced through the corridor.

The darkspawn atop him was momentarily stunned, but something was infinitely more important than that. Beneath the sounds of battle, the screams of darkspawn and Wardens, the clang of metal on carapace, the crunch of metal through bone, and the gush and spurt of spilt blood and trampled corruption, Anders heard a soft sound like the ripping of fabric. The Veil tore.
Memories of the Stone

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all of the feedback. I hope you enjoy the chapter.

9:31 Dragon 1 Solis Late Afternoon

Kal'Hirol, Somewhere in the Trade Quarters

Anders hastily conjured another ball of light. No one could save him if they couldn't see him, after all. The darkspawn atop him shrieked, and brought up a half dozen claws, either protect its eyes or to spear him to death. Anders never found out. The creature froze. It's face grew bulbous and swollen, the exposed veins on its body expanded, and its eyes bulged in its sockets. Then it exploded.

That... was not Compassion. Claws, blood, and flesh went everywhere. The only thing left of the creature was its massive carapace, weighing down Anders' chest. Someone grabbed the carapace and threw it off him. It was Amell, of course, his hands still sheathed in blue from his spell. Amell cast a second spell, and suddenly Anders couldn't move. He probably couldn't have moved anyway, but the telekinetic barrier around him meant he couldn't even try. Anders watched the rest of the battle from the ground. Twice, a darkspawn dove on him, only to bounce off Amell's barrier and pick a new target.

The barrier might have kept him safe, but it did nothing for the pain. Anders was in agony. His chest still felt like it was being crushed, and his leg had a pain as blinding as the light Compassion had summoned, and the less said of his shoulder the better. Amell came back to him when the fight with the children was over and dispelled the force field he'd cast. "Can you move?" Amell asked, kneeling next to him.

"I can try," Anders said. Sitting up sent a sharp pain through his shoulder and his leg. The leg bit made sense. There was a claw sticking out of his thigh, after all. Anders felt dizzy. "Well isn't that something."

"Hey," Amell took off his helmet. His hair was a mess, black strands sticking up in every direction. Anders chuckled. Amell grabbed his face. His dirty gauntlets smeared cold ooze and warm blood over Anders' cheeks. It felt awful. "Stay with me. I'm not a healer. Tell me what to do here. There's a claw in your leg and an open wound on your shoulder," Amell unbuckled one gauntlet and threw it on the ground to press his palm against Anders' forehead. "And you're cold. What does that mean?"

"Uh..." Anders blinked. Amell split into two people and came back together. "Um. I think-I'm going into shock? Don't take the claw out. Just... stop the bleeding. Keep pressure on the wound. Get a poultice for my shoulder-and... a lyrium potion. I'll take care of it."

"Boss... Demons." Oghren warned them.

"How many?" Amell asked.

"Three." Oghren said. "No, four. Looks like... just shades? And-oh nug shit."

"That-I did that," Anders said, laying or, more accurately, falling back down so he didn't pass out,
"The Veil is so thin... and Compassion was right there. I shouldn't have summoned her."

"Boss..." Oghren said again.

"Damnit," Amell muttered. His dagger appeared his hand, and he rolled up his sleeve. One look at the scars on Amell's arm made Anders hope he was still seeing double. "Nathaniel, Sigrun, come and help Anders. Oghren, the shades. Leave her to me." Amell cut open an old scar, leaving an angry line of red in it's place. That must hurt, Anders thought as Amell stood and turned to face something Anders couldn't see.

"I have some bandages," Sigrun offered, dropping her pack and taking a spot beside his leg.

"I have a poultice," Nathaniel said. He rummaged through his own pack and knelt beside his shoulder.

"Don't." Anders started to say. Nathaniel cut through the clasp on his spaulders before he could finish. "Goodbye feathers." Anders sighed. Similarly, Sigrun cut his robes around where the claw was embedded in his leg. As much as Anders might have needed armor, his robes had to be better than running around the Deep Roads half naked. Anders sighed again, willing the ceiling stop spinning while Sigrun wrapped his leg around the claw, and Nathaniel dealt with his shoulder.

Someone pushed a lyrium potion into his hands, and he drank it. The sickly sweet taste made him want to be sick again for how it mixed with the rot in the air, but Anders kept it down. His head felt a little clearer for it, and he could feel the pull of the Fade through the torn Veil once more. Anders channeled regenerative energies for a few seconds to get his bearings and recover from his shock.

Amell was back when Anders sat up. A tear in the Veil was nothing to scoff at, but it couldn't have been too serious if only a handful of shades made it through. Anders was relieved he hadn't bungled everything, until he noticed the demon swaying idly behind Amell.

"Andraste's holy knickers, what the shit." Anders said.

Amell followed his gaze to the demon. "It's fine," He said, "She's mine now. I can hold her for as long as it takes to get you on your feet."

"Mine..." The demon repeated, her sultry voice echoing through the corridor. She was a creature of desire and naked lust. Her skin was a dark lilac; lavender flames cracked through her skin and crowned her head in place of hair. She ran her hands over her naked body, humming softly to herself, and glanced at Amell with a smile as if enraptured with a lover and not bound by a mage.

"I'm..." Anders said.

"Yeah." Oghren agreed, ogling the demon unashamedly.

"That's not at all what I meant," Anders said.

"S'what I meant." Oghren snorted. "So... you can make her fight, right? Can you make her, you know, do other stuff?"

"Maker's balls, man, really?" Anders asked.

"Hey, come on!" Oghren brought up his hands defensively, "We're all thinking it. Well, the Boss isn't, obviously, but it's not like she's... you know, real."

The desire demon paced a few feet and stopped beside Amell, trailing her clawed fingers over his
shoulders, up his neck, and into hair. She seemed very much real to Anders. "She's as real as you are, Oghren," Amell said, "And she might not be the last. We need to move. Now what, Anders?"

"Now I need to heal this mess." Anders said. "Can you... get me somewhere not covered in flesh ornaments? It's going to take a while."

"We could make camp back at the forge." Sigrun said. "The golem there was defending it from intruders. With our golem, and this... thing," Sigrun flapped a hand at the demon ,"We should be safe for a while."

"That was back a corridor and up a flight of stairs," Nathaniel said. "Anders has a claw in his leg. How are we going to get him there?"

"She can carry him." Amell said. The demon looked to Anders, her eyes empty pools of black. The ghost of a smile traced her lips.

"I'd really rather she didn't." Anders laughed nervously.

"She won't hurt you, Anders." Amell said.

"Oh, no, I'm sure, and I hate to be picky, but I mean... Could we not do that?"

"Maybe the golem could carry him?" Sigrun suggested.

The walking boulder was so ancient it barely understood Amell when he ordered it to fight, even holding its control rod. Anders shook his head. "Not without jarring my leg."

Nathaniel and Amell could drag him, if they strung him up between them. Anders was about to suggest as much when Amell knelt and picked him up, arms under his knees and around his shoulders.

It was extraordinarily uncomfortable. Amell's chest armor jutted against Anders' side, and the one gauntlet he was still wearing was chafing something unmentionable against the back of Anders' knee. Granted, he wasn't a golem or demon, but he was no chariot either.

"Someone get my things," Amell said.

"Got 'em," Sigrun said, slinging Amell's shield over her shoulder and picking up the rest of his discarded things.

"Let's head back to the forge then." Nathaniel said.

Everyone was being terribly mature about the whole ordeal. Not a single quip about him needing to be carried. Anders supposed he could be mature too, until Oghren giggled. "Having fun there, princess?"

"Buckets." Anders said tartly.

"Leave him be, Oghren." Amell said.

"Fine, fine. Just trying to lighten the mood." Oghren muttered, falling back to walk with Nathaniel.

"Comfortable?" Amell ventured when Oghren had gone.

"No," Anders laughed. Laughing hurt. "Give it to me straight. Am I going to have to lay off the pies?"
"You're not that heavy." Amell said. Whatever alluring scent that had clung to him that morning was lost to the fetid stench of darkspawn. Ah well. There was nothing for it really. Anders was no basket of roses at the moment, either. "I don't mind carrying you."

"Are you sure you can handle the stairs when we get there?" Anders asked.

"If I can't, I'll cheat." Amell shrugged.

"Cheat how?" Anders asked.

"By channeling my magic inward to augment my strength." Amell said.

"By doing what now?" Anders asked.

"You didn't think I had any real martial prowess, did you?" Amell grinned down at him. "It's all magic, the way I fight."

"I've never heard of a Knight Enchanter using a real sword before." Anders said.

"I'm not one of those." Amell said disdainfully.

"No, I had a feeling 'Chantry Protectorate' wasn't really your style." Anders said.

"Back during the Blight, I found the phylactery of an ancient mage. He'd been bound to it in death, and was part of an order that used magic to augment their physical prowess. I made a deal with ... what was left of him, for his memories." Amell said. "He called himself an Arcane Warrior."

"Just like that?" Anders asked. "What if it hadn't been a spirit? What if it had been a demon in disguise?"

"It was a good deal." Amell said.

Well. That was totally reassuring. They reached the stairs, and Anders had to put a hand on Amell's shoulders to keep from toppling out of his arms. "Are you alright?" Amell asked.

"My bruises have bruises and even my teeth hurt, but I'm alive, so... thanks for that." Anders said.

"I didn't count on the children being able to climb like that. It was on the ceiling when it fell on you."

Amell said. "I won't let anything that close again."

"Don't make promises you can't keep." Anders said.

"I never do." Amell said. "Did you not have time to summon a barrier?"

"I don't know if you noticed, but I'm exhausted, and you're kind of demanding." Anders did his best to look indignant. Not an easy task when he was being cradled like a babe, but at least he was an indignant babe. "Every break we've had, I've been busy healing someone and didn't get to rest."

"I didn't realize I was pushing you so hard." Amell said. "Tell me next time."

"That's a fine 'I'm sorry.'" Anders huffed.

"I'm sorry," Amell said obediently.

"Good." Anders said. "I forgive you. Anyway, on the bright side, at least it didn't get my face. Whether or not I end up crippled, at least I'm still pretty."
"There is that." Amell agreed.

They reached the forge without incident and Amell set him on the ground. The rest of them set about fortifying the room as best they were able so Anders would be safe to heal himself. The golem they stationed at the door, but the desire demon continued to float about Amell, touching his hands and playing with his hair. For the most part, he ignored her.

"What else do you need?" Amell asked.

"Clean water, if you can summon any. A clean rag, and more bandages. A rod, wood or metal, and a strip of leather or cloth. Another poultice and another potion. And two people to help me take the claw out of my leg. You and Nate, probably. And elevate my leg now so we can start with you have everything." Anders said.

They brought him everything he asked for, propping his leg up on an anvil while they went about fetching supplies. The water came in a spare bowl someone had found, the strip of leather was Nathaniel's belt, and the rod they'd picked was a poker from the forge. Anders stared at the claw in his leg, feeling dizzy all over again. He'd gone into shock when it had happened, and for all he knew it had hit an artery. "I'm going to scream a lot." Anders decided.

"Oh don't be such a piss baby." Oghren said. He unhooked his hip flask and thrust it out at him. Andrew took a long drink. The hard liquor washed the taste of vomit out of his mouth and made him feel a little better. "Just grit your teeth and do it. We've all had worse."

"I haven't." Nate said.

"Me neither." Sigrun said.

"No one asked you." Oghren frowned. Anders handed him his flask back.

"Alright," Anders took a deep breath. "So. Nate, move my robes out the way, and loop the belt here, above the wound and around the poker. Now twist it until I tell you to stop."

Nate followed his instructions to the letter. The pressure of the tourniquet was almost unbearable, but Anders couldn't afford to pass out. None of them were healers. If he fell unconscious now, he might wake up with nerve damage in his leg, or no leg at all. It wasn't something Anders wanted to think about. "... Stop. Hold it like that. Amell, unwrap the bandages. Water-no, not for me, on the bloody hole in my leg! I don't want any of whatever this slime is getting in there. Alright... Now take the claw and just-be gentle about it."

Amell removed the claw.

Anders screamed. Quite a bit. The pain was worse than when the darkspawn had impaled him in the first place. The sound was even worse. The carapace sliding out of the muscles in his leg made a watery sucking sound, like a boot being pulled from mud. Followed by a loud crack. "Andraste's flaming-did it break?" Anders demanded.

"I have it. Wait." Amell said. Amell's hand glowed blue and Anders felt something moving his beneath his skin. Awful didn't begin to describe the sensation. Vomit crawled into his throat and he swallowed it back down. "There," Amell said, "It was a small piece. Now what?"

"Keep holding the tourniquet and give me the potion." Anders said. Amell handed it to him, and he drank it before he summoned Compassion. She came readily, and the Veil held. Anders let out the breath he'd been holding. "I have it. Give me a quarter hour. Don't let go of the tourniquet."
"I've got it." Nate assured him.

"Easy." Anders said to himself. Sure, there was a gaping hole in his leg, and his shoulder still felt like it had collapsed in its socket, and he couldn't breathe without hurting his ribs, but he wasn't dead. No one else was dead. All in all, today could have been worse.

"Something like this happened in my battalion once." Sigrun said. "It went kind of like this, only a mage wasn't there to heal him, and we had to cut off his arm. And we had to do it while fighting a hoard of darkspawn before the taint infected him, without any golems or demons protecting us, but it was kind of like this."

"Anders' leg is injured, not his arm. And we don't have to amputate anything." Nathaniel said.

"I said 'like' not 'exactly like'. Jeez. Is he always like this?" Sigrun asked.

"Sadly." Anders said.

"Speaking of demons." Oghren interrupted, eyeing the desire demon still floating around Amell. "How come these things are always gals? I mean, you figure there'd be a stud or two in the mix. Are they ever dudes?"

"Sometimes. If that's what you want them to be." Amell said.

"Uh-huh." Oghren grinned. "And you humans dream with these things in your Fade. Ever bang one?"

"Oh ew." Sigrun wrinkled her nose. "Really? It has horns."

"And tits out to here." Oghren held out his hands. "So come on, Boss. Fess up."

"Why do you ask?" Amell asked.

"That's a yes if I ever heard one." Oghren said. "You owe me ten silvers, archer boy."

"That's not what I heard." Nathaniel said. "I owe you nothing, dwarf."

"Oh for-" Anders rolled his eyes. "Anyone who's ever had a wet dream has banged some kind of spirit or demon."

"Aha!" Oghren laughed, "Fellow mage confirms it. Ten silvers. Paid in full when we get back to the Keep."

"That doesn't count." Nathaniel said.

"Nug shit it doesn't." Oghren said. "So what are we doing with her? Kill her now, or keep her around to fight darkspawn?"

The demon was still hanging off Amell. She would pace occasionally, but never more than a few feet away before she wandered back. Her hands were everywhere, in his hair, on his arms, sometimes even wrapped around his neck. Her bare breasts pressed against his arm or his back, and Amell just ignored it. Anders couldn't fathom it. The lurid display was so distracting Anders could barely focus on his healing his leg. At the same time, Anders felt like it was indecent of him to even be looking at her. But then again, even if she weren't bound, desire demons were notoriously shameless. And notoriously evil. She needed to die.

Amell stared at the demon for a long minute. She smiled back at him. "Keep her. She'll be useful."
"Keep her!?" Anders repeated in disbelief. "She's not a puppy, you know, she's a demon. The kind that possess mages like you and me. You can't be serious."

"Trust me, Anders. I know what I'm doing." Amell said. The famous last words of every blood mage.

"If you say so," Anders said warily.

Anders hadn't thought of Amell as a blood mage in weeks. Yes, he used a spell here and there to kill darkspawn, but Anders had never seen him use his magic to control a person. Or bind a demon. It was a rather uncomfortable reminder.

He shouldn't have forgotten in the first place, Anders thought as he finished healing his leg, and told Nate to take off the tourniquet. He should know better than to trust a pretty face, but more than that, he should know better than to trust a friendly one. What did he wear his old pendant for it not to remind himself that friendship was dangerous?

Friendship could be as blind as love. It made a man lose sight of himself. Anders couldn't afford to let that happen. A mage who got careless would end up no mage at all. Anders eyed the demon while he rubbed the feeling back into his leg as his circulation returned. When he could feel his toes again, Anders healed his other minor scrapes and contusions.

"The Veil is torn below," Amell said when their break was over, and Anders could walk again. "On the way back we might run into more demons. Be cautious,"

Anders couldn't afford to be anything less. He had no staff, and only half a robe left to his name. He stayed beside Nathaniel as they descended back into the lower reaches of Kal'Hirol, praying they ran into no more demons. He should have prayed a little harder.

Shades leapt forth from the shadows, angry wraiths seemed to spring forth from the dead bodies of darkspawn littered around them. One blow from their golem could disperse a shade, but the wraiths were annoyingly quick balls of light that darted overhead, shocking anyone who came too near. Anders dispelled them as best he was able with no staff to focus his magic, but Amell insisted they ignore them and keep moving, so they did.

They were almost to the end of the corridor when the ghost of a dwarf ran towards them. "This is my home!" The ghost yelled, "And I will kill all who threaten it!" He charged forward, and before Anders could dispel the magic forming in the air, a creature of molten hate burst forth from the ghost in a shower of flame.

The desire demon dove it with a screech. Her hands lit with purple flame, and she swiped at the rage demon's face. Bits of the rage demon fell off like clumps of molten lava as they fought. Anders summoned ice, and let it form into a lance he flung at the molten creature. It didn't quite freeze, but the lava that made up its 'legs' hardened, and rendered it immobile. The desire demon tore it to pieces.

She seemed almost proud of her victory, walking back to Amell's side with a noticeable sway in her hips. Anders hoped the man still had a firm hold over her as they continued.

Further into the lower reaches, and they came upon a corridor. It was a long corridor. Very long. So long they couldn't see it end. "Back in Kal'Hirol's day, long corridors were a status symbol." Oghren said, chuckling. "The longer the better, if you know what I mean."

"Size isn't everything." Sigrun quipped.
They all laughed, except Amell, who only grinned, but the camaraderie was short lived. When they realized the corridor echoed, they unanimously agreed to be quiet for fear of whatever lay ahead. "The suspense is killing me," Anders whispered when the exit was finally in sight; the hallway opened up into an extraordinarily well lit chamber, but aside from the light Anders could make nothing out.

As they drew closer, they heard voices. The harsh, guttural voices of darkspawn, and they were arguing.

"The Lost is a coward!" One darkspawn was screaming. "The Lost hides behind the man of metal! Face me! Face me!"

"It is the Architect who is a coward!" The other yelled back "He sends many but does not come himself! I will kill you and he will know that he has failed to destroy the Lost! He will know that the Mother will tear him apart!"

They reached the entryway to the chamber, and found the source of the light. It was a golem. And it put their sad little walking boulder to shame. Their golem was a chunk of misshapen stone barely taller than Nathaniel. The darkspawn's golem was a giant of metal, three times the size of their own. Fire shone through every crack in its armor and it dripped with molten lava, as if a rage demon lay within. In one hand, it held half a darkspawn.

One whole darkspawn was standing beside it. On the one hand, it held a staff, and Anders was envious. On the other hand, it held a control rod, and Anders was terrified.

"Who comes now!?" The darkspawn screamed at them.

With a furious screech, the desire demon ran forward. She didn't get two feet into the room before the inferno golem swatted her out of the air, and she died immediately in a puff of purple smoke. That was one problem solved, Anders supposed.

Beside him, Amell was already casting something from a cut in his arm. Anders hadn't noticed, but the darkspawn had. "No!" It screamed. "You will not have the mind of the Lost! The Lost is Awakened! The Man of Metal will protect me!" He darted behind the golem, and climbed up a ladder on its back, out of Amell's line of sight.

"It can't fit through the corridor. Why don't we just run?" Anders suggested.

"There will be no running!" The darkspawn yelled from the golem's back. With a wave of his staff, he summoned a wall of flame to block their exit.

"Nice going, idiot." Sigrun muttered.

"Get the control rod." Amell said, as if it were so simple. He drew his sword and put up his shield, and ran forward to fight a mountain. Well. It was nice knowing him.

Oghren charged with him, as did their own very pathetic golem. Nathaniel ran off as well, arrow notched to shoot the darkspawn down. This... This was suicide. They were all idiots. Anders didn't even have his staff to carve a proper glyph. He cast a quick frost incantation, and watched as it hit the golem's shoulder and promptly melted with all the strength of a snowball.

"How in the shit are we supposed to fight that sodding thing?" Sigrun asked what Anders was thinking. "Look. Their weapons are just bouncing off it, and that darkspawn is crouched so Nathaniel can't shoot him. What do we-"
She didn't get to finish. The golem thrust both its fists into the ground, and at first it seemed as if it had attempted to strike at Oghren and Amell and missed. A moment later, and a jet stream of flame and lava burst forth from the ground beneath Sigrun and burned her alive.

"No!" Anders screamed. A wave of protective magic burst forth from him, unfocused, but Sigrun was standing right next to him. Kneeling right next to him. On the floor right next to him, keening in agony. The flames dispersed as quickly as they came, but her armor was bright red. Anders sheathed his hands in a quick barrier and tore it off piece by burning piece. Atop the golem, the darkspawn was howling with malicious laughter.

He couldn't help her here. Dispelling the flames blocking the door, Anders grabbed her by her armpits and dragged her backwards into the corridor. "It hurts!" Sigrun sobbed. Thank the Maker she could still sob at all. Thank his own quick reflexes. "It hurts! It hurts! It hurts!"

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay." Anders said, dragging her no more than a yard into the hall before he laid her down and dropped to his knees to heal her. Maker's mercy, the burns. Her small clothes had been burned away and her skin was red, everywhere. Her left breast and all down her left side was an ugly black. Focus. You can fix this.

Sigrun was still screaming, tears running down her face, her tiny body twitching erratically from the pain, "It hurts, it hurts, it hurts," Sigrun sobbed.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay." Anders said. He wove a hasty spell of sleep and cast it over her to spare her the pain, and her body relaxed. She was a dwarf, so it wouldn't last long, but it would last long enough to heal her. And then, even though the Veil had torn the last time he'd done it, Anders summoned his spirit.

The sound of fabric ripping came again, over the din of battle in the very next room. Anders almost expected Compassion to walk through the Veil and heal Sigrun herself, but she was there at his finger tips, as always, cooling Sigrun's skin, knitting it back together, washing away the burns. The little dwarf took all of Anders' focus, and he could only pray no darkspawn or demon came to threaten them.

When her burns were no longer life threatening, but still severe, Anders could finally hear what was what going on in the next room as he worked. It didn't sound good.

"Boss!" Oghren called out. "Demon! Big demon! Really sodding big demon!"

A laugh rumbled through the chamber and into the corridor, so deep and powerful the ground shook, and pebbles rained down from the ceiling. "I...am... free!" Something bellowed.

"Oghren! Nathaniel! I need your blood!" Amell yelled.

"Then sodding use it! I'm already bleeding!" Oghren yelled back.

"As am I!" Nathaniel yelled.

"Obey me!" Amell shouted.

"You would dare command me!?" The voice rumbled down the corridor, and rained more pebbles down on Anders' head. "I am immortal! I am eternal! I am Pride!"

"You are mine!" Amell yelled back at it. "Obey me! I am your master now! Fight the golem!"

There was a roar and another rumble, and the crackling sound of lightning joined the sounds of
battle. Anders finished healing Sigrun as quickly as he dared. When her burns receded, he cast a life
ward beneath her in case she relapsed, and then remembered she was naked. He couldn't very well
cover her with his tunic if he didn't have one. His robes were all one piece, but they were mostly rags
now. If he went up in flames, they wouldn't protect him. Anders shrugged out of his robes and
draped them over Sigrun, and then ran back into the chamber in his smalls.

The first thing Anders saw was their golem, reduced to a pile of rocks by the entrance. The next
thing he saw was the inferno golem, still dripping fire and lava, being assaulted by a pride demon
with chains of lightning and electricity. The last thing he saw was Amell, his hands sheathed in dark
red energies tethering him to Oghren and Nathaniel behind him, and the pride demon in front of him.

He was laughing. Anders suddenly understood why he did it so rarely. He sounded insane. That
depth chuckle Anders had heard just that morning was gone. Amell's laugh was the wild cackle of a
man mad with power. Power that came from the blood of his friends.

No. That wasn't fair. Amell was bleeding too. They were all bleeding. They'd been on the losing side
of the battle until the pride demon tipped the scales in their favor. Oghren and Nathaniel had
volunteered for the spell. They were standing just behind Amell, watching the fight, not lying on the
ground in some ritualistic sacrifice. Anders was being too hard on him. So what if he had a creepy
laugh?

Anders jogged over and took up a spot next to them, unsure of how he could help. Amell didn't seem
to need his help. The pride demon was shredding through the golem's armor, tearing off chunk after
chunk while the darkspawn atop it screamed in outrage.

"The Mage cheats! The Mage has allies we were not knowing about! The Mage-" A whip off
electricity from the pride demon caught the darkspawn on the golem's back. Abruptly, it ceased
talking, had a seizure, toppled off the golem and hit the floor, dead. Without the encouragement of its
master, the golem went dormant mid fight.

"Kill this giant piece of nug shit." Oghren spat tiredly.

The pride demon twitched, and tiny bubbles formed beneath its grey skin. They skittered along the
demon's veins, growing exponentially until it exploded in a cloud of green dust. Nathaniel let out an
exuberant, if exhausted, cheer.

Amell unclasped his helmet and dropped it on the ground. Laughing wildly, he ran his blood soaked
gauntlets through his hair and smoothed it back against his scalp. Blood dripped down his brow, and
coated his arms to his elbows. Which was normal, Anders reminded himself. They'd just won a
battle.

Amell spotted him and smirked, but before either of them could say anything Oghren grabbed Amell
about the waist and spun him in a circle. "Hahaha! Fuck yeah! Stone fucking yeah!" Oghren roared,
spinning them again, but on the second attempt he toppled over and they hit the floor together. Amell
landed on him, and grabbed his face, planting a victorious kiss on the mouth Anders assumed
Oghren had somewhere under his beard. Oghren spat on him in disgust, only to laugh a second later
and headlock Amell, noogying him soundly. "Nice fucking job, you dirty little nug humper!"

"Nice job indeed." Nathaniel agreed. He'd also wound up on the floor at some point, and looked
dangerously pale. They all did. Anders took in the cut on Nathaniel's arm, and wondered how much
blood it had taken Amell to bind the pride demon.

A dangerous amount, Anders decided when both Amell and Oghren stayed on the ground rather
than attempt to stand. They all bore a grisly pallor, but a cursory inspection with his magic reassured
him it hadn't been enough to be life threatening for anyone. Anders knelt beside Amell first. He hadn't even called on any healing energies when Amell blinked at him.

"Sigrun?" Amell asked dizzily.


"Good." Amell said.

"Aren't you even going to ask what happened to my clothes?" Anders wondered as he healed him.

Amell looked him over appreciatively for a few moments at the invitation. "No. I'm alright with this."

"Just alright?" Anders demanded. Whether or not he was serious about the flirting, he wasn't about to stand for such a low evaluation of his looks.

"You are undeniably the most attractive man I have ever seen, and I would kiss you right now if I weren't worried it would make you uncomfortable." Amell said, so studiously Anders felt his face heat up. When was the last time anyone had made him actually blush? Hadn't he judged Amell absolutely terrifying a few minutes ago and vowed not to trust him? "Is that better?"

"Much better." Anders said. "Thank you."
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Vigil's Keep

All in all, their expedition into the Deep Roads had gone well. Ignoring the fact that Anders had been impaled, torn the Veil twice, lost his spaulders, had his robes ripped apart and subsequently donated to Sigrun, and came out of the whole ordeal in nothing but his boots and small clothes, it had gone well.

After the pride demon had taken care of the golem for them, they'd been able to reach the darkspawn nest it was guarding and destroy it. Going off of the rant they'd interrupted, it seemed the talking darkspawn were from two warring factions, and they'd already destroyed one. Of the three broodmothers they'd slain, it seemed reasonable to assume one was probably the Mother. So that was good.

What was even better was that Anders had a new staff. When the darkspawn had fallen from its perch atop the inferno golem, the thing's control rod had broken, but the darkspawn's staff had remained intact. It was a beautiful thing made from volcanic aurum, with no blade at it's base so it could actually double as a walking stick. A ruby was set atop it, so powerfully enchanted it put Anders' old staff to shame. Anders would have loved it, were it not so... wrong.

There was a corruption to the staff, after spending so much time in the hands of a darkspawn. It felt to Anders as if had been infused with Blight. The first time he'd touched it, it had slipped from his hand as if coated with a foul sort of oil. There was no grip to make holding it any easier, but Amell had promised him gloves, and Anders imagined they would serve well enough.

Despite its corruption, the staff was still a staff and Anders could use it to heal, so he had no complaints. Alright, so he had a few complaints, but they were minor. Having to walk back to the Vigil in nothing but his small clothes was definitely one of them.

It wasn't for modesty's sake that he'd minded. Anders was 'undeniably attractive' after all. He minded because it was the middle of summer, and the long walk had left him horribly sunburned until he'd had a chance to heal himself, without even the right to complain. Anders might not have given two figs what anyone thought of him, but complaining about a sunburn after Sigrun had gone full Andraste and been burned alive? Well that was just rude.

The little dwarf had decided to come with them and join the Wardens after they'd successfully avenged the Legion. A choice between being a Warden or dying alone in the Deep Roads didn't sound like much of a choice to Anders, but apparently Sigrun had labored over it. Anders had seen what happened when a person with doubt went through the Joining, so he was rather glad when Sigrun survived. He was even more glad when they collectively decided to celebrate her survival
The only downside was that they were in the Vigil's dining hall, and it was crowded with civilians and soldiers in for the evening meal. When they'd returned from Kal'Hirol, everyone had welcomed them like conquering heroes. That probably had more to do with the gold they'd brought back from Kal'Hirol's Treasury than anything else, but Anders didn't like it. The attention made him uncomfortable. Attention from one person or a small group, Anders could handle and even enjoy, but hero worship? Anders didn't know how Amell did it. Even now, they had their own table, but people were staring. It was weird. And kind of creepy.

"Toasts!" Oghren shouted, breaking Anders' out of his thoughts.

"I'll go first," Sigrun said, standing up on the bench she was sitting on so they could all see her better. She held her snifter aloft. The glass looked like a tankard in her tiny hands. "My first official toast as a Warden is for the Legion. Rest well, brothers. I'll join you when my Calling comes."

"To the Legion!" Everyone said.

Anders didn't like drinking to the thought of dying, but he did like drinking. He knocked back a mouthful of his drink with everyone else. Amell had broken out a cask of West Hill Brandy for them, and Anders much preferred it to the fire Oghren usually drank. There were hints of blackcurrent, and the aftertaste was a pleasant honeysuckle. In other words, it tasted expensive.

"I'll go again." Sigrun said after she swallowed. "My second toast as a Warden is to Anders, for saving my life, but more importantly, for letting me borrow his dress."

"To Anders!" Everyone laughed.

Anders rolled his eyes and drank rather than argue the difference between a robe and a dress.

"Your turn, Nate." Sigrun said, sitting back down.

"That's easy." Nate said, "My toast is to you, Sigrun. A remarkable fighter and welcome Sister."

"To Sigrun." Everyone said, drinking again.

"My turn then?" Oghren asked, "Alright. Gotta think up another one now, archer boy stole mine."

"We can skip you if thinking is too hard for you." Sigrun said. Anders liked her.

"Oh. She wounds me," Oghren swayed, putting a hand to his heart. "Rest assured, my spicy little kumquat, Oghren has a toast. An old classic: when from the blood of battle the Stone has fed, let heroes prevail and let the blighters lie dead. Well, here's to us blighters! We're not dead yet."

"We're not dead yet!" Everyone chorused.

"My turn?" Anders surmised, tracing the rim of his glass. He probably should have said something wardeny, but to the Void with that. It was his toast. "To freedom, pretty girls, and our fearless leader."

"Here sodding here!" Oghren slapped his knee, and jumped up on the bench to roar out at the hall. "You hear that, you flaming blighters? We're drinking to the Commander! Raise your cups and drown in 'em!"

A deafening cheer ran through the dining hall, and lasted for several long minutes before it died
down enough for them to continue. Anders didn't know how Amell could stand it. Everyone loved him, but no one even knew him. It seemed... Well it seemed lonely.

"Your turn, Commander." Sigrun said.

"To drinking." Amell said simply. "Nothing burns like the first cup."

"To drinking!" Everyone agreed.

It was definitely a toast Anders could drink to. He was looking forward to being drunk. Sigrun had brought cards, and resolved to teach them all a dwarven card game called 'Diamondback.' Anders was terrible at it. He lost every hand, though he was hard pressed to care with an open tap. A minstrel was playing on the opposite end of the hall, and the mood was light enough that Anders forgot the crowded hall had ever bothered him.

"In Legion, we used to sing a lot," Sigrun said as she dealt another round. "Call songs, for when we were marching. Or eating. Or whenever we felt like it, to keep our spirits up. Do the Wardens have anything like that?"

"Not officially." Amell said.

"What about unofficially?" Sigrun asked.

"Unofficially, I only know one," Amell said.

"Let's hear it then." Oghren said.

"I can't sing." Amell said.

"Please?" Sigrun pleaded.

"I wouldn't mind a song or two." Nate chimed in.

"Why not?" Anders joined in on the peer pressure. "I wouldn't mind judging this singing voice of yours."

Amusingly, Anders noticed Amell didn't seem persuaded until Anders said something. Well, well, wasn't that interesting? Anders would use this newfound power for good. Only for good. He most certainly was not going to wheedle Amell into pampering him. Much.

"Fine." Amell said, taking another shot of brandy before he stood. Anders wondered how drunk he was. Anders wondered how drunk Anders was. "The chorus is 'Gory, gory, what a wretched way to die,' repeated three times."

"This is a fun song, then." Anders guessed.

"I love it already." Sigrun said eagerly.

"It's called 'Blood on the Ramparts.'" Amell said, before launching into song.

Either Amell had decent singing voice, or Anders was too drunk to tell if he was awful. Maybe a bit of both. At the end of every verse, he signaled for them to sing the chorus, though Anders and Nate always had a slight delay. Maybe they were all awful at singing.

"He was mage and Warden both, and surely shook with fright, for though he'd been in battle, he had never seen a Blight."
He had to sit and listen to those awful darkspawn roar. You'll live not one day more!"

"Gory, gory, what a wretched way to die. Gory, gory, what a wretched way to die. Gory, gory, what a wretched way to die."

"'Is everybody ready?' Cried the Commander looking up. Our hero feebly answered 'Yes' and then they stood him up. He charged into the battle, he charged into the fray, he charged with all his Brothers for they were of the Grey. He'll live not one day more!"

"He fought long, and he fought hard; he fought with all the rest. He felt the thrill of battle, and the sword that pierced his breast. But as he fell, he rose again, and so he was possessed. He'll live not one day more!"

"The darkspawn dove upon him, their swords did pierce his skin, Their arrows flew, their maces struck, but still they could not win. Until at last, that final blast, did finally take him down. He'll live not one day more!"

"The days he lived and loved and laughed kept running through his mind. He thought about the Circle girl, the one he'd left behind. He thought about the templars, and wondered what they'd find. He'll live not one day more!"

"The Wardens, they were on the spot. There were demons running wild. The templars jumped and screamed with glee, they armed themselves and smiled, For it had been at least a week since last a mage had failed. He'll live not one day more."

"And as he fell, his scream was loud, his blood went splurting high. His Brothers, they were heard to say, 'What a wretched way to die.' He lay there rolling round, in the welter of his gore. He'll live not one day more!"

"There was blood on the ramparts, there were brains upon the floor, But of the darkspawn he had killed, they numbered twice a score. And so it was that day they found, their victory in war. He'll live not one day more!"

A mad cheer went up through the dining hall when the song ended. Anders belatedly realized everyone had gone quiet to listen to Amell sing, and even felt a little guilty for pressuring him into it when the man flushed. Then again, he was drunk, or at least comfortably inebriated. His face might have been flushed whether or not he was embarrassed. Amell gave a small wave to the room and sat back down.

Sigrun was clapping madly. "I loved it! It was absolutely perfect. I can't believe you only know one! We have to learn more. Or maybe we could come up with our own."

"I also enjoyed it." Nathaniel said. What he'd actually said was more of a slush of vowels, but Anders understood him.
"This one of them self-fulfilling prophecies, this song of yours? Except for the bit about being afraid and liking girls, I mean." Oghren asked, gesturing empathetically with his snifter. Brandy sloshed out onto the table near Anders, and he scooted to the side to evade it before it waterfalled off the edge and into his lap.

He bumped thighs with Amell in the process. Amell stared at him for the contact; it took Amell at least a minute to process that Anders was dodging spilled brandy, and not just pressing against him for the sport of it. Amell made room for him, and then looked back at Oghren. "What?"

"What, what?" Oghren asked.

"You asked me something." Amell said.

"Did I? Don't remember," Oghren shrugged. "Let's have another song, eh! One less mud-lin."

"Less what?" Anders asked.

"Mud-lin. You know, sad and shit."

"Maudlin?" Nathaniel supplied.

"Whatever." Oghren said.

"Hm. Andraste's Mabari was always a favorite of mine." Nathaniel said. "We never heard it in the Free Marches."

"Well go on then!" Oghren ordered.

Nathaniel sang, and as it was a popular tavern song, half the dining hall joined in. Sigrun and Oghren sang the chorus as they learned it, and Amell...

Amell drank. Anders touched his shoulder to get his attention, and wasn't terribly surprised when Amell looked melancholy. He must have really missed his own mabari. "Hey. I know I said I was bad at the feely part of relationships, but do you want to talk about it?"

"Am I that obvious?" Amell wondered "I must be drunk."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Anders laughed. "So come on. Shoulder's right here if you need a cry."


Anders laughed. "Maybe it can wait till we're sober?"

"No, I want you to have it now." Amell insisted. He stood again, much slower this time, and Anders followed suit. The whole dining hall spun. Anders leaned on the table until the room decided to behave.

"Alright." Anders said when he felt relatively confident he could walk.

"Where are you two going?" Sigrun asked.

"I'm borrowing Anders." Amell said. He grabbed his hand again and made towards the exit.

Oghren whistled.
"Oh for-he just wants to give me something." Anders said over his shoulder.

"Yeah! His dick!" Oghren yelled after them. The din of Oghren's laughter faded as Amell dragged Anders out into the hall.

It probably wasn't his dick. Anders doubted 'Andraste's Mabari' would suddenly remind anyone they wanted to have sex. And Amell wasn't being very sexy. He dragged Anders through the halls of the Keep with a single-minded determination.

"Where are we going?" Anders laughed. They reached the stairs to the third story, and Anders had to take them at the speed of a crawl.

"My room." Amell said.

Or maybe it was his dick. "Why...?" Anders ventured.

"It's a surprise." Amell said.

Anders' face was hot on the rest of the walk to Amell's quarters. Amell didn't bunk with the rest of the plebs in the barracks; as the Arl and Commander, he had the best rooms in the Vigil. Rooms with plenty of privacy, Anders imagined.

Well... If he didn't like where the evening went, Anders would just blame it on the alcohol. That was the mature adult thing to do, after all. Anders let Amell drag him through the Keep and to his quarters, unable to help leaning on him while Amell fiddled drunkenly with the lock to his door. When he got it open, Amell pulled him inside.

Anders braced himself to be pushed back against a wall, or thrown onto a bed, or something equally tawdry. Nothing of the sort happened. Amell let go of him and stumbled forward, mumbling to himself. "Where is it...?"

"Where's what?" Anders asked.

Amell's quarters looked more like a library with a very out of place canopy bed than a bedroom. Fancy, Anders thought, stopping at the nearest bookshelf to read some of the titles. When that proved too difficult, he watched Amell rummage gracelessly under his bed.

"Got you." Amell muttered, climbing out from under his bed and dragging along...

"Are you serious!?!" Anders asked.

Amell pushed the yowling cat into his arms. Anders felt like crying. Gingerly, he cradled the little fellow in his arms and scratched its ear until it calmed down. "You got me a cat? How? When? Why?"

"I asked around, when we got back from Kal'Hirol. The Keep could use a mouser, and I thought..." Amell trailed off. "Do you like him?"

"I love him." Anders said. "He looks just like Mr. Wiggums! Oh, who's the prettiest tabby? You are! Yes you!" Anders sat on the edge of Amell's bed and set the cat in his lap. It promptly wandered off to sniff at the sheets, before it picked a pillow and started kneading it. "What should I call him, do you think?"

Amell shrugged and sat beside him to watch the cat. "Hurclaw?"
"Why is everything darkspawn with you?" Anders gave Amell's shoulder a shove. The little tabby dove onto a new pillow and started kneading again. "I know, how about Ser Pounce-a-Lot?"

"I liked Hurclaw." Amell said.

"I'm not calling him Hurclaw." Anders said. Anders leaned over to run his fingers down the cat's spine, and the little fellow thrummed adorably. "I can't believe you got me a cat."

"I want you to like being here." Amell said.

"I do like being here." Anders said. He looked back at Amell and found the man staring at him rather shamelessly. "Really. You don't have to try so hard. Anything beats sitting in a cell. I mean, being mauled half to death by darkspawn isn't my first choice for alternatives, but I try to keep an open mind."

"How open?" Amell asked. Amell set a hand on Anders' thigh, and Anders stared at it. It was just your average hand, really. It probably felt more or less the same as a woman's hand. Amell had held his hand the entire walk to his room, but for some Anders couldn't remember what it felt like. That was brandy for you.

"Um." Anders said tactfully.

Amell took his hand away. "I'm sorry-that's not why I got you the cat-I really do want you to be comfortable here."

"Hey, no, I get it," Anders said quickly. "We're not kids, right? You can want both. I'm having a grand time being a Warden, honest. And uh... I'll think about the other thing."

"Good to know." Amell said.

Ser Pounce wandered back over to walk across Anders' lap. Anders pet him. "So... that song was totally morbid."

"Wardens kind of are 'totally morbid,' Anders." Amell said.

"Well I mean, yeah, but don't we do anything other than fight darkspawn? Do we throw parties? Take over small kingdoms?"

"Arlings, but you were close." Amell said.

"I guess so," Anders laughed. "You know, this might sound silly, but I've never really thought about what I would do if I could do anything. Not seriously."

"That doesn't sound silly at all." Amell said. Ser Pounce wandered to Amell's lap, and the man fell back on the bed to give the cat free rein of his chest. "I understand. Back in the Circle... Freedom was just a fantasy. You can't think too seriously about it or you go mad."

"You get me." Anders said.

"I'm trying." Amell said.

Anders laughed. He definitely liked Amell, crazy blood mage or not. At least enough to bed him. If the man had been a woman, Anders would have taken him up on his offer in a heartbeat. It was a shame, really, but... Well, it wasn't like a bit of experimenting would kill him...

A knock at the door cut off Anders' train of thought.
"Enter!" Amell called out, and sat up.

It was Mistress Woolsey, of all people. A rather portly looking fellow was with her, red faced and dressed in a rather simple doublet and jerkin. Noble, but probably not too noble. "Commander." Woolsey bowed, all practicality despite the fact that the two of them were sitting on Amell's bed, playing with a cat. "I apologize for disturbing you, but-

"But I insisted." The noble interrupted. "My name is Lord Edgar Bensley, Commander. I am a loyal vassal, and distant cousin to Lord Eddelbrek."

Spare me, Anders thought. Nobles could be ridiculously frumpy.

"I come to beg your help." Edgar continued. "My only daughter, my sweet Eileen, has been kidnapped by a gang of bandits which have plagued the arling of late. Their leader, a man named Mosley, is demanding thirty sovereigns for her release, to be delivered to the ruined Chantry by the Forlorn Cove by tonight, or he swears she will die.

"I haven't the means, Commander," Edgar explained, his eyes welling with tears. "If I sold everything I owned, I could deliver the ransom myself, but I could never find a buyer for old tapestries and family heirlooms in so short a time. I thought if I came to you, you could negotiate with the bandits in my stead... or pay my Eileen's ransom."

"My dear Lord Bensley, the Wardens sympathize with your plight, but thirty sovereigns for one girl of lesser standing is too obscene a sum." Woolsey said bluntly. "We simply cannot help you. What we can do is address these attacks. Young Lady Bensley was abducted along the Pilgrim's Path. Mosley is but one man, with a half dozen ruffians at his command, but he may answer to a greater threat that has been waylaying our caravans of late. The Warden-Commander would do better to speak with the Merchant Guild in Amaranthine to learn more, rather than walk blindly into this bandit's nest."

"But my Eileen." Edgar all but sobbed. "Please, Commander. It is as your treasurer says. He has only a half-dozen men. Surely... Surely that would be no trouble for the Hero of Ferelden? I've heard the stories."

"Stories, my dear Lord Bensley, are stories." Woolsey said. "It is only in stories you will see one man live when pitted against six. And even were our Commander to prevail, it is highly unlikely your daughter would survive the encounter. Commander, if you would, could you please explain to Lord Bensley what he asks is impossible?"

Amell grabbed hold of the banister to his canopy bed and used it to pull himself to his feet. He swayed a little, and Anders thought it was obvious he wasn't completely sober. "Where is the cove?"

"Oh-oh-thank you, Commander!" Edgar sobbed. He ran forward and grabbed hold of Amell's hand, kissing his knuckles. "Maker preserve you! The cove is on the coast of the Amaranthine Ocean, following the North Road to Amaranthine. I have a map, and a locket here with a portrait of my sweet Eileen." He fished both things from a pack at his hip and pushed them into Amell's hands. "Please, Commander, we must make haste. I fear for Eileen's life should I delay."

"I'm going alone." Amell said.

"Mosley wanted for me to come in person, I have his ransom note," Edgar said, retrieving a roll of parchment from his pack. "Should I not be present, just to make it clear you speak on my behalf?"

"Commander, I too must question the amount of thought you appear to have given this decision."
Mistress Woolsey said.

"Trust me." Amell said. He set the locket, map, and ransom note down on the bed, went to the armoire on the far side of his room. "You can go. I'll leave right away unless there's anything else you think I should know."

"No, Commander." Edgar said. "Thank you, Commander. I will await you here at the Vigil and pray for your safe return."

He bowed his way out of the room, but Mistress Woolsey stayed to scowl disapprovingly. "...Anders. I noticed you returned from the Deep Roads with a very fine new staff. Perhaps you might use it in defense of our Commander?" She bowed after the suggestion, muttering under her breath when she left. "Or to knock some sense into him."

"So... What's the plan?" Anders asked.

Amell waited until Woolsey had gone to start unbuttoning his doublet. "I'm going to go get that man's daughter."

"Oh, well. Look at you, story book hero, making a liar out of our fair Woolsey." Anders said. "Are you sure you can handle negotiating a hostage situation right now? Because if you had as much brandy as I did, you shouldn't be able to argue your way out of a paper bag."

"I'll sober up on the way there." Amell said. He took his doublet off, and reached into his armoire for a proper tunic to wear beneath his armor. Anders definitely needed to start doing presses. No 'physical prowess' indeed.

"But I mean, still, six bandits against one of you?" Anders asked. "I'm not that good at math, but last I checked six was a little bit more than one."

"I don't plan on fighting them, Anders." Amell said.

"So...?" Anders said.

"Can you help me with this?" Amell waved a hand at his armor stand rather than answer his question.

Anders moved Ser Pounce off his lap with a sigh and went to help. Standing only made the room sway now, as opposed to spin. Anders stared at the armor Amell wore as he put it on. "That's a lot of buckles. What do I do here?"

"Just tighten them, at the sides here." Amell said.

The man's aroma of copper and the Fade was back, mixed with West Hill Brandy and an underlying musk. Anders almost regretted not boffing him when Amell had offered. Then again, if he had, Woolsey's interruption would have been a great deal more awkward. "Do you want me to come with?" Anders asked, tightening the armor under his arms. "Two mages are better than one, and all that."

"I won't make you." Amell said.

"That's sweet, but I just offered, so I think you're good."

"Anders..." Amell turned so they were face to face. "I'm not going to fight. Or to negotiate. I'm going to go there, and I'm going to destroy a man's mind. Are you still sure you want to come?" His eyes
were a deep russet, and reminded Anders rather aptly of dried blood. Anders stared at them for a while until he realized he was staring.

"Well it's not like I was expecting a picnic." Anders said.

"The other day in Kal'Hirol-" Amell started to say.

"That was different. That was a demon." Anders cut him off. "Look. I get it. You're a blood mage. Rawr, scary, but that doesn't make you immortal. As far as I know. I'd feel better coming - no, don't you dare laugh. Anyway, if you died, there'd be nothing stopping the templars from coming and taking me back to the Circle. So there."

"I'm glad you care." Amell said.

"I try," Anders said, checking the last strap on Amell's armor. "Are you good? I'm going to go get ready if you are. Do you mind if we keep Ser Pounce-a-Lot in here until I make a space for him in the barracks?"

"I don't mind. I'll meet you in the inner courtyard." Amell said.

Anders left Amell's room, and took the stairs back down to the Warden's barracks. On the way there, as the ground lurched under him and his head felt twice its usual weight, Anders wondered what he was doing. It wasn't just a joke; Amell was a story book hero. What were did bandits to a man who had bound a pride demon to his will? Anders should have let him run off on his own.

But apparently, Anders was too stupid. Anders had to help. Anders always had to help. Anders stumbled to his bunk, and changed into his boots, a pair of thick woolen trousers, and a rather plain tunic, all courtesy of one of the late Orlesian Wardens. Anders was looking forward to having his own clothes.

What sad standards he had, where socks for Satinalia sounded fantastic and an oily corrupted staff was a dream come true. Anders wrapped a bandage around his right hand as a makeshift grip, and picked up his staff. "I could be getting laid right now. Hypothetically. What's wrong with me?"

Anders muttered to himself, hurrying to the courtyard.

Amell was waiting for him. "It's a half hour's march from the Vigil." Amell said, setting out.

The sun was already falling down behind the horizon. Anders hoped the girl's captures were patient men. He conjured a light for their benefit when they were on the road, "So. What should I be expecting here?"

"They have a leader. I'll convince him to give us the girl. When she's safe, we'll kill them." Amell said.

"Well I'm glad you have it all planned out." Anders said.

"I don't know any more than you do, Anders." Amell said.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Anders said. "I know I look the type, but I don't actually know a lot about blood magic. You know, aside from the basics: demons, mind control, virgin sacrifices."

"This would be the middle one." Amell said.

"But how does it work?" Anders asked. Curiosity killed the cat, and all that, but Anders thought he should at least know what to expect.
"It's a matter of willpower. Mine against whatever I'm enslaving. He'll do as I will him to, want what I want. In this case he'll want to give us the girl and let us go free." Amell said.

"What if he's... I don't know, more willful than you are? Or however you want to put it."

"He won't be." Amell said simply.

At least he was confident, Anders supposed. Confidence and will were probably more or less the same thing.

They walked the rest of the way in relative silence. The North Road was abandoned, being the roundabout way to Amaranthine. It split off towards the coast, and led straight to the ruined Chantry.

"Well," Anders rubbed his hands together, taking in the crumbling ruin and the rickety bridge leading up to it. Little remained of the old Chantry save for its walls. It had been built on an island, raised well above the surrounding sea, and framed in outcroppings of jagged rock. "I wouldn't build a summer home here, but the view is lovely." Anders joked.

"Very." Amell agreed, taking off his gauntlet and handing it to Anders.

"Thanks... I guess." Anders said, putting it on. Amell snorted. "Why am I holding this?"

Amell knelt and drew the dagger from his boot. He sliced open his wrist, and wiped the blood off on his sleeve before sheathing it again.

"Maker's mercy, doesn't that hurt?" Anders asked. "Do you even feel pain?"

"I'm used to it." Amell said, holding out a hand for his gauntlet. Anders gave it back to him and watched him put it on over the cut.

"You're kind of creepy, you know that?" Anders said.

Amell grinned and donned his helmet.

They crossed bridge to the Chantry, the structure swaying gently in time with the waves below. It was deceptively peaceful, given what lay in wait on the other side. Within the ruins of the Chantry, the bandits were well entrenched. Three crossbowmen lingered off to the right under the cover of a few young trees, and yet more might have been hidden in the ruins. Their leader was well outfitted, picking at the dirt beneath his nails with a dagger. "What's all this piss?" Mosley spat. "Where's Bensley?"

"Not here." Amell said. "Where's Eileen?"

Mosley scowled, and bowed his head to press his knuckles against his temple as if warding off a headache. Anders chanced a glance at Amell. The fingers on his injured hand twitched, but there was no other indication of what he was doing. In a way, it was terrifying. One little headache as the only sign of blood magic? No wonder the Chantry and Templars feared it so.

"Boss?" One of the bandits, an ugly bloke to be sure, shuffled anxiously. "You alright?"

Mosley straightened. "I'm fine. Show them the girl."

The girl they brought out looked nothing like her father. She had dark brown skin, and was terribly slender, not portly and pale. Her mother must have been from Rivain. "The girl first. Then the gold." Amell said.
"Send her over." Mosley parroted obediently.

"What? What if they ain't got the money?" One of the smarter bandits demanded.

"Do as I say." Mosley said.

"What you say is fucking stupid, boss. I thought we agreed we was gonna-wait a second. That fucker has a staff! I bet he's one of them blood mage types that makes your brain go stupid."

"He's a healer," Amell said, stepping in front of him when the crossbow men aimed at him. "That's all. Here for Eileen. If he makes you uncomfortable, he can leave with her. I have the gold anyway."

"See?" Mosley said. "You're paranoid, dumbass. Just give them the girl so we can get paid."

The girl's captor gave her a shove that sent her running into Anders' arms. "Wait for me across the bridge." Amell said.

"Are you sure-" Anders started to ask.

"Go." Amell said. He used his 'Warden-Commander' voice, so Anders went.

"Is he going to be alright?" Eileen asked when they were half way across the bridge.

"I certainly hope so." Anders said. "It would make for a rather shoddy ending if the Hero of Ferelden died to a handful of bandits in the middle of nowhere." A realistic ending, sure, but a shoddy one. Anders waited impatiently when they were across.

Sure enough, Amell followed him back across a few minutes later. Not covered in blood, or chased by bandits. Just walking, calm as you please. "Anders, can you summon a firestorm from here?"

"Can I what now?" Anders asked.

"Summon a firestorm from here. I'm not learned in long range magic." Amell said.

"We weren't just going to... I don't know, head back?" Anders asked. "I mean, Eileen is safe."

"Kill them," Eileen said. "They were going to kill my father, after they had the money. And rape me. I don't know who you are, or how you convinced them to let us all go... but kill them."

"Anders?" Amell said.

"No... Uh. Right. I'll try." Anders said.

Anders took up a spot at the edge of the old bridge. With his staff and a great deal of effort, he could manage an inferno in an eight meter sphere. Nine if he was lucky. The old Chantry was slightly bigger than that, but nature had reclaimed much of the ruins. The few trees and foliage that had sprouted would serve well enough as kindling, Anders supposed. The poor sods would be burned alive unless they jumped into the surrounding sea, but the rocky shallows offered only a different kind of death. Anders shook himself.

Drawing on his connection to the Fade, Anders channeled the spell for ten seconds, and then twenty. Feeling woozy, he held it longer still, hearing the whispers of curious wisps and spirits across the Veil, drawn to his magic. When he was certain he had held the primal energies long enough to spread across eight meters, he released it. Anders stumbled, dizzy, but at least he finally had a staff to catch himself on. Perspective was good, after all.
A huge column of swirling flame crashed down from the sky, roaring through the ruined chantry, devouring trees, blacking the old stone columns. The heat of it carried across the bridge, and warmed his face almost pleasantly.

"Impressive." Amell said from beside him, voice soft with admiration. "That's ten meter in diameter, easily."

"You think so?" Anders asked.

"Mhm," Amell hummed agreeably. A wet sucking sound made Anders glance over in time to see Amell peeling off his gauntlet; his hand was stained a gory crimson from the amount of blood he'd let spill in his hold over Mosley. "Would you?"

Anders took hold of his hand and healed it, glad he had no need of Compassion for the spell. At the moment, he wasn't sure she'd come if he called.

Amell had soft hands, Anders was finally sober enough to note. It had been a sobering evening. They took the North Road back to the Vigil, and Anders slipped away during the congratulations to wander the Vigil. He wasn't terribly surprised when he wound up in the Chantry. It was empty, this late in the evening. Anders picked a pew near the front and sat. And to think, today had started out grand.

He felt nothing. No guilt. No remorse. No pride. Nothing. Anders wasn't sure how long he sat there, not praying, not really doing anything, but eventually Amell found him. Anders looked up at the sound of his footsteps. Amell sat beside him.

"... You've never killed someone before, have you?" Amell asked. "A person, not darkspawn or demons."

"What? No. I kill people all the time," Anders said flippantly. "'Anders the Angry,' they call me."

Amell didn't bother calling him out on his lie. He sat beside him in companionable silence for several minutes, smelling of blood and metal and the Fade. Death. It was a little queer it was so soothing. "It gets easier." Amell said eventually.

"I'm not sure that's comforting." Anders said.

"I'm not sure it's supposed to be."
Freedom for Anders

Chapter Notes

I managed to finish this chapter tonight! Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, kudos, and as always thank you for reading. I really love all the feedback you guys have given me. Enjoy.

9:31 Dragon 17 Solis Afternoon
Amaranthine

Anders loved the city. The sounds, the sights, the smell of dog shit. Amaranthine was known as the jewel of the north, and as far as Anders was concerned it was a city that earned the name. Once you got past endless the fields of wailing refugees locked outside the city proper, and the angry guards keeping them there, of course. It was no wonder the city had a smuggling problem. Getting in people was hard enough without worrying about getting in things.

And once you had those things, keeping them was even harder. There were cut purses everywhere. Anders had lost his coin pouch not three steps into the city. Fortunately, it was Sigrun who'd taken it. "It was me who took it this time, but next time it'll be someone else, and they won't give it back. Why don't you guys let me hold onto your coin for now?" Sigrun asked.

"Them casteless tats ain't for nothing, huh?" Oghren asked. "You ex-Carta?"

"Everyone who was ever born casteless is ex-Carta." Sigrun said.

"Can I have my coin back please?" Anders sighed.

"But you're just going to lose it," Sigrun protested.

"Sigrun, give it back. Anders, keep your coin in your boots." Amell said.

"Yes, Mother." Anders rolled his eyes. Sigrun handed him back his small coin pouch, and Anders stuffed it in his shoe. It was outrageously uncomfortable.

Oghren nudged him, "Don't you mean 'Yes, Daddy'?"

"You're gross, you know that?" Anders said. Each step kicked the pouch around in his boot, hard coins cutting against his foot. Did Amell carry his coin like this? No wonder he was so grumpy.

At least Anders didn't have a lot of coins. Apparently, being a Warden entitled Anders to a small stipend each month, but it was a very small stipend. Woolsey was far less generous than Amell with coin. The three gold sovereigns Amell had given him were like to be the last Anders ever saw, so if his foot hurt, at least it hurt from walking on gold. Perspective, Anders.

"I'll get us lodgings at the Pilgrim's Rest tonight," Amell said. "I know all of you want to see the city, but try to stay in groups of two, and don't cause any trouble with the guards. I'll be at the Merchant's Guild House in the market district for most of the afternoon, and at Bann Esmerelle's estate in the evening if you need me. If any templars harass Anders and my name isn't enough to scare them away, send someone to come and find me. I'll see you all later tonight." Amell left.
"So how about it, my hot little pomegranate?" Oghren leered at Sigrun. "You ready to partner up with Oghren?"

"Ew. No." Sigrun said flatly. "Nate?"

"My lady," Nate gave a tiny bow and held out his arm for her. Sigrun snatched it up, and stuck her tongue out at Oghren as they left.

"I knew the 'quiet and stoic' thing would get him all the action." Oghren muttered. "She's a feisty one. I'll have to up my game. Don't you forget that bet, Sparkles. You'll be paying my tab soon enough."

"I'm not worried," Anders said. "That probably just means you'll belch and fart at the same time now."

"I'm a man of many talents," Oghren snorted, hiking up his pants. "So where to first? I gotta find an apothecary or something for this... weird green rash on my-

"Stop!" Anders plugged his ears. "Stop. Stop. No. No more. Let's just go find the apothecary. I could stand to pick up a few flasks myself."

"Heheh. Alright. Your loss. It looks kind of like-"

"Lalalala." Anders said loudly. He set off down the street to the market district at a brisk walk, and Oghren had to jog to catch up with him.

Anders' shoes were making an audible clink with every step. If someone did decide to mug him, it would be a rather simple affair of tackling him and running off with his boots. Anders did not want to walk through the streets of Amaranthine barefoot. Not only were they half paved in uneven cobblestone, but the drainage was questionable at best. The gutters were on the brink of overflowing, shit, piss, and dirty water congealed into puddles of brown sludge where they already had. But that was every city.

Once you got out of the housing district and into the market district, it was actually quite lovely. The drainage was a little better there, and smells of hot iron from the local forge mixed with the smells of fresh bread from bakers and wood shavings from carpenters. The streets were crowded, which meant the cut purses were worse, and Anders was jostled with every other step, but until someone knocked him over and stole his shoes, what did he care?

"So, Sparkles, after the apothecary what do you say we find this Pilgrim's Rest, a few foxy pilgrims, and drink till the sun comes up?" Oghren offered.

"I want to shop for a bit. I was hoping to get a collar and maybe a bell for Ser Pounce-a-Lot." Anders said.

"You and that cat." Oghren shook his head. "Out of all the things the Boss could have given you, pussy sure as shit is ironic."

"Why do you call him that?" Anders wondered.

"Well it's what he is, ain't it?" Oghren shrugged.

"Well why not Commander? Or Amell?"

"Oh! You mean him. Shit, I don't know." Oghren spat. "Cause he's always been the Boss, I guess.
What, did you think King Pike-Twirler was the one doing all the work, saving the world from the Blight?"

"Well I figure he had a hand." Anders guessed. "I mean, I spent most of the Blight hiding in Harper's Ford, over in Highhever, and it's not like there was some mage underground handing out newspapers every other week. I'm not really up on my current events."

"Well... Shit. Go ask the Boss about it then." Oghren shrugged, scratching at his ass. "Point is he's in charge and that's how it's always been."

Up ahead, one of the many buildings lining the streets had a sign with a rather crude drawing of elfroot on it. "Look. Apothecary. Let's go." Anders said.

The door chimed at their entrance, and Oghren went straight up to the poor shop keeper and dropped his trousers. Alright, so all he did was wrench them down his right thigh, but Anders doubted the shopkeeper wanted to see Oghren's hairy green leg any more than he did. "What do you got for this?" Oghren demanded.

Anders turned away from the exchange to browse the shelves. There wasn't much of a selection, but Anders hadn't been expecting an emporium from a tiny little hovel without a name on the door. Anders picked out a few flasks, along with some heatherum, foxite, and other herbs. By the time he was done Oghren was already paying for a salve.

"What are the flowers for?" Oghren asked as Anders emptied his boot onto the counter to pay. "You making a garland?"

"Poultices and potions. You know, for the next time a darkspawn bites off half my shoulder." Anders said.

"I thought that elf gal from the Circle handled all that?" Oghren asked.

"For you, maybe." Anders stuffed the wrapped parcel the shopkeep gave him under his arm, and put his shoe back on. "But since I'm a spirit healer' anything but lyrium potions is 'frivolous' and 'stealing from the Commander's stores.' We're great friends, elf gal and I."

"No shit?" Oghren asked.

"No shit." Anders agreed. They left the store, and continued through the market district, browsing shops and stands until Anders found one that made cat collars and other animal accessories. He got Ser Pounce-a-Lot a purple collar. Royal color, purple. Very fetching. Perfect for a tiny knight.

"We good now?" Oghren asked. "Ready for happy hour yet?"

"...I want to get him something." Anders decided. "The Commander, I mean."

"So get him something, what do I care?" Oghren asked.

"Well you're his friend." Anders said. "For some unfathomable reason. I thought maybe you'd have a suggestion. You know, for whatever he's into."

"The Boss?" Oghren snorted, holding up four sausage-shaped fingers and ticking them off one by one. "Easy. Four D's. Darkspawn, dogs, dicks, and drinks. Take your pick."

"Well I'll just wrangle up a genlock and a pretty bow, then. Thanks."
"Anytime." Oghren chuckled. "So, you and him rolling your oats, then?"

Anders shuddered. "Please don't mention oats. I hate oats. And anyway, no, but he got me a cat. Seems only decent I should get him something back."

"Yeah well good luck with that." Oghren said. "Come on. I don't want to leave you alone, but I am P-E-R-C-H-E-D."

"Perched?" Anders said. "You're perched? Like a bird? You're not going to shit on my head, are you?"

"Gah-Parched! I'm parched! I'm sodding thirsty! Let's just go find the tavern, and you can get the Boss some of their nicer swill. If I leave your delicate ass all alone the Boss' never let me hear the end of it. What if you broke a nail?"

"I'd file it, obviously." Anders said, inspecting his nails, but he waved Oghren on and they set off towards the tavern. "I have to stay pretty."

"You're always saying shit like that." Oghren noted. "Do humans actually think pale piss mopped skirt wearing ninnies are attractive?"


"You're wearing gal's jewelry for Stone's sake!" Oghren threw up his hands. "But whenever we're at the Keep some soldier gal is always throwing herself at you. What's that about?"

"I'm handsome, charming, funny, well dressed, I have great hair... Need I go on?" Anders said.

"I figured they were all a bunch of moss lickers and you were the first pretty gal they'd seen at the Vigil. You can bet my hairy ass if I got half as many offers as you do my bunk would be rocking like a baby's cradle." Oghren laughed.

"Ew." Anders said. "And anyway, the reason you don't get any 'offers' ... Okay, one of the many, many, many-many--"

"Alright, haha, you're not funny."

"-Many, many, many reasons, is because you think a few ladies thanking me for healing a sprained ankle or a paper cut is an offer to jump into bed. Women like to be wooed. How is it you have a son again?"

"And you're gonna woo all these women by buying the Boss gifts, is that it?" Oghren snorted. "So hey, if you're thinking of shit to get him, I'm guessing the honeymoon ain't over yet and you two are good. So what's up?"

"What's up what?" Anders asked.

"What's up with you?" Oghren elaborated. "You been all moody lately. I figured you were just on the rag, but it's been over a week now. Ever since you and the Boss rescued that hot noble lass. What happened?"

"Nothing happened." Anders lied. "And I haven't been moody. I've just been... You know, busy."

"If you say so." Oghren snorted.

Anders had been busy. He was the resident healer for Vigil's Keep, and wouldn't you know it, most
people preferred to have their injuries washed away with magic to letting them heal naturally under a physician's bandages. The fact that he also wasn't sleeping well was irrelevant.

It wasn't as if Anders relished his choices there. On the one hand, he had horrible darkspawn nightmares. On the other, he had Compassion. The spirit was alternatively disappointed, confused, or scared any time he dreamed of her since he'd killed those half dozen bandits at the Forlorn Cove. Anders wasn't any better equipped to explain why their deaths had been necessary than Compassion was to understand.

Anders didn't like thinking about it. It had happened. It was over. They were dead. He'd killed them. The end. But he thought about it anyway. That wasn't him. He wasn't an executioner. He was a healer. He healed. Maybe, if he'd killed them in self-defense, it wouldn't have bothered him, but he hadn't. They were out, and Anders had killed them anyway. It bothered him that it didn't bother him more.

"Oi, there's our tavern." Oghren nudged him, pointing at the Pilgrim's Rest. It was your typical stone brick building, half-buried in a mound of dirt, and surrounded with empty barrels, broken bottles, and rubbish heaps. Homey, really. The inside was marginally better; it smelled like stale vomit and alcohol, but it was clean and his boots didn't stick to the floor, so what more could a man ask for really?

Oghren dragged him to the bar, and with a bit of struggling managed to climb up onto one of the open stools.

"Get you boys a drink?" The bartender offered.

"Well we're not here to fuck nugs," Oghren said.

"What's your poison?" The bartender asked, setting two tankards in front of them.

"House ale for me." Oghren said, pulling out his coin pouch-Maker's mercy, he kept it there?-and setting it on the table. "But this guy wants something special for someone special, if you know what I mean."

"Ah. Alright, we've got a pretty good selection." The bartender said, filling Oghren's glass before he knelt behind the counter. "The Bann orders all her wine from us, you know. We've got your standard Antivian Reds, your Orlesian Whites, what's your lady looking for?"

"Well, she's a he, and he's my Commanding Officer, so something a little stronger would probably be great." Anders said.

"Ah, alright, say no more. How about my very own single malt? I make the best whiskey in Amaranthine." The bartender said, pulling out a glass from under the bar, "Here, give it a try. On the house." He poured a small shot and pushed it towards them. Oghren snatched it up and downed it before Anders had a chance.

"By my ancestors!" Oghren exclaimed, "That is fine indeed! Smoother than elven baby-butt."

"I call it Mackay's Epic Single Malt." The bartender grinned. "I'm Mackay, obviously."

"Well Mackay, sod the Boss, I'm buying a bottle for myself." Oghren said.

"What's that?" Anders asked while Oghren paid for his whiskey, "Back there on the shelf, the blue bottle?"
"That?" Mackay looked over his shoulder. "That is Aqua Magus. One sip will make you think you're a templar. Spirits infused with a bit of lyrium. It'll run you eight silver a bottle."

"For a bottle that small?" Anders asked. "There's barely enough for three, maybe four shots."

"Anything more'll kill ya, and I'm not gonna be held accountable for dead drunks." Mackay said. "Get him that." Oghren said.

"Alright, fine," Anders said. He picked up his leg and took off his shoe, and was counting out his coins when someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around on the stool. Bright green eyes set in a sharp face were glaring at him from behind golden bangs. "Namaya?" Anders said in disbelief. "You're still here? But it's been a month!"

"Don't think I don't know it," Namaya snapped. "But unlike you, I keep my promises. Let's get a booth. We need to talk."

"Do I need to be worried about this broad?" Oghren wondered. "You two gonna play nice?"

"No, we're fine-I'll be right back," Anders said, putting his shoe back on and letting Namaya drag him to a dark corner of the tavern. His head was spinning. Namaya had waited for him. He still had a chance to destroy his phylactery. He still had a chance for freedom. He wouldn't have to hide in Amell's shadow for the rest of his life. He could choose his own fate.

Anders was getting ahead of himself. Namaya might not have found anything, but then why else would she wait for him? He could barely contain his excitement when he took a seat across from her.

"It's here," Namaya said with no preamble. "The templars are keeping the cache in a storehouse, but it's right beside the guardhouse in the market district. You'll know it when you see it. If you want to get in, you'll need to do it between guard shifts. Lucky for you, thanks to the smugglers in this city, they're overworked. It's not guarded the hour before sunset and the hour after. That's your window, and this," Namaya reached into a pocket and pulled out a brass key, "Is your ticket in. Five sovereigns. All up front."

"What?" Anders demanded. "When you agreed to help me, it was one sovereign, paid after my phylactery was destroyed." A sovereign Anders had never had, but at the time he was confident he could improvise. Namaya owed him, after all. He'd saved her life, healing her after she'd taken three crossbow bolts fleeing from the Bann's guards in Harper's Ford where they'd met.

"Yeah. That before your sorry ass made me wait a month in this Maker-forsaken city, holding onto a key that could get me killed and watching the very storehouse I stole it from to make sure the templars didn't move the cache!" Namaya snapped. "Now pay up. I know you've got coin on you, or you wouldn't have been over there haggling for fancy spirits."

"Haggling over eight silvers." Anders said, "I don't have five sovereigns."

Namaya's brow furrowed, and a knot formed in Anders' stomach. "Then you don't have this key." She said, standing.

"Wait!" Anders grabbed her hand, "Namaya, please. I have three sovereigns and ten silvers. That's all. You can have it. Please, this is my life."

Namaya glared at him. She owed him. She owed him her life. He couldn't have come this far to have his freedom walk away from him over two sovereigns. He could beg Oghren. Amell. Someone would loan him the extra gold. Namaya held out a hand, and Anders scrambled to take off his shoe.
and dump his coin pouch into her waiting hand. She opened it and counted them, glare never leaving her face. "Fine. Here." She threw the key on the table, and it clattered across the wood and slid off onto the floor. "But you and I are done."

Anders dove under the table for the key; by the time he had it safely stowed away in his shoe, Namaya was gone.

Freedom. No more looking over his shoulder. No more shackles. No more cells. No more running, knowing it was only a matter of time before the templars caught up with him, because he could never lose them. He'd destroy his phylactery, and those bloodhounds would never catch his scent again. He went back to sit at the stool beside Oghren.

"Old flame?" Oghren guessed.

"Something like that," Anders lied.

"Welcome back," Mackay grinned, "Get you that Aqua Magus now?"

"Ah-no... I don't-No." Anders said.

Oghren raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't pry. Anders rolled his fingers on the countertop, feeling increasingly anxious as time passed. He hadn't even any coin left to buy himself a drink to calm down, and he didn't want to explain to Oghren he'd given all his gold to Namaya for the key to his phylactery.

He had to destroy it, but could he do it alone? What if Namaya was wrong, and there were guards inside? Worse, what if there were templars inside? How would he get away from Oghren to do it? Would Oghren help him? ... Would Amell?

"Mackay," Anders called to the bartender. "Do you have any runners? Who can deliver a message to someone in the city?"

"I got a boy in the kitchen. It'll cost you ten copper, though." Mackay said.

Anders didn't even have that. "Oghren, could you spot me?"

"The fuck happened to your coin?" Oghren demanded, "Don't tell me that broad took it all. She weren't even that pretty. Maybe a six out of ten."

"Please?" Anders begged. He hated begging. "I really need to get a message to the commander. It's personal."

"Am I seriously paying for you to send love letters? Ack. Fine. Here." He stuffed a hand down his pants, and produced a silver he dropped on the counter. "Buy yourself a drink while you're at it. Your twitching is driving me nuts."

Mackay went to the kitchen, and came back with a torn piece of vellum, a quill, and a jar Anders assumed served as an inkwell. "There ya go. We were out of pounce, so I got the cook grinding up some bones. Might take a bit."

"Thanks," Anders said. He stared at the vellum, wondering what to write. Dear Commander, please leave your very important meeting with the Bann of Amaranthine to help me break into a templar cache and destroy my phylactery? Best not.

*Commander,*
I need your help with a personal problem, tonight an hour before sunset. If you have the chance to get back to Pilgrim's Rest before then, I would appreciate it.

Anders

There. That wasn't too desperate. Anders ordered himself a tankard of ale per Oghren's advice, and drank it while he waited for the cook to finish the pounce. It was too watered down for it to have much of a calming effect, and Anders was tapping his foot his stool by the time the kitchen boy came with the pounce. He sprinkled half a handful over the ink, folded up the letter, and handed it off to the boy. "This goes Bann Esmerelle's estate, to the Warden-Commander."

Anders couldn't calm down. He alternated between tapping, twitching, and occasionally pacing no matter how many drinks Oghren pushed at him. Eventually, the poor dwarf couldn't stand him, and ordered him back to the room Amell had rented for them for the night. Anders paced in there as well. He tried to meditate, to practice a few maneuvers with his staff, but nothing helped. His heart was in his throat and his stomach was upside down until someone finally knocked on the door.

Anders half-expected templars, but it was just Amell. "Anders?" Amell shut the door behind him, and took off his helmet, "I got your letter. Oghren said... Well. Is everything alright?"

"Oh, no I'm peachy. I always pace like this," Anders joked, "I-ran into someone. A friend. Sort of. It's a long story. Maybe we should sit? You should sit. I'll keep pacing."

"Anders." Amell caught him mid-pace, just above his elbow. Amell gave his arms a gentle squeeze, and Anders almost resented how relaxing the scent of him was. He'd been anxious for hours; it wasn't natural Amell could calm him so quickly. "Whatever it is, I'll help. Relax."

"You can't just say that. What if I need you to bury a body?" Anders joked.

"I'm a necromancer. I'll make the body bury itself." Amell said.

"Ha-ah-okay." Anders ran his hands through his hair, "I'm alright. I'll sit." He took a seat on the only couch in the room, and Amell sat next to him. "The last time I escaped the tower, I hid in Harper's Ford, over in Highever. While I was there, I met someone. A thief, I guess you could call her. She was running from the local guards, and she'd taken three bolts in the back.

"I healed her, and we got to talking, and sort of arranged a deal for her to help find my phylactery. While you were fighting the Blight, Namaya and I found out that the templars had moved some of their stores of phylacteries from Denerim to Amaranthine. That's why I was at Vigil's Keep. The templars caught me in Amaranthine, but Namaya kept looking. My phylactery was one of the ones they moved, and it's still here, in the templar's storehouse.

"Namaya found out where the storehouse is located, and she got me the key." Anders took off his shoe, and shook out said key. "I have to destroy it. I know I'm a Grey Warden and everything, but what's to stop the Chantry from deciding mages in the Grey Wardens are apostate, too? I have to be sure they can't ever find me again. Ever. You could look for your phylactery too. They moved a lot of stores to Amaranthine, there's no reason yours might not to be there too. We could both be free."

Say yes. Please say yes. Amell stared at him, enigmatic as ever. It was maddening. Anders was shaking with the effort it took him not to fidget, which sort of defeated the point.

"The last time a friend asked me to help destroy their phylactery, we were ambushed by templars, I was conscripted to avoid execution, and my friend's lover was sent to Aeonar." Amell said eventually.
"But... did you destroy it?" Anders asked.

"At the expense of being betrayed by my best friend, yes," Amell said.

"What happened to him?" Anders asked.

"He escaped. He later changed his name, and decided to help refugees escape the Blight." Amell said. "... This friend of yours, do you trust her?"

"Yes?" Anders said.

"That sounded like a question." Amell said.

"I have to do this, Amell. I want out. Please." Anders begged. He was doing an awful lot of begging lately. "Namaya said the guards are busy with the smugglers lately, so it's not guarded an hour before and after sundown. We could sneak in, sneak out, be home in time for dinner."

"Alright," Amell said.

"You-you mean it?" Anders asked, "You'll help me?"

"Of course I'll help you, if this is what you want." Amell said. "No mage should live at the behest of the Chantry. While we're there, we should destroy the entire cache so no one suspects you."

That seemed like overkill to Anders, but then, Amell was a maleficar. He probably hated Chantry oversight as much as the next mage. "Alright. I'm not going to argue against giving a few extra mages a chance to escape the Circle."

"The sun was setting on my way here; do you want to leave now?" Amell asked.

"Yes," Anders jumped to his feet. "Maker yes, I'm going mad just sitting here."

They left the tavern, and were on their way to the warehouse when Amell spoke again. "When this is over, are you going to leave the Wardens?"

"What?" Anders asked. Amell had put his helmet back on, so there was no gauging his expression after the sudden question. "Leave? Who would take care of Ser Pounce-a-Lot?"

"There is that." Amell said.

"I just want the choice," Anders said, wondering why he felt the need to explain himself, "I mean, wasn't that the first thing you said when you recruited me? That mages don't get enough of them?"

"I did say that." Amell alloted. "If you did leave."

"I'm not-"

"If you did leave, I'd understand," Amell said over him. "This isn't a life most people choose. Nathaniel, Oghren, Sigrun... they all chose this. You didn't. If you ever do leave, I won't send anyone after you."

Anders didn't know what to say that, so he said nothing. "There's the storehouse," Anders noted. The street was empty, save for the two of them. "We should hurry."

The key fit. Thank the Maker. Anders closed the door behind them, and took a look around the storehouse. It was filled with armoires, chests, shelves of various magical trinkets. An entire corner
was filled with staves stacked like firewood. "This must be where they keep everything they confiscate from apostates. I wonder if my old staff is here. I wonder if my pillow is here."

"Phylactery first." Amell said.

"Right." Anders said. He pushed open the door to the next room of the storehouse, and someone grabbed his hand and wrenched him forward. His arm was twisted behind his back, and he was slammed face first into a wall. The crunch of his nose breaking deafened him, and he was thrown to the floor a second later.

His blood was on fire. The Fade was gone; Compassion was gone; there was Silence all around him, and it coupled with agony. Anders rolled over and threw up, the harsh burn of his alcoholic vomit curdling in his throat. He tried to sit up, but his arms were trembling. All the strength and magic had been sapped from him. Somewhere above him, a woman was laughing.

"And here I almost believed the infamous Anders wouldn't take the bait." It was Rylock. Of course it was Rylock. Anders could barely see through the pain. There were spots where her face should have been, and Amell...

Amell was also on the ground. He unclasped his helmet with shaking hands and threw it off, barely managing to do so in time before he too threw up.

"Commander," Rylock said, "Such a pleasure, seeing you again. Did you think the world would forget you were a mage if you did not dress like one?"

Amell groaned, and had a little more success than Anders getting onto his hands and knees. Anders took heart from his success and tried again, when someone stepped on the small of his back and knocked him back down. Hands grabbed his wrists, Anders felt the cold metal of shackles.

"We'll be taking Anders now." Rylock explained. "I'll make sure this murderer is never a bother to anyone again."

"Anders is mine," Amell hissed.

"Anders is no one's." Rylock corrected him, "He will never submit. Not to us, and not to you. And you... you are hardly surprising. The Grey Wardens have made you too bold, as freedom makes every mage bold. You would defy the Chantry, and impede us in our sacred duty to see apostates brought to justice. For that, I think only execution is suitable."

"You can't do that," Anders protested. "He's the Warden-Commander of Ferelden. You can't do this. King Alistair allowed my Conscription!"

"Silence this maleficar," Rylock said. For one ridiculous second, Anders thought she was ordering Amell killed, until he realized she meant him. Someone dragged him to his feet, and gagged him. "And smite him again, just in case. He killed two templars on his own."

Fire hit him again, burning through his veins, twisting around his heart, and Anders knees buckled under the pain. Anders started sobbing, unable to help himself.

Rylock drew her sword, and kicked Amell back down to the ground when he tried to stand. She stabbed down in one swift motion, piercing through Amell's side beneath his armpit, where no armor protected him. Blood flew high, and Amell screamed.

"That will have pierced your lung." Rylock said with a clinical detachment that would have made Anders see spots, if he weren't already seeing them, "I would give you not long to live, once the
shock sets in. Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes."

"Anders-" Amell coughed; it was a wet, crackling noise, and Anders knew Rylock was right. He tried to talk around his gag, and failed. Amell was going to die. They were both going to die, and it was all Anders' fault. He should have known better than to trust a friend. He'd worn Ferrenly's pendant for eleven years for nothing.

"Say your goodbyes quickly, Commander," Rylock said.

"Anders..." Amell tried again, inhaling a rickety breath, "Is not the mage you should fear."

The air around Rylock began to sizzle, and a miasma of blood rose from Amell's injury. It sunk into Rylock's skins, into her face, her eyes, her nose, filled her mouth when she opened it to scream.

"Lieutenant!" The templar holding Anders dropped him.

"Maleficar!" A second templar, somewhere Anders couldn't see, screamed and drew his sword.

There were only the two, and Rylock. And she stood over Amell protectively, brandishing her sword while her eyes twitched spastically in her skull.

"Kill them," Amell whispered. For a brief second, Rylock hesitated. She twitched against the invisible confines of her own blood, and Anders could see the veins beneath her cheeks, on her forehead, bubbling as her blood revolted against her. Then she turned in broken clicks like a child's doll, and thrust her sword into her nearest templar brother's throat.

He'd been too stunned, too horrified to defend himself. The templar gurgled, and blood sprayed, but before it could hit the ground, it went flying into the second templar's face, where it sizzled like acid. The templar screamed, clawing at his eyes as they melted in their sockets, and Rylock cut his head off. His hands remained where they'd been, hovering over a face no longer there, and eventually tipped over.

Rylock turned back to Amell, and Anders was terrified his hold on her had waned.

"Now kill yourself," Amell ordered breathlessly. Bones crunched and muscle twisted, and before Rylock could obey, her insides revolted against their confines and splattered across the room. Brain, blood, and flesh hit Anders in the face. A bit of bone embedded itself in his arm from the force of the explosion.

Anders was still gagged and bound. Amell dragged his way to Rylock's armor, the only part of her left, and pulled her keys from her belt. Anders twisted around so Amell could unlock his shackles, and when they fell free Anders wrenched the gag out of his mouth.

"Heal me," Amell coughed. Blood gushed from his side at the act, and he held a hand to the wound. His breathing was rapid, and every inhale came with a dangerous crackle.

"I can't!" Anders called for the Fade, but it may as well not have existed. Blood was everywhere, soaking into his trousers, making him slip when he tried to stand. "I need a potion. I need lyrium. There has to be some in here somewhere."

Amell grabbed his wrist with one hand, and drew his dagger with the other. In a quick motion, he sliced open Anders' wrist.

"Andraste's ass, Amell, what the fuck!?" Anders demanded. Amell kept a vice grip on his wrist.
"Here is your lyrium," Amell hissed.

"I can't-I don't-I'm not a blood mage!" Anders yelled. He shouldn't have yelled. He should have been reassuring, like a healer was supposed to be, but he was terrified and panicking. "I don't know how to do this!"

Amell grabbed the collar of his shirt, and pulled him so close Anders could feel his breath on his face. There wasn't much of it. "I will not. Die to a templar's sword." Amell snarled. "Heal me."

"How?" Anders asked, "I don't know how. Tell me what to do."

"Don't-reach for the Fade." Amell said, "Call from your own life force. Your heart beat. Find it. Pull from it. You can turn it to mana, if you will it."

Anders tried to do as he said. His heart beat wasn't hard to find. It was fluttering madly in his chest, like a caged and crazed bird, but Anders couldn't feel any power in it. He didn't know what he was doing. He was just sitting here, staring at a cut on his wrist while Amell's grip on his arm grew weaker and weaker. He was going to die. Anders was going to kill him. Not with fire, or ice, or lightning, but through his own pathetic ineptitude. He was a joke. He was irresponsible. He was everything everyone said he was.

"Anders." Amell coughed, and walked his hand up his arm until it reached the back of his neck. "Look at me. Watch." Amell pulled a tendril of blood from Anders' wrist, and it took the shape of a small orb, floating in the air between them. It felt like it was being drawn out of Anders' chest, as opposed to the cut on his wrist. He could copy that, the way the drain had felt. "You can do this."

Anders set his hand on Amell's side, and took his eyes off the cut. It didn't come from the cut. The cut was just there, just gave him access. It was just like entropy, only mixed with creationism, and cast on himself. He could do this. Anders found his heartbeat and drew from it, and the spell cast, slowly inflating Amell's collapsed lung, draining the blood, knitting flesh and muscle back together. It made him sick to cast, weak and woozy from blood loss, but Anders had blood to spare. Amell didn't.

Anders healed him. He'd done it. Amell took his first breath fully healed, and it was long and deep, and he didn't cough.

"I..." Anders looked back at the cut on his wrist as what he'd done, what he was, slowly began to sink in. "Did I just... Am I..."

Amell's hand on the back of his neck shifted from the limp clutch of a dying man to the firm grasp of one very much alive. Anders looked up at him, and Amell kissed him.

They'd both thrown up very recently, and were covered in blood, bone, and all manner of decay, but there was no tenderness in the firm press of Amell's lips, and Anders guessed it wasn't supposed to be romantic. Maybe just grateful, or victorious, but Anders couldn't quite process it. It just happened, and as quickly as it happened it was over. Amell let go of him, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I think." Anders said, looking at the mess that lay around them. One templar headless, one dead, one nothing but armor and a puddle of blood. ". What do we do? Do we-hide them? I don't... know what to do here."

"I guess you need me to bury a body after all," Amell said.
This chapter feels a little like filler to me, for which I apologize, but it felt a little mean to just leave Anders with all his problems from the last chapter unresolved.

Thanks for all your wonderful kudos/comments/bookmarks/ and as always, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 17 Solis Evening
Templar Storehouse

"I guess you need me to bury a body after all," Amell said. He scooted back through the blood, vomit, and bits of Rylock to prop himself up against the nearest wall.

Anders felt horrid. Healing Amell had exhausted him. Anders felt all the usual signs of blood loss: dizziness, fatigue, but his skin wasn't cold and his breathing was relatively normal, so he doubted he was going into any state of shock. There was a bit of bone still protruding from his arm (not his own), and his nose was most certainly broken, but since he could breathe through it Anders imagined it would heal straight. That was something to be grateful for at least. Anders liked his nose.

As to the rest... there was blood everywhere: dripping from Anders' wrist, his arms, drying in his nose. And Maker's breath, the smells. The rot of meat and intestines from Rylock's corroded insides, the shit and piss of the remaining templars as they'd lost control of their bowels in death, Anders' and Amell's own vomit after they'd been cut off from their connection to the Fade.

"Rylock doesn't even have a body to bury," Anders said, "I didn't want this. All I wanted was a chance to decide my own fate."

"She was going to kill us, Anders," Amell reminded him.

"I know that!" Anders snapped. "Don't you think I know that? This shouldn't have happened. Namaya... I knew it was too good to be true, but I believed her. I wanted to believe her. I wanted-"

Anders dug under his shirt and with a hard yank, pulled Ferrenly's pendant off his neck and threw it spitefully across the room. "I wanted to trust her. I should have known better, and I almost got us killed because of it."

"We're more than our mistakes, Anders." Amell said. It wasn't comforting.

"Look at this," Ander waved his hand at the death all around them, "This isn't a mistake. Breaking a plate is a mistake. Spilling your drink is a mistake. This is three dead bodies someone is going to find in the morning."

"I'll take care of it." Amell said. "Necromancer, remember?"

"Not that I don't believe you, but Rylock is a puddle. Are you also a puddlemancer?" Anders asked sarcastically.

"I know how to hide bodies," Amell said, "Trust me." Of all the sentences Anders did not want to
"Not going to ask why you know that, but so what?" Anders laughed, feeling hysterical "Someone from the Chantry will come looking for her and then-

"Anders," Amell squeezed his ankle, considering his arms were injured. "If Rylock was here, it couldn't have been at the behest of the Chantry. She saw you conscripted before the King. She was obsessed with you. Tell me I'm wrong."

Anders said nothing.

"So we don't even know if the Chantry will come looking for her," Amell said reassuringly, "And if they do, we'll tell them we haven't seen her since your conscription, and that she probably met her end at the hands of the darkspawn that have been running rampant in Amaranthine of late. Or that I killed her in self-defense, if it comes to that."

"What do you mean, 'I'?" Anders asked, taking note of the pronoun, "You mean 'we' killed her in self-defense."

"No, Anders, I mean 'I.'" Amell told him. "You heard Rylock. The woman was mad, but she was right. They've already branded you a maleficar. Seven escape attempts. A year in solitary. If anyone knew you were a part of this, not even the Wardens could protect you. So yes, if it comes to it, I killed her."

Anders stared at him; Amell couldn't possibly be so fond of him after only a month of tentative flirting. Would he do the same for any Warden? For any mage? "I can't believe you're still standing by me after what just happened."

"It's not just about you," Amell said. Anders relaxed a little. He wouldn't have known how to react if Amell was only doing this because he liked him, "I would do the same for any mage. If I seemed hesitant... You're a friend, Anders. I'm tired of losing them."

"I told you I wasn't going to leave." Anders said.

"In any case, we need to handle this," Amell said, ignoring him. "You can't go back to the tavern like that. I'm sure the storehouse has confiscated more than a few robes. One won't be missed. And we need at least two lyrium potions, one to move the bodies and one so you can heal yourself."

"What about you?" Anders waved a hand at Amell's bloodied armor, "Are you just going wander back to the tavern like that?"

"Like what?" Amell glanced down at himself, "I always look like this. Don't leave your necklace here, we don't need anything leading back to you."

"Right." Anders said. He picked up his necklace and stuffed it in his pocket, and set about exploring the storehouse. It took him an age to find even a handful of lyrium potions, buried under a stack of chests containing all other manner of poultices. There wouldn't have been the time to search for them if he'd looked while Amell was injured. Anders brought them back to Amell, and Amell used his to reanimate the two templars who still had bodies left to animate. Anders used his to heal his nose and the cuts on his arm.

An armoire in the room they were in contained a wide selection of robes, several of them in the Tevinter style. Anders eyed the feathered spaulders longingly, but forced himself to grab a standard Circle robe in beige. The point was to not attract attention after all. Anders changed out of his bloodied doublet and cleaned himself off without any real thought, until he noticed Amell staring at
"Sorry," Amell cleared his throat and turned around.

"I get it, I'm irresistible." Anders joked. "It's the blood, right? Really brings out the color in my cheeks."

"Something like that." Amell said.

"This have anything to do with how you seem to get whenever you use blood magic?" Anders wondered, changing out his trousers and pulling on his new robe. It didn't quite fit, but that was what sashes were for.

"Something like that," Amell said again. "I should probably apologize for that."

"No need," Anders said, "It's not like you're the first patient who ever kissed me."

"I'm sure you have a story or two there. Are you changed?" Amell asked.

"Changed." Anders agreed. "So... not to critique your brilliance or anything, but..." Anders looked at the headless templar, holding said head under his arm as if it were a helmet. "Really?"

The templar put his head back on, and Anders nearly threw up again. Twice, the corpse missed trying to reattach its head to its spine, and the grind of bone against bone made Anders shudder. Eventually, it succeeded, and the head held on through some act of Amell's magic. The other corpse set about picking up Rylock's armor.

"And what about the blood?" Anders asked. "Do we just stay here and scrub the floors, or what?"

"It's blood," Amell said, channeling a rather simplistic spell that drew every last drop from the floor boards, and bloated his corpses with it. "It's like it never happened."

Anders wished it could have been that simple. Anders went back to the tavern, while Amell went Maker knew where with his 'templars.' Anders accepted a drink from Oghren that may as well have been water, drank, avoided his questions, and went to bed, but sleep wasn't waiting for him there. He lay abed, listening to the comings and goings of other patrons for one hour, and then an hour more before he got back up. The front room was deserted, save for the one tavern girl that worked the night shift. Anders gave her every borrowed coin he had left, and drank until the ale lost its flavor. A half hour in, and the girl decided to stop ignoring him. A short conversation later, and she was in his lap, her milky breasts spilling from her bodice, her hands in his hair and her teeth on his ear, and Anders didn't have to think about being a maleficar or murderer or anything else. His hands were lost under her clothes, cupping her breast and pushing her down to grind against his cock when Amell finally came back.

The templars were gone, but Amell was a mess. The blood had all dried, but he still carried the helmet he'd thrown up on in one hand. His gauntlets and his greaves were covered in dirt, mud, and all manner of questionable sludge that made Anders wonder where he'd taken the bodies and what he'd done with them. Worse still, Amell had somehow earned a bruise on his jaw and a matching cut on his lip.

The barmaid covered her breasts with a giggle. Anders didn't even know her name. Amell took them in at a glance, and walked past them to his room without a word. And why did Anders care? Amell might not even care. It wasn't like Anders was courting the man. At best, Anders was considering having sex with him. It didn't mean Anders couldn't have sex with other people in the mean time.
"Ugh," The barmaid sighed when Amell had gone, lacing up her bodice. "He tracked in mud. Typical. I have to get this or Mackay will have my hide in the morning. My room is the second one behind the counter. Wanna wait for me, handsome?"

"I... should probably go to bed, actually." Anders lied, accepting the kiss the girl planted on his cheek. "I'm a terrible tease, I know."

"You know where I am if you change your mind," The barmaid said.

Anders first thought was to go find Amell, except he had no idea what he could say that wouldn't make him sound pathetic. 'I don't know what's going on and I don't feel like I have a say in my life anymore and I just want someone to hold me so I don't have to think about it.' No, that didn't sound pathetic at all. It wasn't like Anders had ever had a say in his life in the first place.

Anders went back to his room and lay abed, staring at the ceiling until the sun came up. In the morning, all of them went back to the Vigil, and not a word was said of Anders' and Amells' absence that evening, save for a few harmless quips from Oghren. Anders went and found Ser Pounce-a-Lot in the small cubby he'd made for him under his bunk, and dragged the cat with him to the Vigil's chapel.

Anders preferred the chapel in Vigil's Keep to the one at the Circle Tower. Not only were there less templars at Vigil's Keep, but there were less mages. Anders was an Andrastian, and a mage, but he remembered the sort of mages who had frequented the chapel at the Circe. Keili, Markus, and the others. Chantry apologists, all repenting their magic as though it were a curse of the Maker and not a gift from Him.

It was a gift. Anders was certain of it. And as a gift from the Maker, mages had an obligation to use magic in His service. Anders lived by the belief loosely enough. Barring the occasional electricity trick in bed, Anders didn't use magic for his own amusement. He didn't use it as a short cut. It seemed to Anders Andraste counseled men to seek their own path to the Maker, but how could that path be through blood magic?

How could it not be, when it had been right there? When it had saved Amell's life, so effortlessly, so easily? Where was the evil in that? Where was the evil in Amell? "What else could I have done?" Anders voiced the question aloud, more to Ser Pounce-a-Lot than the Maker, considering which one was more likely to give him an answer. His cat had nothing to say to him, preferring to purr and rub circles around his legs. The answer was nothing, of course.

Anders picked Ser Pounce back and put him in his lap, fishing the collar he'd gotten him out of his pocket. "Look what Daddy got you," Anders said. He tied the tiny collar with its tiny bell around Ser Pounce's neck, but even that did little to take his mind off the fact that he was a maleficar now.

"Aren't you handsome?"

"Am I, now?" Amell's voice intruded on his thoughts.

"Amell," Anders leapt out of the pew he was sitting in, startled, and startled Ser Pounce-a-Lot in turn. His cat sprinted away, vanishing beneath the many tapestries lining the chapel walls, and Anders almost wanted to join him.

It was no wonder Amell had managed to sneak up on him. He was dressed in his formal Warden doublet, all blue and silver with a pair of black leather boots much quieter than his dragonscale greaves. His hair was even gelled back, though that likely had more to do with whatever important Arl-thing he was busy with than Anders.
"Am I interrupting?" Amell asked. He made his way through the pews, and stopped a little too close for comfort. Anders wanted him to go away almost as desperately as he wanted him to say. Amell still had the cut on his lip, liable to scar now that Anders hadn't healed it when it had happened. Looking at it made Anders feel guilty.

"No." Anders said. "Not exactly."

"I come bearing gifts, if that helps," Amell said.

"Not really," Anders sighed, and sat down. Amell sat beside him, leaving a polite inch between them. "That just reminds me I was going to get you something, until I gave Namaya every coin I had for that key."

"I don't mind loaning you more if you need it." Amell said.

"That's a good way to go broke." Anders laughed. "Were you there when we were playing Diamondbank? I'm pretty sure I still owe Sigrun fifty silver or more."

"Maybe, but I'm a rich man in case you hadn't noticed. I have an entire arling you can bleed dry." Gentle as the joke was, Anders wasn't sure he was ready to joke about blood magic so soon. His laugh was a little awkward as a result. "That was probably tasteless." Amell decided. It had been, but for some reason seeing Amell's awkward smile and being reminded he was human made up for it.

Amell handed him his gift.

"A book?" Anders noted astutely, "Who told you I could read?" He joked, flipping it over to read the title aloud, "Phylacteries: A history written in blood. You shouldn't have."

"I thought you might want to know a little more about what you're chasing after," Amell explained. "And just how 'forbidden' blood magic really is. The Chantry condones it, as long as they can use it to oppress mages."

"I like it," Anders confessed, though he wasn't sure if he shared Amell's opinion on blood magic. To Anders, phylacteries had always been a good example of the evils that were borne of blood magic. It was in the nature of blood magic to oppress and control. It made sense the Chantry would rely on it in their hypocrisy. "I'll read it."

"Good, I'm glad." Amell said. "Can I ask what you were praying for?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," Anders said glibly, "A harem, fresh apple pie, the collapse of the templar order."

"Anders..." Amell lifted a hand as if to touch him, and unable to decide what to do with it, put it back in his lap. "I know that you're 'touchy' not 'feely' but... I hope you know I'm here for you, or I'd like to be. I know you're not sleeping. I know what happened with Rylock upset you. And I know that not everyone at the Vigil has been entirely welcoming."

"Oghren told you about Cera," Anders guessed.

"Oghren doesn't keep a lot of secrets," Amell said. "I had a word with her. She won't deny you any more supplies."

Anders sighed, setting the book down on the pew beside him. A few yards away, Ser Pounce-a-Lot was playing with the tassels to a tapestry. Anders wished his own life were half so simple. "Look, I'm glad you care, I really am, but I'm rubbish at getting all weighty about things. That's not me, you
know? You want to talk about magic, or witty one-liners, then I'm your guy, but the rest is just..."

The rest was why Anders wore Ferrenly's necklace, until he broke the clasp in a childish fit yesterday. Sharing is caring and all that, until you care too much, and think that just because you saved Namaya's life and had a grand time on the run with her for a few months, she wouldn't turn you into the templars the first chance she got. Amell wasn't Ferrenly, or Namaya, but...

"Do you remember when they used to let the apprentices out? At the Circle?" Anders asked. "They'd take us down to the shore for a few minutes of fresh air every other week."

"Vaguely," Amell allotted, accepting his change of topic without question. "I was ten or eleven when they stopped."

"Wait, seriously?" Anders stared at him, trying to do the math in his head. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one," Amell said.

"Bullshit." Anders said. Amell was at least twenty-five, if not bordering on thirty. He certainly looked it. There was a permanent shadow to his almond eyes, and while he was rather lean, he didn't have the wiry frame of a boy just turned man. Nor the immaturity of one. If his hair had even a hint of grey, or his face any wrinkles, Anders might have believed he was forty.

"I was conscripted days after my Harrowing, Anders." Amell said.

"But you're so-I mean-" Anders floundered, "I can't recover from this, can I?"

"Keep trying." Amell grinned. "I'm sure there's a compliment in there somewhere."

"Mature?" Anders offered. "Wise beyond your years. There we go. Anyway, the first time I escaped, it was during that 'outdoor time.' I was fifteen. I jumped off the dock and into the lake, and just swam like mad. The first templar that jumped in after me forgot about his armor and sank like a rock. It was hilarious. So, I get to the other side, and there's Kester, that old ferryman, just laughing his ass off as I run past, soaking wet, robe dragging an extra five feet behind me.

"I get to the Imperial Highway, and just start running. I guess I had it in my fifteen year old head that I was going to make it all the way back to Tallo on foot. Looks, humor, brains, pick two, right? So I'm halfway to Gherlen's Pass when I run into a noble being held up by maybe five bandits. All his retainers are already dead. So I pick the first spell that comes to me, light my hands on fire, and run at them screaming I don't remember what. In retrospect... well it's a miracle I'm alive. They decided they didn't want to fight a mage and fled.

"The man I saved was Bann Ferrenly. He was on his way to the markets outside Orzammar. He brought me with, bought me a change of clothes... was the first real friend I ever made. He let me pick out a pendant for myself, complete with dwarven enchantments and made with real silver. He said it was a reward for my service and my friendship. A week later, he finds out he's not too fond of mages, and I find out I'm not too fond of nobles. Turned me into the templars after all that. That's kind of how I learned you can't put too much on people. You get too weighty, and you'll weigh too much, and they'll let you down.

Ser Pounce-a-Lot had come back, somewhere in the middle of his story, and Anders picked him up and put him in his lap. "Anyway," Anders said, "If I've been moody lately, I'll get over. I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"I never said you couldn't." Amell said. "But I'm not Ferrenly, Anders. I'd hope by now you trust me. We shook hands, remember?"
"There is that." Anders said, and allowed himself a laugh. "You really want to know?"

"I really want to know." Amell promised.

"I think I did the right thing, in the storehouse," Anders said. "Healing you. Not getting you in that position in the first place, obviously. I know you're not much of a believer, but I am. Sort of. There are a lot of verses in the Chant of Light I don't agree with. I don't believe the magisters of Tevinter ever set foot in the Golden City. I don't believe darkspawn are the Maker's punishment for the pride of a few mages, but blood magic... It's demonic. It's evil. It corrupts. And I keep thinking it was the right thing to do."

"Do you want to know how I learned blood magic, Anders?" Amell asked.

"From a demon," Anders guessed.

"Are you going to steal every punch-line?" Amell asked, "Yes, from a demon. Do you remember the friend I told you about? The one who's phylactery I helped destroy?"

"If I don't, I've got a real bad memory," Anders chuckled, "That was yesterday."

"He didn't just escape, change his name, and start helping refugees," Amell said. "He was caught, and given a choice between poisoning an Arl and death. He got close to the Arl through the Arlessa. Her son was a mage, and she didn't want to lose him to the Circle, so my friend taught him in secret. He tried, but he wasn't very good at it. The boy became possessed by a demon.

"This demon... it destroyed the entire Arling. It summoned hoard after hoard of undead, and created veritable army at the disposal of just one mage. It enslaved the minds of countless men and women with ease. It was... remarkable," Amell trailed off, and Anders wasn't sure he cared for the look on his face. "It was everything the Chantry feared. An untrained mage, run rampant with power. We worked a ritual to send me into the Fade, and undo the boy's possession."

"Undo a possession?" Anders blinked at him, "I didn't even know that was possible."

"The Circle never likes to talk about it. It takes a lot of lyrium... or a lot of blood, and a lot of very specific circumstances, but it's possible. When I found the demon, we spoke. We sat together for what felt like an age, just talking. No fighting. No mind control. No sudden possession. I knew it had the power to defeat the Blight, and I knew could use it, so I made a deal, and I did. And I can't tell you how many times our victory hinged on me knowing what I know.

"I'm not going to deny that it's dangerous, that it attracts demons, and creates temptations, but that's all magic. Any harrowed mage can tell you that. Blood magic... is just a second harrowing." Amell said

"I'm still reeling from my first, to be perfectly honest," Anders said, "I don't know if I can handle a second."

"Then it's a good thing you're not a blood mage." Amell said.

"But I am a blood mage," Anders argued, and just admitting it put a sour taste in his mouth. Useful or not, blood magic could exploited. It corrupted, and it came from demons, which Compassion was not, "In the storehouse-"

"You cast a spell," Anders interrupted him. "It happened to involve blood. That doesn't make you a blood mage. At worst, you augmented a healing spell. Pray if you like, but the Maker is gone. He isn't going to punish you for saving my life. There's no one here but you and me, and I'm not about
Anders said, and then his confession came tumbling out despite all his better judgment. "It's Compassion. Ever since my Joining... She's drawn to me, and my dreams shape her reality. But lately? All my dreams are nightmares of darkspawn. Can you imagine what that's like for a spirit of Compassion? And when they aren't of darkspawn, I dream of those bandits at the cove, and I can't explain to a spirit how killing someone now saves someone later. She's a spirit. She doesn't think that far ahead, she's incapable of it. And now, using blood magic? How do I explain that to her?"

"Easily," Amell said, "My friend was a blood mage for years, Anders. He became a spirit healer when he went on to help refugees, and as far as I know he never stopped practicing blood magic. Spirits don't care about blood magic. They care about how we use it. You're a good man. That's all that matters."

Anders wanted to believe him. Amell's smile had all the confidence of the man, and it wasn't often someone who knew him called him a good man. It was coming from a blood mage, but Amell was more than that. He was his friend.

Amell stood to leave him, and for some inexplicable reason Anders grabbed his hand.

"Amell," What was he going to say? 'I hope you don't think me making out with a barmaid means because I crave human contact when I'm stressed means I stopped thinking about your offer?' or maybe 'Hey I know you're the Warden Commander of Ferelden and Arl of Amaranthine, but do you want to come babysit me whenever being a Warden gets to be too much for me?'

"Thanks for talking with me." Anders said lamely.

"Anytime." Amell said.

Anders slept that night, though he couldn't say whether a purring cat on his chest, Amell's kind words, or sheer exhaustion drove him to it.

It didn't take him long to recognize the sepia tones, the emerald sky, and floating far off Black City as the Fade. He was dreaming of the Pilgrim's Rest, and that barmaid whose name he still didn't know. It was a welcome reprieve from darkspawn, from Compassion's tears, from cramped cells and too-tight shackles. He slid his hand under her shirt all the same, on the vain hope it was a shade, a wisp forming the memory, and he could enjoy it for what it was.

He couldn't remember the color of the barmaid's eyes, but he doubted they were gold. "Compassion," Anders sighed. No wet dreams then. Just his brain picked apart by his spirit. "Why this memory?"

"It confuses me." Compassion said, shaking off the barmaid's form. She stayed in her own for a moment, before shifting into Amell's. Anders was quite certain he had never seen Amell in a tunic that fell open at his chest, with form-fitting trousers that bunched tight around his crotch. "Why not him? You were scared, You wanted comfort. This other form, it meant nothing to you. You like him. I like him."

"Oh for-I didn't even have sex with her," Anders said.

"Because he came back. Because you felt guilty. Why do you look for Compassion in all the wrong places?"

"Can you not use his voice?" Anders asked, trying to decide whether or not to push Compassion off
his lap. The tunic was surprisingly distracting. "And I don't want to find 'comfort' or 'compassion' or anything like that with Amell. I like him. He's my friend. I don't want to confuse things. That kiss was bad enough. If I went running off to him for sex in the mood I was in the other night after that, it would have meant something. I know you don't understand why that's bad, but it is. Whatever this is, it has to stay friendly."

"You're scared." Compassion said.

"Of course I'm bloody scared!" Anders snapped, and then immediately regretted it. Compassion only had one emotion: compassion. She wasn't mocking him. He hugged her in apology, and felt a little queer that she was still using Amell's form. At least she didn't have his smell right. "We just murdered three templars and hid their bodies Maker-knows-where. The second I step out from behind Amell's shadow, I'm a dead man, and I'll have to run again. I'm an apostate, first and forever, Compassion. Do you see why me getting attached to people is a bad idea?"

"I don't understand," Compassion said, "I want you to be happy."

"I'd be happier if you would stop avoiding me in here." Anders said, "You're my only long term gal, you know."

"... there is a corruption in you." Compassion whispered, finally shifting back into her own form. The bar fell away, and they sat in a field of reeds. "Dark... and tainted. There is no Compassion there. I want to be with you, but it frightens me."

"The darkspawn taint?" Anders said. "It can't hurt you,"

"I am not afraid for myself. I am afraid for you. I see it like a seed in your soul, taking root, rotting you from the inside out, making you less of the man you were." Compassion cupped his cheek, and leaned forward to kiss him on his forehead, just like his mother always had. "That's why I want you to find Compassion in others, my poor, sweet mage. I fear you are losing it in yourself."
Chapter Notes

I made sure to behead something, so I know this chapter isn't filler, hehe. Thank you all for your wonderful comments/kudos/bookmarks, and as always thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 20 Solis Early Morning
The Pilgrim's Path Through the Wending Woods

"Not to belabor the point or anything, but I think this caravan was attacked," Anders said. The caravan in question was a smoldering ruin, blocking their way through the ravine, but the fact that it was smoldering at all proved the attack had happened recently.

"Thank you, Anders." Amell said.

"Hawk eyes on this one," Oghren snorted.

"Be nice, Oghren," Amell said, "We might have missed it."

"You're mean, you know that?" Anders said. Amell actually chuckled, so Anders supposed the teasing was worth it.

"I traveled these trade routes as a child, with my father." Nathaniel said, ignoring them and picking his way over the ruined caravan. "They were safer then."

"Riveting commentary, Archy," Oghren said, stepping on the same plank Nathaniel had stepped over, and breaking it in half. "Not that nostalgia isn't fun, but can we hurry this along? All this greenery is making my beard itch."

"Are you sure you that's not your rash?" Anders joked, reaching for the hem of his robe to hold it up as he climbed over the ruined caravan, until he remembered he wasn't wearing one. Old habits, and all that. He'd never get used to trousers.

Anders finally had his official Warden's outfit. He hated to admit it, but it was rather fetching. He had thin leather trousers and a matching leather chest piece, all in a slimming black. Atop the chestpiece were spaulders in brigandine, silver studs riveted to the thick woolen fabric in place of the feathers Anders preferred. Leather boots went up to his knees, and matching gloves went up to his elbows, both thick enough to pick up or step on anything from rashvine nettle to coal if he wanted. Add on a pretty warden tabard in a basic chainmail, and a belt complete with pouches and straps to carry his satchel, and Anders was set.

Fetching or not, nothing would beat the freedom of robes. Anders stepped over the broken plank and held out a hand for Sigrun.

"Thanks!" Sigrun said, grabbing his hand and vaulting over. "Everything is so big up here. And so bright!"

"Homesick?" Anders wondered.
"Not at all!" Sigrun grinned. "I grew up in Dust Town. That's like... a slum's slum. Compared to Dust Town, this is like a palace. An outdoor palace, strewn with broken carts, dead bodies, and ruined caravans, but I'm not picky."

"Tell me if you see a whole one." Amell said. Not creepy at all.

"A whole caravan?" Sigrun asked.

"He means a body." Anders said.

"Oh! Right. You're a neck...A nekee...A neckEEE?" Sigrun floundered.

"Necromancer." Amell said. They came to a halt at a place where a pile of caravans and fallen trees blocked off the ravine the road traveled between. It looked like the perfect place for an ambush, Anders couldn't help thinking, clutching his slippery staff as tight as he dared.

"I know another way around," Nathaniel said.

Amell sheathed both his hands in sapphire, and the wreckage lifted, stacking itself into neat piles on either side of the ravine. In a few minutes, a path was clear. Nathaniel went through first.

"Show off," Anders said.

Amell glanced back at him, but with his helmet on Anders had no way of knowing if he was grinning. He probably was.

A moment later, and Nathaniel came back, "Bandits, ahead. Seven." He warned them. "They looked like scavengers. I doubt they caused all this damage."

"No way," Sigrun agreed. "Something big and angry came through here. If we were in the Deep Roads, I'd say a golem did this."

"Boss, here's an ugly one," Oghren said, kicking a corpse lying atop one of the piles Amell had made. It was a bandit, or had been. He'd been impaled by what looked like a tree branch.

"Thank you," Amell said. He knelt beside the corpse, and Anders felt the Fade swell as a wisp crossed, and was bound to the dead man.

"That is so cool." Sigrun said when the corpse stood up, tree branch still firmly stuck in its stomach.

"For a dead woman, you are remarkably perky." Nathaniel said.

"Oh come on, it's cool," Sigrun insisted, "Magic is cool! You humans take way too much for granted. The surface is fascinating."

"Nathaniel, did you see any cover for you and Anders?" Amell asked.

"I did." Nathaniel said, "I'll show him. The bandits are just around the bend, to the left."

"Everyone ready?" Amell asked. It seemed like a rhetorical question, because in the same breath Oghren and Amell were charging, Sigrun at their heels, and Nathaniel was dragging Anders with him.

It was decent cover. Nathaniel found a spot between two boulders and a tree, which seemed to serve him well enough as an archer's slit. Anders cast a protective glyph beneath them, and then focused on the battle. A glyph of warding for Sigrun and Oghren, enhancement magic for Amell and
Nathaniel, barriers for whoever looked to be the focus of their enemies. There was a soothing sort of rhythm to fighting, without actually having to fight. Anders liked the detachment. He much preferred to think of himself as helping his friends, as opposed to killing anyone. Maybe it wasn't a healthy coping method, but it was the only one he had.

When the last bandit fell, Anders called out, "Does anyone need healing?"

"Sigrun," Amell called back.

The little dwarf trudged across the battlefield, and took a seat in the dirt beside Anders. "It's nothing." Sigrun argued, unbuckling her right boot and fighting with her greaves to show him where a bolt had hit her in between the two separate pieces of armor. "I don't even know how he noticed. I'm barely bleeding."

Anders could take a guess. There was an upside of blood magic, Anders supposed. It probably helped if a Commander could tell when his recruits were injured. "Well, nothing can turn into something pretty quick. This will hurt a little," Kneeling beside her, Anders pulled the bolt from her leg, and knit the flesh back together with his magic. "Didn't they teach you not to hide injuries in that Legion of yours?"

"Kind of the opposite, really," Sigrun shrugged, watching his magic in rapt fascination. "In the Legion, you never know when the fighting stop, so you just have to grin and bear it until you get back to base camp. It's not like we had a healer around to take care of us whenever something happened. Man, magic is so cool. Can you set that bush on fire?" She pointed to the foliage in question.

"Probably, but why would I want to?" Anders asked. "All done, you can put your shoe back on."

"Well can you freeze it?" Sigrun asked, putting her boot back on.

"Why do you want me to kill the bush?" Anders demanded.

"Because it's there! It's an evil bush! Do it!"

"Magic isn't for your amusement!" Anders stubbornly refused her. "Why don't I just do a little dance? Anders' Spicy Shimmy?"

"Oh, ew," Sigrun wrinkled her nose at him. "I'll pass. Thanks for healing in my leg."

"I'm game," Amell glanced back at them, and not two seconds later the bush went up in flame seemingly of its own accord. Sigrun squealed in delight.

"Really?" Anders sighed, dousing the bush with a quick ice spell before it set the whole forest aflame.

"It was an evil bush," Amell shrugged innocently. "There's a ruin in the distance. We should see if whatever is causing these attacks is holed up there." He'd lost his corpse in the fight, and went to find another among the dead.

"Disappointed, Anders?" Nathaniel wondered quietly, leaning back against the tree they'd taken shelter under throughout the fight.

"A little," Anders admitted. "I'm an excellent dancer, you know. Her loss."

"Ah. I was under the impression it wasn't her attention you wanted," Nathaniel nodded at Amell's
"Jealousy doesn’t become you, Nate." Anders said. "I’m sure if you show a little skin, the Commander will pay attention to you too."

Nathaniel snorted; it sounded suspiciously close to a laugh, but that was impossible. Nathaniel was even more stoic than Amell. "You tell a lot of jokes, but-" Nathaniel coughed. His voice was normally deep, but when he coughed he sounded as if he was gargling gravel. The sound was cringe-worthy, and it came twice before the Howe doubled over, and a hot spray of his blood hit Anders in the face. A loud crack came next, followed by a deep rumbling, and a branch burst forth from Nathaniel’s stomach.

"Nathaniel!" Anders heard someone scream, and only recognized the voice for his own when the tree Nathaniel had been leaning against lifted him up and flung him across the forest.

Reaching for the Fade, Anders hands erupted in a cone of frost, freezing the insane tree solid before it could cause any more damage. Without waiting to see if it thawed or shattered, Anders turned and sprinted in the direction Nathaniel had been thrown. "Nathaniel?" Anders called out, tearing through the underbrush to find his fellow Warden.

Another of Nathaniel’s wicked coughs drew his attention, and Anders found him on the far side of a fallen log. Anders vaulted it, but hadn’t counted on it hiding a small ditch. He tumbled down a small hill and nearly landed on Nathaniel when he hit the bottom. "Don't move!" Anders ordered, not even sure if Nathaniel was able.

"No worries there," Nathaniel wheezed from under a pile of branches. Anders breathed a sigh of relief that he was even still talking.

Throwing Nathaniel’s tabard to the side, Anders sucked in a sharp breath. The hole went clear through him, right at his stomach. Anders summoned Compassion, and channeled as much of her benevolent energy as his connection to the Fade allowed. The healing was slow going.

"What was that?" Nathaniel asked, his lungs struggling to find the air to form the words.

"Don't talk." Anders ordered. "I don't know. Maybe nature magic? The Veil isn't thin here, I would have felt it. There shouldn't be any possessed trees or sylvans or whatever. The bandits in this area must have an apostate working for them."

Eventually, Anders had the damage undone, Nathaniel’s stomach in one piece and no gaping holes in his body. His armor was beyond saving. Anders held out a hand to help him to stand, and Nathaniel toppled over the second he tried. His ankle must have been sprained in the fall. "You wasted enough time on me," Nathaniel said, giving him a shove, "Go help the others,"

"Stay put," Anders ordered, wondering if the archer even had a choice, but he wasn't on the verge of death, whereas the others might be. Climbing his way out of the ditch and using his slippery staff as a very bad walking stick, Anders struggled back to the main path to find Amell, Oghren, and Sigrun. Possessed trees were everywhere. Anders counted five. The only one holding their own looked to be Oghren, his strength and his axe the only thing making a dent in the monsters. Sigrun was unarmed, and Anders spotted her smaller axes imbedded uselessly in one of the sylvan’s legs. Her only defense was her speed, and the fact that she could roll away before the tree's could reach her. Amell’s possessed corpse was back to being just a corpse after having its head chopped off, and Amell was struggling to keep two of the sylvans encased in cages of telekinetic force, but the creature looked about to break free from its crushing prison.
Anders couldn't understand why he was struggling at first, but after a few seconds it clicked. The sylvan's had no blood, and Amell was first and foremost a blood mage. That silly fire spell he'd used on the bush was probably the only one he knew, and his sword was no substitute for an axe.

Running to join them, Anders' hands erupted in an explosive ball of flame, and he sent it careening into the nearest sylvan's substitute for a face. The sylvan burst aflame, and kept fighting. A charred branch fell from the sylvan's canopy, sending sparks of flame licking through the grass, and after a moment the creature crumbled, it's legs giving out underneath it with a loud crack.

Sigrun and Amell spotted him, and ran through the possessed trees to his side. Once they were clear, Anders drew on the last of his reserves to summon an ice storm that froze and shattered the sylvan's chasing them. Oghren handled the remainder, and the battle was quickly over.

"Nathaniel?" Amell demanded.

"No, Anders, actually," Anders joked. Amell was still wearing his helmet, but for some reason Anders could feel him frowning. Anders cleared his throat and pointed towards the ditch, but by then Nathaniel had dragged himself out of it.

"Here," Nathaniel called out in answer, heavily favoring his left leg, but Anders didn't have the reserves of magic left to heal him. Nathaniel limped his way over, and eyed the nearby trees suspiciously before deciding to rest against a boulder instead.

"You're alright?" Amell eyed the hole in Nathaniel's armor suspiciously.

"He shouldn't be," Sigrun chimed in. "One of those tree things impaled him. I saw it."

"Fine, thanks to Anders," Nathaniel nodded in his direction, though Anders was willing to hazard a guess they were all fine thanks to Anders.

"Can you heal his leg?" Amell asked.

"Remember that time I said you were demanding?" Anders asked, "Because you're demanding,"

"It's my ankle," Nathaniel clarified. "I'll be fine, if no more trees attack us. We can wait until Anders has the mana to heal me."

Amell nodded, and wandered away from the rest of them to his own boulder, and collapsed against it. Anders decided to join him, considering Amell seemed like the type of person to hide an injury. Amell took off his helmet and set it on the ground beside him, and reached into his belt pocket for a lyrium draught. At Anders' approach, he held it out to him instead.

Well... wasn't that sweet of him. Anders drank it, and sat down beside him. "You're welcome, by the way."

"For what?" Amell blinked blearily at him, as if he hadn't exerted all his mana on complex telekinetic spells in lieu of any other way to defend himself.

"Oh, I don't know, saving your life?" Anders mused.

"You saved Nathaniel's life," Amell corrected him.

"No actually, I think I saved everyone's life there." Anders said.

"I take it you want a reward?" Amell guessed.
"It couldn't hurt," Anders said. "I'm thinking a medal, or maybe a trophy! The inscription could be 'Thedas' Greatest Healer,'"

"Why don't I just repay the favor by saving your life sometime?" Amell said, "Like say, a few weeks ago, when a darkspawn fell on you in Kal'Hirol? Or a few days ago when rogue templars were going to execute you?"

"Those don't count," Anders pouted.

"Why not?" Amell asked.

"Because that's no fun?" Anders said.

"Well..." Amell looked him over, and Anders was relieved to note whatever interest Amell had in him was still there. "Any time you want a 'fun' reward, just ask. I'd be more than happy to think of something."

Amell set a hand to his shoulder and squeezed as he stood. Anders tried to think of something imaginative as the man went to check on the rest of the group, but nothing came to him. He couldn't picture Amell on his knees, or in his lap the same way he could with a beautiful woman. He had no idea what being with him would be like, and it certainly didn't help his imagination that the man was so hard to read. Giving up, Anders stood and they continued their search.

They didn't have to search long. Amell had guessed right. Their trek to the top of the ruins found them an elven camp, with just one elf. The fierce little thing burst up from the ground in front of them in a shower of leaves and roots. Oghren screamed. Anders cast a quick barrier over all of them. Amell stepped in front of them all, and held out a placating hand.

"More scavengers here to prey on the misfortunes of others?" The elf woman hissed, taking in the five of them and their matching armor. "... No. You are too well armed. Here for me then. You will not drive me from these forests. The shem could not do it, the darkspawn could not do it, and you will fare no better!" The trees in her camp ripped up from the ground around them and stepped forth.

"No! We're not," Amell lied, so passionately Anders believed him, until he remembered stopping the attacks was exactly why they were here, "We are Grey Wardens," Amell tapped the griffon inscribed on his chest piece.

"Ah..." The elf seemed to relax. The trees around sunk back into the ground, and without the threat of imminent death, Anders had to admit the elf was quite the looker. Her eyes were an unnatural shade of green, and her robes split open at her chest to reveal a ridiculously generous amount of cleavage. Oghren's mouth was open, which was Oghren for you, but even Nathaniel was staring.

"You are here to battle the darkspawn, then?" The elf said, "Fair enough... they are rampant of late. If only they had killed the shems before the shems could kill my clan..."

"I'm sorry," Amell said. "You should know I can sense near a score of darkspawn in the area, but I'm sure you can take care of yourself."

"I can." The elf said. "Should you encounter any merchant caravans, tell them to release my sister, or more of their men will die. Now go, deal with your darkspawn. And stay away from here. This place is not for you." Roots erupted from the ground again, and swallowed the elf whole.

Amell ushered them out of the ruins, and they made their way back to the Pilgrim's Path before he called for a halt.
"It appears we have found our culprit," Nathaniel said.

"Yup." Oghren said, "That little elf caused about as much as damage as ol' Branka used to when she went on her monthly rampages. There a reason we didn't just kill her and be done with all this when we had the chance?"

"She's a very powerful mage, Oghren," Amell said, unabashed admiration in his voice.

"Hoho, you thinking about hoping borders after all?" Oghren said, "She was hot, not arguing that. Did you see those tits?"

"I was more interested in the three sylvans she summoned," Amell said, "We should search the caravans for survivors; perhaps someone will know something about her sister."

"Or perhaps the Merchant's Guild might," Nathaniel added. "I would not argue against finding a peaceful solution to this."

"The tits, right?" Oghren asked, "It's the tits."

"Honestly, Oghren," Sigrun sighed.

"Hey, that gal is the reason Archy here had a tree branch rammed through his stomach, and if you ask me, the only reason a guy forgets getting stuck like that is if he likes the one doing the sticking," Oghren said.

Amell snorted. Anders couldn't help laughing.

"Anyway," Sigrun said loudly, "Did you guys see her camp? There was blood everywhere, but not like the kind you see in a fight. It looked like someone just dumped bucket of bloods on everything, and the weapons? They were just scattered about. It didn't look right."

"Let's start with looking for survivors," Amell said. He went to search the caravans, and Anders followed him, given the other alternatives he had for partners. They went through caravan after ruined caravan, all along the road, checking abandoned bandit camps, trying to find a single living soul. It wasn't looking good.

"So... come here often?" Anders said to lighten the mood.

Amell made an amused sound, "I-... wait. Do you sense that?"

"Darkspawn?" Anders guessed. "Not yet. I mean, sort of, whenever they're really close-"

"No, something weaker." Amell said, "Stay close,"

"Oh, you can count on it." Anders said, "This place is a death trap. If I have to go into the bushes to answer nature's call, you're coming with me."

Amell led him over a hill to a cluster of trees. Anders bit back a childish whine, afraid any one of those trees might decide to spontaneously uproot and attack them, and followed Amell as he broke into a jog. There was a man under the trees, or what was left of one. His face was covered in welts, and his skin was more shades of purple than Anders knew existed. At their approach, the man scrambled backwards and hugged the nearest tree. "Don't look! Don't look at me!"

"He's a ghoul." Amell said, taking off his helmet to kneel beside the man. "Still coherent, though."

"They came," The man whimpered. His eyes were thick with cataracts, and completely blind, "They
came from beneath... around, from shadows. We were ripped apart... biting claws and teeth from the
darkness. And then... I woke? Flesh and bone and gristle under me... around me. Everyone dead...
dead, soft meat melting into the ground. I...I crawled away. Came here. Can't stand... to see it."

"So this... I mean... is this really what's going to happen to us?" Anders swallowed, unable to bring
himself to kneel so close to the man, "Are we really going to end up like this? What was that
alternative you mentioned, the two-hundred year option?"

"Later, Anders," Amell squeezed his leg, "I'll tell you later." Amell turned back to the man, "Do you
know anything about the elf's sister?"

"Sister?" The man squeaked, "I... have a sister. Do I? Elf-sister... no! We did not take her. Probably
dead. Or... eaten."

"Did you kill the elves?" Amell asked.

"No. No!" The man shook his head wildly. "Darkspawn came first. They slaughtered us... took our steel. Brought it to the elven camp. Tricked us. Tricked the elf. Now... she thinks we are to blame. Hunts all in her rage, while they watch..."

"So all these people died over a... misunderstanding?" Anders looked over his shoulder, back at
where the river of caravans lay burning. "Maker... that's horrible! We have to stop her, tell her she's
wrong! Do you think she's still back at her camp? We should try to find her."

"We will, Anders," Amell promised, looking back to the ghoul. "This disease you have, it's Blight-
sickness. I can put an end to it."

"An end?" The man said. "Yes... an end. Please. Dead. Should be already dead. Make an end."

Amell drew his dagger, and slit the man's throat. For some reason, Anders watched as congealed
black blood bubbled out of his throat and down his chest. The ghoul died smiling.

"Why could he still talk?" Anders asked, "Why was he still there? In the Vigil... in the cellars, none
of them could talk..."

"Later, Anders." Amell cleaned off his dagger, sheathed it, and stood. "I promise. We need to get
back to the others, there are a lot of darkspawn nearby." Amell set off at a jog, and Anders had no
choice but to follow.

Back on the path, Oghren was standing with his back to a hill, Sigrun at his side. Nathaniel was
crouched with his bow drawn nearby. "Aye, I feel 'em!" Oghren yelled when he saw them, "We got
a lot of the Stone-cursed dusters coming! No offense, Sigrun."

"Stow it, Oghren," Sigrun spat. Good for her, Anders thought.

The darkspawn burst forth exactly as the ghoul had said. Well, not exactly. Anders wasn't half mad
with blight sickness, so he could see some of the shrieks had been hiding in the trees, the genlocks
behind boulders, the hurlocks under ruined caravans. But they weren't sylvans, and Amell had no
trouble with any of them. Anders laid down his glyphs, Nathaniel had his arrows, Sigrun her axes,
and Oghren... was Oghren. The fight was over quickly.

"The elf was tricked into thinking the humans killed her sister, and murdered her clan. The
darkspawn set it up. Search the bodies for anything elven," Amell said.

"Uh... Commander, no offense, but your magic doesn't leave a lot of 'bodies' behind," Sigrun said.
"And I have no idea what elven things look like."

"Leafy, flowery shit. You know, la de da de da, I'm a fairy." Oghren pranced a few feet to the nearest genlock, and started rooting through its armor. Everyone followed suit, and it was several minutes before Nathaniel finally spoke up.

"Is this elven?" Nathaniel asked, holding up a necklace.

Amell held out a hand for it, and turned it over to read the back of the pendant. "Ma emma samahl... You are my laughter. I'm not sure if it's her sisters, but it's obviously from her clan."

"You speak elvish?" Nathaniel asked.

"Not exactly." Amell said vaguely, "I'm going to go talk to her. I want the rest of you to wait for me. I don't want to alarm her."

"Wait, are you serious?" Anders asked, "Remember that bit I said about you not being immortal?"
"We spoke civilly once." Amell said, "There's no reason to suspect we couldn't do it again."

"Except that she's kind of terrifying, and can turn any tree into a walking killing machine," Anders reminded him, since he apparently needed reminding. "We're in the woods, you know. I don't know if you noticed, but there are kind of a lot of trees here."

"I'll be fine," Amell promised, "Wait for me here, and I'll be back."

"He's going to die, isn't he?" Anders sighed as Amell walked back towards the ruin alone.

"Naw." Oghren said. "Remember that blood vial mage shit thing I told you about?"

"The phylactery?" Anders said.

"Yeah. It was an elf mage thing," Oghren reminded him, "She's an elf mage thing. You see where I'm going with this."

"I really don't." Anders said.

"He likes mage shit. She's mage shit." Oghren said, taking a drink from his hip flask. "Wouldn't expect him back any time soon. Shit, if she were a he, I wouldn't expect him back at all."

Anders rolled his eyes. The main path was still littered with ruined caravans, and the corpses of darkspawn. It split off, about a yard down, into a second path that lead towards the ruin. A small brook ran through the path, and a wooden bridge spanned the length of it. Sigrun and Nathaniel were sitting on it, talking amicably. The ruins were completely overrun with trees, and several stories high. The camp was completely hidden behind them. If the elf did kill Amell, they'd have no way of knowing. It made Anders uncomfortable.

He started pacing, and didn't get two feet before Oghren punched him in the stomach with his flask. "Drink, Sparkles. He'll be fine. He's a tough son of a bitch. And besides, if she doesn't listen to reason... well, there's always... you know." Oghren made a gesture so vague Anders couldn't begin to guess what he was insinuating. He wiggled his fingers beside his temple.

"... his hair? There's always his hair?" Anders guessed, taking a drink, "I certainly hope not. Have you seen his helmet hair? It's ridiculous."

"Gah!" Oghren snapped, "Blood magic! There's always his blood magic."
"... you think he would do that? Just enslave her if she didn't agree with him?" Anders asked.

"Hey, I didn't say enslave." Oghren said quickly, "You're a mage. You know more about this shit than I do. You know, that thing where he makes people like him."

"... what?" Anders asked.

"You know, that blood magicy shit he does," Oghren shrugged, taking another drink, "The subtle shit. Gets under your skin, sneaks into your head, makes you think you like him, gets you to do what he wants."

"You mean... what do you mean?" Anders thought of Mosley, and his headache, "Does he do that a lot?"

"All the soddin' time," Oghren said. "I love the little thunderhumper and all, but he ain't right. Up here." Oghren tapped a greasy fist against his head. "Never seen a problem he didn't try to fix with blood magic. Back during the Blight.... Eh. Whatever. Don't matter none. Point is he'll be fine."

Well wasn't that just dandy? Anders went back to pacing. Not long later, Amell came back down the hill, with the elf at his side. She was wearing the necklace they had found, the silver pendant dangling rather provocatively between her breasts. Oghren was so deep in his leer he was nearly drooling. Anders was embarrassed for him.

"There's an abandoned mine, to the north," Amell said by way of greeting. "The darkspawn causing the disturbances along the Pilgrim's Path are likely there. Everyone, this is Velanna. She's agreed to help us fight the darkspawn; in turn we're to look for her sister among them. Velanna, this Oghren, Anders, Nathaniel, and Sigrun,"

"So... can I stop being afraid of trees now... or?" Anders asked.

"Nice to meet you!" Sigrun said.

"Real nice," Oghren chuckled, and took another drink.

"A pleasure." Nathaniel bowed.

"So you travel with a coward, a lecher, a shem, and a durgen'len. Lovely," Velanna said flatly, scowling. "Can we get a move on? These darkspawn will not hunt themselves."

"Lead the way," Amell said. The two of them took the lead, breaking from the path to head deeper into the forest.

"So... she's friendly," Anders whispered to Oghren.

"Who gives a shit? She's sodding hot. Well, at least from the front. Look how bony that rump is."

"That... is a less than respectful way to speak of a lady." Nathaniel said.

"'Lady'" Oghren snorted. "That 'lady' butchered ten caravans, by my count. I'll speak however I want."

"I'm sure she regrets it. It was a mistake," Sigrun said. "... what's a durgen'len?"

"Elven word for dwarf." Oghren said.


"Really?" Anders asked, "Durgenelelelelen sounds fancy to you?"

"Sounded a lot better than 'coward.'" Sigrun said.

"You don't know she meant me. She could have meant anyone." Anders said.

"She meant you," Sigrun and Nathaniel said in tandem. Everyone laughed, and Anders enjoyed how light the conversation was until they found the mine. It was a decrepit thing, long abandoned, and half buried in a hill half the size of a mountain. The stone door had collapsed before the entrance, but it had been trampled into tiny rocks by what Anders could only guess was the passage of darkspawn.

"So..." Anders stared into the black abyss, "This is it then?"

"This is it," Amell agreed. "Would you handle the light, Anders?"

Anders summoned a small wisp, and bound it to hover about his staff. He wasn't reassured by the scene it illuminated. The mine led down, so far down Anders couldn't see the bottom, and the stairs that lead down were ancient and rotted. It made Anders nervous, but Amell tackled them with the same confidence he tackled everything. More than a few of the steps creaked under his weight. Anders followed him, and everyone along with. "These are about as bad as the stairs the Boss made in Kal'Hirol, right?" Oghren joked to lighten the mood.

"You made stairs?" Sigrun asked.

"Of a fashion." Amell said, "With telekinetic energies, I can--"

The step under Amell collapsed. Anders dropped his staff and dove after him. The light went wild, shining from a thousand different directions as Anders' staff clattered down the mine, but Anders caught him. Why, why, why hadn't Anders started doing presses? Amell was in full dragonscale armor, and holding onto his arm was like to rip Anders' own arm from its socket.

"I've got you," Anders said, "Someone-pull me up,"

"Not gonna work!" Oghren yelled. "This whole thing is cracking. Nobody move."

"Pull me up, or I swear to the Maker-" Anders said.

"Anders-" Amell said.

"I'm not going to drop you," Anders promised, and hoped he had the strength to keep said promise.

"Anders, let go," Amell said gently, "I'll cast a force field on myself. I'll be fine. Let go so the stairs don't-"

The stairwell collapsed.

Anders fell. Amell grabbed him, and Anders felt the Fade swell as Amell struggled to summon a force field around them. The spell never finished, and they hit the ground together. Anders blacked out.

When he woke up, he was in a cell.
In Retreat, Panic

Chapter Notes

Some helpful clarification for this chapter, since we have Anders' perspective here and some things the poor boy doesn't understand.

Ghilan'him banal'vhen is the derogatory term for Arcane warriors.
Dirth'ena enasalin is the polite term for Arcane warriors.
Ma nuvenin means "As you wish" Ma serannas means "Thank you" and Derath Shiral means "Farewell"

My take on the Arcane Warrior specialization is that if you suck up enough of a person's memories to completely master their very difficult to master specialization, then you sucked up a lot of memories. It's no Well of Sorrows, but Amell has some Elvhen floating around in his head. If anyone is curious, we can have Anders ask him more about it, but otherwise it's just a bit of flavor that makes Velanna a little more friendly to Amell.

Thank you for all your wonderful comments/kudos/bookmarks, and as always, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 20 Solis Sometime
Somewhere, In A Cell

It was dark. Painfully dark. In Anders' old cell, light had come in under the door, but only at night, when the templars kept the sconces lit in the hall. Time had been backwards for Anders, then. He'd slept during the day, unable to bear wasting that precious light. He'd prop open the food hatch, and sit with the light illuminating his legs and his waste bucket in the corner, reassured that he hadn't gone blind yet.

Then the patrol would come by, and find him with his arm outside the hatch, and a metal boot would grind down on his hand. Twice, his fingers had broken from it, and Anders had had to beg for a healer when the glyph of neutralization in the cell kept him from healing himself. It had been so hard to get the templars to listen, or even notice. They only came to his cell door once a day, in the middle of the day, when Anders was usually asleep. They gave him a bowl of food, and changed his waste bucket, and that was the extent of his human interaction for an entire year.

Two, maybe three months in, and that little cat had finally pranced past his cell. Anders had felt the fur on his finger tips, and wept. It was the first bit of Compassion Anders had experienced since he was locked in that awful room. He couldn't even dream of his spirit, when his connection to the Fade was so weak it kept his dreams a fog, and he woke without remembering them. If he even slept at all. Anders wasn't sure he could call the fitful rest he found in that room sleeping.

It had been so cramped. So painfully cramped. He could sit, but he couldn't stretch out his legs so they were straight. Falling asleep sitting up had always left him with the fear that he'd roll over in his sleep, and knock over his waste bucket, and spend the next eight, nine, or however many months he had left covered in shit. It had been so hard to keep track of time in that coffin.
Ten months in, and Anders had started screaming one day, certain it had been years, and the templars had just forgotten about him. Or more likely, they remembered, and just didn't care enough to let him out. He screamed himself hoarse, lost his voice, and only knew it had happened ten months in because a templar had come by to tell him to shut up, because he wasn't going to listen to him scream for the two months he had left.

It wasn't his first panic attack, or even his last. Somewhere around three months, maybe four, Anders had begged for a bit of fresh air, sunlight, to see a crack in the door for just a few seconds. At five months, or maybe six, he'd spent a week banging on the door until his hands bled, begging to be let out. Around eight months, he tried to kill himself, but he had nothing to work with. There were no sharp edges to slit his wrists, no rope or banister to hang himself from, nothing remotely dangerous or deadly.

He tried biting his tongue, on the hopes he'd drown in his own blood, but he was too weak to keep biting through the pain. He tried starving himself, and he made it four days with no food or water. The templars never said anything. They didn't try to persuade him to eat, lecture him, or mention it at all. They checked his bowl and cup, and seeing he hadn't eaten, just left them. There was no reason to waste getting him new food if he wasn't eating what he had, after all.

On the fifth day, the cat had come back. It snuck in through the open hatch, and curled up in his lap, purring. Anders didn't believe in signs, or miracles, or anything during that long year, but he loved that cat. He ate four day old oats and stale water just so he could see that cat again. He might not have bothered, with how little the templars fed him. He lost so much weight in that cell, the first time Anders had seen himself in a mirror, he'd started crying.

This cell wasn't that cell. This cell... this cell was worse. There was room to lie down, but it was so dark it was like he'd been locked away in the Void. And it was cold. So terribly cold. Anders touched his chest, and realized his clothes were gone. The spaulders, the pretty tabard, even his boots. Everything but his trousers was missing, and something on his arms. Anders touched them, and realized them for bandages. Why were there bandages on his arms?

Anders felt around in the dark, but there was only cold stone. His staff was gone, as was his satchel. "... Amell?" Anders ventured. "Oghren?... anyone?" Silence answered him. He was alone in here.

Anders stood up cautiously. His head ached, as did his back, but there were no templar shackles on him. He reached for the Fade, but felt nothing. Anders sucked in a deep breath, and tried to let it out slowly. There were any number of reasons his magic might not be able to reach him. There could be a glyph of neutralization in the room. Somewhere. Anders felt the walls, trying to find the door, but his hands came into contact with cold stone at every turn.

Calm down, Anders. Stay calm. Focus. Try to focus on something. Beyond the black, there were whispers. Quiet, guttural whispers that seemed to come from just outside his cell. The sound made Anders skin crawl, as if some fetid oil were wrapping itself around every inch of his naked skin. Breathe. Focus. Focus on something. Sing a song. What was that song Amell had sung?

Something about dying horribly and being possessed. Anders laughed, and quickly found himself unable to stop laughing. He ran out breath, just laughing, and collapsed on the floor. The pain wasn't just in his head, or his back, or his arms, it was everywhere. It was inside him, pressing on his chest, carving into his stomach. He couldn't breathe. He was going to die in here. He was going to die in this tiny cell, a prisoner just like he'd been for his entire life.

The panic never passed. Occasionally, it dwindled, only to flare back up again every time Anders looked into the abyss around him and heard the quiet whispers in the back of his head. He lost track of time, and lost track of himself, and alternated between hyperventilating, crying, or outright
screaming. It might have minutes, it might have been hours, it might have been days, but eventually there came a click at the door to his cell. A key? Anders crouched, and listened to the heave of the stone door moving slowly off its hinges.

There was hardly any light on the other side, but that didn't matter. There was some, the faint orange crackle of a single torch, and as soon as the crack widened enough for him to fit through, Anders bolted out. He shoved the first thing he encountered aside, and was halfway down a hallway when something grabbed him around his waist and lifted him off his feet. Anders slammed his elbow backwards and was rewarded with a pained grunt, but the thing held on.

It was also talking, but what did Anders care? Templars could talk. Even darkspawn could talk now. Everyone could talk. Anders laughed hysterically and tried to struggle out of the thing's grasp, and was turned around and crushed against something warm and firm. It locked his arms against his side, and shoved his face forward into something equally warm.

The Fade was out here. It was the first thing Anders noticed, when he was capable of noticing anything. He grabbed for it, and while there was no healing what was wrong with him, it helped to have it there, to feel Compassion's reassuring essence just beyond the Veil, to be able to summon light and know he wasn't trapped in that damned eternal dark. Anders took a shallow breath, and inhaled copper, sweat, and the Fade.

Amell. Anders inhaled again, shakily, and finally realized Amell was holding him. More than just holding him, Amell had him crushed against his chest, one arm locked tight around his back, the other buried in his hair. Amell was also sporting nothing more than his trousers, and his lips were at Anders' ear, talking quietly.

"Anders, please calm down," Amell said, stroking his hair, "We can't stay here. You're okay. Breathe. It's okay. It's just me. We're getting out. It's over."

Anders took another breath, and slowly felt his senses return to him. Amell and Maker knew who else had freed him from his cell, and he'd taken off running like a magister out of the Black City, and continued his panic attack into a full blown tantrum. Amell had caught him, and kept him from running... where?

Anders looked around, but saw nothing helpful. They were standing in a hallway, with architecture similar to the ruins. All around them were more cell doors, several open, a handful not. Anders couldn't see whoever else was there to witness his panic attack. He guessed they were behind him. Probably everyone, with Anders' luck, but what did he care? Anders had never cared what anyone thought of him, and he wasn't about to start now. Amell wasn't judging him, so damn the rest.

Taking another breath, Anders wrapped his arms around Amell and hugged him back. A voice in his head was warning him against getting too feely, but Anders was tired of listening to the voices in his head, darkspawn or his own. He was tired, and he was terrified, and damned if he didn't need the damn hug.

"Hey," Amell said gently, relaxing his grip on Anders' back to rub his shoulders gently, "Are you back?"

Anders made a noise he hoped was affirmative.

"We're still in the mines," Amell explained without letting go of him, "The darkspawn set a trap, but Velanna's sister, Seranni, is helping us escape. Our things are in a store room, very far from where we are now. I need your help. You, Velanna, and I are the only ones who have any means of defending ourselves without weapons or armor. Are you alright? Can you fight?"
"Peachy," Anders said. His voice cracked. Another deep breath, and Anders felt comfortable pulling back from him. "Did I... I punched you didn't I?"

"I'm sure I did something to deserve it," Amell said; his smile was reassuring. Amell reached up and touched Anders' ear. "At least they didn't take your earring. I might not have recognized you without it."

Anders tried to laugh. It came out as more of a wheeze.

"If you are quite finished coddling your man-child for his tantrum-" Velanna started to say.

Amell whirled on her, "Do not." Amell said threateningly. Velanna closed her mouth.

Anders finally had a chance to take in who was with Amell. Velanna was there, of course, but the darkspawn had taken her robes, and left her nothing but her lower smalls. Her arms were folded over her bare breasts, considering her robe had made it obvious she wore no bindings. Nathaniel was there in his trousers, holding a torch and making a very valiant effort to stare at the ceiling. All of them had bandages around their arms. Apparently they were all too afraid to take them off and see what the darkspawn had done to them.

"I thought you said Velanna's sister was helping us?" Anders asked.

"She ran after making sure Velanna and I were free." Amell said. "Stay near me. We need to search the rest of the cells for Sigrun and Oghren."

The first cell they checked was empty, but the second was filled with ghouls that attacked at the sight of them. Without a front line of armored warriors, the emaciated half-men were markedly more terrifying. Anders reached for ice, Amell for telekinetics, and Velanna for lightning. Casting the spell caused her to drop her arms. Anders was a healer, and seen far worse; he was more than capable of seeing a feminine form in a clinical light if he needed. Amell had no interest in women, so there was no issue there, but poor Nathaniel was a mess. His face turned purple, and he turned around as if he'd walked in on Velanna changing and not fighting a ghoul.

"Creators, a shem and a fool," Velanna muttered, "Are you going to turn your back every time I cast a spell? Regardless of the threats we face? Yes, I have breasts, human, and if you keep acting so carelessly, they are lack to be the last you ever see. Pay attention!"

"There are worse things to die for," Nathaniel said quietly, "But I'll endeavor to be less respectful in the future, my lady,"

Velanna made a face at him, but Anders couldn't help noticing the remark had her covering her breasts again in-between checking each cell. The next one had Sigrun. Unlike Velanna, she had a binder to wear with her trousers. Anders felt slightly less embarrassed over his panic attack when she ran out crying, and latched onto Amell's legs. Amell knelt and hugged her.

"Oh ancestors! Thank you! Thank you! A thousand times thank you, Commander!" Sigrun sobbed, "I thought-I thought I was done for! I thought they were going to turn me into one of those things! Birthing darkspawn for all eternity. I was going to kill myself, but I didn't have a weapon."

"I'll never let that happen," Amell promised, petting her hair. Her pigtails bounced when his hands ran over them, and Anders suddenly felt a great deal less special for his hug. "I promise I'll find you if we ever lose you in the Deep Roads, and I'll kill you myself if it comes to that."

That didn't sound reassuring to Anders, but it must have to Sigrun. She hugged Amell tighter, and even kissed his cheek. "Thank you. I'm ready to die fighting, but to live like that? I... I couldn't."
"Do you see now why we don’t let women go to their Calling alone?" Amell asked, "I know you're eager for death, Sigrun, but promise me you won't forget how this feels when you think about going to yours."

"I-I promise, Commander," Sigrun nodded, taking a step back. Her arms were also bandaged. "Thank you."

The next cell held a man not a ghoul, but also not Oghren. He was a human, with dark red hair and a matching month old beard. He squinted at their intrusion and the light cast from Nathaniel's torch. "Who-are you? How did you get here?"

"You're a Grey Warden," Amell said, apparently sensing the taint where Anders couldn't, "One of the Orlesians, from Vigil's Keep? Garvan? Jarlath? Keenan?"

"Keenan." The man agreed, squinting at Amell. "Red eyes, black hair... You must be Warden-Commander Amell. It's an honor to meet you, Ser, though I had hoped you would avoid capture... would be luckier than the rest of us."

"It's been over a month since the attack on the Keep," Amell said, "How do you still live?"

"They keep me fed." Keenan said. "On what, I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know."

"Why?" Amell asked.

"They're using my blood, for what I cannot say." Keenan lifted an arm, bandaged in much the same way all of their arms were bandaged. "I see you have suffered the same fate. You must escape this place. I fear for what these darkspawn have planned for us all."

"We must escape this place," Amell corrected him.

Keenan shook his head, "No. I'll not walk again. I tried to escape, and a darkspawn with a wicked maul crushed my legs."

"Anders?" Amell asked.

Anders knelt beside him, but a cursory inspection of the man's legs confirmed his suspicion. 'Crushed' was an understatement. The man's bones were little more than dust. It was a wonder he was still alive. "This is too much. I can't heal this." Anders said.

"I know it. I'm resigned to it." Keenan said. "If you're escaping, I would ask something of you," Keenan removed a gold band from his hand, and held it out to Amell, "I have a wife, Nida, in Amaranthine. If you could tell her I died trying to make this world a better place, I would appreciate it."

Amell took the ring and put it on as not to lose it. "And what of you? We could leave you, and come back better equipped, perhaps carry you out."

"No," Keenan said. "No. To what end? To life as a cripple? A burden on Nida, on the Wardens? Never able to meet my Calling with any dignity? That's not the life I want for myself."

Amell reached for his dagger, but he was barefoot. The dagger was gone. He frowned. "I need something sharp."

"Don't waste time on me, Commander," Keenan said.
"You're a Warden, not a waste. Consider this your Calling." Amell said, and unraveled the bandage on his arm. Anders flinched preemptively, unwilling to imagine the sort of cut a darkspawn might leave, bleeding someone. He looked anyway. It was a surgical cut, just beneath the bend in Amell's arm, and it was recent enough that Amell scratching it made it bleed anew. "I don't know how to make this painless." Amell warned him. Blood gathered from the cut to swarm around Amell's hand, waiting ominously.

"If this is my Calling, I'll meet it bravely, pain or not." Keenan said. "In peace, vigilance. In war, victory."

Amell held out the hand he wasn't using for his spell. Keenan shook it. "In death, sacrifice." Amell said, and killed him.

It was horrible. The blood latched onto Keenan's face, seeping into his nose and his open mouth when he screamed. It looked as it had with Rylock, only instead of controlling Keenan, it suffocated him. A few breathless seconds later, and the blood was gone. Keenan seized, and died. Not from suffocation. It was too fast. Anders guessed Amell had stopped his heart.

Amell said nothing. He stood and went to the next cell as if the one they'd just checked had been empty.

"He wanted to make the world a better place." Velanna muttered, shaking her head. "What an insipid line. Is that really supposed to make his wife feel better about his death?"

"You must be so much fun at funerals," Anders said. "What do you think, Sigrun? Legion of the Dead material?"

"Oh, definitely. She'd fit right in. Except for the part where she's mostly naked. Why did they take all our clothes again?" Sigrun asked rhetorically. No one seemed to know.

"I imagine it made him feel better, believing he did not die in vain," Nathaniel offered up.

"All deaths are in vain," Velanna said.

"Oh yeah," Sigrun said, "She's perfect."

Amell rejoined them, his usual enigmatic expression gone, and replaced with a look so distraught Anders reached for the Fade, half-expecting an ogre to burst out of the cell behind him. "That was the last cell." Amell said. "Where's Oghren? Seranni said they were keeping us all down here."

"Perhaps he did not fall into the mine with the rest of us?" Nathaniel said, "If I recall correctly, he was rather cautious on the stairs."

"I'm sure we'll find him if we just follow the smell," Anders joked.

Amell glanced back and forth down the hall. There were only two exits: left and right. Amell turned left.

"Where are you going!?" Velanna demanded, grabbing Amell's arm. "Seranni said the exit was to the right. That darkspawn emissary, their leader, it brought you in from that direction! Are you so eager to die for that drunken durgen'len?"

"That drunken durgen'len is my best friend," Amell said, shaking free of her grasp. "Anders, protect Sigrun. Velanna, protect Nathaniel. Seranni said the darkspawn patrol here every half hour or so. Go quickly. Velanna, lead the way to the store room Seranni mentioned. I'll catch up."
"You are a fool." Velanna said, "Should we also tell your lover you died making the world a better place?"

"Dareth shiral, Velanna," Amell said, and left them.

"Ghilan'him banal'vhen," Velanna spat. "That shem would dare to use our words, to promise me-" Velanna bit back the rest of her curses, and turned right. Nathaniel followed her. Anders hesitated, and summoned his own mage light as the light from Nathaniel's torch faded. He trusted Amell, not Velanna, or anyone else in their group. Amell was their leader, why weren't they going with him?

Sigrun tugged his hand. "Come on. If I learned one thing in the Legion, it's that you follow every order your Commanding Officer gives you, whether or not you agree with them."

"You know, considering everyone in your battalion died, I don't know that that reassures me much." Anders said.

"Well, yeah, but... they died making the world a better place?" Sigrun shrugged.

"That's-you're horrible. I can't believe you're joking about that," Anders said, allowing her to lead him down the hall after Velanna, and away from Amell.

"Well... when your choices are laugh or cry, wouldn't you rather laugh?" Sigrun said. "I know that's kind of hypocritical, considering I came out of my cell bawling like a baby, but...

"Hey, don't worry about it," Anders said, "When I came out of my cell, I was having such a panic attack I punched Amell in the stomach."

"Really?" Sigrun giggled. "Okay, well, that makes me feel a little better, so thanks."

"Anytime." Anders grinned.

The hallway opened up into overgrown Avvar ruins. There was no more need for Nathaniel's torch, or Anders' mage light when sconces filled with veilfire torches lined the walls. The ancient magic had likely been burning for an Age. Statues of warriors were all around them, holding up the ruins in place of pillars, and much of the stonework was overgrown with roots. The chamber they were in led down, where a large group of darkspawn were milling about aimlessly.

"This way," Nathaniel whispered, gesturing to hallway off to the right. "We should go around."

Everyone agreed. They took the hall down and around the darkspawn, holding their breath as they went, but they passed them with relative ease. The chamber emptied out into another hallway, and they followed that for a time as the ruins began to give way to the old mine. Silverite was all around them, sticking out of the stone. Barrel after barrel was full of the stuff. If the mine weren't filled with darkspawn, Anders imagined it would have been quite profitable.

"No, no, no," Velanna muttered. "Seranni said the storeroom was just before the mine, but there was nothing!"

"Maybe it's hidden?" Sigrun wondered. "Let's go back, check the walls for a switch. Us dwarves usually hide them in sconces."

They turned around, and sure enough the third sconce they pulled gave way with a click. Their equipment, and the equipment of countless other prisoners, was heaped carelessly within. Anders dug through chain and plate mail until he found the armor Amell had commissioned for him, and got dressed. Everyone else followed suit, though there was some confusion when they came across their
Grey Warden pendants. There was nothing to distinguish one from the other, so they made their best
guesses by the length of the necklaces.

"Should we wait here for the Commander and Oghren?" Sigrun wondered. "Or should we take their
things now, and hope they find a way out?"

"You wish for us to carry around two sets of armor, a battle axe, a sword, and a shield?" Velanna
asked, "And you expect us to fight darkspawn carrying these things?"

"What if they have to run?" Sigrun asked, "What if they don't have time to stop and get dressed like
we do? The Commander's armor is made from real dragon scales. It just doesn't seem right to leave
it."

"I can carry one set." Nathaniel said, "Help me find a sack."

"I'll get the other," Anders volunteered, "We're in the back anyway. It won't matter so much if we've
got a few things to carry."

They had to look to some of the mining equipment to find the sacks and ropes necessary to rope all
of Oghren and Amell's gear into backpacks. In the meantime, Sigrun picked through the pile for
every ring, necklace, and trinket she could find, considering none of them knew which might belong
to Amell or Oghren.

When they were set, Anders was pleasantly surprised to find Amell's armor wasn't too terribly heavy.
Dragon scale was surprisingly light, but as for Nate... The poor archer was bent under the weight of
Oghren's plate-mail and battle axe. He didn't need to be too terribly mobile, Anders supposed, as
long as the rest of them could keep the darkspawn back and he could fire his arrows, and if worst
came to worst, he could always drop the pack.

They continued through the mine, and then they found the miners. In a large chamber, countless men
and women were strung up from the mine's support beams by their necks. In the center, a cluster of
darkspawn looked to be celebrating.

"Perhaps either of you could dispatch them from afar?" Nathaniel suggested.

"Easily." Velanna said.

Anders called for fire, a little bemused to see Velanna picked the same element. They channelled
their spells for several long seconds, and released them into the darkspawn. The flames caught, and
seared the creatures alive. The smell of cooked meat filled the air, and one of the beams caught fire. It
crackled for a short while, until Anders threw a hasty frost spell at it to douse the flames, and keep
the mine from collapsing on them. When the last darkspawn fell, they waited to see if any darkspawn
had overheard them, but it seemed luck was on their sides.

"My fireballs are bigger than yours," Velanna said.

"It's not the size that counts," Anders said.

"Did your commander tell you that?" Velanna wondered, "He was trying not to hurt your feelings."

Sigrun giggled. Anders rolled his eyes. They went into the chamber, and from there it was a simple
matter of picking the only tunnel they couldn't sense the darkspawn through. The tunnel dead ended
into a pile of boulders, but above that pile, at about Velanna's height, the entrance to the mine lay
above them, complete with the toppled stairwell. "And no Commander to make stairs," Nathaniel
said.
"We'll just have to climb," Sigrun said. "Who wants to boost me?"

Anders volunteered himself, and the little dwarf was up and over in a single bound. Okay, so maybe it was three bounds, but Anders did it. They handed her their packs, and Velanna went second, followed by Anders, and finally Nate.

"I see what happened," Anders said, after a cursory look at the toppled stairwell, and the room around them. "There are glyphs all along the floor here. Glyphs for sleep, for neutralization. This room was a death trap."

"Maybe we shouldn't wait in here then?" Sigrun wondered. "We could wait just there, in the tunnel at this level for the Commander and Oghren."

"Far more like your Commander and his man are dead," Velanna said bluntly. "... but I have not seen my sister since she first freed us, so I will wait with you."

"What if she's dead?" Anders asked.

"Do not say such things!" Velanna snapped.

"Yeah, doesn't feel good, does it?" Anders glared at her. "That's my point. Let's go wait."

They stepped off the glyphs, and into the tunnel. It wasn't a mineshaft, but rather another hallway into the Avvar ruins, for a path they hadn't taken. They went down the hall until they reached a doorway, and voted unanimously to open it. The door opened up into a vast, empty chamber. Anders couldn't say what the original purpose of the room had been. Maybe a ball room. The vaulted ceiling went so high that where it had broken, sunlight streamed in. A small balcony ran along the inside the room near the ceiling, marking a second story, and countless corridors seemed to end here.

"Well... If they're going to get out, it's probably going to be through here." Sigrun said.

"Or through where we escaped." Nathaniel said.

"So, I guess we wait?" Sigrun asked.

"I guess we wait." Anders said.

Velanna paced. Nathaniel cleaned his armor, sharpened his blades, and fiddled with his arrows. Anders tried to take his mind off it all talking to Sigrun, and asking her every inane question about the Legion of the Dead that popped into his head.

They waited for the better part of an hour before some of them started to lose heart. "Perhaps... they did not make it? And were recaptured?" Nathaniel said, ever the optimistic pessimist.

"Maybe we should have left their gear," Sigrun said, "Do you think they would have found it?"

"Perhaps, maybe," Velanna repeated mockingly, "Stop mewling. They are either alive and fighting to reach us or they are dead. We can do nothing for either but wait."

"We could go back," Anders said.

"We would risk being captured again." Nathaniel said.

"The Commander said he'd always find me if I was ever lost." Sigrun said, standing up. "I should do the same. I don't like this waiting. It feels too much like running. We have our gear; we're Wardens. Let's go kill darkspawn."
"Can't believe I'm saying this, but yeah. Let's go be heroes." Anders said, picking up his staff and leaving Amell's things at the top the stairs. They had scarcely set foot on the first step before the sounds of battle reached them.

Then again, 'battle' was probably an overzealous description of the sounds they heard. There were darkspawn, screaming defiance in their guttural tongue. There were the roars of something both inhuman and indarkspawn. And there were the screams and curses of men. They seemed to be coming from the far door on the first floor. All four of them ran in that direction, but they didn't get halfway across the room before the door was flung open, and Amell and Oghren came running out.

Amell was bloodied beyond belief. The man had bruises that made him look a ghoul, and cuts too numerous to count. He left bloody footprints in his wake. A vicious looking burn marred the left side of his body; his right hand clutched a tattered satchel, and his left held onto Oghren and dragged him along.

Oghren... Oghren was stark naked. It was something Anders never wanted to see, but there it was. The man looked like he was wearing fleece, red hair covering his body from head to toe. He was just as wounded; half his beard had been signed off, and his chest and right shoulder were burned. "Run for your sodding lives!" Oghren yelled when he saw them. "Don't fucking fight! Just run! Run, you fuckers, run!"

Chasing them were scores of darkspawn. Giant spiders. An ogre. Drakes. And two very large dragons, the size of horses. One dragon stopped and reared its head back, its inhale loud enough to rival the sound of a fierce wind rushing through a canyon. Amell grabbed Oghren, and a force field flared to life around them just in time to block the flames, and Anders didn't have to guess how they'd earned the burns.

Everyone hesitated. "Run!" Amell yelled, and they stopped hesitating. Anders ran back up the stairs, and slung Amell's pack over his shoulder. Nathaniel grabbed Oghren's.

"The stairs in the mine shaft are still out!" Sigrun warned them.

"Cast-Wall-Behind us," Amell yelled, dragging Oghren up with him. "Barrier! Ice! Anything!" They ran into the corridor, and Nathaniel slammed the door shut behind them. Velanna cast a wall of electricity. Anders added a barrier. Amell kept running to the stairs, and hastily threw them back together with telekinetic magic. Oghren ran straight up them as they formed. "Go!" Amell yelled.

Everyone ran. They climbed the stairs, and reached the top of the mine and were out into the Wending Woods. It was nighttime, the only light illuminating them that of stars and the moons. "Velanna, help me collapse this!" Amell ordered.

"Seranni-" Velanna protested.

"Gone! I saw her leave, I swear it! Help me!" Amell said. Below, in the mine shaft, a dragon roared. Amell grabbed Velanna, and his force field flared around them as flames came shooting up and out of the shaft. No one else was close enough to be burned, but everyone felt the heat. The metal frame of the door glowed an angry red.

Velanna cast, and Amell with her. Together, their magic brought the ceiling of the mine shaft crumbling down, locking the darkspawn, dragons, and other beasts below. Velanna fell to her knees, and reached out to touch the barrier of rocks and boulders she'd created where the entrance to the mine had been. "Seranni..."

"Gone, Velanna. I swear," Amell wheezed, hands on his knees. "She left with the darkspawn
emissary."

"Why?" Velanna asked, tears in her eyes. "Why is she with that monster? Where did she go?"


"Come back?" Anders asked. "To fight all that? Are you mad?"

"Of course!" Velanna exclaimed. "You're Wardens. You always fight these monsters, and you can sense them, even deep beneath the earth. I would join you! Give me the ability to hunt these monsters in the Deep, that I may find Seranni among them!"

"The Joining could kill you," Amell said, collapsing onto his back.

"At the very least, it's hard to get the taste out of your mouth for a few hours," Anders said.

Velanna glared at him. Not a Joker, that one. "I am not afraid of death! I will pledge my service to you in exchange for the powers your order can grant. What say you?"

"Ma nuvenin," Amell said.

"Ma serannas." Velanna said.

"You two wanna use proper words, or you just gonna speak flower all day?" Oghren asked, opting for a drink from his flask instead of putting his clothes back on.

"Will you also still teach me of the dirth'ena enasalin?" Velanna asked, ignoring Oghren. "This knowledge you have stolen from the elvhen, that taught you our tongue and lets you fight as you do?"

"Yes." Amell said.

"Then... I..." Velanna cleared her throat. "I misjudged you. Forgive me. Grief makes me hard."

"There's nothing to forgive, Velanna," Amell said. "Not from me, anyway. Anders...? Could you come heal Oghren and I?"

Maybe Anders was a little bias, or maybe he just didn't want anything to do with Oghren while he was naked, but he went to Amell first. The man lay in the grass, exhausted, burnt, bruised, and bloodied, but he managed a smirk when Anders knelt next to him.

"You're insane, you know that?" Anders said, setting his hands on Amell's bare chest and summoning Compassion. Amell was no Oghren, but he still had a decent amount of hair on his chest; it thinned out and led a trail down to his navel and vanished into his trousers. It felt soft under Anders' fingers. He hadn't noticed, hugging him. Amell had just felt warm. Firm. Soothing. "Are we really going to come back here and fight dragons?"

"That's the plan." Amell said.

"Did I mention you're insane?" Anders asked.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Amell decided.

"See, that's how I know you're insane." Anders said, "Sane people don't take 'insane' as a compliment."
"Well, you're touching me, and I know you don't need to do that to heal me, so I can't be that bad." Amell said. Anders took his hands off at being called out, but Amell caught his hand and pulled it back so it was splayed against his chest. "I just outran two dragons, five drakes, and more darkspawn than I can count. Just let me have this for a few seconds. It doesn't have to mean anything."

"Favor for a favor, I guess," Anders said, "I'm sorry... for that little incident when you got me out of that cell. Turns out me and cells don't really get on. Who knew, right?"

"Who knew," Amell agreed, letting go of Anders' hand. Though Anders was free to take his hands off then, he left them on until Amell was fully healed.

"All done," Anders said. Amell sat up and brushed dried blood and ash off himself. Anders probably should have gone to heal Oghren then, but there was no telling whether or not the dwarf had put his pants on yet, so he stayed next to Amell.

"Anders..." Amell pulled his knees up to his chest, and draped his arms over them. "About what happened. I've never been in solitary, I won't pretend to know what it was like, but I remember the Circle. I won't let them take you back."

"That's... I don't know what to say to that." Anders admitted. Blood magic be damned, at this point. If that was what Amell was doing to make Anders' like him, he was doing it while saying everything Anders had ever wanted to hear.

"You don't have to say anything," Amell said. "I just wanted you to know."

"... you remember that bit, where you said I was the most attractive man you'd ever seen?" Anders mouth asked without permission from his brain. Amell raised an interested eyebrow. "You're not so bad yourself. Definitely a close second to a mirror," Anders joked.

"Thank you," Amell grinned, "And thank you for protecting everyone while I was gone."

"Oh I don't know that I really did anything," Anders said, "Nathaniel led us, and Velanna, you know, scary."

"You're an exceptional mage, Anders." Amell said. "You maintained a bond with a spirit of Compassion through the Taint, you learned a new type of magic under stress in the span of a few minutes, and you command primal energies like I've never seen."

"Stop, you're making me blush," Anders said. "I'm a healer, that's all. You're just sweet on me."

"I might be." Amell said. "It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"No," Sex was one thing, but Anders thought of Amell's hug and all his promises, the voice in his head telling him that feelings were dangerous. "No, it doesn't bother me at all."
Wouldn't you know it, Velanna wasn't the sort for camaraderie and revelry. After her Joining, she'd eaten an entire stuffed pheasant on her own, picked out a bunk for herself in the furthest corner the barracks, and gone to sleep. There'd been no drinks, no toasts, nothing beyond their ridiculously brief introduction in the woods.

For all intents and purposes, she reminded Anders of a feral cat. She'd eat the food you put out for her, sleep in the bed you gave her, but get anywhere near her and you were going to get clawed to pieces. Velanna refused to even look the part of a Warden. As long as they were at the Vigil, she persisted in wearing her dalish garb: barefoot, with a leafy robe that revealed far too much cleavage, and her sister's necklace. Anders never saw her wearing her Joining pendant. He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd thrown it out.

Away from the Vigil, Velanna at least looked the part. They all had matching Grey Warden armor for their 'expeditions' as Amell called them. Their first goal was to clear out and reclaim the Silverite Mine for the Vigil, so they had a steady supply of the metal to outfit their soldiers. Their second goal was clearing out a gorge Velanna had shown them in the Wending Wood which contained a generous supply of granite to rebuild the Vigil's walls. That was all well and good and responsible, but it was their third goal that was most exciting: lyrium smuggling.

Anders would have called it 'lyrium finding.' Amell didn't call it that, of course. Amell didn't call it anything. The lyrium crates they planned to bring back from Kal'Hirol would just be the spoils of their 'expeditions.' It was terribly exciting, and terribly illegal. Anders felt like a regular lyrium smuggler, and was all set to buy himself a dashing chapeau. A million months from now, when he could finally afford one on the paltry stipend Woolsey gave him.

Amell wanted it for 'compelling reasons.' Apparently, there was a vein of lyrium in the Silverite Mine their men would work in secret once the mine was clear, but there was no reason to ignore whole crates of the stuff just sitting around in Kal'Hirol in the mean time. Anders had to give Amell credit for balls. Anders certainly wouldn't have been first in line to defy the Chantry, but then they were planning on being relatively subtle about it. Outside of their little group of Wardens, the only people who knew about their little lyrium plot were the Vigil's dwarven contractors, and a handful of their trusted miners. All of them agreed the most important rule of the whole thing was 'Don't tell Cera.'

It was an easy rule to follow. Anders hated that Circle witch. He would have been more than happy to avoid her for the rest of his life, save that her quarters were right off the library, and Amell liked to read.

Oghren meant well, but Anders was willing to bet there was more to Amell than the four D's Oghren
had mentioned. For starters, neither 'blood magic' nor 'ancient elven gibberish' started with a 'D'. In his free time, if Amell wasn't in the library, he was doing something arcane. Recently, that something always seemed to involve Velanna. Anders was not jealous.

Anders didn't want to learn how to be an Arcane Warrior or a Dirthenwhatever Velanna called it, but Amell at least might have offered. If nothing else, Anders probably would have done a better job learning than Velanna. The little elf could not seem to get a handle on what Amell was telling her, no matter how often they practiced.

Then again, Anders was an ass, and really couldn't blame her. No one wanted to pass up an opportunity to watch the Commander give a demonstration, and every time the two practiced, there were always at least a dozen soldiers watching. Under that kind of pressure, Anders would have been lucky to summon a snowflake, let alone 'channel his magic inward and let the Veil surround him' or 'step into the Fade,' but Velanna was stubborn.

"Ten coppers, she throws the training stick across the yard again," Anders whispered to Nate. He took a bite of his apple, comfortable watching the exchange so long as he wasn't in throwing range. He sat on a barrel, several yards away. The last time he'd watched, Anders had been sitting on the fence around the training ring. Velanna's staff had flown across the ring and knocked him flat.

"She's improving." Nathaniel said. "I'll take your bet."

Amell had allowed Velanna to use a staff in place of a sword and shield, which seemed like cheating to Anders. Without magic augmenting her physically, even knowing how to wield the weapon had yet to help Velanna against Amell. Ten free coppers for Anders.

"She hasn't managed to hit him once." Anders said.

"You never said she had to hit him." Nathaniel said. "You said she had to throw her staff. I think the loss of her clan made her unstable. The loss of my family drove me to a similar state... I think she's calmed down. Last night she agreed to have dinner with me."

The wooden thud of staff hitting practice shield drew Anders' attention. Magic hummed within Amell, quickening his steps, strengthening his blows. Velanna had yet to manage the same trick.

"You're shitting me. You're courting her? I mean, I know she's a looker, but aren't you scared she'll eat your head when she's done?"

"I'm not very familiar with elven customs." Nathaniel said. "Do you think that's something I should be concerned about?"

"I knew you had a sense of humor." Anders grinned.

"I'm not courting her." Nate clarified. "She just agreed to eat in the dining hall with me...I know she's a little...."

"Bitchy?" Anders supplied.

"I didn't say that." Nathaniel said, but didn't disagree, "I just think we should make more of an effort to include her."

"She'd have to want to be included first." Anders snorted. "I tried talking to her. I asked her if she wanted to discuss magic with me, and she said that humans steal elven ideas, and the only reason she was training with the Commander was to get back what should never have been lost."

"Knowing you, you probably said something insulting to provoke her." Nathaniel guessed.
"Well I wasn't calling her 'my lady' and bowing every other minute, if that's what you mean." Anders said.

"No. I'm well aware your interests lie elsewhere." Nathaniel said.

"Alright. Go ahead. Get it out of your system." Anders said.

"Get what out of my system?" Nathaniel asked.

"All the cracks you've been waiting to make about me and the Commander." Anders said. "Go on, I'll give it to you free this time, since you're going to owe me ten copper soon."

"I wasn't going to make any cracks." Nathaniel said.

"I don't believe you." Anders said.

"That sounds like a personal problem." Nathaniel said.


"Only that I would question why you seem to think your relationship merits joking about." Nathaniel said. "Are you embarrassed?"

"Well now I am." Anders said. "You're really over thinking this. I just figured you'd have a pun or two saved up, but I guess Oghren already took all the good ones."

"The ones he said to you were good?" Nathaniel wondered. "I barely understood the ones he had saved up for me."

"Rolling your oats? Did you get that one?" Anders asked.

"Polishing the footstones?" Nathaniel shrugged. "I still don't-wait. No. I get it now."

Anders laughed. In the middle of the training grounds, Velanna was still trying to force the magic roaring off her into an internal expression of magic, and failing. Amell was offering encouragement, even as Velanna beat at his shield with her staff. It didn't appear to be making a dent, or tiring him in the slightest.

"There's nothing going on between us, you know." Anders said.

"That's surprising." Nathaniel said. "But it's also none of my business, so I won't pry."

"Look, session's over." Anders pointed. He finished his apple, and tossed the core behind him into the grass. "Get ready to pay up."

"This is impossible!" Velanna snapped. "Were it not for the memories of my ancestor imprinted in your mind, even you could not manage such magic!"

"It's not impossible, Velanna." Amell said. "I saw you bind those sylvans. You have a remarkable talent for spirit magic, and it can be hard to dissociate from spirits and the Fade to focus on physical magic, but this is your heritage. You told me you wanted this."

"I do not need my own words repeated back at me! I know what I want! Do you have any idea how unfair it is that you stumbled on an ancient artifact of the elvhen? Do you have any idea how rare, how precious this knowledge is? To be wasted on a shem!" Velanna clenched her staff, and Anders readied himself for the throw. "... Ir abelas. I am tired. I... I am going to rest. Ma serannas, for the
lesson." Velanna muttered, leaving the training ground. She dropped her staff in the training barrel as she left.

"Ten coppers, was it?" Nathaniel said.

"Bastard." Anders sighed, handing over the coin.

"Thank you." Nathaniel said, pocketing it. He turned to leave, and Anders should have let him. He didn't know who to blame for the words that tumbled out of him. "Nate. How are you?"

"How am I?" Nate asked. "Is this another joke? Some sort of play on my family name?"

"That... would actually be really clever, Howe am I, Howe you are. I'm kind of upset I didn't think of that now." Anders said.

"How sad for you." Nathaniel said.

Anders laughed, and Nate scowled at him and turned back around. "No, wait, I was serious."

"You're never serious." Nathaniel said, but he came back to stand next to him. "What was your question?"

"How are you?" Anders asked. "I just thought, today being today... And you with your family... If you wanted to skip all the wailing and gnashing of teeth, we could go get drinks. Keep things light."

"That's..." Nate stared at him askance, as if waiting for the punchline to come out and deck him in the face. Anders kept silent, and eventually Nate smiled a little. "Thank you, Anders, but I think I'm going to watch the ceremony, and spend some time in the chapel. I've had time to handle my father, and Adria... But since we met Velanna I keep thinking of my own sister. I still haven't really accepted it..."

"What was her name?" Anders asked. That seemed like the right sort of question to ask. A nice, neutral question. No jokes. Being feely wasn't so hard.

"Delilah." Nathaniel said. "... Do you have any siblings?"

"Not that I know of," Anders said. He supposed it was possible. He'd been twelve when the Templars had take him. There was no reason his parents might not have had another child to replace him. One without magic. One they could keep.

"They're awful." Nathaniel grinned. "Delilah used to put beetles in my blankets, and Thomas once put worms in my slippers. When I put them on in the morning, I woke the whole castle screaming."

"Call me crazy, but that doesn't sound awful." Anders said. "I can't tell you how many mages would kill for those memories."

"Would you?" Nathaniel asked.

"Me? No." Anders recalled the cove, and the bandits in the woods. He didn't even like killing in self-defense. "I'm a lover, not a fighter. But it still sounds nice."

"Worms and beetles sound nice?" Nathaniel laughed. "Alright. I'll call you crazy.Anyway... Thank you for the offer, Anders. Have you ever lost anyone?"

"Nope. Not me." Anders said, "Us Circle mages have that going for us at least. No family, no family
"Perhaps that's a loss in itself." Nathaniel said.

Alright. That was a little too heavy. Abandon ship, Anders. Quick, find an escape route. "Oh look, a thing." Anders said, hopping off the barrel. "I'll talk to you later, Nate."

Anders picked a random direction and strode off. Alright, so maybe it wasn't completely random. Amell was still in the training ring, sparring with two soldiers simultaneously. Anders wandered over and leaned on the fence to watch him. Amell's magic was definitely cheating. Even when he wasn't quick enough to dodge or block, the Veil wrapped around him, and the blows seemed to phase straight through him. It was definitely handy for a front line fighter, but Anders wasn't that.

A short while later, and Amell had knocked both the men over to a great deal of rowdy cheering from the crowd. He dropped off his sword and shield in the practice barrels, and finally noticed Anders watching him. Amell waved, and took off his padded training armor before walking over.

He was sweating like mad. It honestly didn't look half bad, once Amell had his tunic off. The sweat made his skin glisten, and once he ran his hand through his helmet hair it feathered out rather nicely. The only really noteworthy thing were the wraps around his arms and hands. Anders knew exactly what they were meant to hide.

Anders had seen the scars, when the darkspawn had taken Amell's tunic in the mines. Sure, the monsters had bound the cut they'd made to bleed Amell as they'd bled all of them, but that was one cut among dozens. Amell's arms were a wreck. Vertical, diagonal, horizontal. They looked like they were cross-stitched together. It wasn't pretty, and it didn't leave much doubt as to what he was. In public, Anders never saw him with his arms uncovered.

"Not here to spar with me, are you?" Amell asked, wringing out his tunic.

"You'd lay me flat. I'll pass." Anders said.

"That's a shame." Amell said.

"Haha." Anders said. He walked right into that one. "I was actually wondering what you were doing tonight."

"You were?" Amell raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah." Anders followed him to the water trough, and watched Amell splash himself down before drying off with a nearby rag. "All Soul's Day kind of feels like All Sob's Day, if you know what I mean. Do you want to get a drink, and skip all that?"

"I would love to," Amell said. "But I'm expected to give a speech tonight, for the Wardens and for the men we lost in the attack on the Vigil."

"Well you're not going to talk all night, are you? What about after?" Anders asked.

"After works." Amell said. "It might be pretty late, though... If you want to wait for me to change, we could have a drink now, before all the sobbing starts."

"That works for me." Anders said.

"Alright." Amell said. "I'll meet you in the dining hall, in around a quarter hour?"
"See you in a bit." Anders agreed. Amell grinned, and picked up his training armor. He left carrying it all without putting his tunic back on. His back didn't look half bad either. Sure, there were no curves, but the lean musculature had its own appeal. And Anders' imagination finally had a few things to work with, remembering how Amell had held him, the way his chest had felt, Compassion's... depiction of Amell in his lap.

Anders went to wait for him in the dining hall. The kitchens only served the watered down ale for free, so that was what Anders' ordered. Amell showed up when he was halfway into his tankard, changed into his Grey Warden formal and carrying...

"Oh for fuck's sake." Anders said.

"What?" Amell stopped short.

"Are you kidding me right now? Is that Aqua Magus?" Anders asked.

"Yes?" Amell said, looking between the bottle in his hand and Anders. "I thought you might like it. Have you had it before?"

"That's exactly what I was going to buy you, before Namaya took every sovereign I had." Anders said. "There goes that idea."

"You were?" Amell asked, sitting across from him. He set two shot glasses alongside the bottle. "Well... Thank you, then. You have excellent taste."

"You're welcome." Anders sighed.

Amell grinned, and poured him a shot. It was bright blue, and had the soft glow of lyrium. "I honestly thought you would be all for All Soul's Day, being an Andrastian."

"If it was just about Andraste, sure, but then you throw in the whole mourning the dead bit, and it's just not my thing." Anders said, picking up his glass.

"Toast?" Amell asked.

"I've got nothing." Anders said.

"We killed two dragons last week, and you can't think of a toast?" Amell exhaled hard through his nose, that characteristic almost-laugh of his that so frustrated Anders whenever he couldn't get a real one out of him.

"You killed two dragons," Anders corrected him. "I hid behind a statue, covered head to toe with fire balm. Maker's balls, that was awful. My skin was sticky, my hair was a rock, and I have no idea how the servants ever managed to wash it out of my clothes. I'm not drinking to that."

"To drinking?" Amell offered instead.

"To drinking." Anders agreed. Maybe it was because he was a mage, but Aqua Magus tasted fantastic. There were hints of blueberry, the pleasant burn of strong spirits, and the sweet hint of lyrium that brought a small bit of the Fade into the mix. "That's incredible. Do you think we can get Cera to supply us with this, instead of our usual lyrium potions?"

"Doubtful." Amell grinned.

"So a speech, huh?" Anders asked as Amell poured him another shot. "Have you ever... you know,
lost anyone?"

"Not to death." Amell said. "Have you?"

"Don't laugh." Anders warned him.

"I would never." Amell promised.

"A cat." Anders said. "When I was a kid, before the Circle. Her name was Princess. She was a calico. I know that sounds ridiculous, but there it is."

"It doesn't sound too ridiculous." Amell said. "My mabari isn't dead, but I still miss him."

"Most people never seem to care much about animals." Anders said. "I really do intend to get you something, you know. For getting me Ser Pounce-a-Lot."

"You don't owe me anything, Anders," Amell said. "I told you, I want you to like being here."

"And so I do," Anders drank his second shot. It made his fingers tingle. "I should still repay you, somehow. Any suggestions, since you stole my drink idea?"

"A few." Amell grinned.

"Any that involve actually getting you something?" Anders asked.

"No." Amell admitted.

"Well you're no help." Anders said. "You don't mind if I skip out on listening to your speech, do you?"

"Not at all." Amell said. "Oghren's not a fan of the holiday either. You could probably have a few drinks with him if you get bored. Personally, I'm a lot more interested in what today used to be."

"Meaning?" Anders asked.

"Funalis, a day dedicated to Dumat. The archdemon of the First Blight, Old God of Silence, rumored to be the one who first taught Archon Thalsian the secrets of blood magic." Amell said, with just a little too much reverence in his voice.

"Okay, I still like you, but you're doing your creepy thing again." Anders said. "Please tell me you don't have an altar to an Old God or anything like that hidden away in your bedroom."

"That would be a little pointless, considering he's dead." Amell said. "I just think it's interesting, being what I am... I know you don't practice, but I appreciate being able to tell someone about things like this. Oghren knows, but he doesn't really care. Do you mind, me talking about it?"

"Hey, I'm always up for an intellectual discussion. As long as your not sacrificing any kittens or anything like that." Anders joked.

"That was one time." Amell said.

"That's... That's a joke, right?" Anders asked.

"Sure." Amell said. He had to be joking.

Anders squinted at him.
"It was possessed. It's a long story." Amell assured him, pouring them a third shot. That would be the last of the bottle.

"... Did you know that's how Mr. Wiggums died?" Anders asked. "The poor bugger. Wandered into the summoning circle while an apprentice was doing the summoning sciences, and got possessed by a rage demon."

"I heard about that." Amell said.

"To Mr. Wiggums," Anders said, drinking.

"To Mr. Wiggums," Amell said.

"Anyway, go ahead and tell me whatever you were going to tell me about Dumat and blood magic and whatever else you fancy," Anders said.

"There's not really much more I was going to say..." Amell said. "I'm told my sword and dagger are made from the bones of Dumat. They were gifts from Weisshaupt, when I was appointed Warden Commander. It's something I think about, whenever I use them."

"You've got dragon everything, and all I've got is my creepy darkspawn staff." Anders said. "I'm jealous."

"I can always commission you a new staff, if it bothers you." Amell offered.

"Will you stop offering to get me things?" Anders huffed. "You can't buy my love, you know. I'm not that easy."

"Maybe I just want to spoil you for my own sake." Amell said.

"I'll go rotten that way." Anders said. "And anyway, you're fine. I already think you're alright."

"Just alright?" Amell asked.

Anders decided to blame the Aqua Magus for his answer. He was barely tipsy. "And the picture of virile heroism. And a scholar. Better?"

"A little. I should go help set up for tonight. I'll come find you after the speech?" Amell said, standing. "Did you just want to have more drinks and talk, or...?"

"Or...? Paint our toenails? Do our hair?" Anders joked.

"I can compromise, if that's what you want." Amell said.

"I'm kidding. I would never let you touch my hair. It's too perfect." Anders said.

"Just drinks, then?" Amell deduced. Anders wasn't entirely sure whether or not that was all he wanted. "I'll find you in here, or the barracks?"

"Wherever Oghren is, I suppose." Anders said.

Amell picked up his empty bottle and shot glasses, and hesitated. "Did you want me to teach you? The physical magic I use?"

"What?" Anders asked, wondering where that question had come from. He didn't want to learn, but it was nice Amell finally offered. "No. I mean it's great for you, but I'm not a front line fighter."
"Why?"

"I just noticed you come to watch, whenever Velanna and I are practicing." Amell said. "I thought you might be interested."

"Well, yeah, but not in the magic." Anders said.

"... I can't tell if you're teasing me." Amell said.


"I like it." Amell grinned. "I'll see you later tonight."

Anders left the dining hall to go find Oghren. He wasn't terribly hard to find. He was in the Warden's barracks, leaning dangerously far back in his chair, tankard in hand. Somehow, he'd procured an entire keg for himself and was using it as a footrest. "Hey Sparkles!" Oghren called out on seeing him. "Come and have a drink with me!"

"I thought you'd never ask." Anders grinned, grabbing a chair and dragging it over.

"Here, I grabbed an extra tankard in case anyone else wanna to get away from this cry baby 'holiday.'" Oghren said. He picked up said tankard from the floor, and filled it to the brim from the keg. Foamed sloshed over the edge and onto Anders' tunic when Oghren thrust the tankard into his chest.

"Thank you, thank you," Anders said, taking a long drink. It tasted like piss compared to the Aqua Magus. "So you're not a fan of All Soul's Day, either, I take it?"

"Ah, piss on your human holidays." Oghren said, taking a long drink. "Us dwarves have our own holidays, and we actually celebrate them. You know, Provings, drinking, dancing, not all this solemn sobbing and staring at fires shit. Only holiday of yours I like is the Satin one, and only cause the Boss gives damn good gifts."

"Satinalia." Anders said.

"Whatever." Oghren said. "So what's wrong with you? You're human. I think. Why aren't you out there mourning dead folk and starting fires?"

"Because that doesn't sound fun?" Anders guessed.

"Here sodding here." Oghren said, filling his tankard up and taking another drink. "We got enough sad shit without making a holiday out of it. Where are my cards? You wanna play Diamondback?"

"Wicked Grace?" Anders asked.

"Sure, why the fuck not." Oghren said, hoping down from his chair and heading to his bunk. He rummaged through his things for a few minutes before he came back with a deck of cards, and a bottle of hard liquor. Somehow, Anders wasn't surprised the backs of the cards had naked dwarven women on them.

"Seeing as we're both poor as dusters, let's play for shots." Oghren said.

"Does the winner drink, or does the loser?" Anders asked.

"You." Oghren tapped the side of his bulbous nose with a finger, and then point at him. Anders had no idea what the gesture meant. "I like you. Let's go. Wicked Grace it is. Winner drinks, ya?"
Two hours later, and they were sloshed. It was a good call, making the winner drink. It meant neither of them could get very far ahead before alcohol caught up with them, and the other won. Add that to the fact that they were also drinking ale like water, and Anders was a mess.

Oghren was little better. "Don't like today. Don't like it one sodding bit."

"Fuck today!" Anders agreed, raising his glass.

"Fuck today!" Oghren chorused, drinking. "Day for the dead. Who's idea was that? Wasn't my damn fault the kid died. Blunted weapons still a sodding weapon."

"Who died?" Anders asked.

"Just some stupid kid." Oghren muttered. He missed his mouth and poured his next drink on his beard, but didn't seem to notice. "Fuck him. Fuck the caste. Fuck Orzammar. Fuck Branka, that moss licker. Fuck..." Oghren trailed off. He slapped a hand to his face, and dragged it down over his beard. He seemed to age a decade, in that simple motion, wrinkles showing at his eyes and his forehead when he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Anders asked.

"I didn't do right by them," Oghren muttered. "Fells. The nugget. He's gonna grow up knowing his da's nothing but a drunk. Little Amell, Big Amell. Both of 'em knowing I'm good for nothing."

"Hey, hey, no," Anders grabbed Oghren's meaty hand across the table. "You're good at stuff."

"He's done right by me and how'd I repay him?" Oghren demanded. "Almost got the thunderhumper killed, making him come back for my sorry ass in that mine."

"That wasn't your fault." Anders said. "Darkspawn did that. Fuck darkspawn."

"Fuck darkspawn!" Oghren shouted in agreement, swinging his tankard towards his mouth. He missed, and the ale flew out of the cup and over his shoulder. The wild swing leaned him back his chair, and he toppled back onto the floor. Oghren's feet flew up in the air, and all Anders could think was that it was hilarious. He laughed until his sides hurt, and only realized Oghren might have hurt himself when he ran out of breath.

"Hey, are you okay?" Anders asked, peering over the table. Oghren didn't answer, Anders cast a sloppy healing spell in his direction, and honestly couldn't tell if it did anything. Oghren let out a loud snore, and Anders relaxed. "You're okay."

"I see you decided not to wait for me." Amell said from the doorway.

"Hey, you." Anders grinned.

"Hey yourself." Amell said. Anders laughed. Amell glanced at Oghren on the floor, and seemingly unconcerned, pulled up a chair to sit next to Anders. He was all copper and the Fade, sweat with a hint of firewood leftover from the ceremony.

"You smell, really nice." Anders said.

"Do I?" Amell grinned. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Two. Four. Two? "This is a trick question." Anders said.

"How is this a trick question?" Amell laughed.
"Because I am very drunk." Anders said.

"Apparently not as drunk as Oghren. Where did he get that cask?" Amell asked.


"I'll bet." Amell said. "Do you want help getting to your bunk?"

"No, no!" Anders shoved him. "Get drunk with me. Come on. Catch up. I'll wait."

"Alright. I'll have a few drinks." Amell agreed. He always agreed. Anders loved it. "Where's the cup Oghren was using?"

"He dropped it." Anders giggled.

Amell stood and went to find said cup. Anders stared at his ass while he bent to retrieve it. He had a nice ass. Probably from working out. Why didn't Anders work out? Amell poured himself a drink from the cask and came back to sit next to him.

"You smell nice." Anders said.

"Thank you." Amell grinned.

"How was your- the talking thing?" Anders asked.

"The speech?" Amell asked.

"Yes!" Anders said.

"Boring. It wouldn't interest you. What were you two playing?" Amell asked.

"Wicked Grace. I'm very bad at it." Anders said. "Do you want to play?"

"I'd love to." Amell said. He reached for the cards scattered across the table, and his sleeve pulled up his wrist. Anders grabbed his hand, and rolled the sleeve up. A myriad of scars greeted him.

"I wish I could heal these." Anders said.

"... Do they bother you?" Amell asked.

"You have to hide them." Anders said. "It sucks, you know? It sucks that you have to hide them. You're not a bad guy. I mean, so what? Right?"

Amell squeezed his hand. "I'm glad they don't bother you."

"No. No, you know? They're just you, you know?" Anders asked.

Anders didn't remember anything after that. He woke up in his bunk with a massive hangover. On the stand beside his bunk, a glass of water and a glass of something green was waiting for him. Anders drank both, and wished hangovers were something healing magic could cure. He lay back down, and knocked a pillow off his bed.

Which was impossible, because Anders only had one pillow. Anders rolled over and stared down at the floor. His mother's poorly stitched pillow stared back up at him. He must have been dreaming. Anders picked it up and gave it an experimental squeeze. It felt real. The same itchy fabric and uncomfortable lace.
A lump formed in his throat. Anders swallowed it back down, and hugged the pillow to his chest. He fell back asleep, and woke again later with the pillow still there, and his hangover gone. Ser Pounce-a-Lot had curled up on his feet at some point, and Anders took care not to wake him when he got up.

No one else was in the barracks with him. Anders guessed it was sometime in the afternoon. He left his pillow on his bed, and went to bathe, shave, and change, and then went to find Amell.

Amell was alone in the library, reading. Anders made his way over to him, glad there was no one else about.

"Good morning." Amell said, setting down the tome he was holding. It was a tattered thing, the edges burnt as if it had been pulled from a fire at one point.

"Is it?" Anders asked, coming to stand next to the armchair Amell was sitting in. "I thought it was afternoon, at least."

"It's morning for you." Amell said.

"I guess so." Anders said.

"Sleep well?" Amell asked, sounding terribly smug. Anders wondered if that was because of the pillow, or something that had happened last night.

"I honestly don't remember." Anders admitted. "I don't suppose I missed anything important?"

"Such as?" Amell asked.

"Did I throw up? Profess my undying love? Go on an alcohol induced rampage?" Anders guessed, sitting on the arm of his chair.

"Not quite," Amell grinned. "We played cards for a bit, and then you sang your own rendition of 'Andraste's Mabari' only with Ser Pounce-a-Lot as the hero before passing out."

"And where does my pillow come into all this?" Anders wondered.

"I wrote to the Circle, when you told me about it." Amell said. "Your things arrived this morning. Your old staff, as well, so you don't have to use the 'creepy darkspawn' one anymore."

"Well I..." Anders felt the lump in his throat all over again, and choked it back down. "I mean... You... I definitely owe you."

"Anders-" Amell started.

"No, I definitely do." Anders said. "Except I'm poor as dirt, and even if I were rich, I couldn't afford what my mother's pillow means to me, so how about a kiss?"

"I'd settle for that." Amell said, standing slowly. "Right now?"

"Sure, why not?" Anders shrugged, standing up with him. It wasn't like Amell hadn't kissed him before, and nothing could be worse than that kiss. "But just one, and you can't mess up my hair."

"So many rules." Amell said quietly. "Anything else?"

"Your feelings can't be hurt if it turns out I'm not into it." Anders decided.

"Well I'll try to make it a good one then," Amell said. Amell set his hands on Anders' chest and
walked him back a few feet to the wall behind him.

It was ... a very good start, Anders decided, resting his hands on Amell's waist. Amell ran his hands up his chest, over his shoulder, along his neck, and stopped at his jaw. "Hair," Anders warned him.

"I won't." Amell promised, and leaned in to kiss him.

It was just a kiss, really. Amell's lips were soft, and tasted faintly of cider. For some ridiculous reason, Anders had almost expected him to taste like blood. Amell's hands on his jaw kept firm control of the kiss, and stretched it out from one moment, into more. His tongue flicked over Anders' lips, and slid briefly over Anders' own, and there was nothing Anders' didn't like about it.

Amell's lips parted from his for a few seconds, and he inhaled briefly before trying to go back to him. Anders tilted his chin up, and the kiss landed there. "I said one." Anders teased.

"This is one." Amell protested.

Well. Anders liked it. Anders liked Amell. To the Void with the rest. Why over-think it? "Nope. The rest are mine." Anders bent his head and kissed Amell again, but Anders' hands had barely started wandering before a loud, rude cough interrupted them.

Amell broke off from him and glanced over his shoulder. His body was still firmly pressed against Anders' and he didn't seem keen on moving it. "Can I help you, Ambassador?" Amell snarled.

"Yes, actually." Cera said unapologetically. Anders peeked over Amell's shoulder and found the woman scowling at them. "I could use you help going over these figures for this month's requisitions from the Circle."

"You've never needed my help before," Amell said, not moving. "If this job is too overwhelming for you, let me know, and I'll have a new ambassador assigned." Amell threatened her.

Anders grinned. He couldn't help it. He found a rather snug place for his hands on Amell's thighs and looked straight at the furious little elf. She bowed and stormed out. "She really hates me."

Anders said.

"The Void can take her." Amell said.

"Oh! Feisty. I don't think I've ever heard you hate on someone before." Anders said. Templars, maybe. "I kind of like it."

"She's cruel, and narrow-minded, and I'm tired of her speaking ill of you." Amell said.

"You just described most of Thedas, I think." Anders said. "Come on, we should separate before someone else comes in and decides to waggle a finger at us. I'm going to go have breakfast. You eat yet?"

"Hours ago." Amell said. "Would you mind picking up where we left off, later?"

"Maybe." Anders said. The answer was definitely yes, but Amell said he liked being teased, so who was Anders to fight him? "I'll think about it."

"Promise?" Amell called after him.

Anders laughed.
Elvish Translations
Ir Abelas - I'm sorry
Ma Serranas - Thank you

This is an optional [Apples and Apostates' Chapter](#) that details the events of this chapter told from Amell's perspective. It links back to this one.
The Dark Theurge

Chapter Notes

This chapter was so frustrating to write. I took a handful of liberties with a handful of things, particularly the elvish. If reading it bothers you, just skip over it. I'll never put anything in elvish that you absolutely need to know for the story to make sense. It's just flavor. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, and as always, thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 9 Matrinalis Afternoon

Vigil's Keep Infirmary

"Magic is so cool." Sigrun said. She was sitting on a stool by the supply cabinet and kicking her feet. Anders sometimes had trouble remembering she was a grown woman. Not only was Sigrun remarkably tiny, but she was remarkably upbeat. Definitely not the sort of person Anders would expect to be a part of something called the 'Legion of the Dead.'

"You want to give me a hand with this?" Anders asked, unable to move away from the unconscious man he was healing. Apparently, a beam from one of the scaffoldings in the courtyard had fallen on the poor sod and cracked his skull. Anders had been in the middle of lunch when a servant had come running.

It was a damn shame, really. It was a good lunch. Roast duck and cranberry sauce, with hot scones and apple cider. All cold now. Anders sighed. Sigrun had been having lunch with him, and followed him to the infirmary. Out of boredom, if Anders had to guess.

"Sure, what do you need?" Sigrun asked.

"Bandages, a poultice, and an ice balm. Bandages are right behind you, on top of the cabinet. Ice balm is on the top drawer on the left, poultice drawer just below it. And elfroot, those green leaves drying to your right. To your right. Your right. Your other right." Anders said.

Sigrun came back with everything and dumped it on the table next to him. Ideally, the Vigil's grumpy physician should have been helping him, but Maker knew where he was at the moment.

"So... What are you doing? With your hands?" Sigrun asked.

"I'm channeling a spirit of Compassion, and she's healing his injuries." Anders said.

"She? It's a she? What's she like?" Sigrun asked.

"Not exactly. I mean, technically it's an it, but it always appears as a she. And she's... Well she's compassionate, what do you want me to say?" Anders asked.

"Something interesting." Sigrun yawned, hopping back onto her chair. "You're supposed to be the funny one. If you're not careful I'll have to bump you down to fuck."
"Wait, what?" Anders asked.

"You know, marry, fuck, kill?" Sigrun asked. "The Commander and I were playing the other day."

"Maker's breath. Are you twelve?" Anders asked.

"Oh boo." Sigrun stuck her tongue out at him, "Fine, be a sour puss."

The silence that followed bothered Anders. The only sound was the hum of Compassion, the slow stitch of flesh as it knitted back together beneath his fingers, Sigrun's feet thudding on her stool.

"Alright, fine," Anders said. "Nate, Oghren, Amell."

"Oh that is so easy," Sigrun said eagerly, "Kill Amell, fuck Nate, marry Oghren."

"Seriously?" Anders asked. "You're messing with me right? You'd kill Amell? 'You saved my life twice; Hold me when I'm scared; I'll never leave you behind, Commander,' Amell?"

"Hey," Sigrun held up her hands defensively, "Just because I like him doesn't mean I think he's attractive. The no beard really kills it for me. And it's mostly for his sake I'd kill him anyway; I know he's not into women."

"Alright, sure, but why not kill Nate?" Anders asked. "That bit of fluff on his chin is hardly a beard."


Anders choked, and had to focus very intently to keep from botching his healing spell. "You are awful today. I love it."

"Heheh. I know. Don't tell Nate I said that. He's great, he really is, but I couldn't steal him from Velanna." Sigrun said.


"... Honestly? Oghren's not a bad guy. Once you get past the smell, and the smell, and ancestors, the smell. I know he's gross, but you catch him sober, and he looks... So tired. I feel bad for him. He's been through two wives, and all he really has is the Commander." Sigrun shrugged. "Besides, it could be a sexless marriage. Most are, anyway."

Anders laughed. "Alright, I definitely wasn't expecting that."

"Don't... Don't tell Oghren I said that. Please. I get enough of his awful flirting as it is." Sigrun begged.

"My lips are sealed, believe me. I made him a bet I'd pay his tab for a week if you ever complimented him." Anders said.

"Why would you do that?" Sigrun asked. "That's like a noble saying he'll live the rest of his life as a duster if it ever rains in Orzammar. It'll never happen, but that's just not something you risk."

Anders snorted. He finished his spell, but the poor sod was left with an ugly pink line where the gash had been. It was definitely going to scar. Anders washed the blood from his patient's head, smeared on the poultice, and wrapped the wound in bandages.

Anders was still wrapping when another fellow came running into the infirmary. The man's hair was
on backwards; he had a full beard and mustache, with not a single strand on his head. "Where is he?
Out of my way, out of my way. Oh, my poor stupid Herren. Is he going to be alright? Tell me he's
not going to be any more brain dead than usual."

"He'll be fine." Anders said. "As soon as I finish wrapping this I'm going to put him under a sleep
pell that should last around ten hours. When he wakes up, make sure he keeps that ice balm there on
his head and chews elfroot for the pain."

"As if he ever listens to me!" The bald man huffed.

"Aww," Sigrun said. "You're married."

"Shoo, shoo!" The bald man flapped his hands at her, and Sigrun hopped off the stool. The bald man
snatched it up and dragged it over to the table where Anders' patient lay. "What else? Anything
else?"

"Nothing else." Anders promised. He finished up, and cast his last sleep spell. "But really, it's going
to be at last ten hours before he wakes up. You don't have to wait here the whole time."

Can I make you something for healing him? No, wait, you're a mage. A mage like the Commander
maybe?"

"Nope." Anders said, cleaning up the workspace. He rolled up unused bandages, washed out the
poultice jar, and dumped out dirty water. Sigrun helped him. "Just a mage. I don't need anything.
This is just what I do."

The bald man made a dismissive noise, and Anders washed the blood off his hands in the infirmary
basin. When he was finally finished, he left with Sigrun and they headed back to the dining hall.

"Couples are so cute." Sigrun said.

"What you call 'cute' I call 'crazy'. No amount of sex is worth getting that worked up over someone.
Did you notice he was bald? I bet all his hair fell out fretting like that." Anders said.

"Well, I guess you sure are done channeling Compassion," Sigrun said. "Anyway, your turn. Same
people. Oghren, Nate, Amell."

"Marry Oghren, fuck Amell, kill Nate." Anders said. "Next."

"Oh Stone no! Back up. What do you mean fuck Amell?" Sigrun protested. "You're supposed to
marry him!"

"I've only known him for two months." Anders said.

"In the game, stupid. You marry him in the game." Sigrun said.

"I can marry whoever I want, and I want to marry Oghren." Anders said. It was pure coincidence
Oghren was leaving the dining hall as he said it.

"Nope. Not touching it. Don't wanna know." Oghren muttered, striding quickly past them.

Sigrun laughed, and subsequently forgot her question, for which Anders was grateful. They found
their trays where they'd left them, gone cold. Anders reheated them as best he was able with a very
weak fire spell that overcooked his duck and burned Sigrun's scone. She was a terribly good sport
"So you'd marry me, huh?" Anders asked, after spending an age chewing through his ruined duck. "Who was I against?"

"Velanna and Cera," Sigrun said. Well. There went that self esteem boast. It wasn't like Sigrun had much of a choice with those options. "We were doing mages."

"... Kill Cera?" Anders ventured.

"Kill Cera." Sigrun agreed.

"You're a good wife." Anders said.

"Oghren sort of told everyone she was shorting you. That kind of thing wouldn't fly in the Legion. Dead men don't hold grudges. You short someone out in the Deep, they die, and then you die when you've got no one to watch your back." Sigrun finished the half of her scone that was still edible, and tossed her utensils onto her tray. "Well, I've got your back, hubby."

"That is so sweet of you." Anders said, similarly picking up his own mess. "Really, I'm all a tingle. So what does my wife have planned for today?"

"I thought I would help out in the courtyard with the reconstruction on the walls. You?" Sigrun picked up her tray, and Anders followed suit.

"Nothing, if I can help it." Anders said. They dropped their trays off and left the dining hall. They lingered outside the door to finish their conversation, occasionally moving to one side or the other for passersby.

"Isn't sloth one of your demons?" Sigrun asked. "Didn't you tell me about them like... yesterday?"

"Hey, I'm not lazy." Anders said. "I'm the Vigil's resident healer. I just saved some fellow's life, probably."

"That took you half an hour. What else have you done today?" Sigrun folded her arms and stared up at him.

"Andraste's knickers you're demanding. I want a divorce." Anders joked. "Anyway, I'm probably just going to go... read."

"Right. 'Read'." Sigrun rolled her eyes. "Have fun slapping tongues with the Commander, then. I'll catch you later."

"Later," Anders waved as she left.

So Anders didn't want to spend every day working himself into the ground. So what? Anders was still earning his keep at the Keep, and Amell's opinion was the only one that really mattered. And as far as Anders could tell, Amell seemed to think he could do no wrong.

Anders looped his thumbs in his belt, and wandered down the hall towards the second story stairwell. Aside from a spoiled lunch, today was rather swell. Most days were rather swell, recently. Funny how having someone to 'slap tongues' with could do that. Maybe he could find some other part of Amell to slap, if Amell wasn't busy for once.

It was damned frustrating how much work went into ruling an Arling. Not for Amell. Anders had no
idea if it was frustrating for Amell, but it was frustrating for Anders. It felt like every time Anders got anywhere near the man, a servant would come running and drag Amell away to see to some crisis or another, but maybe today they'd have better luck.

Anders wandered up the stairs, whistling Amell's horrible song, and wandered straight into him. Anders would have counted it a sign from the Maker, if Velanna weren't right there with him. They were both carrying staves. Amell was holding a book in his free hand, and Velanna a small silver chest. Anders hadn't known Amell even owned a staff.

"Hamin, Velanna," Amell was saying.

"Emma hamin. Elgar'arla-" Velanna stopped short, seeing him.

"Ah yes, you better stop talking. I'll have you know I'm fluent in elvish as well sarcasm." Anders joked.


"I didn't know you owned a staff. What else are you keeping from me?" Anders joked.

"Nathaniel dar mana." Velanna said.

"Ar dirth, hamin." Amell said. Amell turned back to him. "You weren't coming to find me, were you?"

"Something like that, but I can see you're apparently busy with the whole, dead elf person in your head thing so..." Anders trailed off. Velanna very clearly did not want Anders to be a part of whatever they were up to. She was scowling something fierce, and shifting impatiently from foot to foot. Whether or not Anders was curious, he did love to rattle her, and Amell had never said 'no' to him before... "Where are you off to?" Anders asked.

And there it was. Amell hesitated, and Velanna's face pinched up like a cat's butt. "We're-" Amell started to say, when the sound of footsteps stopped him.

The three of them moved to one side of the stairwell, and a servant carried a load of towels walked past them.

"We're-" Amell started again.

"You do not seriously intend to tell him, do you?" Velanna interrupted, apparently unable to contain herself. "I know you favor the man, but the sight of my sylvans alone had him cowering like a frightened animal. At the first sign of era'lin he will turn tail and flee, and then what will become of us?"

"Anders knows what I am, Velanna." Amell said.

"Oh, this is one of those things, then." Anders said. No surprise there. It was always blood magic with Amell.

"After a fashion." Amell said vaguely. "It's very... involved?"

"This is really one of those things, then." Anders said. Demons, maybe?

"Creators, see how he shrinks back? I am going to wait with Nathaniel for you." Velanna shouldered past them and left.
"Did you want to come with us?" Amell asked when the sound of Velanna's footsteps faded. "It is 'one of those things.' I didn't mention because I wasn't sure how you'd react, but if you did want to come..." Amell freed up a hand by shoving his book under his arm, and reached out to trace Anders' earring. It was... oddly affectionate. "I don't know how to say this nonchalantly."

"Well then say it chalantly, and we'll go from there." Anders said. As with most problems, Amell's affection went away when Anders ignored it.

"It would mean a lot to me." Amell said, "I'm not asking you to participate, but it would be nice to know I don't have to hold back around you."

"I feel like you just missed an opportunity for a euphemism in there, somewhere." Anders said.

"Probably." Amell agreed.

A staff, a book that was probably a grimoire or spellbound tome, and a mystery box. There was no way whatever Amell was up to didn't involve demons. Blood magic was one thing, but willful demon summoning? The smart thing for Anders to do here was probably to walk away. Preferably with his ears plugged, while humming.

"I understand if you're uncomfortable." Amell said when Anders hesitated. "We should be finished later this evening, if you were still interested in whatever you wanted me for."

"So all I have to do to make you happy is come, huh?" Anders joked.

"That's all." Amell grinned.

"Laugh, damn you." Anders shoved him, and they started down the stairs together. He was going to regret this.

"Haha." Amell said obediently.

"You're impossible, you know that?" Anders asked. "So what is this? What horrible demonic ritual of necromancy and blood magic are you up to now?"

"Maybe not in public?" Amell suggested.

They weren't exactly in the middle of a crowd, walking through the halls of the Vigil, but Anders kept silent. Amell led him out of the Keep and into the courtyard, and from there into the cellars, of all places.

"I thought we cleared these out?" Anders asked. "Are we just looking for a private place to be creepy, or is there something else down here?"

"An ancient Avvar crypt," Amell explained when they were alone, "You remember Nathaniel and I went to find his sister in Amaranthine, last Tuesday? She had a key, one of four passed down through her family. Nathaniel helped me find the rest among his families things, and we found the chamber they unlock last night, in one of the passages near the Deep Roads. There's a presence bound there. A shade, I would guess, hundreds of years old."

"And you... want to have a sit down with tea and crumpets, and learn about Avvar history from this thing?" Anders guessed.

"Something like that." Amell agreed.
"Oh, good," Anders said, "I'm totally reassured. This doesn't sound dangerous at all. Summoning demons is a lot safer than just picking up a history book. Those things give you paper cuts, you know."

"... I was hoping to have it augment my connection to the Fade by implanting its thought process into my head with blood magic." Amell said.

Anders did an abrupt about-face. "Well, I'm leaving."

"Anders, wait." Amell dropped the book he was holding to grab Anders' arm.

"You really are insane, you know that?" Anders shook off Amell's hand and glared at him. "I didn't know there was level past dragon hunting, but here we are. You're seriously going to invite a demon into your head? I don't want to stay here and watch you get possessed. The blood magic: fine, whatever, but this is mad."

"This is how I learned blood magic, Anders." Amell said, as if he was being perfectly reasonable, "Demons don't give lessons, they give thoughts. Thought patterns."

"Memories?" Anders felt the need to add.

"Maybe." Amell confessed. "Whatever was in the phylactery I found, it honored the bargain all the same. Words aren't wind with demons, Anders, they're will, and demons are bound by them. Stay. Please. Trust me."

"I don't suppose you'll at least teach me that little ritual to undo a possession before I go along with this?" Anders asked.

"There's no need," Amell said, "The demon is in a binding circle, and I intend to keep it there."

"Until you invite him into your head for an abominably good time." Anders said. Frustrated, Anders sighed and stuffed a stray strand of hair back behind his ear. Calm down, Anders. No reason to care so much. Amell protected him from being sent back to the Circle. That was all.

"Words aren't wind with me, either, Anders." Amell said softly. "When I say I know what I'm doing, I mean it. If I make you a promise, I'll keep it. Haven't I so far?"

It only took one. It didn't matter how experienced anyone was with demons; one mistake, and that was it. Anders didn't want to see Amell's russet eyes glowing purple or green, or watch his soft hands grow claws, or anything like that. Anders pinched the bridge of his nose to fight off a headache, wondering why he wasn't just walking away. "If you get possessed, I am going to kick your ass so hard the demon will fly out of your lying mouth."

"Then there's no losing here." Amell said. "The Circle would make you an honorary Senior Enchanter for discovering possessions can be undone with a good ass-kicking and never come after you again."

"Hey, I'm the joker here, not you." Anders warned him, "You stay on your side of the line where it's creepy."

"Sorry." Amell said. "So... are you staying?"

"Yes, I'm bloody staying. Come on, let's hurry up before I come to my senses." Anders said.

"Would you mind if I kissed you?" Amell asked.
"Ugh," Why was Anders going along with this? He didn't like Amell that much, did he? "Fine. Don't touch my hair."

"Ugh?" Amell said.

"I'm still mad at you. You can't just kiss it better." Anders said.

"What if it's a good kiss?" Amell asked.

"Oh for-" Anders grabbed Amell's face in his hands and kissed him. The stupid bastard. The stupid, overconfident, compassionate, charitable, ridiculously good-smelling, creepy bastard. Anders bit Amell's bottom lip, more in punishment than anything else, and wasn't expecting it to make Amell moan. He did it again, and sucked on the abused lip afterwards. Amell dropped his staff with an unceremonious clatter, and fist both his hands in Anders' tunic. Suddenly, Amell no longer seemed quite the terrifying blood mage.

Anders wished they were near a wall so Anders could pin Amell against it. Amell gave him free rein with everything from his lips, to his hair, to any part of his body Anders put his hands on, and did nothing but moan in response. Anders should have taken Amell up on his countless offers ages ago. If Amell was this responsive to a kiss, Anders couldn't begin to picture him in bed. That was a lie. He could, and he did, and he had to stop himself before he forgot he was angry.

Anders broke off from him, listening to Amell's and his own heavy breathing. Why were they wasting time with demons again? "Don't fuck this up." Anders said, not sure if he was talking to Amell or himself.

"I... Uh..." Amell took a deep breath, mindlessly running his hands over Anders' chest. How old was he again? Twenty-one? Anders could believe that, if only for this one moment. "I won't."

Amell cleared his throat and took a step back. He picked up his scattered things and aged a decade, just in time for Velanna to come storming back up through the cellars. "Creators! What is keeping you?"

Velanna made a disgusted noise and went back the way she came.

"Are we?" Anders asked. "Someone's overzealous."

Amell seemed too out of breath to laugh, or Anders imagined he would have. "Could we pick up where we left off later tonight? ... or right after this?"

"I'm still mad at you." Anders said.

"I'm okay with that, actually, if that's you mad." Amell said.

They took the cellars down into the dungeons, and from there headed down a stairwell that had been blocked off with rubble the last time they'd been through. At the bottom was the sort of door Anders pictured would lead into a crypt. It was a thick blackwood, covered in wrought iron, and a smattering of broken lock picks were on the floor beside it.

"I thought you said you had the keys to the crypt?" Amell asked.

"To the crypt," Amell clarified, "This is a burial chamber. The crypt is just beyond it."
Said burial chamber was appropriately creepy. They stepped out onto a balcony that ringed around the chamber, and stairs just before them lead down where Velanna and Nathaniel were waiting. Just past them, another door similar to the first waited, surrounded by four locks, all filled with keys. All along the walls, on both stories, Avvar sarcophagi were stuffed into inlets in the stone.

"Fancy meeting you two here," Anders said.

"I could say the same," Nathaniel said.

"How could you say the same?" Anders asked, "You're not even a mage. What do you want to do with summoning an ancient Avvar demon?"

Nathaniel shrugged, his eyes flicking briefly to Velanna. Well. That made two of them.

"How do you intend to counter the energy drain of this spirit?" Velanna asked Amell, ignoring the two of them. "Bound or not, after a hundred years, I refuse to believe this spirit weak of will."

"The ... spirits I have bound to my grimoire should give off more than enough magic to counter a single shade." Amell said.

"And the ritual?" Velanna demanded, "I want to hear of it. Ilshae deemed spirits too great a risk to be the specialization of a Keeper. She was never happy with my decision to utilize sylvans in defense of the clan."

"It might be easier to show than tell. Do you mind if I start, and you can ask any questions when we're finished?" Amell asked.

"Do you need my help in any way other than what we already discussed?" Velanna asked.

"Watch the glyphs, around the edge of the circle. Reinforce any that weaken." Amell said.

"Very well," Velanna nodded. "Let us make use of this spirit."

Inside the crypt, all around the walls were the statues of ancient Avvar warriors, staring down at a binding circle in the center of the room. A golden celestial globe stood in the middle, rotating leisurely. Anders picked a statue and sat down on stone base. Nathaniel joined him. Their presence was vital, really. No way Amell and Velanna could have handled this without them.

Amell rolled up his sleeve all the way to his shoulder, and drew the dagger he kept even in his formal boots. The cut he made on his arm wasn't his usual vertical slice across his forearm. It was long and horizontal, and bled horribly. The soft patter of blood hitting the stone floor made Anders wince; a healing incantation was on his lips before he even realized what he was doing, and Anders shook it away.

Velanna opened up the small silver chest she'd brought. Anders wasn't surprised to see it contained lyrium. She used it to reinforce the glyphs and the binding circle while Amell set his dagger aside, and picked up his book and staff in its place. The chant that followed was everything Anders expected from blood magic.

"By blood you were bound, by blood unbound," and all that sort of ruckus, read straight from Amell's grimoire. Anders didn't know whether or not to be reassured Amell didn't have it memorized. As he read, the globe spun faster and faster, until it was a blur of gold. As the spell finished, darkness fell over the chamber, and Anders instinctively summoned a wisp for light.

It didn't help. The darkness didn't respond to Anders' light the way shadows would. It condensed
seemingly of its own accord, and took on the vague shape of a man standing in the center of the circle. "Kiveal!" It screamed, twisting around in its tiny prison. "Where are you? I told you nothing could hold me!"

"Dead," Amell said. "All who bound you here are dead. The Avvar are no more." It was sort of true. The Avvar at Vigil's Keep were dead, if nothing else.

"You lie! I will not be denied my vengeance!" The demon roared, charging straight for Amell. It hit the invisible barrier of its binding circle, and scattered into smoke and shadow for a few seconds before it reformed. "Why have you summoned me, augur?"

"To make a deal," Amell said.

"You are not of the Avvar?" It asked.

"No," Amell said.

"Then prove it." The demon said, throwing itself repeatedly against the invisible confines of its cage. Velanna cast a spell to strengthen the wards whenever the demon seemed to be making progress. "It was their magic that bound me here. I know this place. This crypt. In these same caves there was a shrine to the Mountain Father. Does it remain?"

"The room with the old statue, and the inactive golems?" Nathniel asked.

"Golems!" The demon snarled, "Gifts from the dwarves, children of the Mountain Father. Destroy them! Destroy it all. Bring me the head of this statue."

"Nathaniel, go and find Oghren," Amell said, "Have him handle the golems if activating them is tied to the shrine. Do not bring him into this room. Be quick."

Nathaniel stood up, and left the room at a brisk walk near a jog.

"What is this deal you want to make with me, augur?" The demon asked. "I have no need of your pathetic form. I am my own master."

"You have the ability to alter a human's psyche," Amell said.

"Yes." The demon said. "To drain. To drink. To change the mind, to make it mine. To make it more."

"I want you to augment my connection to the Fade, or my affinity for the arcane. In return, I'll free you from this prison." Amell said.

The demon stopped bashing itself against the walls of the binding circle. It stood still in the center, a faceless man of shadow like something out of Anders' nightmares, watching Amell with newfound fascination. "... There is too much of the Fade in you already." It said eventually. "I will enhance your attunement to magic, if you free me from this place. But first you must destroy the shrine."

And that was it. The only thing left to do was wait. Velanna circled the demon's containment circle, cautious and alert. The demon stood still, shadows and smoke rolling off the form of a faceless man who stared at Amell and nothing else. Amell held his book and his staff, blood still dripping from his arm. It had painted two splattered lines on the floor, one on either side of his arm where the drops of red were rolling off. Anders watched and tried to time it, but the drops were random, the soft pitter patter almost like rain. It bothered Anders for all the wrong reasons. It had to hurt.
Eventually, Nathaniel returned, carrying a rock. Or at least it looked like a rock to Anders. The
demon laughed gleefully. "Defamed! Defiled! Desecrated! Your reward, augur!"

Anders didn't like what happened next. The demon couldn't affect them from inside the circle, so
Amell stepped in with it. Shadows swarmed over him, and he was lifted off his feet and suspended
mid-air. It looked all too much like the spells Amell cast on darkspawn. It lasted for less than three
heartbeats, but that was enough for Anders to stand and reach for the Fade when the demon released
Amell. Amell caught himself on his staff when he landed, and stumbled backwards out of the
containment circle with a hand to his head.

"And now your end of the bargain! Free me!"

"Velanna," Amell said.

"Return to the Beyond, spirit," Velanna said, using the half chest of lyrium that remained to expel
pure mana, and tear the shade apart, "Ar lasa mala revas."

Anders healed Amell's arm from a distance. Amell didn't seem to notice, still holding one hand to his
head when Velanna came over to him. "I confess that was... terribly invigorating. I felt the Beyond
surge when you stepped into the elgar'arla. How do you feel? This ritual you used, to summon the
spirit while retaining the binding, I would appreciate the chance to read it."

'Terribly invigorating' wasn't how Anders would describe what had just happened. Maybe just
'terrible.' He started for the door.

"Of course," Amell mumbled. "Anders, are you leaving?"

"What? Me? I've got to use the little mage's room." Anders lied. "But this was swell. Really. I'll
catch you later, alright?"

Anders didn't 'flee.' He just left. Very quickly. He walked out of the crypt, up the stairs out of the
burial chamber, and back up into the dungeons. Oghren was there, waiting and drinking after he'd
apparently helped Nathaniel destroy an ancient Avvar shrine. "Hey Sparkles," Oghren said, falling
into step with him. "Slow down, eh? My legs aren't as long as yours. Where you headed?"

"Oh, you know," Anders shrugged, not slowing, "I thought I would go find a nice chamber pot to
throw up in."

"You don't say," Oghren said. "You wanna talk about it?"

"No. Yes? I don't know." Anders stopped when they were in the cellars, and sat on the nearest
upright cask of ale. Anders felt sick. There was a tight knot in the center of his chest, and a dull ache
spread across his entire body. Stress, probably. Not a fun feeling, stress. "You weren't kidding, were
you? About the Commander and blood magic."

"So that's what this is, huh? I shoulda figured." Oghren said, unhooking the flask he wore as a belt
and holding it out. Anders took a drink, and felt a little better.

"Did Nate tell you what he was doing down there?" Anders asked.

"Naw," Oghren said, leaning against a nearby cask considering he was too short to sit on it without
jumping. "Boss told me, last night. Apparently the thing had a grudge against dwarves, or I'd have
helped. Was it one of them sexy ones? What'd he do, suck face with it in front of you?"

"I wish." Anders said. "It was a shade. A demon with no physical form. He just ... let it in.
Practically hugged the damn thing. Andraste's knickerweasels, it looked like-" it was possessing him? Killing him? Anders took another drink.

"So... what? Did it finally dawn on you that donning the sausage hat with the Boss might not to be such a good idea? No bucking the forbidden horse with the forbidden mage?" Oghren chuckled.

"Please stop." Anders said.

"Well what do you want me to say, Sparkles?" Oghren asked, "I warned you, didn't I? I told you. He ain't right."

"You know that's really something coming from you, considering the other night you were practically in tears at the thought of disappointing him." Anders said.

"Okay, first," Oghren held up five fingers, and started counting down them, "Shove it. Second: Shove it harder. Third: So sodding what? I love the little fucker anyway. Fourth: Not a damn one of us that isn't fucked up some way or another. Archy's a thief, the elf is a bitch, Sig's suicidal, and you're a slack-jawed coward. I'm a drunk, and the Boss ain't all there up top. We're a merry little band of blighters."

"You're holding up five fingers. What's fifth?" Anders asked.

Oghren looked down at his hand, and seemed to start upon realizing he had a thumb. "Fifth is shove it."

"Thanks. I feel a lot better now." Anders lied, handing Oghren back his flask.

"Yep." Oghren said. "Go get drunk. Sleep it off. S'what I always do."

Anders took his advice. He got thoroughly sloshed, avoided Amell for the rest of the day, and passed out in the general vicinity of his bunk.

He woke up in a cell. The dark around him was like the Void, and Anders swore he could feel the shadows crawling over his skin. The cell was smaller than any cell he'd ever been in before, the walls slowly closing in around him. His knees were already bent, but the walls pushed at his feet, driving his legs further and further into his chest until each breath was an agony. Somewhere outside his cell, if there was an outside, people were singing. The chorus of Amell's horrible song, over and over while darkspawn laughed in the distance.

His cat was in his lap, somehow not crushed by his legs. It was the one bit of comfort left to him, and Anders tried to pet it. A band of red wrapped around Ander's wrist, and his hand caught fire. "No! No, not again! It was an accident!" Anders screamed. He couldn't stop his hand from moving, and petting the poor little thing. Princess, Mr. Wiggums, Ser Pounce-A-Lot, all three of them caught flame, and turned to ash in his lap, and he was alone again.

"Begone, demon!" Someone screamed. The cell fell away, the dark was driven back. Sepia tones and a far off Black Spire took over. The Fade. It was just the Fade. Just a nightmare. "This is our place!" Compassion was standing over him, looking as always like his mother. A short distance away, a demon of Fear cackled gleefully.

"This is your only defense? A spirit of Compassion? The weakest of them all?" The demon spat, its form shifting. It wore a templar's skirt, but the rest of it was a mess of claws and twisted flesh. Too many feet shown beneath its skirt, blue and bloated, like a hanging corpse, like those poor miners in the Wending Wood. "How is it no demon has claimed you yet, mage? Perhaps they think you too trifling to notice?"
Anders staggered to his feet, and found Compassion's hand. Fear demons were notoriously powerful, and Anders wanted nothing to do with one threatening Compassion. He could kill it. Probably. Maybe. "You heard her. Sod off."

"Fear rules you, as I should," The demon cackled. "Is there nothing in your life not bound by it? You Fear your templars. You Fear your would-be lover. Even your sad spirit Fears. You scare her. It is delicious."

"Yeah, well, so is cake, so something, something, go soak your head." Anders said. Nice one, Anders. The demon will be feeling that burn for days. "This is her demesne, not yours. Leave, or I'll kill you."

"You still Fear," The demon cackled, but it floated backwards obediently. "You Fear she will leave you, just your mother. I will be waiting when she does."

Anders sat back down when the demon had gone, feeling wretched. Compassion knelt next to him, and hugged him about his shoulders. It was a hug Anders needed. "I keep 'waking up' like this, and I'm never going to get any real sleep." Anders sighed.

"I could not let it gorge on your Fear," Compassion said. "I cannot stand when you have nightmares. Would you rather I had not intervened?"

"No, of course not." Anders squeezed her hand. "Any time you want to talk, I'm your guy."

"It lies," Compassion whispered, burying her face in his shoulder. "It's a demon and it lies. It is not you I Fear. It is that corruption. The demon... it comes so often, watching your nightmares. I wish that it were gone."

"That's my fault," Anders knew. "If I weren't such a coward, it wouldn't have any strength to bother you."

"You are very Brave," Compassion said.

"I'm glad you think so, but you're no spirit of Bravery, sweetheart." Anders said. "I think we know what my virtues are. On the bright side, that's what? Almost a fortnight with no nightmares?"

Compassion made a face at him. She couldn't follow time the way he could, and he knew it. "I'm getting better, is what I mean. I think I have a handle on the whole 'tainted' thing now. It helps if I don't go to bed stressed."

"I'm glad." Compassion said. "Perhaps with less nightmares, the demon will weaken, and leave us alone."

A thought occurred to Anders, and while he didn't like it, he liked demons threatening his spirit even less. "Well... hey, if it's really bothering you, Amell is doing these expeditions to Kal'Hirol, retrieving a lot of the abandoned lyrium there. Maybe he'd be willing to use some to go kill our little Fear demon for us?" Anders said.

"He is very kind to you," Compassion said. "I am sure he would."

"I'll ask him," Anders promised, planting a kiss on her forehead. "I don't like anyone threatening my girl."

"The demon, what it said... do you truly Fear him? Your Amell?"
"It's a demon," Anders said. He didn't want to think about it. "It lies."

Chapter End Notes

Elvish Translations
Hamin: Relax.
Emma hamin: I am relaxed.
Elgar'arala: Demon/Spirit Binding Circle.
Nathaniel dar mana: Nathaniel is waiting.
Ar dirth: I know.
Era'lin: Blood magic (I disagree with most Wikis on this. Era seems to be a word used for mage or magic-related concepts.)
Ar lasa mala revas: You are now free.
Hopefully, this chapter is an appropriate 'Thank You' for getting us to 1000 views. I feel like you'll either love it or hate it. Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments, kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and as always, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 13 Matrinalis Too Late to Still be in Bed

Vigil's Keep - Warden's Barracks

"What do you think, Ser Pounce-a-Lot?" Anders asked his cat as it walked circles on his chest, attempting to make itself comfortable. "Is Daddy crazy? Is Other Daddy crazy?"

The unhelpful little blighter had no answer for him. Anders sighed, and gave Ser Pounce a scratch he hadn't earned. "This is all your fault, you know that?"

Ser Pounce purred, leaning into the scratch, and let out a rather heartwarming "Meow."

"Yes. All your fault," Anders cooed, scratching his ears with both hands. "I didn't ask for a cat. Certainly not an adorable little tabby like you. I didn't ask for anything. Except a harem, and some apple pie. Where is my harem, anyway? 'I keep my promises' he says."

More purring. It was like Ser Pounce wasn't even listening. What a rude cat. "I know, we have to go talk to him. We can't leave our girl in the lurch like that. Demons have no manners, you know? Why can't they just stick to their own demesnes?" No answer. Rude. "Probably because crazy blood mages keep summoning them."

Anders didn't care for reflecting on what had happened. The past was in the past, as the saying went, but his thoughts wandered traitorously. Ser Pounce bit his hand when Anders stopped petting him. "Ow." Anders lied. It hadn't hurt. He gave the tabby a hard tap on the nose. "That's no way to get what you want. But you're right. I can't just hide in here forever."


Miraculously, Ser Pounce decided to listen and trotted over, bell jingling. Anders led him out of the barracks and down the hall. Anders didn't quite make it to the stairwell before Ser Pounce sat down in defiance, apparently having walked as far as he wanted. "Little blighter." Anders said.

Anders climbed the stairs alone and went to the library first. Sigrun and Nathaniel were there, reading. No Amell. Anders climbed the floor to the third story on the off chance Amell was in his quarters. That seemed unlikely, given how busy 'the Arl of Amaranthine and Warden-Commander of Ferelden' always was, but Anders may as well try. It was that or ask for directions, after all. Anders would never stoop so low.

Anders gave Amell's door a knock, and waited. He heard a loud thud from inside a few seconds
later, and muffled mutterings. "Wait!" Amell yelled from inside.

Anders waited. Eventually, the door opened, and Amell stood in front of him. He was wearing trousers, and what look to be a very recently donned tunic, to judge by the way it tangled up around his stomach. Long-sleeved, of course. The sleeves were probably the only reason Amell had put it on. "Anders," Amell said. He sounded surprised.

"That's me," Anders agreed, pushing down an irrational surge of guilt. "Do you have a minute?"

"As many as you want," Amell took a step back and waved him into his room. Anders half expected there to be a summoning circle on the floor, but there was nothing horrible and arcane going on anywhere that Anders could tell. The walls were lined with bookshelves, the bed was made, and the desk had an open book and a few bottles of what Anders guessed were the drinkable kind of spirits. Just a bedroom. Nothing creepy.

"Getting started early?" Anders joked, gesturing to the bottles on Amell's desk.

"It's Saturday." Amell said.

"You're not sloshed, are you?" Anders asked.

"Not yet." Amell said. "Why?"

"Just wondering," Anders shrugged. He couldn't decide what to do with his hands, and stuffed his thumbs into his belt to keep them still. "What were you reading?"

Amell looked back at his desk. The book was vaguely familiar. Tattered and burnt. Anders had seen him reading it before. "... Sacrilege?" Amell said.

"Fun." Anders said.

"It's a different take on Andraste. As a mage, and not the Maker's Chosen." Amell elaborated, "I'm told it's what the Imperial Chantry believes. The Shaper of Orzammar gave it to me as a gift ages ago."

"How many ages are we talking?" Anders joked. "Storm? Steel?"

"Very funny," Amell grinned.

"Thank you," Ridiculously, Anders felt a little disappointed he hadn't managed to make him laugh. And awkwardly awkward. Time to find the point and get to it. "So... listen. I was wondering if I could ask you a favor."

"Ask away." Amell said.

"I was wondering if you'd mind summoning a demon for me." Anders said.

Amell stared at him, and his face went through a handful of contorted expressions before he burst out laughing. The wild cackle would have felt rewarding if Anders had been trying to make him laugh.

"I'm serious," Anders said.

"What?" Amell took a deep breath, and dragged a hand across his face, wiping his grin away.

"Really? You're not just mocking me?"

"Okay, first: I'm a little concerned you find someone mocking you so funny, and second: No. I'm
not.” Anders wished they were sitting. This felt like a sit down conversation. Not a 'hover in the middle of the room because you fucked up avoiding him and you're probably going to run as soon as you're done talking’ conversation. "You remember how I told you I rely on a single spirit of Compassion? Well, a demon has been threatening her demesne recently."

"What kind of demon?" Amell asked.

"Fear." Anders said. "I was hoping you could summon it? Or maybe fight it in the Fade? Something like a Harrowing, maybe?"

"Alright." Amell said. No hesitation. No stipulations. No comments about Anders avoiding him for the past few days. He just agreed. He always agreed. "Is it urgent? Velanna and I used the last of the lyrium on the shade in the cellars. The amount we'd need for a summoning or a Harrowing would require another expedition to Kal'Hirol unless I talked to Cera, and I don't trust her not to report this to the Circle as some sort of indication you're at risk for possession."

"I don't think it's that urgent," Anders said. The fear demon hadn't seemed willing to fight him, after all. Not yet, at least. "But the sooner we take care of it the sooner I'll feel better. Maybe sometime this month, or next month at the latest?"

"Alright." Amell said.

Well. That was easy. Anders rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, and chanced a glance at the door. He could leave now. Compassion was taken care of, he had all his affairs in order. One foot in front of the other, Anders.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" Anders asked rather than leave.

"Ask you what?" Amell asked.

"Why I've been avoiding you for the past few days?" Anders ventured.

"I... don't really think there's a need, do you?" Amell asked.

"You could pretend to be a little upset about it, at least." Anders said.

"I resigned myself to most people being afraid of me years ago, Anders." Amell said.

"I see how it is," Anders said, "Last month I'm an exceptional mage and the most attractive man you've ever seen, and now I'm 'most people.'"

"I didn't say that," Amell said. "I still think you're exceptional, and attractive, but I understand. You being afraid."

"Will you stop saying that? I'm not afraid of you." Anders said.

"... You avoided me for days after the ritual, and now you're asking me to banish a Fear demon, but you're not afraid of me?" Amell asked.

"Oh yes, you pick that low hanging fruit. I bet it tastes great. Any type of demon could threaten my spirit, and I'd want it gone. The fact that it's Fear doesn't mean anything." Anders said.

"Except that demons are drawn to the emotions they reflect. Anders, I don't mind, really, I understand." Amell said.
"I'm not afraid of you!" Anders snapped. "You're not the only thing going on in my life, you know. I have more than enough nightmares for a Fear demon thanks to the Taint without adding you into the mess. So stop being so self-absorbed and ask me why I've been avoiding you."

"Why have you been avoiding me?" Amell asked obediently.

"Because you're crazy, and you're going to bleed to death someday summoning a demon to do Maker knows what, and it bothers me that that bothers me. You stepped right into that summoning circle. There was nothing keeping that demon from possessing you in there. It should have possessed you in there."

"But it didn't." Amell said. "It was a shade, Anders. They-"

"I know about shades," Anders interrupted him, "I know about demons, alright? I'm a mage too, in case you hadn't noticed. I know they don't need a host, but it was still a risk. A stupid risk." Amell didn't argue. It was frustrating. Anders wanted to argue. "Tell me I'm wrong," Anders said.

"You're not." Amell said. "I'm not going to argue with you, Anders. I know blood magic has risks. I think they're worth it. I was hoping if you saw the precautions I take and the control I have over my magic you'd understand."

"What precautions?" Anders asked, "Did you forget the part where you stepped into the circle, because I didn't."

"Velanna was there. You were there. If it did possess me, the circle would have kept me bound there, and I would have been easy to kill." Amell said. Like it was no big deal.

"See, you shouldn't even be thinking about that as an option. You can't die. Who would keep the templars away from me, then? Who would run the arling?"


"... You don't?" Anders asked. "I thought you liked being a Grey Warden."

"I do, but I didn't ask for this arling," Amell said bitterly, "I wrote to Weisshaupt after the Blight, and asked for appointment to Tevinter. They put me here instead. I don't doubt Alistair had something to do with that. Writing to Weisshaupt about how my 'proclivities' would make me a risk in Tevinter. How my 'preferences' would make me an embarrassment there. All his speculations on how I ended the Blight without Loghain or I dying to the archdemon. Taking my dog."

Amell stopped. He turned around and laced his hands together over his head. Anders had never seen him get worked up before. Not when he wasn't dying, or arguing with Cera. Amell went to his desk and took a drink from the open bottle there. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"That you're obsessed with blood magic and going to die horribly," Anders said.

"Anything else?" Amell asked.

"No, that was about it." Anders said. Amell took another drink and leaned on his desk, and consciousness or not, pulled his sleeves down further on both wrists. Anders felt guilty again. "So... Is that a good book?" Nice one, Anders. Don't ask him if he's unhappy ruling Amaranthine, or talk about his dog, or anything like that. No, let's focus on the book. That'll comfort him.

"It is." Amell said.
"Tevinter, huh?" Anders asked. "Not afraid of the Black Divine? The ritualistic virgin and kitten sacrifices? All the-"

"Blood mages?" Amell finished for him. "Not so much."

"You know they keep slaves there, right? I get not wanting to be judged just for being what you are, but Tevinter? That's like using a sledgehammer to crack open a nut." Anders said.

"Maybe I really like nuts." Amell said.

Anders laughed. Amell grinned at him, and Anders swore he could feel the tension defusing until Amell gave his sleeves another tug.

"Stop it." Anders said. Anders caught Amell's wrist, and rolled his sleeve up around his elbow. His arms were a mess. Line after line in every direction, the scars a shade lighter than the rest of his skin. But they were his mess.

"I don't care." Anders said. He ran his fingers up Amell's arm to prove it. The texture of so many scars was an odd combination of smooth and rough, with almost imperceptible indents that came from skin pulled back together and healed taut. It wasn't unpleasant. It just made Anders want to keep tracing the scars, so he did.

"Except that I'm apparently obsessed and going to die horribly." Amell reminded him.

"Look, I didn't mean it like that." Anders said. "You can be as creepy as you want, I would just rather you not die in the process."

Amell looked down at Anders' hand running over his arm. Anders stopped tracing his scars and took his hand back. He didn't know what to do with it afterwards.

"I think you like me a little." Amell said. His voice was soft, and he took the lost hand back and wove their fingers together. Well... Good. At least Amell believed him.

"Maybe a little." Anders said.

"I know what I'm doing." Amell said.

"Well it's a good thing one of us does." Anders snorted.

"I meant-" Amell started.

"Come on, I know what you meant." Anders interrupted. He shouldn't have brought it up in the first place. The whole conversation was too weighty for him. "I'm sorry, alright? Can we just stop talking now?"

"We can stop talking now." Amell agreed, but he didn't follow it up in the way Anders expected.

"Aren't you going to kiss me or something?" Anders asked.

"Or something?" Amell asked.

"You know, so it's clear you forgive me for avoiding you, and you and I are alright? 'Or something'." Anders said.

Amell took hold of Anders' belt and pulled him forward so Anders was straddling his leg. Anders fought back the urge to grind against his thigh, but the friction was right there, and Amell pushed his
leg up to encourage him. The scent of him left Anders' thoughts clouded with hot metal and sweat and the tantalizing whispers of magic.

"Something like this?" Amell guessed.

The twitch of Anders' hips would have been imperceptible if they weren't pressed so close together. Amell's hand left his belt, and curled around the back of his thigh. Anders licked his lips, and watched Amell's eyes follow the path of his tongue. "Something like this," Anders agreed.

Amell cupped the back of his neck, and pulled Anders in for the kiss he'd asked for, but hadn't realized he so desperately craved. Amell tasted like whatever he'd been drinking. The flicks of his tongue came with fire and honey, and unashamed moans that hummed through Anders' mouth. Amell's hand slid up from Anders' thigh to his ass and squeezed, and their kiss swallowed Anders' needy whimper.

Amell locked Anders in his embrace, a hand in Anders' hair bending his head back for Amell to ravish his neck. He trailed a path of hot kisses down to Anders' collarbone, and sucked, swirling his tongue in a way that Anders hoped would leave a mark. Anders ground against him, chasing what little friction he could get on Amell's thigh. Amell's tongue carved a slick path back up to Anders' ear, and when Amell tugged on his earring with his teeth, Anders knew he was lost.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" Amell asked.

"Yes," Anders gasped, "Fuck, yes."

Amell leaned back to take off his belt and toss it at their feet. Anders felt pinned in place by his eyes. Amell didn't look away from him, even undressing, as if nothing else could be more important. Anders took off his own belt, and threw it behind him. Amell pulled Anders' tunic free of his trousers, and Anders lifted his arms for him to get it off. Amell dropped it on the floor beside them.

Amell's sharp exhale and the look on his face made Anders' toes curl. Amell dragged the pads of his fingers down Anders' chest, lingering on his nipples and over each rib. His eyes followed the path of his hands and Anders shivered. He wasn't used to the inspection. To the lack of a dark corner, frantic hands, and a few stolen moments.

"You're beautiful," Amell said, voice so low it was almost reverent. Amell caught his hips when he reached them, and pulled Anders back in for another kiss.

Anders fisted his hands in Amell's tunic, and turned Amell's tender kiss into something hot and desperate, "Say that again."

"You're beautiful," Amell said obediently, and picked Anders' up by his thighs. A sound of surprised spilled out of Anders' mouth and into Amell's when he set him on the desk. "What do you like?" Amell asked.

"What?" Anders asked, heart racing with how easy it was for Amell to lift him. His imagination conjured images of Amell pinning him to the wall, hands under his knees, dripping with sweat and fucking him till he screamed. "I-sex?"

"Where do you like to be touched?" Amell clarified. Anders felt the pull of the Fade, and the taste of lyrium on Amell's tongue when he kissed him again. "Can I use magic?"

"Yes," Anders drew on his own, and let static tingle between his fingers when he kneaded down Amell's shoulders. Amell groaned into his mouth, and Anders' proud grin ruined their kiss. Amell kissed his collarbone instead, the first breath of magic Anders felt from him was a rush of heat that
seemed to pulse along his tongue.

"Oh-fuck," Anders cut off his spell to tangle his hands in Amell's hair. "Fuck that's good."

Amell exhaled a tiny breath, and the sudden switch to ice made Anders shiver. He bit his lip to stifle a gasp. Amell traced an aimless path over his chest, breath cooling the scorching path left by his tongue. All of it was interspersed with the drag of his teeth, a few sharp bites that went straight to Anders' cock. "Fuck-that's- fuck, Amell."

Amell flicked his tongue over Anders' nipple, and worried to a peak with his teeth and magic before he turned his attention to the other. Anders bit down a moan, hips jerking. The motion pulled his trousers taut and invented friction for his aching cock at the same time Amell's teeth pressed a faint circle around his nipple. "Holy shit," Anders smoothed the sweat on his brow back into his hair.

Amell groaned against his skin, tiny sparks of static dancing at his finger tips. He dragged his hands down Anders' back, still worshiping his chest with his mouth, and the tingle mixed with the ripples of pleasure stirred by his mouth. Anders broke and moaned, "Fuck. Just fuck me. You're being evil right now. Evil blood mage."

Amell muffled a laugh against Anders' chest, and snaked his fingers into the waistband of Anders' trousers. He stepped back, and Anders lifted his hips for Amell to drag them off with his smalls. Anders' cock was stiff and throbbing and leaking down his shaft, and Amell pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and sucked on it, his eyes so hot Anders thought they might melt him.

"No comment?" Anders asked.

"I have better things to do with my mouth," Amell licked his palm and sucked on his fingers. He spun the chair in front of Anders and sat, taking hold of his cock to run damp fingers up and down his shaft. Anders bit down a whine, desperate for real friction. Amell kissed the inside of his thigh, and leaned forward to drag his tongue along the underside of Anders' shaft.

Anders squirmed and clutched at Amell's shoulders, and hesitated reaching for his hair, "Can I-"

"Anything you want," Amell cut him off, licking the fluid leaking from Anders' cock. A shiver of pleasure ran through him, and Anders fisted his hands in Amell's hair. "As hard as you want," Amell added, breath warm on wet skin. Amell swept his tongue up and down Anders' length, tracing ridges, veins, mingling with the occasional kiss Anders decided not to think about.

Anders didn't need to think; he could feel. His shaft was smeared and dripping wet when Amell took him into his mouth, saliva glistening on his lips. The warm, wet embrace around the head of his cock made Anders' hips buck. "Fuck-sorry-fuck," Anders groaned, loosening his grip on Amell's hair so he could move. Amell took to him hungrily, his eager moans vibrating along Anders' cock and building bliss.

Anders felt the Fade, and the sweeps and swirls of Amell's tongue turned from warm to hot, and Anders felt it everywhere. Pleasure wound tight in his stomach, caught up in his chest, tingled in his feet and curled his fingers and toes. Anders bit down a wild moan, and scrabbled for some kind of purchase to keep himself from bucking mindless up for more. Amell pinned his legs under his arms, and wrapped his arms around the small of Anders' back. He sank low on Anders' cock, his tongue a bed of heat, and Anders whimpered, "Fuck-oh-fuck-yes-yes, don't stop."

Amell hummed encouragement around his cock, the subtle vibrations mingling with the slick, blazing friction. The sensations were so overwhelming they were almost too much to bear. Anders dissolved into shivers and desperate gasps, "Please-fuck-yes-please I'm right there," Amell hummed
again, and Anders made the mistake of looking down. His cock was dripping wet, and the sight of it sliding between Amell's lips could have undone him on its own, but then Amell glanced up at him, eyes shadowed and shameless, and Anders came hard.

His climax felt hotter than Amell's tongue. It burned through him in mindless waves, and left him in a thick, white rush that filled Amell's mouth to overflowing. It spilled from the corners of his lips and stained Anders' cock as Amell kept moving, sucking and dragging his tongue until the aftershock was enough to make Anders whimper. He pushed feebly at Amell, and Amell broke from his cock with a wet pop.

Amell's chin was dripping wet, and he wiped his face off with a hand, sucking what he could off his fingers. Anders couldn't feel his toes. His left ear was ringing, and his whole body throbbed to the rapid beat of his heart. "Fuck," Anders gasped, pitching forward to hold onto his trembling thighs and catch his breath, "Fuck, you're good at that."

"I know," Amell grinned.

"Ass," Anders stumbled off the desk. He wasn't sure where he'd intended to go, but his knees buckled. Amell caught him before he could fall and pulled him into his lap. Maker, he smelled good. He felt good. The firm body beneath him offered all the support Anders could possibly ask for. Amell wrapped his arms around him in an embrace magic made warm.

"Your turn?" Anders asked.

"Whenever you're ready," Amell ran his nails along Anders' scalp. A happy hum escaped Anders, and Amell kissed his shoulder. Anders was hard pressed to care about blood magic or demons, but the affection scared him. He pulled back from it, and grabbed Amell's shirt to pull it up over his head. Amell raised his arms for him, and Anders tossed the shirt aside.

Maker's fucking mercy. Anders had seen Amell without his shirt more than once, but it didn't make him any less intimidating. Anders traced over the well-defined collarbones, and the sharp lines of muscle, static at his fingertips when Amell gave him a push to get him off his lap.

"Wait," Amell said.

"Where are you going?" Anders demanded.

"With my arms showing?" Amell glanced over his shoulder at him, latching and locking the door, "Nowhere. We forgot to lock the door."

"Oh now you care," Anders laughed when he came back, "Good thing you were thinking of me back there."

"I wasn't thinking of anything but you," Amell said, leaning on his desk to pull off his socks. Amell slid his thumbs into his trousers and pushed them down and off with his smalls. Anders caught Amell's waist before he turned around and ran his thumbs over the dimples in his back.

"I like these," Anders said.

"Yeah?" Amell leaned back against his chest, and the warm press of bare skin was something Anders desperately needed more of.

"Yeah," Anders slid an arm around Amell's waist, and stole a sweaty palm around his erection. The soft skin and firm length felt perfect beneath his fingers. Anders ran his thumb over his slit, loving the twitch of Amell's cock in his palm. Amell dropped his head back on his shoulder, breathy moans
Anders bit Amell's shoulder, and licked the taste of salt off his skin. He pulled through to the Fade, and let a whisper of electricity play over the hand he held against Amell's stomach. Anders let it gather past the tingle of static, and built it up into a shock before he released it. Amell cried out, and his legs buckled. Anders caught him before he slipped out of his arms and pulled him back against his chest.

"Too much?" Anders guessed.

"No-no-fuck-just-bed?" Amell managed, grabbing Anders' hand to drag him there. Amell threw himself down on the mattress and pulled Anders on top of him, cupping his face in his hands to kiss him, lips still slick from the time they'd spent on Anders' cock. Anders wrapped his hand around Amell's shaft, and broke off from his lips to kiss Amell's forearm.


"They look fine," Anders said.

"Liar," Amell said.

Anders let static gather into another shock, and let it sweep up Amell's thighs and ripple through his cock. A shout escaped Amell, and the bite of his nails on Anders' back was almost painful. Electric ecstasy made him tremble and his back arch. Anders climbed over him, and licked the taste of lyrium off his skin on his way down his chest, "They do," Anders said against his skin, "Whatever. They're just you."

Amell was still panting from Anders' spell when Anders reached his cock, and dragged his tongue up the sensitive underbelly. The heady taste clouded Anders’ head. He held Amell's cock steady, his tongue slipping over his shaft and head, grazing his fingers and palm. Amell dug for purchase with his heels, but the sheets were rich and frictionless, and his legs were slipping in an eager scramble.

Anders stretched his lips around the head of Amell's cock and sucked. "Fuck, Anders, yes," Amell groaned, brushing his fingers over Anders' brow and the few loose wisps of gold that hung there. Anders reached behind his head and pulled out his tie, and his hair fell around his face. The strands swayed with every bob of his head, but weren't quite in the way, "Oh-fuck you look good," Amell said.

Anders chuckled around Amell's cock, and knew exactly what it felt like when Amell bit his lip. Saliva escaped around his straining lips, and spilled down Anders' chin to run down his neck. He tried for an experimental swirl of his tongue, and felt half a maleficar to make Amell moan so easily. Anders took hold of Amell's thighs to hold him steady, the warmth of the sweat between them as much as bliss as the way Amell tensed for his touch.

Amell ran his fingers through his hair, and Anders closed his eyes, lost to the rhythm, the taste, the sound of their mingled breath, and the wet slide of skin on skin. A few broken tremors ran through Amell, and he squeezed Anders' shoulder, voice hoarse when he spoke, "Can I come in your mouth?"

Anders debated stopping to say yes. He settled on a playful thumbs up. Amell made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a moan. Anders wasn't sure whether he liked Amell's expression or the sounds he made more when he came. The raw unfiltered passion of both was the most honest thing Anders had ever seen from him.
Heat hit the back Anders' throat, coated his tongue, filled his mouth and spilled down his chin. Anders swallowed, but his lips and face were still dripping onto Amell's cock when he pulled back and caught his breath. He cleared his throat and coughed, wiping off his face as best he was able with his hand. His jaw ached, but the ache was almost as pleasant as the one in his cock.

"Fuck," Amell said breathlessly.

Anders laughed and rolled out of the wet spot left between his legs, and stared up at the ceiling of the canopy bed. The terrifying thought that he could get used to this, wanted to get used to this, flitted through his head before Anders shut it out. Maker, Anders must have been the crazy one.

Now what? Anders couldn't help wondering. It wasn't as if they'd snuck into a closet for a quick tryst and were running out again as soon as they were finished. This was Amell's room. Amell's bed. Was he supposed to gather his clothes and leave? Did Amell want him to stay? Had Amell even enjoyed himself, or was Anders just giving himself too much credit? Anders didn't know and didn't know how to ask. Clothes then. Anders decided. He couldn't run away from his problem naked, after all.

"Have fun?" Amell spoke up when Anders shifted.

"Loads," Anders joked, relieved Amell had said something. "... Did you?"

Amell hummed affirmatively, and groped blindly across the bed until he found Anders' chest. Amell trailed his fingers lazily up and down his skin, and Anders tried to ignore how nice it felt. "Want to go again?"

"Right now?" Anders asked.

"Yes." Amell said.

"Yes." Anders laughed.

Anders lost an hour like that. Maybe more. They went three times before Anders gave up. His whole body felt like a bruise. A good bruise.

"Quitter." Amell mumbled, laying with his arms folded over Anders' stomach. Anders let him. The whole bed felt like a wet spot at this point, and Amell the only warm thing left.

"How are you not exhausted?" Anders asked.

"I'm young," Amell said.

"You're only five years younger than me, you ass." Anders said. "You're cheating somehow."

"Blood magic." Amell said.


"So ... This was good, I hope?" Amell asked.

"And people say I ask stupid questions." Anders said.

"I just don't want you to start avoiding me again," Amell said.

"Look... I ... I won't, alright?" Anders said, and hoped that would be the end of it.

"Alright." Amell said.
"So that book," Anders changed the topic. "Do you think I could borrow it, when you're done with it?"

"Didn't I already give you a book to read?" Amell wondered.

"I read it. Honest. I am thoroughly versed in Chantry-approved blood magic. But I mean, Andraste as a mage? When I was younger, I used to be a good little Andrastian. I said my prayers, repented my sins, all of it." Now he had sex with malefics and had a borderline sacrilegious opinion on blood magic. What would his mother say? "I really believed, you know? Then the templars showed up and dragged me off without so much as a by-your-leave."

"How old were you?" Amell asked gently.

"Twelve," Anders flexed his fingers. He could still see his young self, clutching the pillow his mother had made for him to his chest around the handcuffs the bloody templars had slapped on a child.

Amell found his hand and squeezed it, banishing the memory. "How old were you?" Anders asked.

"Seven." Amell said.

They sat in what seemed to Anders a companionable silence for a time. It was nice, being with a fellow mage: someone who understood, someone who could relate. "Anyway," Anders shook himself, forcing a smile, "What I was getting at was it would be nice to read something from a Chantry that doesn't try to collar mages just for being what we are."

"Of course you can borrow it," Amell assured him, "Just be careful with it. I think I've got the only copy outside of the Imperium."

"I will be." Anders promised.

"Anders, can I ask you something 'feely'?" Amell asked.

"Am I going to get in trouble if I say no?" Anders asked.

"No. Of course not." Amell said.

Amell lay on his stomach, not pressing him. Anders curiosity got the better of him. "What is it?"

"Did you mean it, or were you just trying to save face?" Amell asked. "When you said you weren't afraid of me?"

This was a bad question. Anders didn't like this question. He wasn't afraid of Amell. He was afraid for Amell. Neither of those options were appealing. "You're not that scary." Anders said.

"You call me creepy all the time." Amell said.

"Not the same thing. At this point it could be a nickname." Anders said.

"I like nicknames." Amell agreed. "Can I pick one for you?"

Anders was already a nickname. Anders didn't tell Amell that. He wasn't sure if he ever would. "Sure, but I get the final say. And Maker help you if it has anything to do with darkspawn."

"Nevermind then." Amell said.
Anders laughed. Amell chuckled a little. The levity made Anders feel better. It was light, and Anders much preferred it to anything weighty. He couldn't handle weighty. Amell climbed up his chest to kiss him, and Anders was just starting to think maybe he could go again after all when someone knocked on the door.

"Warden-Commander?" Someone yelled through the door.

Amell groaned and buried his face in Anders' shoulder. "Good thing you locked it." Anders whispered. Amell sighed and sat up.

"Wait! I'll be out in a minute!" Amell yelled through the door.

Amell climbed out of bed and hastily wiped himself down with his discarded tunic before heading to his armoire to change into something fresh. "You can use my washroom if you want. And borrow that book. I was just rereading it."

"Alright." Anders said. "I think we missed lunch, but I guess I'll see you at dinner?"

"Assuming whatever this is doesn't keep me." Amell said, buttoning up a blue and silver doublet.

"Commander!?" Whoever was at the door yelled again.

"I said wait!" Amell yelled back.

"You want to sneak out through the window, make a run for it? We could catch a boat for Tevinter and be gone before anyone suspects a thing." Anders joked.

"Yes." Amell said. He finished dressing and came back to the bed. Anders didn't need a goodbye kiss, but Amell gave him one. "I'll see you at dinner."

"See you." Anders agreed. Amell slipped out the door without giving whoever was at it a look inside. Anders wondered if he was a secret. If he was, he wasn't a very well kept one. Anders got up, and took an exceptionally long piss and an equally long bath before changing back into his clothes. He couldn't find his hair tie.

Anders went to Amell's desk, and gingerly picked up the damaged tome, when he noticed Amell's grimoire.

It was sitting on top of a pile of other books on a corner of the desk. It was bound in black leather, with a reservoir rune embossed in silver on the cover, and it radiated power. It felt like standing next to a cask of pure lyrium. Amell had claimed it a spelltome, bound with spirits, but the way he'd paused made Anders suspect otherwise.

It wasn't any of Anders' business. He had his tome, and his clothes, and his cue to leave. Curiosity killed the cat, after all, but then... What else were those nine lives for? Anders reached out to open it.

It screamed. A malevolent scream, of Anguish, of Agony, of Terror and Despair. The sound cut through Anders like a knife, and seemed to come from inside his own skull. The pain of it touched his soul and rent his heart. Anders covered his ears, but the screaming stopped as soon as he stopped touching the tome. They weren't spirits. They weren't spirits at all.

Anders had known before he ever touched it. There'd been no reason to touch it. He knew what Amell was. Anders took a deep breath, and realized he was shaking. He was just startled. That was all. He was fine.
He wasn't afraid.
I think I'm going to call these Chitter Chatter Chapters. This one is kind of all over the place, but it has everything I wanted to touch on so here we are. Big reminder that I appreciate all of you! Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments subscriptions bookmarks and kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 24 Matrinalis Afternoon

Vigil's Keep - Warden Barracks

Anders was awful at Wicked Grace. He was never dealt a good hand, and he never seemed to pick the right cards to play or discard. He had horrible smattering of suits, at the moment. A knight, an angel, two songs, and a serpent. To make things even worse, he'd played two daggers earlier, certain he would draw more later. All in all, it was a mess.

He wasn't dexterous enough to cheat, which was frustrating, considering both Sigrun and Nathaniel were. Even Oghren managed to palm a card or two, but Anders couldn't work out how to get his hand all the way across the table and back into his lap without anyone noticing.

He wasn't even a good bluffer. Whatever his tells were, they were obvious enough that everyone knew them, and raised whenever he got a particularly bad hand. Anders took to whistling Blood on the Ramparts to take his mind off how appalling his cards were, but he honestly couldn't say if it was helping him any.

"By the Stone, I can't take it anymore!" Oghren slammed his tankard down on the table. Ale sloshed over the edge, and Nathaniel scrambled to save the discard deck from getting wet. He probably stole a dozen cards in the process. "You keep whistling that sodding song I am going to ram your head so far up your ass the next time you whistle it'll be a fart!"

Anders' whistle tapered off into a sad wheeze.

"Gee Oghren," Sigrun giggled, playing her third knight. "That sounds pretty... gory,"

"No! Don't you start." Oghren said.

"What do you think, Nate?" Sigrun asked.

"I think that would be a wretched way to die." Nate said, playing his third serpent. This game was rigged.

"Nug humpers, all of you." Oghren said.

Anders laughed despite his luck. Sigrun took up the song in earnest just to annoy Oghren. Anders was ridiculously fond of the little dwarf. She'd quickly become one of his favorite companions to have around the Vigil, right next to Amell and Oghren. Anders took another look at his hand, and decided to cut his losses, "I'm out," Anders said. He dropped his horrid cards on the table, and left the barracks. Once he was in the hall, he stuffed his thumbs into his belt and started whistling again.
"Anders," A voice said from right behind him.

Anders did not scream. He just whistled. Loudly. With his mouth open. Anders whirled around and found Nate staring at him, evidently having followed him into the hall. "Maker's balls, Nate, you have got to learn how to make a little noise when you move. Cough, belch, fart, or something. I think you gave me a heart attack. Don't give me mouth to mouth if I faint. Go find Amell."

"Has anyone ever told you you startle easily?" Nate asked.

"You'd startle too if your shadow jumped off the ground and started asking you questions." Anders said. "What do you need?"

"I wanted your opinion on this," Nathaniel said, taking a pouch off his belt and emptying the contents into his hand. A large gemstone fell out, a greenstone or emerald or something. Nathaniel handed it to him.

Anders weighed the thing, but he wasn't a dwarf. It was a gem. "It's... very green?" Anders said.

"It's a malachite," Nathaniel explained. "Sigrun... found it."

"Stole it." Anders said, handing it back. Nathaniel didn't argue.

"I was hoping to make it into a necklace." Nathaniel said.

"And the necklace is... for me?" Anders said.

"No," Nathaniel said. Anders pouted. "I know you courted a lot of women in the past, and I noticed you wear a lot of jewelry. I thought you might have some helpful insight. What type of setting I should use, the cut, the length of the chain, the type of clasp."

"Settle down there, lover boy," Anders said. "I woo, I don't court, and I don't wear a lot of jewelry."

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow at him. Anders glanced down at himself. Alright. So maybe he did wear a lot of jewelry, but that wasn't his fault. Amell hadn't been kidding about spoiling him. Amell had given him a new gold earring in place of his old brass one, a new chain and clasp to replace the one Anders had broken on Ferrenly's necklace, and a set of enchanted rings. Anders hadn't asked for any of it, but damned if he wasn't happy to have it.

"Alright. Fine. I wear a lot of jewelry." Anders found a nearby pillar to lean against. "So this is for Velanna? How's that working out?"

"I don't know that our relationship is really relevant to my question." Nathaniel said.

"It's completely relevant. There are levels to jewelry, you know. You can't go all out if you haven't gone 'all out.'" Mostly, Anders was just curious.

"I think I would call us friends, at this point," Nathaniel said cautiously. "I just want advice on the sort of necklace you would give any beautiful woman to express an interest."

"Alright," Anders said, thinking. "You want my advice? Don't give her a necklace. The only necklace she wears is her sister's, and if you gave her one she'd probably go on some crazy rant about erasing her sister's memory. Make it a bracelet. Everyone loves bracelets... unless they're some sort of symbol for shackles and humans enslaving the elven race, and you know what? Why don't you just give her the stone? That seems safe. It would go nice with the chip on her shoulder."
"Thank you." Nathaniel said flatly. "This was about as helpful as I expected it to be."

"Well why are you asking me?" Anders asked. "I just wear whatever Amell gives me. He's the one with the dead elf in his head. Why not ask him?"

"I didn't know that he would have any advice, considering." Nathaniel said.

"Considering...?" Anders said.

"Considering he has no interest in women." Nathaniel said.

"Yes, mysterious creatures, women," Anders rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows their secrets can only truly be unlocked by our manly man keys. He and Velanna are practically inseparable. Go ask him."

"I-hush." Nathaniel said.

"Well that's just rude," Anders folded his arms over his chest. "If you don't like my advice-"

"Your advice?" Velanna interrupted. At least Anders didn't scream this time. He turned around and found her standing behind him in the hall. "Your advice on what?"

"Woah. She's talking to me. Voluntarily. Quick, run outside and check the sky for flying pigs." Anders said.

"Ugh." Velanna muttered, shouldering past him towards the barracks. Anders stared at her back, and his mouth slipped open. Nate shook his head. The temptation was too much.

"How do you feel about bracelets?" Anders asked.

Nate sighed.

"How do I feel about what?" Velanna demanded, coming back over. She set her hands on her hips and glared at them.

"Bracelets." Anders said again. "You know, jingle jangle bangle, bracelet. Wear them on your wrists?"

"I know what a bracelet is, you-" Velanna stopped and glanced at Nate. If anything, her glare darkened. Oh boy. Anders contemplated fleeing, but he didn't want to miss the show. "What are you hiding behind your back?"

"Nothing." Nathaniel lied.

Velanna held her hand out, palm up. Nathaniel sighed again and dropped the malachite into it without a fight. Just friends, huh? Anders saw through that lie. Velanna turned the gem over in her hands. "Where did you get this?"

"I ... Just...came across it." Nathaniel fumbled. Poor bastard. He really was smitten.

"This is beautiful." Velanna said. "Ilshae used to collect these stones for her aravel. See the swirls, here? They resemble the vallaslin of Sylaise. Ilshae used to give them to the children, whenever they needed healing. She would tell them her magic came from the stones. She called them 'Sylaise's Tears' and said the magic only worked if they rubbed the stones with their hands, because Sylaise so loves warmth. It took their minds off the pain. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"I take it you knew better?" Nathaniel asked.
"I did, but I thought Ilshae a fool. Even as a child. I rubbed the stone because I thought she believed, and didn't want to hurt her feelings. More the fool me." Velanna mumbled, toying with the gem. "Always the fool me... You intended this as a gift for me?"

"I did." Nathaniel said.

"And Anders' advice was to turn it to a bracelet? No wonder you did not like it. This is perfect as it is. Ma serannas, Nathaniel. I will find a place for it." Velanna said. She even smiled. Anders was tempted to run outside and check the sky for flying pigs after all. Velanna went into the barracks and left them out in the hall.

Nathaniel watched her walk away, grinning. It was sickeningly sweet, really.

"You owe me." Anders said.

"I don't owe you." Nathaniel said. He turned and followed Velanna into the barracks.

"You owe me!" Anders yelled after him.

Nathaniel definitely owed him. Anders chuckled to himself and headed to the stairwell. Amell was busy going over something or other with someone or other, but he'd claimed he'd be done by mid-afternoon. Losing hand after hand of Wicked Grace would be a lot more tolerable with Amell there. Or they could just have sex. That was always a fun option.

Anders checked the library first. Amell wasn't there, but Cera was. The elf was just leaving, and Anders almost ran right into her. She smelled like musty tomes and a life of imprisonment. Anders hated that smell.

"Anders," The fiery little elf glared up at him. Anders did not have good luck with elves. Namaya, Velanna, Cera. Amell liked him, and Amell had a dead elf in his head. Did that count? "Good. I need to talk to you."

"What a coincidence! Because I need to do literally anything else, so..." Anders turned around, and started towards the third story stairwell. Cera followed him. "Seriously?" Anders sighed and stopped.

"Why have you not turned in your staff for study? The one of volcanic aurum retrieved from the dwarven fortress of Kal'Hirol?" Cera asked.

"Because it's mine...?" Anders ventured.

"You have a replacement," Cera said. "I know the Warden Commander requisitioned your things from the Circle-"

"Which, you know, you could have done," Anders interrupted her. "But you didn't, so... Go away?"

"By your own report, the staff appears Tainted," Cera continued as if she hadn't heard him. "You claim it 'slippery' with a prevailing aura of 'wrongness.' A crude assessment, but a fascinating one. The Blight is not known to affect inanimate objects. It warrants study, the kind which can only be carried out by the Circle. You should have turned it in. You still should."

"If Amell wants to study my staff, he's more than welcome to," Anders said. Shit. That was a good one. Remember that, Anders.

"His title is 'Warden Commander' and it is highly inappropriate for you to refer to him as anything else." Cera said haughtily.
If the little witch thought calling Amell 'Amell' was inappropriate she should have heard the hundreds of comebacks Anders was sitting on. 'You should hear what I call him bed' was probably one of his top three. "If Amell has a problem with me calling him Amell, then I'm sure Amell can tell me himself." Anders said.

"Are you at all aware of the significance of this arling?" Cera demanded. "The Wardens need to endear themselves to the local populace to prove they can be trusted with political standing in Ferelden. It is difficult enough for the nobility to accept a mage as their Arl, even the Hero of Ferelden, but a mage in a public relationship with a known apostate? Do you have any idea the resentment you are stirring?"

"Kind of hard to miss when it's standing right in front of me with its knickers in a twist." Anders said. "Jealous much?"

"Turn in your staff." Cera said.

"Blow me." Anders said.

Cera turned red. "You insolent, irresponsible, sad excuse for a--"

"Ambassador." A voice called out. Anders turned around, surprised. Not because someone had interrupted, but because anyone but Amell would be willing to defend him. Mistress Woolsey stood at the base of the third story stairwell, frowning at them. "I trust you have a reason for speaking to a Senior Warden in such a fashion?"

"Anders has been a Warden for scarcely two months." Cera said incredulously. "Calling him 'Senior'."

"Is the truth." Woolsey said. Anders could have kissed the old girl. "Anders is one of the senior most wardens at the Vigil. He manages the infirmary, and has a physician and aid under his charge, and you are out of turn to speak to him in such a fashion. And Anders, while the Wardens keep their own council, I do not believe the Warden Commander would appreciate the Ambassador of one of his most formidable allies to be accorded with anything less than respect."

"She started it." Anders said.

Cera said nothing. She trembled like an angry cat, all upturned hackles, and stormed away without a word. Woolsey descended the last of the stairs and came over to him.

"Thanks. I think." Anders said.

"She's right, you know." Woolsey said. "Not about the staff. The spoils of your expeditions are rightly yours, and I would not be so ready to turn them over to the Circle were I you. Your relationship with the Commander, however... Eyes are on us here in the arling. I have already spoken to the Commander about it. I will not pretend it is fair to either of you, but please, be discreet. For all our sakes."

Woolsey left him standing in the middle of the hall. Anders felt a little queasy, but couldn't say why. Well... What did he care if they had to keep it a secret? It wasn't like the Circle had been any different. It wasn't like he didn't have practice. No big deal. It was just sex anyway.

Anders turned to head up the stairs, but Amell was already heading down them. Fortuitous, that. No... Wait. Woolsey. Amell was meeting with Woolsey this morning. Something about trade. Anders should pay more attention when Amell was talking about the arling.
"Anders," Amell grinned, taking the last few steps at a jog. "Looking for me? I was just coming to find you." Amell stopped in front of him and leaned in for a kiss. Anders leaned back. Amell's confused expression combined with his puckered lips was more than a little hilarious.


"You ran into Mistress Woolsey on the way up." Amell guessed.

"Or she ran into me on the way down." Anders said.

"We're contrary today," Amell said.

"No, I'm contrary today." Anders said.

Amell grinned and tried to kiss him again. Well... When had Anders ever cared about rules? Anders caught Amell's hips and held him for a few seconds. Alright, so maybe it was more of a minute. It wasn't Anders' fault Amell smelled and tasted so intoxicating.

"We are. Supposed to be a secret." Amell said when they broke apart. He was doing a very poor job of keeping them one, Anders thought. "To be honest, I'm already half a secret. It's easy for everyone to forget I'm a mage under all the armor."

"So Rylock... wasn't just fucking with you? That's really why you wear it?" Anders asked.

"No, I wear it because I don't like being stabbed." Amell said.

"Doesn't seem to be helping a lot there, honestly." Anders said.

"It helps a lottle." Amell said.

"A lottle?" Anders said.

"I... was going to say a lot but changed my mind and tried to say a little as a joke." Amell said.

"What did I tell you? You're Creepy, not funny." Anders said. "So, what's the plan? Do I just not look at you in public? Yes Ser Commander Ser?"

"That's ... No," Amell glanced around the hall. Anders imagined he wanted to sit down. Anders wanted to sit down. Anders grabbed Amell's hand and led him back up to his quarters. Anders lit a fire in the hearth with his magic and they sat down on the couch.

"Well?" Anders prompted him.

"We just can't touch in public, and you're supposed to call me Commander." Amell said.

"Not Creepy? I was getting fond of Creepy." Anders said.

"You can call me anything you want when we're alone, or with the Wardens. But not in front of the soldiers, or the people, and never in court." Amell said. "... I'm sorry. I know this is a hassle-"

"Hey, whatever. Aside from having to call you Commander it's not like anything changed. I wasn't cuddled up in your lap on the throne calling you smoochie-kins or anything like that." Anders said.

"I'm also supposed to stop 'showing obvious favor through excessive compensation'." Amell said.
"That means all the gifts right?" Anders asked.

"I wasn't going to listen to that one." Amell said. "Don't worry."

"You better not. My name-day is coming up. I expect a pony, by the way." Anders said.

"That's a little steep considering the darkspawn ate all of our horses." Amell said.

"No excuses." Anders said.

"Alright. I'll get you a pony." Amell said, "In the meantime, I have everything set up if you're ready to kill the Fear demon."

Anders hadn't seen any binding circles when he'd walked into Amell's room, but he imagined they could always use the one in the cellars. "So... You are going to kill it, right?" Anders asked. "No making crazy blood magic deals?" Or binding it to your grimoire? Anders wanted to ask but didn't.

"Of course I'm going to kill it," Amell said. "Fear demons are too primal to bargain. They don't have any traits to appeal to the way Desire and Pride demons do."

"Well you could promise to be extra creepy, but I see what you mean." Anders said.

"I don't think we should summon it." Amell continued. "The binding circle in the cellars is too weak to hold a Fear demon. Add that to how thin the Veil is down there, and it could summon Terror demons to follow it through, and we'd have a Tear beneath the Vigil."


"With the two of us and your spirit having control of the demesne, it should be easy." Amell said.

"The two of us?" Anders asked. "Are you sure you need me there?"

"The Fear demon is drawn to you and your spirit, Anders. Without you there there's nothing to guarantee it would even show." Amell said.

"Are you sure we can't summon it?" Anders asked. "Demons are stronger in the Fade, after all."

"So are mages." Amell said.

"... You know I almost didn't finish my Harrowing?" The question tumbled out of Anders' mouth without his permission, and he braced himself for an incredulous snort. Amell reached over and held his hand. No judgment, just silent support, so Anders kept talking. "The First Enchanter rushed it, after my second escape attempt. Harrowed mages can't be made Tranquil, and the Knight Commander was considering Tranquility as a solution for the 'repeat offender'.

"I was sixteen. Sixteen. Can you believe that? I was sent to the Circle at twelve. They gave me four years of training, and threw me into the Fade to fight a demon. I didn't know what was going on, what I was doing. I latched onto the first thing that spoke to me, this... Spirit. I thought. It took the form of an apprentice. It told me it was an apprentice that died during its own Harrowing.

"It went on and on about how cruel the templars were, how unfair and unjust the Circle was to throw mages lives away, forcing them to fight demons or be made Tranquil. It told me it would help me escape, help me get away from them, from the Circle if I just let it in. And you know what I did? I said yes.

"Compassion saved me. She told me to open my eyes, said it was a demon playing me, trying to
possess me. The demon was furious with her. It tried to kill her, and I tried to protect her. Just putting up a fight broke the spell, and I woke up with a templar's sword staring me straight in the face.

"I was taking too long, they said. That was it. I was sixteen and taking too long to fight a bloody Pride demon, so they were just going to stick me on the floor. Can you believe that?" Anders laughed, and rubbed the back of his neck. "... I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"Hopefully because you trust me." Amell said.

"Well yeah, but 'oh by the way last time I did this I almost got possessed' probably isn't the best thing to hear before we jump into the Fade." Anders said.

"That's not what I heard." Amell said. "I heard you stood up to a Pride demon with hardly any training and won. I don't think you even need my help with a Fear demon, but I'm happy to be here for you."

Anders hadn't ever looked at it that way. When you put it that way, it almost sounded brave. "I think I get why she likes you." Anders said.

"Why who-" Amell started to ask. Anders would tell him later. He caught Amell's face in his hands and kissed him, and quickly had Amell pinned beneath him. One hand under Amell's tunic to tease his nipple, one hand in his trousers to grab his ass, and Amell was a mess of unintelligible moans. Anders was getting pretty good at this. "Anders-we should probably-fight it now-while I have time before-before... fuck."

Anders let go of him, laughing. "Alright. You're right. The sooner we get this over with the better. I'll have to think of some way to show my gratitude after."

"You could fuck me." Amell said. No creativity with this one.

"You say that like I don't already." Anders said.

"No I meant actually fuck me," Amell wrapped his legs around Anders' waist. Anders caressed one thigh without thinking.

"Oh 'actually' fuck. Because we were only 'sort of' fucking before." Anders joked.

Amell didn't have a retort. Anders rolled his hips forward experimentally and decided he liked the way he fit between Amell's legs. Amell pushed back against him eagerly and Anders had to take a slow breath to settle down. "Is it weird that I kind of pictured this the other way around?" Anders asked.

"No." Amell said, "I'd love to fuck you, but unless you've gotten a lot of practice in without me it's not really something we can jump into."

"I take it you've had a lot of practice without me?" Anders asked.

"Yes. Well, not too recently." Amell reached up to play with Anders' earring. "I know you don't like to talk about things like this, but I sort of assumed we were exclusive?"

Fuck. Not this conversation. Anders had gone weeks without this conversation. Alright. Big boy knickers Anders. Tell him this is just casual sex. Tell him you don't like him like that. Anders tried. He opened his mouth to say it. No sound came out. Amell noticed his hesitation and put on what Anders thought was a very believable smile.
"Well that's my fault then," Amell said, dropping his hand. "It's fine, if you'd rather not be. Anyway-
"
"You're seriously just going to let me get away with anything, aren't you?" Anders' mouth betrayed
him. He had everything he wanted. Protection from templars, a good friend, good sex, no strings,
and he had to open his stupid mouth.

"I don't mind if that's what you want," Amell said.

"Liar." Anders said.

"I don't mind enough to stop having sex with you." Amell clarified.

"Well I don't mind being exclusive, so..." Anders said.

"Liar." Amell said.

"Oh, come on." Anders said. "Who has time to fuck more than one person anyway? Unless it's a
threesome. Which I am not into, by the way. So yes, you're the only one I'm fucking and I'd be
happy to fuck you tonight."

"You're a romantic." Amell gave him a shove and rolled out from under him and off the couch. "I'm
going to go use the washroom before I get Oghren then."

"So, remember how I just said I wasn't into threesomes?" Anders asked.

"Flames, Anders, not to fuck." Amell laughed. Anders was a little proud he managed to get a laugh
out of him, even as an accident. "He's our 'templar.' Just as a precaution." Amell explained.

"You're going to tell Oghren I have a Fear demon harassing me? I'll never live that down." Anders
said.

"Oghren already knows." Amell said.

"What?" Anders asked. "But he hasn't said anything. He hasn't given me any shit."

"It's important for you to be confident when we go into the Fade. I told Oghren not to rattle you."
Amell said.

"And he listened?" Anders asked.

"Oghren is a good man when he needs to be," Amell said, and left for the washroom.

"But he hasn't given me any shit!" Anders yelled after him.

Amell didn't answer him. Anders stood up and paced a circle around his room. Anders liked Amell's
room. Sure, it used to belong to Nate's dad, and that was a little weird, but it felt like the way the
Circle should have. Arcane, without any mold or musk or templars. Anders wandered over to his
desk.

The satchel Amell had found in the Silverite Mine was on the floor beside it. A few letters and a
tome were on his desk, stained with some sort of fetid black liquid that looked like the Blight. A
fresh parchment was beside them, half filled with notes for whatever Amell had been working on.
Anders doubted anyone could forge that script. Amell had no slant at all to his letters. It was odd.
Anders was right handed, so his letters went right. Maybe Amell was ambidextrous.
"What are you doing?" Amell asked when he came out of the washroom.

"Looking at your handwriting?" Anders said.

"Snooping is bad, Anders." Amell said.

"I have no self control." Anders said. "I thought that was obvious by now. So this looks creepy. You and Woolsey were up to no good this morning, I take it?"

"We were going over the renewed trade along the Pilgrim's Path. Remember I told you yesterday?" Amell asked.

"Yessss?" Anders said.

"You weren't listening." Amell said.

"I wasn't listening." Anders said. "What's all this, then?"

"This is what I was working on last night," Amell said, "I found the journal and the notes in the lab where Oghren was being held, back in the Silverite Mines. I think they belonged to the darkspawn emissary Velanna's sister Seranni was with. They're not very coherent, considering a darkspawn wrote them, but from what I can tell the darkspawn are using our blood to enhance themselves somehow, and that's why they can talk now. I was writing up what I knew to send to Avernus."

"Avernus your two-hundred year old blood mage pal?" Anders asked.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" Amell asked.

"Honestly? I'm getting there. You think all this will help with the whole... not turning into a crazy ghoul and rotting away from the inside out thing?" Anders asked.

"I'm hoping." Amell said. "Avernus was already able to sustain himself off the Taint for two hundred years."

"But with blood magic, right?" Anders asked. "... Do you know how to do that?"

"Would you want me to teach you if I did?" Amell asked.

"Well, I kind of like living, and not being a ghoul, so assuming I don't have to sacrifice anyone in the process... I'm going to go with yes." Anders said.

"Then as soon as he teaches me, I'll teach you." Amell promised. "... I know some of the basics, if you wanted to learn. It's blood magic that draws directly from the Taint."

"And that sounds fascinating, but let's just stick to whatever spell makes me immortal for now and worry about being full fledged maleficas later." Anders said.

"If you change your mind, I'd love to teach you, but I won't press. Let me go find Oghren and we'll deal with your Fear demon." Amell caught his chin and planted a hard kiss on his cheek. "Don't snoop." Amell said and left.

Well now Anders had to snoop. Anders looked back at the desk when Amell left, but his letter was no fun. It was written in a cipher Anders couldn't possible hope to decipher, and the darkspawn's notes were so illegible Anders couldn't make them out. Amell's grimoire was still on the desk, but Anders had learned his lesson there.
What else was there, really? Amell had a journal he wrote in every night, but that was just low. And locked, in the drawer on his nightstand. Anders threw himself down on the bed and stared at the ceiling until Amell came back with Oghren.

The dwarf was fully outfitted in his platemail Warden armor, and carrying his helmet and his battleaxe. Calm down, Anders. It's just a precaution. Oghren's not a real templar. Real templars didn't belch and scratch their codpiece in front of you. "Hey, Sparkles." Oghren said, trundling over to sit on the edge of the bed. "Drink?" Oghren offered, holding out his hip flask.

Anders took it. Etched into it beside the mouth piece were the words 'One for the ditch.' Well. Wasn't that cheery? Anders took a drink and felt a little better for the fire it lit in his stomach. Liquid confidence was just as good as real confidence, right?

"Give me a few minutes to set up," Amell said. "Both of you play nice."

"So..." Anders said.

"Yep." Oghren said.

"Not going to make fun of me?" Anders asked.


"You've been in the Fade?" Anders asked. "But you're a dwarf. How have you been in the Fade?"

"No offense, Sparkles, but I don't really wanna talk about it. Ain't right, your Fade. Ain't sodding right. I know the drill. You two take a nap and I sit here in case you turn into one of them fleshy freaks. Then I split you like a melon." Oghren said.

"And you're okay with that?" Anders asked.

"Do I sodding look okay with that?" Oghren demanded.

"I don't know. Your face is kind of this mess." Anders waved a hand at Oghren's bushy eyebrows, bulbous nose, and tangled nest of a beard. "It's kind of hard for me to tell if you have an expression under all that."

"This is a frown." Oghren said helpfully.

"Do a smile." Anders said.

Oghren's mouth split open to reveal a set of yellowed teeth and rancid breath.

Anders recoiled. "Okay. Got it. Thanks. Not okay with this then."

"It helps that I'm pretty drunk right now. Wasn't just drinking during our card game for shits and giggles. Don't worry about it, though. Ain't nothing gonna happen," Oghren said reassuringly. "I just don't like mage shit."

"Anders, come and inscribe two paralysis glyphs here and here." Amell said.

"Why are we paralyzing ourselves exactly?" Anders asked.

Anders got up and looked at the set up Amell had made. It looked like your typical Harrowing, only a little more crude. There was no Harrowing Chamber, obviously, and the pedestal Anders
remembered had been replaced with a simple silver bowl on the floor. Amell had even set down two pillows. How quaint.

"We're not." Amell said. "We can dispel them when we wake up. It's just a precaution."

"Alright." Anders cast the glyphs, and sat down on one of the pillows. "This is a lot better already, honestly. I never understood why they made us stand up just to pass out. I had a friend who broke his nose that way, you know. Fell flat on his face."

"Ready?" Amell asked.

"No." Anders said. He looked at the bowl of liquid lyrium sitting in front of him, and felt a little queasy. "So I just stick my hands in it like any old Harrowing?"

"Don't think of it as a Harrowing." Amell said.

"What should I think of it as then? A dream date?" Anders asked, and felt a little better for the shield sarcasm provided.

"Sure." Amell reached across the bowl and held Anders' hand. "Anything that helps you relax. You can think of it as introducing me to your spirit,"

"This is cute. Totally unrelated, but I'm gonna barf." Oghren said.

"Do you want to kiss me, just to fuck with him?" Anders asked.

"Barfing though. That's not gonna make your little ritual go tits up is it?" Oghren asked.

"If you want." Amell leaned across the bowl and kissed him.

"This would be so much better if you were two gals instead of two dudes." Oghren complained.

Anders barely heard him. He'd been bluffing. He wanted the kiss. Andraste preserve him, he needed it. He knew he needed to relax, but his nerves were shot to the Void and back at what was waiting for him on the other side of that damn bowl.

Amell helped. He always helped. His lips were soft and full of encouragement, and his free hand reached up to cradle Anders' jaw. There was a hint of soap underlying Amell's usual musk, and the combination was soothing. Anders was fine. He wasn't afraid. This would be easy.

Anders dunked their hands in the bowl together. Just like the first time Anders had done it, it felt like dying. The lyrium was cold as ice, and it swept up his arm and went straight to his heart. Relax. Relax. Anders sucked in a pained breath. It would stop. It would stop when he passed out.

"It's okay." Someone said when everything went dark. Amell or Compassion. "I'm here."

He woke up alone.
Hello everyone. Welcome back! Thank you for all of your comments, kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and as always, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 24 Matrinalis Sometime

Somewhere

Anders woke up in a field of reeds. He sat up feeling groggy, and took in the barren landscape and muted light. The islands of other demesnes of other spirits and demons floated all around him, the Black City among them. The smell of the Fade reminded him of Amell, and he felt a little better for it.

A hand squeezed his shoulder. Anders reached up to squeeze it back, and touched leathery skin. "Lost your spirit, little mage?" Fear laughed at him.

Anders scrambled forward on his hands and knees and climbed to his feet. Willpower. It's all willpower. Anders summoned a staff and a barrier. The Fear demon clapped mockingly. "Where's Compassion?" Anders asked.

"Where indeed," The Fear demon circled him. Cautiously? Mockingly? "Such a fragile spirit, Compassion. Perhaps I killed your little spirit. Perhaps feeding off your Fear gave me the strength to make this demesne mine. Do you see your spirit anywhere, little mage?" Fear clenched its first, and demons of Terror burst out of the ground around it. They were lanky creatures of limb and ligament, their jaws broken off and hanging open down to their chest. "One of these, perhaps?"

"This is her demesne, not yours. Where is she?" Anders clenched his staff and counted. One, two... five Terror demons. He wasn't that much of a coward. The Fear demon had to have already have been strong before it noticed him.

The Fear demon laughed again. It was less a laugh, and more a chortle. It's whole body shook, bulbous and twisted, and the many bloated feet beneath its skirt swayed madly. Anders felt sick. He drew a repulsion glyph beneath his feet, but he had no idea if the magic would hold against six demons.

"So scared. So scared for one little spirit." A tongue flicked out of the Fear demon's mouth and licked its skinless lips. "Why? Perhaps because you Fear you'll never find another? Poor little spirit healer with no spirit. No virtues. Nothing to-" A bolt of spirit magic hit the Fear demon in the face. Anders wished he could say he'd done it.

The bolt struck one of the many tentacles on the demon's head. The magic seared through flesh and fat, and the tentacle fell off to flop among the reeds. The sickening smell of gristle filled the air, and the Fear demon screamed in outrage. All around Anders the Terror demons threw back their heads and wailed, broken jaws rattling on their chests.
Anders was right in the center of them, and the sound brought him to his knees. Sonic pulses bombarded him from all sides and turned the ground beneath him into pudding. Anders slipped and fell, but rather than take advantage how prone he was, the Terror demons dove into the ground and vanished.

The Fear demon noticed, and dove at him, only to bounce off his repulsion glyph. Anders picked himself up. Unable to reach him, the demon brought up its hands, and spindles of ice grew between its fingers like spider webs. Anders brought up a hasty spell shield, and the frost spell the demon cast at him diffused into the Fade around them.

"Coward!" The Fear demon screamed.

Alright Anders. Focus. You listened in some of your classes. Everything has a weakness. What are Fear demons weak against?

The demon threw another frost spell at him, and Anders deflected it with another shield. Not frost. Not fire. Electricity. That was it. Anders channeled the magic in air around him to form a bolt he flung at the demon. The Fear demon flickered, and vanished. The bolt flew through the space it had been standing in and continued out into the Void. The Fear demon reappeared a few feet to the left, cackling.

"I hope I don't kill Oghren." Anders said to himself. He threw bolt after bolt while the Fear demon phased in and out of existence around him. "Damn fucking shit. This is so not working. Mages are stronger in the Fade my ass."

A manic laugh from off to Anders' left put the Fear demon's cackling to shame. Anders dared a glance, and saw Amell had bound two of the three Terror demons and was forcing them to fight each other. The Fear demon turned away from Anders to scream. "No! You would dare! They are mine!"

Anders gathered for another bolt, held it until the voltage made his teeth rattle, and unleashed it into the Fear demon's back. The spell ripped a hole in the creature's side. A fountain of blood and intestines painted the reeds black and green, and the creature seized. One of its tentacles burst, and two of its spines fell off its back. Wailing in pain, the Fear demon turned back to him, still twitching with aftershocks from the spell.

Anders gathered for another bolt, but the Fear demon flickered, and vanished. The three Terror demons not bound to Amell threw back their heads and roared, hanging jaws rattling, and dove into the ground. The fighting stopped abruptly, and none of the demons reappeared.

"Well, we won." Anders said. "I think."

Amell limped over to him, and Anders belatedly realized Amell had been fighting five demons at once while Anders struggled with one. His two Terror demons came with him, threads of red miasma tethering them to Amell's hands.

They were aptly named. In place of eyes, the Terror demons had empty holes in their heads, from which pus oozed every few seconds. The pus poured into their open mouths, which contained row after endless row of teeth. On the bright side, unlike the Desire demon, they did absolutely nothing without direction when bound. Anders hoped that meant they were weak, or stupid, or both.

"Where did it go?" Anders asked. He looked around, and saw nothing but hills and reeds. "I don't think I killed it. Where's Compassion? This doesn't make sense. This is her demesne; she should shape it. It's usually littered with my memories, but this place looks empty. Maker, what if it actually killed her? She can't regenerate. She's not a spirit of Faith or anything strong like that."
"Anders, calm down." Amell said. "There's no reason to give the Fear demon any more of an advantage."

"No, you don't understand. I have to find her." Anders said. He tried to summon her, and felt an urgent pull to his right. Anders took off running. "This way!"

"Anders wait!" Amell called after him.

Amell could bloody well keep up. Anders didn't have time to wait. He ran through a field of reeds, and crested a hill. The other side fell off into the Void, but a curved path led down back under the island. Anders followed it into a cave, and found Compassion.

The Fear demon was there as well, along with its three remaining Terror demons. All of them were chasing her. Anders' mind could barely comprehend what he was watching. The landscape kept changing, walls would manifest and then vanish, the ground would fall away and reform as the spirit and demon fought for dominance over the tiny realm. Compassion looked little more than a ball of light, darting madly from corner to corner of the cave while Terror demons burst up in front of her at every turn. The Fear demon was too injured to chase, but it was watching and cackling gleefully.

"Get away from her!" Anders yelled, raising up his staff and channeling a storm. "You want Fear? I'll show you why mages are feared!"

Anders dropped the storm behind Compassion. Lightning struck, and arched between the Terror demons, and the Fear demon. It crashed against the ceiling, and brought half cave down. Two of the Terror demons were crushed. The other was caught in a seizure. Anders channeled a second lightning spell, and let it loose between the Fear demon and its last minion.

Electricity arched between the two, and the Terror demon exploded. The Fear demon was burnt from the inside out, its eyes melted in its skull, every last tentacle on its head burst. Their corpses lingered for the span of a few breaths, and then faded into green dust.

"Anders!" Compassion phased out of the cave, and reappeared in front of him just outside it. Anders staff vanished. He didn't need it anymore. Compassion jumped into his arms. "I knew you would come. You care. You care so much."

Anders hugged her. "Hey sweetheart."

"It tried to steal you from me!" Compassion said. "It stole into your dreams, your memories. The year I lost you. It fed on so much. I couldn't stop it."

"Hey, it's okay," Anders kissed her forehead. "It's all over now. I told you I wouldn't let anything threaten my girl."

"I told you you didn't need me," Amell said from behind him. Anders turned around. Amell was leaning against the walled side of the path, a fair distance away. The two Terror demons were still standing behind him, idle and bound. "This is your spirit?"

"Who are you?" Compassion asked.

"What do you mean who is he?" Anders laughed. "Amell. You told me you liked him, remember? Said he was nice to me?"

"This isn't the Amell you dream of," Compassion said, shrinking back. "I don't like this Amell. He walks with demons."
"Well that's... I mean he had to bind them, to keep them from hurting us." Anders explained. 
Compassion flickered, and vanished to reappear behind Anders, visibly agitated. "Compassion?"

"I don't like him." Compassion said again. "Make him go away. He holds the demons here."

"The Terror demons are the last things threatening your spirit's demesne. As soon as we kill them we 
should wake. I can keep them bound, and wait at the top of the path if you want to take a minute."
Amell said. He didn't seem at all surprised or affected by Compassion's response to him.

"No. No, hang on." Anders took Compassion's hand to keep her from flickering. "He isn't keeping 
the demon's here. He bound them. Okay? To protect us. He doesn't walk with them. He's going to 
banish them. He's helping keep you safe. Can't you tell? Can't you read his mind, the way you're 
always reading mine?"

"No," Compassion said.

"No?" Anders asked. "Well... Just trust me, then. He's the only reason I was able to come here and 
help you. You have to like him."

"Anders, it's fine." Amell said. "I don't know that a spirit can make the distinction between demons 
and someone using demon magic."

"No, she can. She's smart. I taught her jokes. She can learn, just give me a minute." Anders said. He 
let go of Compassion's hand and walked over to Amell. Anders patted Amell's face. "Look. See? 
Safe. Nice blood mage. He's not going to hurt you or me. You liked him. Come say hi or 

Compassion flickered across her domain, and eventually settled a few nervous feet away from 
Amell.

"Sweets, he's actively sapping his will right now to keep those demons bound just so we can talk." 
Anders said. "Doesn't that count for something?"

"... You are very kind to help Anders." Compassion said eventually.

"You must have a very strong bond with him to be willing to speak to me." Amell said.

"Yes." Compassion said.

"... I haven't spoken to a spirit in almost three years now," Amell said.

"Cat got your tongue?" Anders asked.

"Something like that." Amell said. "... Do you prefer to be called she?"

"Yes." Compassion said.

"That's actually fascinating," Amell said. "Most Fade denizens don't have gender preferences that 
aren't shaped around dreamers' expectations."

"Yes." Compassion said.

"That makes sense, then," Amell said.

"What makes sense?" Anders asked. "Care to fill me in?"
"Your spirit prefers 'she' because you expect it to be a 'she.'" Amell said. "Which is still interesting I suppose. Is that form anyone in particular?" Alright. Maybe inviting Amell to talk to Compassion wasn't such a good idea after all.


"Can Anders channel anything but healing magic through you?" Amell asked.


"And you... tell jokes?" Amell ventured.


"How did you meet him?" Amell asked.

No. No no no no.

"I heard him crying," Compassion said. "I wanted to help him. I filled his dreams with things I thought would comfort him, but I had very little experience with mortals, and my interference made him aware of me. We spoke. He was very kind."

That... could have been worse, Anders supposed. No mention of how it had happened when he was twelve, a fortnight into his stay at the Circle. No mention of how Compassion had taken the shape of his mother and he'd cried into her bosom for an hour. No mention of him still being a country bumpkin, barely able to write his own name let alone understand he was communing with a spirit. No mention of how he'd called her 'Mom' for a year until he'd figured it out.

"I have another question, but I think it would make both of you uncomfortable." Amell said.

"You're going to ask if we've had sex, aren't you?" Anders guessed.

"No, actually." Amell made a face at him, and looked back to Compassion. "I was going to ask if you would ever possess him, to save his life if he was badly injured or dying."

"No! No I would never." Compassion said fiercely. "I am no demon. What is this accusation?"

"I'm also going to go with 'What the fuck?' on this one." Anders said.

"It was just a question. Thank you for answering it. I have no more, if you wanted to ask me anything." Amell said.

"You are very kind to Anders. Do you care about him?" Compassion asked. Anders regretted everything about letting these two talk.

"Very much." Amell said.

"I have no other questions then. Thank you for helping us fight this demon." Compassion said.

"You're welcome." Amell said. "Thank you for talking to me. Anders, are you ready or do you want me to give you some time alone?"

"Maybe just a second? Are you alright holding those two?" Anders asked.

"I'm fine." Amell promised. "I'll wait at the top of the path."
Amell left. The Terror demons trailed listlessly after him.

"So hey, what was that?" Anders asked when he'd gone. "Is blood magic really that scary?"

"He reeks of demons." Compassion said, hugging herself in a gesture that looked painfully human.

"I think he smells nice." Anders said.

"He is kind to you," Compassion said. "And you care about him, but... Please be careful. Demons are not to be trusted."

"He's not a demon." Anders said.

"He is close." Compassion said.

Anders didn't know how to respond to that. "Alright, well... You stay safe, alright? And don't listen to any demons or anyone else's dreams. You're not a weak spirit. You shape the Fade with the best of them."

"Thank you, Anders." Compassion said. "I love you too."

"I didn't say that." Anders said.

"You thought it." Compassion said.

Anders gave her a hug. The path beneath him turned to stone, much like the spiral staircases of the Circle, and Anders followed it up to where Amell was waiting. The demesne was already looking better, frozen pieces of his past littered among the reeds. The smell of apple pie and cinnamon, the warmth of a fire place, and other little odds and ends of the mortal world filled up the barren landscape.

The only really out of place things were the Terror demons. They stood next to Amell while he drained a lyrium vein in the ground with a look near enough to ecstasy to make Anders skin heat up.

"All set." Anders said.

"Go ahead then." Amell said. "They won't fight back."

Anders channeled another lightning spell, and held it until the static made the hair on his arms stand up. He released it on both the Terror demons, and it tore through their lanky forms, burning skin and sinew. They didn't fight back, but they did scream. Not the aggressive howls from before, but a strange keening sound as if betrayed. They died in puffs of green smoke, and Anders woke up.

Anders was lying on the ground, with his finger stuffed up his nose and a hand shoved down Amell's trousers. Amell was lying under a chair Anders was relatively positive hadn't been there when they'd gone into the Fade. The chair had a bowl on top of it. That didn't seem good. Amell woke up, and instinctively sat up before Anders could warn him. He banged his head something fierce on the chair and knocked the bowl of some sort of liquid onto his chest. "Damn it Oghren," Amell moaned.

Amell rolled over in pain, and twisted Anders' wrist in the process. "Ow! Ow! Hand! Stop!" Anders protested, trying to free it from under Amell's belt.

Oghren was howling. "Hahaha! That's what you get, you little thunderhumper! Making me sit here waiting for some demon bullshit to jump out of your corpse and scare me shitless! Hahaha, good
luck washing THAT out of your clothes!"

"Is this-what is this?" Amell shoved the chair back and sat up, peeling his wet tunic off his chest.

"Andraste's flaming knickers that's foul." Anders said, massaging his injured wrist. He dispelled the paralysis glyphs under them and scooted away from Amell. "You're taking at least three baths before you touch me. Seriously, what is that? Did you dump piss on him? There's no way piss smells that bad."

Oghren laughed, and took off his helmet. "Why don't you lick it and find out? Fuck this shit. I did my part. It took you chuckle-fucks till sundown to finish up in there. I'm gonna go drink myself into a comma. Use lye when you wash that, by the way. That shit stains." Oghren said, hopping off the bed and leaving.

"I have to bathe." Amell said, stripping out of his ruined clothes. "Damnit, I liked that shirt. Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure why not? I could use one considering Oghren touched me. And I think some of whatever that was got in my hair." Anders said.

Anders followed him to the washroom. Amell dropped his ruined clothes into his laundry basket. Anders hesitated doing the same. If they were supposed to be subtle, Anders probably shouldn't be leaving his clothes in Amell's laundry for the servants to find. Then again, could the servants really tell the difference? He and Amell were about the same size. Then again again, Anders didn't have any other clothes to change into, so he left his in a pile on the bench.

Amell was standing in front of his bath, channeling a fairly simple spell to fill it with water. Anders watched the way Amell's muscles played beneath his skin when he rolled his shoulders, and let his eyes wander south to where his thighs met his ass. "You should cast in the nude more often," Anders said.

"That sounds impractical." Amell said.


"You're the one who came over here," Amell said.

"I take it back," Anders said. Anders heated the water with a modified fire spell, and grabbed a bar of soap from Amell's vanity before climbing into the bath. He found a seat for himself on the stone bench beneath the water. "Come here, you're rancid."

Amell dunked himself under water before coming over. "Where do you want me?" Amell asked.

"Don't give me that look. You still smell." Anders grabbed Amell's waist and sat him down on the bench facing away from him before attacking him with the soap. Anders probably should have been sensual about it, or something, but whatever Oghren had dumped on Amell was rank, and Anders wanted it gone.

"I love your hands," Amell sighed while Anders was washing his back.

"Don't start with that look. You still smell." Anders grabbed Amell's waist and sat him down on the bench facing away from him before attacking him with the soap. Anders probably should have been sensual about it, or something, but whatever Oghren had dumped on Amell was rank, and Anders wanted it gone.

"I love your hands," Amell sighed while Anders was washing his back.

"Don't start with that yet. At least not until I get your hair." Anders said.

"I can wash myself, you know," Amell said, leaning back into his hands. Anders stopped supporting him and Amell fell back into the bath. He came back up with a confused gasp.
"Well fine. Wash yourself. See if I ever I try to be nice again." Anders huffed, tossing the soap into water.

"I take it back-" Amell said.

"No. It's too late. My feelings are hurt." Anders said, folding his arms over his chest.

Amell straddled his lap and wrapped his arms around his neck. Anders liked him naked almost as much as he liked him wet. He liked everything from the way the water smoothed his hair back from his face, to the way it tamed the hair on his chest and arms, to the way it made his skin shine like the way it did when he was sweating and panting underneath him. "What was I saying?" Anders asked.

"I don't know," Amell said and kissed him. The smell was gone, thank the Maker. It had been mostly on his clothes. Amell just smelled like soap now. Anders parted his lips for Amell's tongue and grabbed his ass under the water, sliding his fingers through the crack in his backside. He pressed the pads of his fingers against his entrance and Amell moaned into his mouth.

"So I know this spell..." Anders said around Amell's eager lips. "... but it probably won't work under water."

"Is it the electricity one?" Amell asked, leaving Anders' mouth in favor of his jaw. "I know that one too."

"No it's a grease spell." Anders said.

"Have you ever had sex like this before?" Amell asked.

"Once. With a pirate. In a brothel." Anders said.

"That sounded like a joke." Amell said.

"I'm dead serious." Anders said, massaging Amell's thighs. "I don't even have a good follow up for that. Well I do but it's gross so I'm not going to say it."

"Oghren is my best friend, Anders, I think I can handle gross jokes." Amell said.

"No. I refuse. I'm an adult. I'm better than that." Anders said.

Conversation died. Amell kissed his neck, and sucked on the skin there while rolling his tongue. Anders shivered, and let slip a hard exhale at the soft bite of Amell's nails dragging down his chest. Amell splayed out his right hand, and traced slow circles over Anders' nipple with his thumb while his left hand drifted lower to follow the path of dark hair beneath his navel.

"Do you want to move to the bed?" Anders asked, and shivered at the gentle twist of Amell's thumb and forefinger over his nipple.

Amell ran his tongue up Anders' jaw, his breath heating the slick path he left on his way to Anders' ear. Amell's teeth closed over his earring and his hand closed around his cock. A tug of both had Anders' biting his lip to stifle a groan, "I want you to fuck me right here," Amell said.

"I can do that," Anders tangled a hand in Amell's hair and pulled his head back to expose his throat, and bent to kiss and worry at the soft skin. He felt Amell's shaky sigh against his tongue, and jerked his hips up into Amell's hand. Amell abandoned the nipple he'd worn stiff to grab the back of Anders' head and hold him to his throat.
Anders let his teeth graze him, and Amell's sharp gasp made his hip buck again, "You want the spell?" Anders asked.

"I want you," Amell punctuated his words with another pump of his hand. He ran the pad of his thumb over Anders' slit and a ripple of pleasure made Anders groan.

"Up," Anders grabbed Amell's thighs, and gave them a firm squeeze to encourage him out of the water. Amell put his hands on Anders' shoulders and half-knelt, half-stood on the bench, his cock stiff and rigid and at the perfect height for Anders' mouth. Anders licked down his shaft, heat and salt on his tongue, and won a breathless groan.

Anders licked back up, and parted his lips to take the swollen head into his mouth and suck. Amell's hand clenched hard on his shoulder, and Anders glanced up at him. He was staring down at him, panting, enraptured, red eyes like fire and blood. "Fuck, you're beautiful," Amell said. Anders chased the taste of him, and a swirl of his tongue made Amell bite his lip.

Anders pulled through to the Fade, and let a thin film of oil coat his fingers. "I felt that," Amell said. Anders let his cock fall from his lips with a chuckle, licking spit off his lips, "That's the goal."

Anders ran his fingers through the taut muscles of Amell's ass.

"No, I meant the Fa-fuck," Amell stuttered when Anders pressed the pad of his finger against his tight hole, "Fuck me."

Anders rested his forehead on Amell's hips and pushed an obedient finger inside him. Amell groaned, and Anders groaned with him, picturing the tight heat around his cock and not just his finger. He bit Amell's hip, and started shallow thrusts he couldn't help bucking his hips in time with. The water didn't offer him any friction, and Anders didn't dare find it in his hand. He wanted this to last.

Anders sucked on Amell's hip again, nipping and licking a path over the sharp v at his hips while Amell moaned for him. "You want another?" Anders asked.

"Fuck yes," Amell said.

Anders added a second finger into his tight heat, and the hand Amell kept on his shoulder clench. Anders looked up to see him worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. "Good?" Anders asked.

"Perfect." Amell ran his hand through Anders' hair, dragging his nails over his scalp. Anders' heart raced a little faster at the thought of him fisting a hand in his hair and pulling his head back, Amell's thumb at his bottom lip to push his mouth open and-Maker Amell did it. A whine slipped out of Anders at the fantasy's fulfillment, and his hips bucked again into nothing.

He wanted friction, but he wanted whatever this was more. Anders licked the head of Amell's cock, and sank down on it in time with the thrusts of his fingers. His eyes fluttered shut, fluid dripping from the corners of his mouth, and Amell gave his hair a tug. "You look - so good like this," Amell groaned. "Fuck, Anders- I want you to fuck me."

Anders freed his fingers from him and broke from his cock, a tendril of spit still tethering them together. Anders was near gasping, and Amell had barely touched him. He felt the tension in his stomach like a knot, and grabbed for Amell to unravel it, pulling him back down under the water and onto his lap. Amell wrapped a hand around his cock, and Anders' hips jerked to chase the friction even knowing he only meant it for a guide.

Amell swept Anders cock between taut muscle of his ass, and Anders clenched his fingers in Amell's
thighs to keep from bucking up into him. Amell lowered himself onto him, no teasing, and an impassioned, 'Oh fuck,' tore from Anders' throat. The tight, hot sheath of Amell's ass around his cock was worth every fevered moan the Circle had ever made him swallow.

Amell sank down on him until his ass was snug against Anders thighs, and dropped his forehead onto Anders' shoulder, hard gasps spilling warm breath down Anders' chest. Anders ran his hands up Amell's chest, a swirl of his thumbs over his nipples making Amell writhe in his lap. Anders kept going, over his shoulders, and down to his scarred up arms. "Good?" Anders asked.

"Perfect," Amell choked out. He clasped Anders' jaw, fingers half buried in his hair, and turned his head to kiss him. It was a mess, wet lips and catching teeth, and tattered gasps when Amell started moving. Delicious friction sent pleasure rippling through Anders' cock, and built a fire in the pit of his stomach. Amell found a rhythm for them, fast but not frantic, and set a hand on Anders' knee to support himself when he leaned back.

Anders' eyes raked over his body. The mix of water and sweat that beaded on his brow, his soaked black hair that slapped against his neck with every bounce, the play of movement of his lean shoulders and the sharp but quivering muscles in his stomach. "You look-fucking-fantastic," Anders blurted.

"Yeah?" Amell asked in-between breaths.

"Yeah," Anders took hold of Amell's cock beneath the water and stroked it to the cadence they'd set.

"Fuck, Anders," Amell grabbed for his free hand, and set it to his face. Anders couldn't guess what he wanted, and slipped his fingers into his mouth. Amell moaned, and Anders held onto his jaw, loving every hot gasp that spilled over the back of his palm. Small waves crashed up against Anders' chest, and did nothing for the fevered flush on his skin.

Anders let go of Amell's cock to hold onto his ass. He dug his fingers into the taut muscle, and pulled Amell down hard to meet his every urgent thrust. Amell's gasps turned into groans, and twisted into shouts that sent shivers down Anders' spine and made the fire in his stomach burn even hotter. "Fuck, yes, I like loud." Anders decided, dragging blunt nails down Amell's thigh and jerking his hips up for another shout that sounded half a sob.

Amell dropped his free hand under the water, and the tremble that played out in his chest and his arm and marked his frantic strokes was so obscenely arousing Anders had to blink hard to see straight again. "Do it," Anders begged, driving harder and faster into that slick heat, desperate to feel it clench around him, "I want to feel it. I want to feel you."

Amell screamed around his hand. Anders dropped his fingers from his mouth, and locked them around the nape of Amell's neck, dragging him in close to feel him shudder against his chest and around his cock. Anders turned his face into Amell's hair and breathed in the few scents the water couldn't mask. Sweat, and the faintest hint of blood, the whisper from the Fade that burned in both of them.

Amell bit his earring; the sharp tug sent a shiver down Anders' spine and into his cock. Every rock of his hips made Amell tremble, and Anders felt Amell's lips move against his skin when he spoke, breathless but eager, "Come inside me. I want it. I want all of it. I want all of you." Amell licked his jaw down to his mouth, and grabbed Anders' face in his hands to pull his bottom lip between his teeth and suck hard.

Anders didn't scream. He couldn't. He moaned instead, the sound muffled against Amell's mouth. His climax felt electric, thrilling through his hands and feet. Waves of pleasure ravaged his body, and
left it in thick, satisfying spurts. Anders rode each one out with a sharp jerk of his hips and a broken
gasp. Amell kissed him, worrying at his lips with sucks and tiny bites until they felt as blissfully used
as the rest of Anders' body.

Anders eased him off his cock, and pulled him tight against his chest to hold him until the water went
cold.

"We're going to fall asleep here." Amell said.

"I don't care." Anders said.

"You'll get pruny," Amell warned him.

"Okay, I care." Anders said.

Amell fell off him and crawled out of the bath for a new bar of soap. Lazy, Anders thought. The old
one was under the water somewhere. He came back with it and they finished washing up. They
climbed out, and Amell dried off and left the washroom. He went to his armoire for a clean change
of clothes. "Do you want me to go get you dinner from the kitchens, and a change of clothes?"
Amell asked from the other room. "I think some of whatever Oghren dumped on me got on you
too."

"I'll never going to say no to you spoiling me." Anders said, ignoring his clothes pile and wrapping a
towel around his waist instead. "I'm not putting pants on while you're gone though, so if someone
walks in on me that's their problem."

Anders leaned against the doorframe to the washroom while Amell finished dressing.

"Alright," Amell hesitated when he finished dressing, and instead of heading for the door, came back
over to him. Anders stomach knotted. Amell kissed him; that wasn't too bad. That was safe. "You're
amazing." Amell said.

"I know." Anders joked.

"What do you want for dessert? Apple something?" Amell asked.

"Mmm, apple something." Anders said.

"Alright. I'll be right back." Amell said. "No snooping!" He called back as he left.

"I'm gonna snoop!" Anders yelled after him.

Anders was not going to snoop. There was nothing for him to snoop through. He cleaned up the
ritual site while he waited for Amell to come back, letting towels soak up whatever kind of liquid
Oghren had dumped on them. He wasn't going to pick them back up, though. Amell could do that.
Or the servants could.

Anders lit a fire in the hearth and threw himself down on the couch. Amell came back with a bowl of
stew, a bowl of mashed potatoes, a tankard of ale, and an apple something for him. It was an apple
tart, more specifically. He also brought him a new change of clothes, but Anders was in no hurry to
leave his towel. "So I have a question." Anders said as he tried the stew. It was beef stew with
dumplings, and everything he never knew he needed.

"I have an answer," Amell said.
"What was with that question you asked Compassion? The one about possessing me?" Anders asked.

"It was just a question." Amell said.

"Yeah, but what kind of question is that?" Anders asked. "You don't seriously think a spirit of Compassion is going to possess anyone, do you?"

"Not violently," Amell said.

"Seriously?" Anders asked, "I really don't think you have any right to talk here."

"It was just a question." Amell said.

"But you had a reason to ask it." Anders said, "Do you think I'm that weak, or Compassion is that dangerous?"

"Neither. I think that spirits get attached to their spirit healers. I think some spirits have trouble letting go when their healer dies. I just wanted to hear yours say otherwise, and it-she did." Amell said. "I don't doubt you, Anders. I saw the storm you cast, and the bolt before it. I know you're more than capable. It was just a question."

"... Have you ever seen that happen?" Anders asked, "Did your spirit healer blood mage friend die and... get possessed?"


"Someone else then?" Anders asked.

"It was just a question, Anders." Amell said.

Anders decided to let it go. He ate the rest of his dinner with Amell, and spoke of other things, and changed into his clothes when they finished. "I think it's too late for anyone to come after me," Amell said, "Do you want to play Wicked Grace?"

"I'm terrible at Wicked Grace," Anders said.

"Do you want to play strip Wicked Grace?" Amell asked.

Anders played, and lost, but he also ended up having sex, so really it was more of a win. It left him exhausted, and while he didn't remember falling asleep afterwards, but he must have because he woke up to the scratch of a quill moving over parchment, and the soft glow of mage light. Amell was sitting in bed next to him, writing in his journal. He stopped when he noticed he was awake.

"Morning," Amell said.

"Liar," Anders yawned. "How long was I out?"

"An hour, maybe," Amell said.

"Time for the old walk of shame then," Anders said, stretching. "Do you know where my smalls went?"

"Behind the headboard, I think." Amell said. "... you don't have to go you know."

"That's not very sneaky." Anders said. "You don't think me slipping out of your quarters in the
morning is going to raise eyebrows?"

"I think the servants are going to gossip either way, and they're the only ones who will notice."
Amell said. "... I'd like it if you stayed."

Staying sounded dangerous, but Anders didn't really want to get up now that he was lying down, and if it made Amell happy... "Then I guess I'm staying. But no cuddling."

Amell smiled at him and went back to writing in his journal. Anders laid back down, and listened to the scratch of his quill until he fell asleep.

He had only good dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart for this chapter!

These are two optional Apples and Apostates' Chapters from Amell's perspective set between this chapter and the next if you'd like to follow both in chronological order. Both have links back to this chapter.

Ma'Arlath - 9:31 Dragon 27 Matrinalis
Just a Flame - 9:31 Dragon 28 Matrinalis
Far Afield

Chapter Notes

Hello reader! Thank you so much for supporting this story. We hit 100 kudos! Elvish translations are in the bottom chapter notes. Thank you so much for all your comments, kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, and as always, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 2 Parvulis Afternoon

The North Road - Near the Turnoble Estate

Anders did not like walking. Even in his very fine boots, with his not-so-fine staff for a walking stick, walking was the worst. His socks got sweaty, his feet hurt, and it was Kingsway, and it was cold. Anders did not like Kingsway. Sure, Amell had gotten him a thick woolen scarf, and his name-day was coming up, but nothing made a cold wind on a cold sweat any better.

Yet here he was. Walking. Sweating. Cold. Uncomfortable. About to fight a large horde of darkspawn marauding through the countryside. Amell had better make good on that pony.

"Are all humans so incompetent?" Velanna complained. She had a powerful stride: driving her staff into the dirt with every step and kicking up dust. It matched her temper, Anders thought. Nathaniel ranged ahead, as always, while Sigrun and Oghren trailed behind. "Why can this Eddelbrek not defend his own holdings?"

"Eddelbrek is a lord, not an arl, or even a bann." Amell explained, "He has men enough to defend his person and little more."

"Then his reach surpasses his grasp. How very human of him." Velanna said, her voice dripping with disdain. "Why do we care if he suffers for it?"

"Because he doesn't. The people do. The Wardens own these lands, and I own the Wardens." There was something terribly attractive about the possessive way Amell spoke, Anders thought to himself. "They're my responsibility."

"Then why have you not been responsible for them?" Velanna demanded. Maker's breath the woman was persistent. How did Nate stand it? "Why have your soldiers not already dealt with this threat?"

"My soldiers are not Grey Wardens." Amell said, "We are. Var vir shivanas nadas, Velanna." The elf thing, though. That was less attractive, and more just weird.

"Na vhenan'ara nuvenin revas, tel'shivanas." Velanna said.

"Ar dirth." Amell said, glancing at Anders.

"Is that me? Are we talking about me now?" Anders wondered.

"I called you a coward." Velanna said helpfully.
"She didn't say that." Amell promised.

"So what's that like?" Anders wondered. "You know living with a dead person inside your head and all?"

"Hard to explain," Amell said unhelpfully.

"Well give it your best shot." Anders said, shoving him. "Come on, I'm curious. You're not allowed to say no to me."

"Gee, Anders, that's no way to talk to your Commanding Officer." Sigrun teased.

"Oh go away. We're not at the Vigil, I can say whatever I want." Anders wove his arms through Amell's and leaned on him. "Can't I, smoochie-kins?"

"Anything you want, sweetie pie." Amell said.

"Well, here comes my breakfast. Hope it tastes better the second time around." Oghren said.

"I think it's cute!" Sigrun said, skipping ahead to walk next to Anders. "I hate that I never get to see you two be sweet together."

"I really hope you don't think we actually talk like that." Anders said, letting go of Amell.

"I bet you do." Sigrun said.

"We do." Amell said.

"We do not." Anders said. "Tell me about your dead elf thing."

"I'm not sure what there is to tell." Amell said. "The words are just there when I need them, and the magic feels innate. Like I've always had it. If I didn't know I wasn't an elf I wouldn't be able to tell you which parts were me and which were memories."

"Sounds creepy." Anders said. He didn't like the thought of not being the only person in his head.

"When I first made the deal, I spoke nothing but elvish for a week, except I didn't realize I was doing it. I couldn't make myself stop." Amell said. "It was a little disorienting."

" Fucking weird is what it was," Oghren said. "We had to stop in the middle of our mission and go sit in this Dalish flower power circle until Numb Nuts here learned how to talk again. You should have seen the way Prince Pike-Twirler was freaking out, thinking he'd have to lead us if the Boss never went back to normal. Heheh, he-..."

Oghren glanced at Amell and trailed off, taking a drink from his flask instead. "Well. Whatever. Nevermind."

"You can tell the story, Oghren. I don't mind." Amell said.

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't wanna think about him much either." Oghren said. " Ain't enough cheese in Orlais to go with that man's whine."

"Smoke ahead," Nathaniel came back from the front of their squad to tell them, "I think we've found our farmstead."

The Turnoble Estate was in a sad state when they came across it. The smoke had led them most of
the way, so Anders wasn't surprised they found no survivors. The small fences that had kept in farm animals had done nothing to keep out darkspawn. The ground was ashen and blighted, the doors of every farmhouse they passed kicked in, or torn off their hinges. Before many of them, the men of the house, pitifully armed with pitchforks and torches, had made their last stand. The women of the house were nowhere to be seen.

It made Anders sick. Any of many tracks in the dirt and rubble could have been from one of the poor ladies, dragged to a fate worse than death. Nate would have known. He was their tracker. Anders glanced at him, but his expression was as grim as it always was. Anders recalled Amell's morbid promise to Sigrun in the Silverite Mines, and decided it wasn't so morbid after all.

"Do you think they're trying to... repopulate? After we destroyed their nest in Kal'Hirol?" Sigrun asked.

"It's possible." Amell said, putting on his helmet. Everyone who wore one did likewise.

Further on, beside a well in the middle of the small cluster of farmhouses they found the body of a templar. Just looking at him made Anders feel queasy. His armor was in shambles, the chest cavity caved in so the Sword of Mercy decorating the platemail was buried in his ribcage. The half of his face that Anders could see was a mess of bone, blood, and brain. Something had gnawed him into obscurity.

Amell knelt beside the corpse, "Ser Darrian," Amell found the man's name on a letter on his person. His hands glowed an ethereal blue, and Anders felt the swell of the Fade, and a moment later Ser Darrian stood, one eye rolling out of his socket and landing in a crevice in his armor, where it stayed. "He died recently," Amell gauged the corpse as it knelt to pick up its fallen sword and shield. "Be alert."

Take a deep breath, Anders told himself. Preferably upwind. He knew it was useful. Extraordinarily useful. Amell's control over his necromantic creations was parallel to having another sword of the living, breathing variety on their side. The fact that it was disgusting and just short of unholy was just an unfortunate side effect of very talented magic. There was a spirit in there somewhere. A nice spirit of Valor or Fortitude or something. Think about that.

When he was sure the corpse wouldn't make him sick, Anders kept on. An undead templar was something out of his nightmares, and it was giving him chills. He could almost swear he heard the corpse breathing, whispering. His skin started to feel greasy and clammy all at once, and Anders realized too late it wasn't the corpse making him feel that way.

"Darkspawn," Amell warned them.

The darkspawn had laid a trap. Again. Anders tried not to let that thought sit, but sit it did. The darkspawn were talking, laying traps and ambushes, and exacting them with brutal efficiency. A dozen genlocks sprung up from the rocks and rubble, throwing smoke bombs that concealed half a dozen shrieks, their shrill cries deafening the battle field. Ears ringing, Anders drew a repulsion glyph beneath his feet in time to catch the first shriek that came for him. Sigrun hadn't been so lucky.

A shriek had tackled her, bladed hands taking wild swipes at her face. Sigrun narrowly managed to block them with her arms, but the beast was shredding her armor fast. Drawing on his connection to the Fade, Anders built up a wave of ice in his hands. His fingers were numb when he released it, freezing the shriek atop Sigrun and two more behind it. The little legionnaire crawled out from her attacker, drew her axes, and promptly shattered it. She spared him a wave before engaging another.

It had all happened in the span of a few seconds. When those seconds were up, the horde grew,
another dozen hurlocks bursting forth from the farmhouses like cockroaches. One of them looked to be wearing dragonbone armor, and he brandished a poleaxe above his head, screaming, "Kill them! Kill them for the Mother!"

"Oghren, Sigrun! Shrieks! Velanna, Nathaniel, genlocks!" Amell yelled, and the battle split apart. Amell left them to charge the hurlock commander, and the five hurlocks with him, while Ser Darrian charged for the remaining six. It left Anders with both everything and nothing. Amell never gave him a target; the entire battle field was his to manage.

Anders cast barriers for Sigrun, Oghren, and Amell, and looked around for Velanna and Nathaniel. They were in the fields behind a downed fence, a short distance away. Nathaniel was already on his knees, no doubt the work of the three genlock corpses surrounding him. He was still fighting, tough bastard, a line of arrows planted in the ground before him he drew and fired with alarming precision.

Velanna was standing in front him, her arms and legs wrapped in roots that lashed out wildly at the remaining genlocks who circled both of them, jeering. It took Anders longer than he would have liked to reach Nathaniel's side. The ground beneath him had turned to mud, soaking up every drop of spilled darkspawn blood, and Anders boots fought him when he tried to escape it. Once he was free, he still had get through a ring of genlocks.

Velanna cleared a path for him with a lash from one of the vines about her arms. Anders ran, and dropped a repulsion glyph underneath Nate before he knelt. The tiny darkspawn bastards had hamstrung him, Anders saw. Nathaniel's left boot was ruined, along with the ligaments in his ankle, and the back of his right leg had been cleaved open. Anders grimaced, a sympathy pain making his own legs hurt at the sight. Nathaniel should have been writhing in pain, not fighting from his knees. Tough bastard indeed.

Anders dropped a paralysis glyph between the three of them and the remaining genlocks, summoned Compassion. He'd only just started channeling her healing energy when the tremors started.

"Fenedhis," Velanna said.


"That's the name." Anders said, knitting the mangled muscle as quickly as he dared.

"Ogre!" Came Amell's warning from across the field. "Oghren! Ogre!"

"Kinda busy!" Oghren yelled back.

"Faster, Anders." Velanna said.

"Not helping." Anders barked at her.

"Anders," Nate said again, more urgently. "Stop. You're not going to get it in time. Get back to the Commander, both of you. Maybe it won't notice me."

Anders shook his head. A few moments later, and he had to shout to be heard over the quakes of the ogre's footfalls, "I've almost got it."

Somewhere near, Anders heard Velanna swearing in elvhen, and the sound of boughs and branches breaking as the beast broke through her magic. When at last the wound closed beneath his fingers, Anders grabbed Nate's arm and dragged him to his feet. Behind them, Velanna screamed. Anders reached through to the Fade to grasp the essence of ice, weaving it about his fingers as he turned.
The ogre was right on him; Anders released his spell half-formed in a panic.

It saved his life. The ogre's hands crashed down on the wall of ice, instead of his head. Sleet and icicles rained down on him as the ogre beat against his barrier, breaking it faster than Anders could reform it. Then the ogre broke through.

The ogre grabbed him in one hand, and lifted him off his feet. Anders dropped his staff, and tried to summon fire, lightning, ice, but he couldn't focus around the massive fingers crushing his chest. With startling clarity, Anders understood how Ser Darrian had died. Ser Darrian died how Anders was going to die. At least Nate was alright, Anders thought. A rather selfless last thought. Good for him.

The compression on his chest grew tighter, and Anders took what he was sure to be his final breath, when all at once the ogre stopped. The giant darkspawn was still staring at him, but the terrible malice was gone from its jet black eyes, and replaced with... nothing. With stiff, rigid movements, the ogre dropped him, turned around, and turned its wrath on its fellow darkspawn.

Amell. Anders grabbed his staff and picked himself up, casting a quick restorative spell to heal his bruised ribs. He turned around and found Amell a stone's throw away, his sword and shield abandoned for a dagger. Around one hand coiled the energy that tethered him to Ser Darrian, a grey-blue to match the corpse's frozen lips. The other was wreathed in an angry crimson, and tied him not only to the ogre, but to the half score of darkspawn he'd abandoned to come to Anders' aid.

They were seizing, caught in a miasma of red, and Anders didn't want to think about how much blood Amell had let to hold both spells. In the time it had taken Anders to heal Nathaniel, the darkspawn had become a multitude. Genlocks sprung from every rock, shrieks from every shadow, and the farmhouses held more hurlocks than they had humans. Everyone was struggling. Anders couldn't decide who to help, and cast a barrier in a wide net to protect all six of them.

The hurlock commander still lived, caught writhing in Amell's spell, but in the time Amell had taken to bind the ogre, it shook off the hold and charged with its weapon raised on high. Anders screamed. He didn't know what came out of his mouth, but Amell understood him. Anders cast a frost spell, and Amell turned in time to catch the darkspawn's poleaxe on his chest.

Anders' frost spell connected, and ice swept over the hurlock commander, so cold the air around it crystallized and turned to snow. The hurlock commander froze solid, a white statue on the battlefield, with Amell still impaled on its poleaxe. Anders broke into a run, summoning more frost to freeze the remaining darkspawn shaking free of Amell's miasma. Because it wore off. Because all spells wore off. Not because Amell was weak.

Amell hadn't moved by the time Anders reached him, pinned in place by the hurlock alpha's blade. Anders shattered the frozen darkspawn with a hard blow from his staff, but the poleaxe remained in place, axe embedded in Amell's chest piece. That was fine. He was fine. It was just stuck in the dragonscales. That was all.

Amell grabbed the poleaxe, and before Anders could tell him not to, wrenched it free of his armor with a strength that had to be amplified with magic. A spray of blood followed the extracted blade. Amell took two faulty steps backwards, and collapsed.

"No! Don't you dare!" Anders screamed, dropping onto his knees to catch Amell before he hit the ground.

Amell, as it turned out, didn't dare. He landed on his knees, and caught himself on his hands, both miraculously still encased in the dark energies that tied him to his servants. Amell took off his helmet, snarling in pain. Anders dropped his staff and held Amell's shoulders to keep him from falling over.

Amell's face bore a ghastly pallor Anders had only ever seen on the dead, and the undead. The rest of him was drenched in red. He looked as if he'd been drained of all the blood in his body, only to bathe in it. He was going to go into shock any second now. It was Anders' fault. It was all Anders' fault. The pride demon had taken blood from both Nathaniel and Oghren to bind, and an ogre was only slightly smaller than one.

The right side of Amell's chest piece was indented. His ribs were almost certainly broken, and his right lung had been bruised if his harsh breaths were any indication. Anders had heard the sound before. Had been the reason for the sound before. Anders shook himself.

He had to get Amell's armor off. He couldn't heal broken ribs with indented armor in the way. Damn this armor. Anders hated this fucking armor, and all of its fucking buckles, and the fact that it was fucking worthless and didn't help at all with not getting fucking stabbed. Anders drew the glyphs for a lifeward to keep Amell from dying on him, and a repulsion glyph overlaid with a glyph of warding to keep them safe, and then fought with Amell's armor.

He had it off in under a minute, but a minute was an eternity with injuries this bad. Anders ripped Amell's already ripped tunic off to give him a good look at the wound, and regretted it. His skin was split on the right side of his chest, pink muscle, red blood, white bone where there should have been tawny skin and black hair. Patient. Make him a patient. Make him not Amell. Anders summoned Compassion, but the healing magic he channeled washed over the gash on Amell's chest like oil on water.

Anders stared at his glowing hands, dumbfounded. She wouldn't. She wouldn't refuse to heal him. Compassion healed everyone. Not her. It wasn't her. Anders looked at Amell, and the sheath of blood on his arm. Tendrils of red still tied Amell to the ogre, and kept it bound. The same energies kept his wounds open, and flowing freely.

"Stop!" Anders took off his scarf and pressed it to Amell's wound to do what little he could to staunch the flow of blood without magic. "Amell, stop! Let go of the spell!"

Stubbornly, stupidly, Amell refused, and the idiot could barely manage that. Anders wouldn't have noticed the imperceptible shake of Amell's head if he wasn't kneeling right next to him.

Anders caught Amell's face in his hands to tear his eyes away from the battle, "Amell, let go or I can't heal you."

Amell opened his mouth to say something, but the sound that escaped him wasn't quite a word. Unable to speak, he pointed.

Anders followed his finger. Amell was pointing at the ogre. A horde of darkspawn, nearly two score, were struggling to take it down. Nathaniel was picking them off with his arrows, and Velanna her nature magic, but she was wounded, one arm hanging limp at her side. Less than a stone's throw away, Sigrun was barely holding her own against maybe two or three shrieks. On the other side of the field, Oghren looked too busy with three hurlocks to help. Amell's hold on the ogre was the only thing keeping the ambush from becoming a massacre.

It didn't matter. If Amell died, the ogre would be free anyway. Better he lived, and then they could think of something else. Try to retreat. "Amell please," Anders begged, "Let me heal you."

Amell sucked in a rickety breath and reached for him, clasping the back of his neck. Anders let Amell pull him forward to speak into his ear, expecting an order, or some sort of instruction. "I'm-
"Sorry," Amell whispered.

"For what?" Anders asked. He could have thought of any number of things Amell had to be sorry for, but kissing him wasn't one of them.

It was easily the worst kiss of Anders' life, but he still didn't think Amell needed to be sorry for it. He tasted exclusively of blood. It was on his tongue, on his lips, in his mouth. The scent of it was overpowering, the texture like a gel that kept Anders from actually feeling him, and his timing was laughably terrible.

But Anders didn't laugh. Against his better judgment, sense of texture, taste, and smell, Anders kissed him back. Aside from their imminent deaths, there was no immediate danger. He could spare a second, if only a second, to reassure Amell he was here, and he was going to take care of him.

One second stretched into two, which stretched into three, and Anders found it hard to pull away. Hard to want to pull away. His head felt heavy, his thoughts sluggish. There was an urgency, wasn't there? For something... But it was so hard to think about anything but Amell. Amell was the only thing that mattered. Amell was the only thing he cared about. Anders would have done anything and everything for him.

Then, very suddenly, Amell didn't matter at all. The darkspawn mattered. Anders stood, amplifying his voice with his magic so it would carry across the battlefield. "Nathaniel, Sigrun, harry the darkspawn towards the templar! Oghren, kill the ogre now while it's enslaved then fall back! Velanna, flank them so I can call down a firestorm!" The words felt scripted, like he wasn't the one saying them, only repeating what someone was telling him. Anders couldn't explain how the strategy had come to him, but he also couldn't care.

Everyone obeyed. No one even questioned him. Anders didn't question himself. He was halfway through channeling his spell when he realized what had happened. By then, the ogre was dead, the remaining scores of darkspawn clustered about Ser Darrian, mindlessly attempting to kill a corpse without their hurlock commander to lead them. Anders released the inferno, and the pillar crashing down on the darkspawn and Ser Darrian, setting them all aflame. When the hardier darkspawn who survived the initial blast attempted to escape the firestorm, Velanna's magic was there to throw them back in. Nathaniel and the others were picking off the few survivors who refused to be herded, and within moments, the battle was over.

A splitting headache doubled Anders over. He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to fight it off. His throat was raw, and his tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth. He tried to talk on his own, but words wouldn't come to him. He couldn't think of anything to say. He couldn't think at all. Anders sucked in a breath, panicking, and let it out in a scream.

"Andraste's flaming knicker damned fucking shit fucker!" Anders choked out. Thank the Maker. He could talk. He could think. He hadn't completely lost his mind to whatever compulsion Amell had put him under. Anders put his hands on his knees and threw up, the numb, single-minded purpose he'd felt replaying over and over in his head.

"Anders!" Sigrun called.

Anders held up a hand to tell her to wait, and kept retching.

Sigrun grabbed his hand and tugged, unconcerned with the stream of vomit coming out of his mouth. "Anders, please hurry! Throw up later! Please!"

Later. Later was good. He could worry about what happened later. Anders wiped his mouth off with
the back of his hand, and let her drag him back to where Amell was lying on the ground, unconscious. The lifeward underneath Amell was pulsing faintly to the rhythm of a heartbeat, and the only thing keeping him alive.

Oghren was hugging his battle axe. Nathaniel was kneeling next to Amell, keeping pressure on the wound with Anders' scarf. Velanna was pacing, still cradling a broken arm, her short quick steps taking her nowhere.

Anders ran over, and knelt next to Amell, but there was nothing left in him to summon Compassion with. After the firestorm, he hadn't the mana. Anders dug into his satchel for a potion, and hissed at the sudden sharp pain he met with. He pulled his hand out, and found it cut with broken glass, and dripping blood and lyrium. The ogre must have crushed his satchel and all his potions when it picked him up.

"Velanna, I need a potion. Lyrium," Anders said.

"I don't have any left," Velanna said, and glanced back at Amell. Realization lit her eyes. "No! Mala halani nadas! Do something! Heal him! Push yourself!" Her voice reached a fevered pitch, and she cut herself off. Velanna ran her good hand through her hair, and started pacing again.

"How? I don't have any-" Anders stopped. Idiot. He was an idiot. Anders pulled a shard of broken glass out of his hand. The cut was just there. It didn't come from the cut. Anders found his heartbeat and drew from it. He refreshed the lifeward with blood magic, and that alone felt draining. "I can't-I can't summon a spirit with this. I'll kill myself. I barely understand how blood magic works. He was conscious before, he walked me through it—it wasn't this bad!"

Oghren took off his gauntlet, and thrust his arm in his face. Nathaniel drew one of his daggers and held it out to him.

"I still don't know how to do this!" Anders yelled at them. "I've never used someone else's blood before. I'm not Amell! If I—"

"Shut the fuck up, and cast the fucking spell." Oghren said. He grabbed Nathaniel's dagger and cut his wrist like it was nothing. Blood founted messily onto Amell's unconscious face.

"What if I kill you?" Anders asked.

"Do I look like I give a shit?" Oghren asked.

"No. Stop it, why would you risk that? Try to do more than one person." Sigrun said. She took off her gauntlet, and thrust out her own arm, already bleeding from the damage the shrieks had done to her, "Amell casts lots of spells with his own blood. I don't know anything about magic, but both of us should be more than enough to summon a spirit. You can do it, Anders. I watch you heal all the time. You're a great healer."

"Wait." Velanna said. She sucked in a breath, calmed down enough to stop pacing, "Find both their heartbeats and tie them together before you cast the spell, or you won't pull from both."

"How do you-" Anders started to ask.

"He's been teaching me." Velanna said. She squared her good shoulder defiantly, but none of them were about to say anything. "I don't know any healing magic, but I know that's what you have to do to pull from more than one source at a time."

Anders did what she said. He found Oghren's heartbeat first, and Sigrun's second. Their hearts were
both beating fast, though not in tandem. He wove the two heartbeats together, and waited until they were a single pulse to draw from them. To judge from Compassion's reaction to Amell, Anders guessed the man had been lying when he'd claimed spirits didn't care about blood magic. Anders hoped Compassion trusted him enough to answer.

She was there when Anders summoned her, just as she always was. Blood magic healing a blood mage, but she was there. Anders didn't allow himself a sigh of relief. He still had to finish channeling her without killing his friends. Anders focused the benevolent energy on Amell's chest wound, and watched the rent flesh slowly knit back together beneath his fingers. He kept an eye on Oghren and Sigrun as well, hoping the spell wouldn't take more than a pint of blood from either of them to finish.

He had no way of knowing. Their blood wasn't gathering in a bowl anywhere, it was swirling about his hands, mingling with Compassion's white glow, dissipating into the air around them as it was drained of its power. No one spoke. Anders channelled the spell for close to a quarter hour before Amell's wound finally closed. The fractured and broken ribs, the bruised lung, the full body inflammation and shock that had knocked him unconscious: Compassion erased all of it.

Anders stopped channeling her. Sigrun and Oghren sat down.

"Woo, boy am I dizzy." Sigrun said. She looked a little green, and held her head up with one hand, "Did it work? Is he okay? Why is he still asleep? Can you wake him up?"

"No. Not with the amount of blood he lost. He should keep sleeping." Anders said.

"This hardly seems the place," Nathaniel said. "We should get him into one of the houses. Barricade ourselves in and take refuge there until it's safe for us to travel again."

"Who's going to carry him?" Sigrun asked.

"Not you. And not Oghren." Anders said. "You two need to keep sitting, for at least another quarter hour."

"I could carry him, were my arm not broken." Velanna said. "I can channel my magic inward now, enough for a simple test of strength."

"... Anders, would you mind healing her with my blood?" Nathaniel asked.

"I-... you know what, sure. Fuck it." Anders said.

Nathaniel drew another dagger, and made a very precise cut on his forearm. Anders drew from him, and cast a simple regenerative spell that healed Velanna's arm. Her ribs were bruised on the same side, Anders could sense, but unlike Amell she hadn't suffered any contusions or fractures. Anders healed her bruises as well. Velanna gave her arm an experimental flex. "Ma serannas, both of you."

"Before we move him, we should do a sweep to make sure no more darkspawn are lurking." Nathaniel said. "I don't know why we didn't sense them sooner, but we should be cautious not to fall into the same trap twice."

"We kind of already did," Sigrun said.

"A quarter hour. Then you can all get up." Anders said.

With nothing else to do, they waited.
Elvish Translations
Var vir shivanas nadas: Our way must be one of duty/It's our responsibility.
Na vhenan'ara nuvenin revas, tel'shivanas: Your boyfriend wants freedom, not
duty/responsibilities.
Ar dirth: I know.
Fenedhis: Fuck (Basically)
Mala halani nadas!: You have to help him now/immediately.
Ma serannas: Thank you.
Far Afield Part Two

Chapter Notes

The song in this chapter is my adapted version of "Somewhere There's a Mother." No one seemed to mind the song last time, so here we are again. Woops. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, and as always, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 2 Parvulis Late Afternoon

The Turnoble Estate

Anders was not happy. There were a lot of reasons for that, but the first and foremost reason was lying in the dirt in front of him in dragonscale greaves and a torn up tunic. Healed or not, Amell was a mess, and not just because of his horrible helmet hair. An ugly pink scar ran across the right side of his chest, a remnant of the battle Anders couldn't heal. It reminded Anders of his own chest, the ogre squeezing the life out of him, and how Amell had saved his life. He should be grateful, but he wasn't.

He may as well own up to being a maleficar now. They'd all joined in on the blood magic-merry-go-round. After Anders had healed Velanna's broken arm, Velanna had offered up her blood to heal the lacerations the shrieks had left on Sigrun's arms. Now they were all sitting around an unconscious Amell, woozy and drinking and generally making poor choices. Anders needed a nap.

"Do you guys want to hear a song we used to sing in the Legion?" Sigrun offered to break the silence.

"Please," Velanna said.

"Go for it, hot stuff," Oghren said, taking a swig from his flask.

"Why not?" Nathaniel said.

Anders could have done without the song, but he didn't say anything. He wasn't in the mood to argue, or do anything but sit in the dirt and pick broken glass out of his hand while he tried not to think.

"Somewhere there's a mother,
Crying for her daughter.
She's a legionnaire,
They sent her out to slaughter.
But don't you cry for her,
She don't need your sympathy.
She's a legionnaire,
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a father,
Crying for his son.
His son's a legionnaire,
In a war that can't be won.
But don't you cry for him,
He don't need your sympathy.
He's a legionnaire,
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a husband,
Crying for his wife.
His wife's a legionnaire,
And she's fighting for her life.
But don't you cry for her,
She don't need your sympathy.
She's a legionnaire,
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a woman,
Crying all alone.
Her lover was a legionnaire,
And now he's lost to Stone.
But don't you cry for him,
He wouldn't want your sympathy.
He died a legionnaire,
And that's the best that dust can be."

Everyone clapped, except for Anders, and not just because his hand was a mess. Why did every song have to be so bloody depressing? Anders agreed with Oghren. Their lives were bad enough without adding in horrible holidays and mopey music.

"I always really liked that one." Sigrun said, accepting a drink from Oghren's flask when he offered it. "If you replace legionnaire with warden, it kind of works for us, don't you think?"

"You're more than just a duster, or a legionnaire, or a warden, Sigrun." Velanna said kindly. Anders looked up, but no pigs were flying over head, about to shit on him. That was good. Pig shit in his hair sounded awful. "You don't have to wear a meaningless title to prove yourself to anyone."

"I just... think it's a nice song." Sigrun mumbled, passing the flask to Nathaniel. She picked up Anders' discarded scarf, and wiped the blood off Amell's face with it, "Amell would have liked it."

"I liked it." Nathaniel promised, taking a drink and handing the flask to Velanna. "Thank you for sharing. And our titles aren't meaningless."

"Of course the human noble would say that." Velanna said. She took a drink with the rest of them. Anders was stunned. Maybe some people could change. Not Amell, but some people.

Nathaniel ignored the jab. "Being a Warden means something. It's fine to be proud of it. We may not have saved these people, but these darkspawn will threaten no one else. I counted almost two score, all dead."

"You keep track of how many darkspawn you kill?" Anders asked. Velanna handed him the flask, and he took a greedy gulp with the assumption he'd earned it. The fire running down his throat and into his stomach did nothing for him. "We should compete."

"Sparkles, every one of us would whip your ass," Oghren said, grabbing his flask back. "You're the healer, dumbass. You kill maybe one for our five, not counting that firestorm thing back there."
"Indeed. That was tactically brilliant, Anders," Nathaniel said.

Anders gave him a queasy smile and said nothing.

"It makes no difference how many we kill when they breed like rats beneath the earth." Velanna said. "Unless we strike preemptively, our efforts are in vain. This horde should have been scouted out sooner. Amell is making poor use of his soldiers, spreading them thin between the roads and the farmlands and the city. He should pick one and guard it well, not fail all three."

"Hey, shut up." Anders said. "He's trying, okay? This just ... went to shit. This whole thing was just shit."

"So Sparkles," Oghren said, draining the last of his hip flask and pulling a second flask out from inside his chest armor, "I got a question."

"Whatever it is, no." Anders said.

"That bit back there, where you grew balls and a brain, and came up with a plan to save our sorry hides," Oghren said, passing him the new flask. "The firestorm, the orders, 'harry this, flank that'? Since when do you know shit about strategy?"

Kittens. Puppies. Happy thoughts, Anders. He took a long drink from the flask. It tasted like nothing, not even fire at this point. Anders passed it off, "Since an hour or so ago, obviously," Anders said. Maker's mercy, please let him drop it.

"Nuh uh." Oghren said, waggling a sausage-shaped finger at him. No such luck. Anders never had any luck. "I looked over when you were yelling out orders. I saw the pretty red lipstick you were wearing. That wasn't you at all, was it?"

"What are you talking about?" Sigrun asked.

"I'm talking about how the Boss puts more than just his dick in Sparkles' mouth," Oghren said, "Those were the Boss's orders back there, I'd bet my balls on it. Seen him do it before. Use blood magic to steal someone's voice, make 'em say shit they wouldn't normally say."

"Is this true?" Velanna asked.

Everyone stared at him. Bile gathered like a rock in Anders' throat and made his throat muscles quiver. He swallowed twice to force it back down, and took a deep breath through his nose. "Funny story, I really don't want to talk about it." Anders said.

"He did." Velanna decided. "He held two blood slaves and one undead servant, all while grievously wounded. That's fairly impressive, considering he had complex commands for each minion."

"So hey, remember how Nate just said titles matter?" Anders asked. "Maybe we don't call me Amell's blood slave or minion anymore."

"Did he speak through you, or just put the will to fight in your head?" Velanna asked.

"What was it like?" Sigrun asked eagerly.

"Could have sworn I already said this, but I really don't want to talk about it." Anders said.

"Why not? Did it feel bad?" Sigrun asked. "Did it hurt?"

"The red lipstick Oghren mentioned, this was blood, correct?" Velanna asked. They weren't even
listening to him. "Do you know if the blood had to be in your mouth for him to have control of your voice?"

"I don't want to fucking talk about it, okay!?" Anders yelled. It shut all of them up. Good. Anders shoved himself off the ground, ignoring their surprised expressions. "I'm going to go take a piss or something." Anders muttered.

Anders walked away from them. The battlefield was a mess to cross. The field they'd fought in was littered with the bodies of genlocks and shrieks, and enough blood had been spilled to turn the ground into a sludge of black and brown, sucking up his boots with every step and making his departure far less dramatic than it could have been. Past the field, in the center of the small cluster of farmhouses was the wreckage of Anders' firestorm.

The small stone well had been singed an angry black. In a ten meter circle all around the well, the ground was black, the bodies of darkspawn piled high. Hurlocks, genlocks, shrieks, all of them burnt to into crisp, unrecognizable lumps. The ogre was the one exception, it's corpse like a black boulder in their midst. The smell of charcoal and cooked flesh was in the air, but it hardly bothered Anders now.

It had worked. They'd won. That was something, at least.

"Anders, wait," Nathaniel called after him, following him across the field and back to the farmhouses. "We shouldn't travel alone, not after that ambush. There might be more darkspawn about."

"Fine," Anders walked around one the farmhouses and leaned against a window sill. He freed his cock from his trousers to piss on the wall, and didn't really care what Nate did in the meantime. Anders was still pissing when he decided to look in the window, and saw the bodies. "Maker's mercy," Anders said.

He shook himself off in a hurry and fixed his trousers. Inside the house, the dark silhouettes of women were swaying idly from the rafters in the main room. There were two that Anders could see, and doubtless more in the other houses. "Nate, inside. Maker-they're-... they hung them. Just like in the mines."

"What?" Nate walked over to look in the window. Anders summoned a small ball of mage light, and sent it through the glass. It lit up the inside of the house, and illuminated the women. Their clothes were ripped, their bodies bruised and bloodied. Their faces were pale and bloated, their mouths open. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and purple.

"Ashes we were, and ashes we become. Maker give these women a place at your side." Nathaniel said quietly. "At least the darkspawn didn't take them. I'll cut them down and lay them out with the men. We can make a pyre later. Give me a hand?"

"Alright." Anders said. Anything was better dealing with the fact that he'd literally lost his mind an hour ago. Anders kept his light summoned, and followed Nate into the farmhouse. The smell hit him like a bad analogy. It was awful, basically. Burnt flesh and charcoal were far more preferable to the raw stench of death, which smelled like shit and rot. Nate found a chair, and set it between the two women.

"Do you want me to catch them...?" Anders asked.

"I'd appreciate it," Nathaniel said. "It feels disrespectful to just let them fall."
"Alright," Anders took up a spot under the first woman, and Nathaniel drew a dagger from his hip. Anders listened to the rhythmic slice of his dagger sawing through the rope, the strands snapping one by one until the woman dropped down into his arms. She landed with a loud moan from the gases in her body expelling, and Nathaniel fell off the chair he was standing on with a high-pitched shriek.

"It's just gas," Anders said. He should have laughed. Ordinarily, Nate's reaction would have been hilarious, but he didn't have it in him today.

"Right," Nathaniel said, rubbing at his chest. "Just gas. Right. Okay. Can you get her outside or do you need me to take her?"

"I got her." Anders said, dragging the woman out by her armpits. He laid her down on the ground, and ignored the stain she left on his trousers. He went back inside and helped Nate with the second corpse. They went through the rest of the five farmhouses like that, and dragged out thirteen women in total, five of them young girls. They also found a genlock emissary, huddled over a bowl of blood and channeling a spell. Nathaniel killed it with a quick dagger to the back of its neck.

"Do you suppose that emissary was the reason we couldn't sense the darkspawn here?" Nathaniel asked.

"Probably. I don't know enough about blood magic to know if that's possible, but why else would it be in here casting with this?" Anders nudged the bowl of blood with his toe.

"... Anders-" Nathaniel started, voice uncharacteristically soft.

"Don't." Anders interrupted him. "Whatever you're going to say, don't."

"Alright." Nathaniel said, kneeling to pick up the dead darkspawn by its armpits. His polite silence made Anders curious. It was Nate, after all. Nate didn't care about all the nuances of blood magic. He wasn't going to ask him anything that would make Anders have to think about what had happened.

"... What were you going to say?" Anders asked.

Nathaniel stopped, and dropped the darkspawn just beside the door. He straightened out and brushed off his hands on his knees. "I was going to say I'm sorry. I know our group is a little... dysfunctional, and we can be insensitive. I can't promise I'll know what to say, but if you need to talk about what just happened, I'll listen."

"... Thanks, Nate." Anders said. "I don't want to talk about it, but thanks."

"Anytime." Nathaniel said.

"Are we friends now?" Anders wondered.

"I wouldn't go that far." Nathaniel said, but he was grinning. Anders decided they were friends.

"So where are we shacking up?" Anders asked.

"What?" Nathaniel asked, startled.

"Where are we shaking up? You know, what house are we going to go barricade ourselves in until Amell wakes up." Anders said. "What did you think I meant?"

"Nothing." Nathaniel said, kneeling down to pick the darkspawn back up.
"Did you think I was hitting on you?" Anders asked.

"No." Nathaniel said.

"You thought I was hitting on you." Anders said.

"You flirt with everything," Nathaniel said. "It was a safe assumption." He dragged the darkspawn over to the mess at the well, and heaved it into the pile. "I think we should take refuge in the third house we cleared, the one with the second story windows facing east, so we can wake with the sun and be ready to travel in the morning. Assuming you think Amell will be fit for travel."

"Not really," Anders said, "He should be on bed rest for at least three days, but we could probably get him back to the Vigil if someone helped him walk."

Anders followed Nate to the house he chose, and helped him barricade the windows and doors with pieces of furniture.

"Velanna could help him," Nathaniel said, dragging a bookshelf in front of a window. "She's gotten better at the Dalish magic Amell's been teaching her. She still can't step into the Fade like he can, but the other day I watched her lift ten stones with ease."

"And she's gotten better at blood magic, apparently." Anders said, doing the same to another window.

"Are you trying to bait me into a fight, Anders?" Nathaniel asked.

"Nope," Anders said, "Just wondering if you knew."

"No." Nathaniel said. "I suppose you were right when you said they were close. I haven't seen her that distraught since we met, and her sister was in danger."

They finished barricading the first story of the house, and Anders took a minute to stretch. "I'll throw down some paralysis glyphs on the windows to the second story, just in case. If the darkspawn can ambush us like this, they can probably figure out how to scale buildings."

"Thank you." Nathaniel said. "We should post a watch, while we're taking precautions. I'm going to go bring everyone inside. Would you mind checking the larder for food? I don't think any of us brought rations outside of water. This was supposed to be an easy skirmish."

"No problem." Anders said. Anything that got him away from everyone. Anders went into the kitchen, and found the larder. He rummaged through jars and cloth sacks for the ingredients he assumed went into a soup. Anders wasn't a cook, but he could throw together something edible if he was forced.

There was no need for mages to learn how to cook, when the templars were all too happy to use the Tranquil for the free labor they provided. That, and learning any sort of basic life skills would give mages the ability to survive on their own if they ever escaped the Circle. Fortunately, Anders was resourceful, and a quick study, and he'd figured out the basics during his many escape attempts. A little hot water and a few vegetables, whatever meat chunks he could find, and tada, soup.

Anders summoned water for the cauldron in the kitchen hearth, and lit a fire with his magic. He cut up the vegetables he'd found, and when the water was boiling, he tossed in what he had. Lentils, a few carrots, some garlic gloves, an onion. A handful of thyme. Unfortunately, there were no meat chunks for Anders to use, but he found a jar of jerky and chewed on a piece while he waited for his soup to cook.
Cooking beans smelled horrible. Anders was leaning against the counter, watching the cauldron in the fireplace, thinking very determinedly of nothing when Sigrun came in. "Hey. Nate said you were making us all lunch? Or is it dinner now? Linner? Dunch?"

"Linner." Anders said.

"Nice," Sigrun clapped her hands together, and wandered over to the hearth to peer into the kettle. "Phew. Stinks. So um... I know you said you didn't want to talk about it, but-"

"Please don't." Anders said.

"Jeez. Alright, fine. Can I at least thank you for healing my arms?" Sigrun asked.


Sigrun left him to stew with his stew. Anders hummed to himself to keep his mind blank, and rummaged through the kitchen for bowls and spoons. It would take the soup almost an hour to cook. Anders didn't know what to do with himself in the meantime. He went outside and cast his paralysis glyphs on the windows, he paced, he ate odds and ends out of the larder, and eventually found a bottle of moonshine in one of the cabinets in the kitchen.

It kept him busy, and it kept him numb, and when the soup was finished he got himself a bowl and went into the main room where everyone was talking to tell them linner was ready, and that he'd take last watch. He went to the second story to eat alone. There were three bedrooms, and Anders could guess how they were going to split them. Anders picked a room at random and pushed open the door, unsurprised he happened to pick the one with Amell in it.

The people who'd lived here had been farmers, so their bedroom was nothing special. There was a bed, an armoire, a vanity with a stool, and a wash bucket and chamber pot in the corner. Amell was on the bed; Velanna had laid him out on the wrong side. Amell slept on the left, not the right. His armor was already off, all of it stacked neatly in the far corner of the room. Anders ate, shit, washed, and changed into his smalls and his tunic before climbing into bed, where he sat staring at Amell.

Amell had apologized. He'd looked him in the eyes and said he was sorry. Then he'd turned him into a puppet with no will of its own, no better than a Tranquil. Worse than a Tranquil. Amell had left him completely at risk for possession. Anders was a spirit healer; he attracted spirits and demons, and was the last sort of mage who should have been left with no guards on his mind whatsoever.

Anders had even felt Tranquil by the end of the spell, unable to speak or even think for a few minutes. The single-minded need to kill darkspawn had completely eroded Anders' sense of self in the middle of the spell, and at the start... The blind obsession. The way the world had fallen away, and it had seemed as if Amell was the only thing that existed. Anders had never been in love before. He'd never had the chance, and never expected to have it, but he'd rather feel nothing than the pale mockery of the emotion blood magic left him with.

Sorry wasn't good enough. Anders slept on the floor, and had nightmares of darkspawn.

He was shaken violently awake what felt like minutes later. Anders batted away the meaty hand on his shoulder, and almost puked when Oghren belched into his face. "Wake up, Sparkles,"

"No," Anders whined. His head was splitting pain, and Oghren's breath would have made him sick with or without the hangover. "Give my watch to someone else."

"No," Anders whined. His head was splitting pain, and Oghren's breath would have made him sick with or without the hangover. "Give my watch to someone else."

"Sig already took it. Felt bad for your sorry ass for some reason," Oghren said, kicking him. It wasn't a templars' kick, but it was close. The metal boot thudded into Anders' ass, and Anders sat up,
irrationally furious. It must have shown on his face, because Oghren took a step back. "So what happened? You fall off the bed?"

"Sure," Anders said, standing up and stumbling over to his clothes' pile to dress.

"Bitch Tits made breakfast," Oghren told him, "Some sort of weird nutty elf egg thing, but it's not half bad. Bring you a plate? Can the Boss eat?"

"He can eat, but he'll need fluids when he wakes up. I think the well is ruined, but if you bring me a glass, some salt and citrus I can summon some water and make him a drink." Anders said. "And anything you can get me to help with a hangover."

"I can get you another drink." Oghren snorted.

"Sure," Anders said.

"Glass, salt, citrus, drink. Alright," Oghren hesitated at the door, and Anders tensed, but the dwarf walked out without a comment and he relaxed.

Anders put on his leather chest piece, stepped into his trousers and threw on his tabard, belted both, and put on his spaulders, his boots, and his gloves. He stared at himself in the vanity mirror, but there was nothing to feel handsome about when every piece was covered in darkspawn blood and dirt. Anders tied his hair back and waited for Oghren to come back with his food and his drink.

He came back with everyone, and Anders had to awkwardly shovel food into his mouth under their impatient stares while they waited for him to wake up Amell.

Anders threw together the drink for Amell, and took two shots of moonshine for himself to kill his hangover, and went to sit next to Amell on the bed.

Alright, Anders. It never happened. Nothing's wrong. Avoid the problem. That was the safe way to cope. After all, it had worked for Anders so far. Sure, he had no lasting relationships aside from his spirit, but that was unrelated. Probably.

Anders dispelled the veil of his sleep spell from Amell, after which he was tempted to leave. It wasn't possible. Nathaniel was standing behind him, and Oghren beside him, and combined they blocked his exit. Velanna sat on the other side of the bed, and Sigrun on the foot of it.

Amell groaned. Anders swore he heard the whole room let out a collective sigh of relief. Amell lifted a hand to massage at his face, and pushed back a mop of hair from his blood-colored eyes before settling them on Anders. Anders couldn't read whatever was in them.

Amell struggled upright, and opened his mouth to talk. A wheezing gasp came out. Anders handed him his drink, and Amell drank. He set the empty cup back on the nightstand. "What happened?" Amell finally managed.

"We saved you," Sigrun said.

"You overestimated yourself," Velanna said.

"You fucked up," Oghren said.

"We won the fight, and spent the night barricaded in one of the farmhouses until it was safe to wake you," Nathaniel said, "We found an emissary we believe was shrouding the horde so we couldn't sense them until they were on us."
"The darkspawn hung the women, as they hung the miners. We think, now that they've become more intelligent, they've also become more malicious. Killing and torturing, instead of going with their base instincts to eat and breed. We also heard their commander mention 'the Mother' when the fight started. We think they have another nest somewhere, with this 'Mother' leading them."

"Thank you, Nathaniel," Amell said. "The emissary, it would have been using blood magic. Velanna, did you get a sense for the spell it was using?"

"I wasn't there." Velanna said. "But I see where you are going with this. If we are to infiltrate a nest, we would benefit from such a shroud. I would be happy to help you try to replicate such a spell."

"Thank you," Amell said.

Barely awake, and the first thing Amell cared about was blood magic. Anders didn't have it in him to be surprised. Anders stood up and slipped around Nate to pour himself another shot of moonshine.

"And we saved you," Sigrun said again. "Well, mostly Anders, but we all helped. Oghren and I donated our blood so he could summon his spirit and heal you! How do you do that every fight? I felt so dizzy afterwards, I almost threw up the dinner Anders made,"

"We all almost threw up the dinner Sparkles made," Oghren snorted.

"... Anders?" Amell asked.

"Guilty," Anders said, raising his glass. "I'm a terrible cook."

"Why did you need to use blood magic?" Amell asked. "Is Cera denying you supplies again?"

"Squish," Anders mimed the ogre crushing him by making a fist, "Remember? Ogre broke all my potions."

"I'm sorry," Amell said. Anders gave him a smile made mostly of moonshine and lies.

"Oh please," Velanna said, "It is no fault of yours Anders overestimated himself and took too long to heal Nathaniel's legs. Aside from being so foolish as to get yourself stabbed, you did decently. Enslaving that ogre turned the tide of the battle, and your firestorm plan was well executed. I would like to learn more of the spell you used to manage it, when you have the time."

Amell was still staring at him. Anders kept up his fake smile despite the fact he was sure Amell could see through it. Anders doubted Amell wanted to have this conversation in public, but he'd never won a gamble before, and didn't want to risk it. Anders changed the topic, "You'll have to take it slow for a few days. I'd say bed rest for at least three, once we get back to the Vigil."

"Returning to the Vigil sounds like the safest option, if you feel up to it," Nathaniel agreed, "I don't feel comfortable camping out here any longer than necessary."

"I can help you walk, or carry you if need be," Velanna said.

"I'm sure I can walk," Amell said, finally looking down at his chest. He traced over the scar on his breast, and glanced around the room. "... my armor?"

"Buggered." Oghren said, fetching the discarded chest piece from the corner of the room and tossing it into Amell's lap. "So much for dragonscale, eh? That fucker who did you in was wearing dragonbone, I shit you not. I bet that poll axe he was using was made from the same stuff. Where the fuck does a darkspawn get dragonbone?"
Amell stared at the armor in his lap, and fingered the ruined scales with a look of such profound loss Anders almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Hey, buck up," Oghren said. "Maybe we'll get lucky, and this'll be another Blight with another Archdemon, and that piss baby Wade can make you another set."

"Maybe," Amell agreed with a wan smile. He dropped his legs over the edge of the bed and tried to stand, and promptly toppled forward. Anders caught him, trying to ignore the way Amell's hands clung to him for support and gently squeezed him in thanks.

"Easy," Anders said, sitting Amell back down. "Take it slow. You lost a lot of blood. You should probably eat something before you try going anywhere." Anders picked up the plate Oghren had brought Amell, and set it in his lap. "Velanna made it, so don't worry. Or, you know, do, but her cooking's a lot less bitter than she is."

"It's scrambled eggs, with spinach, pine nuts, and seeds." Velanna said, throwing a frown in Anders' direction, "It's normally served with halla cheese, but I made do with goat."

"It was delicious, Velanna, thank you," Nathaniel said. Everyone chorused him.

"Thank you." Amell agreed, eating slowly.

"Alright, you blighters, he's alive," Oghren said. "We don't need to sit here and spoon feed him. Let's go get our shit and get the fuck out of here."

"I'm glad you're okay, Commander." Sigrun said, giving Amell's foot a squeeze under the blanket before hopping off the bed.

"Someone still needs to help him walk," Velanna said.

"Anders," Amell said. "Would you mind staying?"

"Yeah, sure. No problem." Anders lied, ignoring the ache in his stomach. Everyone filed out, and Anders was left alone with Amell.

Traitors. Anders rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, and rubbed sweat off his palms on his trousers.

"Are you alright?" Amell asked, setting his plate aside.

"Me? Peachy." Anders lied again. "Just a few cuts on my hand, no big deal. What about you?"

"I'm alive," Amell allotted.

"Good to know," Anders said, "You're so pale I wasn't sure."

Amell's smile looked a little uncertain, "Flatterer."

"Actually, yes," Anders said, "If I knew any reanimation spells, right now I'd be worried I cast one. You really do look awful. Any trouble breathing? Chest pains? Anything?"

"Tired, and a little dizzy," Amell confessed.

"No surprise there. You lost a lot of blood and went into shock. So you know, you should eat." Anders gestured at Amell's abandoned plate, and took a few aimless steps around the room. Keep it together, Anders.
"Anders... I'm sorry. For the spell." Amell said.

"Hey, you know. Whatever." Anders shrugged, intending to stop there, but the rest of the words slipped out when they proved too bitter to swallow. "You're a blood mage. It's what you do."

"It's not." Amell said quickly. "Anders, if I thought I had any other-"

"So, I've got an idea." Anders interrupted him. "Let's just not do this, how's that sound? Just eat and get dressed, and I'll help you downstairs."

"I'm sorry." Amell said.

"Yeah, you said that already." Anders said.

"Anders, please talk to me." Amell begged.

"You don't want me to talk to you right now." Anders said. "Eat. Get dressed. I'll help you downstairs."

Amell spent a long minute looking at him. Anders held his stare, and was almost surprised when he won, and Amell broke off. Amell ate in silence, and dressed in silence, and Anders slid an arm around him and helped him stand in silence.

Amell still smelled like the Fade, like blood and sweat. He still felt the same, firm and familiar. Anders hated how much he'd grown to like him. The arrogant ass probably thought Anders didn't want to talk because he was afraid of him, or something like that.

"Anders-" Amell tried again when he was standing.

"No." Anders said.

They walked downstairs in silence, and Anders passed Amell off to Velanna. Everyone gathered their things went outside, where the bodies from the Turnoble estate were laid out atop a makeshift pyre the others must have put together last night. Broken tables and chairs from the other houses made up most of the kindling.

"Should we say something?" Sigrun asked.

"Why?" Velanna demanded. "We didn't know these people. Light the pyre and be done with it."

"Draw your last breath, my friends. Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. Rest at the Maker's right hand, and be Forgiven." Nathaniel said.

Anders cast a fireball onto the pyre. Velanna cast a second, and the flames devoured the bodies. They left the estate behind them, and walked back to Vigil. Velanna supported Amell, and Nathaniel walked with her. Sigrun walked with Oghren.

Anders walked by himself, and ignored most of the conversation. The isolation didn't make him feel any better, but it also didn't make him feel any worse.

That was something, at least.
Hello everyone! Thank you so much for supporting this story. Not much of a comment for this one, but things will cheer up soon, I'm sure. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 3 Parvulis Mid Morning

The North Road

Vigil's Keep loomed in the distance. Scaffolding encased the walls, and men crawled it across like ants, working to reinforce their defenses with the granite they'd found in the Wending Woods. In a way, it was reassuring. Anders didn't doubt the Keep would need protection with the darkspawn an ever increasing threat. Velanna was too hard on Amell, in that one respect. Amell was doing the best with what he had.

Anders still wasn't happy, but he lost his hold on his anger. When Amell stumbled and fell, Anders couldn't help but he a little concerned. Anders jogged over and knelt in the dirt beside him. Amell was on his knees, pale and sweating. He shouldn't have been walking at all.

"I can carry you the rest of the way." Velanna offered.

"No," Amell batted her hands away. "I have to walk in."

"You humans and your pride." Velanna huffed. "I should like to see you try."

Anders cast a simple rejuvenation spell, but there were limits to magic. He couldn't conjure any blood to replace what Amell had lost. Nathaniel dug into his pack and offered Amell a stamina draught.

"It's not his pride that matters, it's the people here," Nathaniel explained while Amell drank. "No one respects a weak ruler. My father never let anyone see him sick. He used to lock himself in his room for however long it took him to recover."

"Ridiculous," Velanna said. "Even leaders fall ill."

"That's what I'm always saying." Anders said. "You're not immortal. Let her carry you if you can't walk."

"I'm fine." Amell lied. "I just need someone's arm."

Anders was halfway to offering his arm when he remembered where they were. No touching allowed at the Vigil. The rule hadn't bothered Anders much before, but it bothered him now. What right did anyone have to tell him he couldn't be with someone just because he was a mage? What did Amell care what these people thought of him? They already thought less of him for being a mage. He was never going to win their respect.
Velanna had given Amell her arm again while Anders was bickering with himself. "Here. Now we'll just look pretentious fools, promenading about the courtyard. That is a human thing to do, yes?"

"If I was courting you, maybe." Amell said. "But it's a lot more subtle than leaning on anyone, so thank you."

"Velanna's a mage too, you know." Anders said, not jealous. "Why is it okay for you to walk with her like that?"

"Because everyone knows the Boss only buggers boys." Oghren said.

"Men, not boys, but yes, that." Amell said.

"How does everyone know that?" Anders asked. "How is that even anyone's business? I wouldn't have known if you hadn't told me."

"Okay," Oghren giggled and smoothed his hands over his beard, "Okay so this happened almost a year ago now, about a week or so before the whole coronation ceremony in Denerim. So-

"Oghren. No." Amell said.

"Aw come on, it was fucking funny." Oghren protested, still giggling just thinking about his story.

"No." Amell said.

Oghren huffed. Amell kept on towards the Keep with Velanna, and Oghren grabbed Anders' wrist and dragged him to the back of their little group. "Okay," Oghren whispered. "So this happened almost year ago now, about a week or so before the whole coronation ceremony in Denerim."

Sigrun shoved in between them, whispering. "Me too. I want to hear this."

"So we're staying at the castle, yeah? And all these nobles blighters are fighting to get in good with the new Hero of Ferelden, throwing their daughters at the poor fucker left and right. You couldn't count the skirts. Dinner after dance after dinner, and the Boss's just got this look on his face the whole time, like he's trying to pass the biggest log you ever shit.

"So this one guy, some noble fuck, don't remember his name, he gets it right away, and then he gets it right away, you know what I'm saying? And then-hehe-and then-hehehe," Oghren giggled uncontrollably.

"And then what?" Sigrun asked. "What happened?"

"Hoohoohoo-and then..." Oghren stopped, looking up. "What the fuck is going on?" They all stopped.

Passing under the gates of the Vigil's outer courtyard, they walked in on a mob. The courtyard was crowded with nearly two score of folk, brandishing pitchforks and torches, rakes and other farm tools made into crude weapons. They were clambering to be let into the inner courtyard, but the steps were barricaded by a score of the Vigil's soldiers. The Seneschal and the Captain of the Guard were in between both groups, apparently trying to keep the peace.

"Oh look, the peasants are revolting," Anders said lightly. "After everything we've done for them."

"They are also causing quite a scene in the yard." Velanna quipped.

Anders laughed his first real laugh since Amell had cast his spell on him, and felt infinitely better.
"I was gone for a day." Amell said in quiet disbelief.

"This way, behind the cellar," Nathaniel gestured, "We can go along the wall for a better view, and try to make sense of what's going on."

They squeezed between the cellar and the outer courtyard wall, and circled around towards the stairs. They found a spot in the shadows, between another building and the inner wall, close enough to hear the shouting. "Open your granaries!" "Bloody feed your people!" "There are darkspawn in the fields!" "What happened to the Turnobles?" "Where's the Commander?" Nothing surprising, really.

The Guard Captain's reaction to the mob, on the other hand... "Damnit, Varel. Stop trying to reason with them." The Guard Captain snarled from the steps, hand on the hilt of his sword. "You don't coddle a revolt. You put it down. Give me the order."

"Maker, what an ass. Hurry up and get up there before-" Anders stopped. Amell had his dagger out. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to disperse them." Amell said calmly.

"And then you're going to cut up an apple to celebrate, right?" Anders asked.

"Sure," Amell said. He set the blade of his dagger to the inside of his arm, where armor didn't protect him. Anders grabbed his wrist before he could make the cut.

"Oh boy, here we go." Oghren mumbled.

"Andraste's ass, Amell. Sigrun has the death wish, not you." Anders said.

"Hey!" Sigrun huffed.

Anders ignored her, "You were hemorrhaging. You went into shock. You try to cast in the state you're in now, and you're going to kill yourself."

"Anders, they're rioting," Amell explained patiently, as if he were a child. Maker, the man could make it so hard to like him sometimes. "And Garevel is right, you don't coddle a revolt. How else do you want me to disperse them?"

"I don't know," Anders said, "But not like this. I'm telling you, as a healer, you can't lose any more blood. Just-... shout them down, or something."

"Anders, look at me." Anders did. Amell's skin was ashen, dark shadows cast beneath his blood shot eyes the only color on him. His hair was a mess; the black strands flew wildly about his face in the autumn wind. The upper half of his armor was loosely buckled to compensate for the indentation over his right breast. He was... well, Anders hadn't been lying before. Amell looked awful. "Do you think I can convince anyone to do anything without magic right now?"

"You could at least try," Anders hissed to keep himself from shouting, "What happened to giving everyone a choice?"

"There is no choice here. They disperse or they die," Amell said flatly. "Do you want me to kill them?"

"I don't want you to kill yourself. You can't spare the blood." Anders said.

"I'll do it." Sigrun interrupted them, taking off her gauntlet. "They're just scared and hungry, and it's
making them stupid. If we can send them home without fighting, we should."

"I will as well." Nathaniel said, similarly reaching for his glove. "This was my family's land until recently. I owe it to these people."

"No. Okay? No," Anders said. "You all lost more than enough blood while I was healing everyone. Every single one of you did."

"You didn't." Velanna said.

"What?" Anders asked.

"All you did was refresh the lifeward," Velanna said. "Not that I care if these people die, but if you truly wanted them safe, and none of us at risk, you could do it."

"Anders wouldn't-" Amell started.

"Fine." Anders took off his glove and rolled up his sleeve. Anders held his arm out, and Amell stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "I told you I didn't care about your magic." Using it to turn him into a mindless thrall was completely different than convincing a mob to leave peacefully, Anders reasoned. He might have been a hypocrite. "If you didn't believe me that's your own damn fault."

Amell held his arm, and Anders ignored the brief caress of his fingers. "It shouldn't take much." Amell promised, making a shallow cut on his wrist. It stung something mad, but Anders wasn't going to wince or whine in front of everyone. He rolled his sleeve back down, and put his glove back on, and they walked out from behind the building.

The Seneschal spotted them. "Make way for the Commander!"

"We will not be-" One of the rioters yelled.

"Quiet! Let the Commander speak!" Yelled another.

Velanna walked Amell up the steps. It was a miracle he didn't fall over. Anders didn't know whether the state Amell was in made him more or less intimidating.

"What happened to the Turnobles!?" Someone yelled. "We saw flames last night! Why aren't you protecting your people?"

"Open the granaries! My son is starving!" Someone else yelled.

"Down with mages! Down with the Wardens! We're not going to take this tyranny!" Yet another someone yelled.

"Go back to your homes." Amell said. Anders felt dizzy. He put a hand on Sigrun's shoulder to keep himself upright. "This is your only warning. Throw down your weapons and leave, or you and all your families will suffer."

That... was not what Anders expected him to say. He doubted Amell had needed blood magic. He delivered the lines so dispassionately even Anders thought he'd make good on the threat.

"You're bluffing!" Some brave bastard dared.

"Garavel, on my count." Amell said.
"Aye, Commander." Garavel said, fingering his sword hilt a little too eagerly for Anders' liking.

"Five." Amell said.

"They'll kill us!" Someone yelled. A hoe hit the ground. A rake followed. By the time Amell hit three, all of the peasants had disarmed.

"Go home. Do not come back." Amell said. "Garavel, have the men see them out. No incidents."

"You heard him, men." Garavel said.

The soldiers herded the peasants out.

"A timely arrival, Commander. You have my thanks." The Seneschal said. Anders still didn't like him. Anders could never remember his name, and there was just something unpleasant about his voice.

"Indeed." Garavel said. Anders didn't like him either. Anyone willing and waiting to butcher some poor farmers had to be an ass. "I gave similar threats before you arrival that went unheeded. I have no idea how you managed that."

"If the common folk just rose up on their own, I'll eat my boot," The Seneschal said. "I fear someone was behind this. Some conspiracy against you, or the Wardens."

"Or they were scared, and they were desperate." Garavel said. "You're paranoid, Varel. Commander, the Turnobles?"

"Dead." Amell said. "Darkspawn."

"They were well loved... Perhaps the people rose up for them." The Seneschal said. "That would be preferable to conspiracy."

"Can we meet for a full report?" Garavel asked. "My men should know what to look out for in the fields. Where they're coming from, their numbers, and the like."

"Of course," Amell said. He was still leaning on Velanna, unable to stand on his own, pale as death.

"No." Anders said. "Stop that. Maker, say no for once. Have you two even looked at him? He's dead on his feet."

Instead of looking at Amell, both men looked at him incredulously for speaking out. Well that was just too bloody bad. Anders was the healer here; he could say whatever he damn well pleased about anyone under his care. He looked back to Amell.

"You need to lie down, and stay lying down. Three days, at least. I'm not kidding." Anders said.

"Surely the Commander can spare an hour, before resting." Garavel said. Anders didn't like him at all. His freakishly large eyes and butt-shaped chin were bad enough without adding in a piss poor personality.

"No... No, Anders is right." Amell said. "We can meet in my quarters tomorrow, Garavel. I'll send for you. Dismissed."

"Commander." Garavel bowed, and walked back into the Keep.

"I would appreciate being present for this meeting as well. Commander." The Seneschal bowed and
followed Garavel into the Keep.

"Say that again." Anders said.

"Say what again?" Amell asked.

"Anders is right." Anders said.

"Anders is right." Amell repeated obediently.

"Creators," Velanna rolled her eyes. "You take him, if you two are going to be like this."

"I'm not allowed to touch him, remember?" Anders said.

"I think it would be fine just this once, considering you're my healer and I'm injured." Amell said, sounding hopeful.

"There, see?" Velanna untangled her arm from Amell's and pushed him into Anders. "He's yours now. I'll come by when you're well again, and we can resume our lessons. Dareth, Amell."

"Ma serannas, Velanna." Amell said.

Velanna left, and the rest of the Wardens went with her. Anders felt abandoned.

Anders didn't want to take Amell back to his room. Anders wanted to be angry at Amell. Anders didn't want to wrap an arm around Amell's waist and bear half his weight through the Keep and up the stairs, lost in his scent and the memory of the forced obsession Anders had had with him.

Amell didn't say anything on the way up to his room, which was good. But he didn't walk like a patient, which was bad. Anders had to hold Amell's hand to keep his arm around Anders' shoulders, and Amell seemed to think it was an invitation to play with his fingers. They took a break on a bench in the second story hall. No one was about, save for the occasional servant.

They were alone in the hall when Anders took off his glove and rolled up his sleeve. The discomfort of dried blood peeling off his skin as the fabric pulled away made Anders hiss. He healed the cut with a simple spell, and Amell ran his fingers over where the cut had been.

"Why did you agree to do that?" Amell asked.

"You were going to do it one way or another." Anders said, rolling his sleeve back down. "You heard Velanna, I was the only one who could spare the blood."

"Thank you. For helping." Amell leaned on him, his head on Anders' shoulder. Amell obviously needed to lean on something, but it didn't have to be Anders. They were sitting, and the wall was right there.

Anders thought of shoving him off, but he didn't. Being enslaved had been horrifying, and Anders wanted to someone to hug him or fuck him. The only person willing to do either was the same person who'd enslaved him in the first place. Anders turned his face into Amell's hair and inhaled, and swore he could feel the tension melt out of his shoulders. It was simultaneously soothing and frustrating.

Asshole.

"Ready to keep going?" Anders asked.
"Hmmmh?" Amell twitched, sitting up.

"Did you fall asleep on me?" Anders asked.

"No?" Amell lied, poorly.

"One more flight. Come on." Anders stood up and heaved Amell along with him.

They made it to the door and Amell handed him his keys to his room, unwilling or unable to unlock the door on his own. Anders got it open, and laid Amell down on the right side of his bed. The right side being the left side. Anders was helping Amell out of his boots when Amell finally broke the silence.

"Anders, can you talk to me yet?" Amell asked.

"No. I'm still mad at you." Anders said as much to remind himself as remind Amell.

"I'm sorry." Amell tried to hold his hand when Anders started unbuckling his greaves. Anders smacked him away.

"That word's not magic, you know. It doesn't undo what you did to me." Anders said.

"I know it doesn't." Amell said. "I just want you to believe me."

"Yeah, well. I want a pony." Anders said.


Amell moved like a snail taking off his gauntlets, but he moved. He could probably get out of rest of his armor on his own. "I'll go give the cooks a meal plan for you." Anders said. "Don't get out of bed unless you have to. The servants will bring you whatever you need, and I'll have my aide come check on you."

"Thank you." Amell said.

Amell got his second gauntlet off and set it on his nightstand. He didn't move after that, exhaustion in his every feature. Anders sighed and unbuckled his chest piece. "I can do it." Amell protested.

"Shut up." Anders said.

Anders undid the buckles and straps, and set the mess of dragonscale on the trunk at the foot of Amell's bed. Amell stared at him the entire time, not talking. Anders would have preferred a kicked puppy dog look to the one Amell was giving him. Amell didn't look wounded, or terribly depressed. Just resigned and tired.

Anders sat next to him. "You need anything else before I go?"

Amell put a hand on his shoulder. Anders stared at it, and after a brief moment of hesitation the hand became a hug. Anders let his frustration out in a hard exhale, and thought of prying Amell off him, but he wasn't that much of a bastard. Amell was trying, at least. Right now it was more than Anders was doing.

"I'm still mad at you," Anders said so they were clear. He wrapped his arms loosely around Amell's waist, and wasn't sure when he stopped allowing the hug and started enjoying it.
Not long later, Amell's grip went slack. Anders laid him down on the bed, and pulled the blankets over him. Anders pulled the keys Amell had given him out of his pocket, and went to leave them on the nightstand. His eyes drifted to the drawer, and the tiny key among Amell's set.

Don't be an ass, Anders.

Curiosity killed the cat. The last time Anders went through Amell's things he hadn't liked what he'd found, and besides, there was no reason to snoop. It wasn't like Amell had had a chance to write about what they'd just been through. Anders had what? Seven lives left? He should save them for something worthwhile.

Anders was an ass.

He unlocked the drawer and picked up the journal, half expecting it to scream at him for the breach of privacy. It didn't. It was just a journal. Anders flipped it open, and the page it opened to had a sketch of the golem they'd fought in Kal'Hriol.

A pretty damn good sketch, actually. Anders didn't know Amell could draw. He turned a few more pages, and found other sketches between entries. There were awakened darkspawn, an elf that looked like Velanna and must have been her sister, the dragons they'd fought in the mines, Anders...

Anders stopped. One of the last filled pages in the journal had a sketch of him sleeping. It cut off at his stomach, where the blanket was tangled around his waist. Amell had imaginatively titled it 'Anders sleeping.' Anders flipped back through the journal, but there was just the one sketch of him.

Anders looked at the entry next to it, but it was completely unrelated notes about the state of the arling, recent tithes, a bit about the darkspawn sighting by the Turnobles. Nothing interesting. Anders closed the journal and put it back in the drawer. He locked it again, and left the keys on the nightstand before he left.

Anders went back downstairs, and left orders for a meal plan for Amell with the Vigil's cooks. He stole some milk from the kitchens while he was there for Ser Pounce-a-Lot before heading to the barracks.

He'd scarcely set foot in the door before he was promptly assaulted by Sigrun. "Is he okay?"

"Peachy. Why wouldn't he be?" Anders said. Ser Pounce-a-Lot emerged from under his bunk at the sound of his voice, and ran over meowing loudly. Anders set the bowl of milk down for him and heated it with his magic.

"Because a darkspawn stuck him like a warden-kabob?" Sigrun guessed.

"He's fine. He's had worse." Oghren said from where he was sitting over at the table. He'd changed out of everything but his trousers. Anders couldn't tell where his beard stopped and his chest hair began. "Stop fretting, my juicy little pomegranate. Come have a drink."

Oghren kicked out a chair for Sigrun, but instead of sliding expertly across the floor it toppled over. Sigrun rolled her eyes and picked it up. "I'm going to go help with the construction in the yard. You guys have fun."

"All work and no play makes for a shit sodding day," Oghren called after her. "What about you, Sparkles? Drink?"

"I'm going to change and get lunch, but then sure." Anders said.
Anders was glad Oghren didn't ask him anything about Amell when Anders finally joined him for drinks. Anders didn't want to think about Amell, and avoided him for the next two days. Anders sent his aide to check on Amell in his stead, wondering what he was even still doing here.

Anders could have on a boat to Rivain to enjoy the warm white beaches at Llomerynn by now. Instead he was freezing in Ferelden. This whole mess was a lot more complicated than Anders wanted it to be. All he wanted was a good friend and a good fuck. He didn't want all of whatever this was. The templars still had his phylactery, which meant the only safe place for him was with the Wardens, but at this rate Amell was going to get one or both of them killed anyway. What was even the point in staying?

On Anders' name-day, on the fifth of Kingsway, a servant came and found him while he was playing cards with everyone, and told him the Commander wanted to see him.

Anders climbed the stairs with a knot in his stomach. Oghren must have been rubbing off on him, because Anders felt far too sober for this conversation. The servant left him in front of Amell's room, and Anders was struck by the childish want to turn around and pretend he hadn't gotten the summons. He pushed open the door to Amell's room with a sigh instead.

Amell was in bed, and looked much better than he had two days ago. Instead of a ripped up tunic, he was in a Grey Warden doublet. The color was back in his face, and a strand of his hair was tamed into a braid and pushed back behind one ear. He looked nice.

"Feeling better?" Anders asked, picking a spot for himself next to Amell's bed. He couldn't decide what to do with his hands, and settled on fiddling with the corner of the blanket.

"A lottle," Amell said.

Anders smiled.

"...I just wanted to make sure you got your gift." Amell explained when he realized he wasn't getting more than the smile. He picked up a parcel from his nightstand, and slid it across the bed to him. It was about the length of Anders' forearm, and the width of his hand.

"This is pretty small for a pony." Anders said, tossing the parcel back and forth between his hands. It had a decent weight to it. It could have been anything.

"I'm still working on the pony." Amell said. "Did you want to open it?"

Not really. Anders untied the strings keeping the plain brown wrapping in place. Silver stared up at him, an eagle motif engraved into a pair of very fine bracers. Anders started laughing. He couldn't help himself. It was too ironic.

"You got me shackles." Anders laughed. Something in him snapped. "Andraste's knickers, that's too much. The blood mage who enslaved me got me shackles."

"I didn't have a choice, Anders." Amell said.

"Really? You went down to the jewelers and they were fresh out of everything except a shiny new pair of shackles?" Anders laughed. "You could have gone with nothing if these were your only options, I'm just saying."

"I didn't have a choice about the spell," Amell said. "The bracers-"

"Don't give me that." Anders interrupted him. "You had a choice. You could have let go of the ogre
and let me heal you. You could have just kept fighting with ogre enslaved. You chose to enslave me. You chose blood magic. You always choose blood magic."

"You said you didn't have a problem with it." Amell said. "You were perfectly willing to heal everyone and help me quell the rebellion with it."

"Surprise!" Anders raised his hands sarcastically, "I'm a hypocrite. I don't mind when you're not using it on me, and I'm sorry, but I think that's a pretty okay thing to be hypocritical about. Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? I'm a spirit healer. I draw spirits and demons like shit draws flies. You risked my life doing that to me."

"I risk your life every time I take you on a mission." Amell said.

"This was worse!" Anders snapped. "Do you even know what that felt like for me?"

"Yes." Amell said. "I've been mind controlled twice by demons, but never by a mage who cares about me. I know what it's like. I was hoping you'd come talk to me about it. I want to be here for you."

"I don't want you to be here for me." Anders said.

Amell didn't react. Anders was expecting him to look surprised or hurt, but he didn't look anything. Somehow that was worse. Anders thought of Amell's sketch, and wondered for a moment if he was wrong about him. Maybe Amell didn't like him as much as Anders thought he did. Anders thought of all his hugs, and little touches. No... No Amell definitely liked him. He was just good at guarding his expressions.

Anders pressed on. "You like me a lot more than I'm used to people liking me, and that scares the shit out of me. I'm having a hard enough time figuring out how I feel about you without blood magic fucking me up. I want to like you, okay? I really do, and that scares me too... I need some space. I'll talk to you later, alright?"

Anders didn't wait for his answer. He turned around and went to the door, and was almost surprised when Amell didn't call after him. It made Anders doubt himself all over again. He glanced over his shoulder half expecting Amell to be nose deep in a book, Anders' rant already forgotten.

Amell had his face buried in his hands. Well that answered that. Anders felt queasy, but he left anyway. It wasn't worth it. If Amell was willing to enslave him for an edge up against the darkspawn, who knew what else he was willing to do? How well did Anders really know him, when Amell was sitting on a grimoire of demons and Compassion couldn't read his mind?

It was a bad hand. Anders was better off cutting his losses now before he cared any more than he already did. Anders wandered back down to the Warden's barracks. Everyone was still playing cards. Sigrun was winning, unsurprisingly, but Velanna wasn't half bad once she finally consented to playing with them.

"You weren't gone long." Sigrun said. "What did Amell get you for your name day? No way it was sex."

"Nothing special," Anders lied. "Deal me in next hand?"

"Sure." Sigrun said.

Anders dug Ser Pounce-a-Lot out from under his bunk. The little tabby howled in protest, and refused to sit in his lap when Anders sat on the bed with him. Anders let him go, and wasn't
surprised when the little fellow ran back under the bunk. Anders didn't want to spend time with
Anders right now either.

"So did you ditch him?" Oghren asked. For someone who was drunk more than half the time,
Oghren was remarkably perceptive.

"I don't know." Anders said. "Maybe."

"Wait, what?" Sigrun looked over at him. Anders watched Nathaniel palm card from the discard
deck when Sigrun looked away. Velanna saw as well, and pinched Nathaniel, but didn't tell. Anders
chuckled a little. "Why?" Sigrun asked.

"Don't really want to talk about it." Anders said.

"I figured as much." Oghren said. He dropped his cards on the table, despite having a fairly good
hand. Three angels played, with one in his hand. "I'm out."

Oghren got up and went over to his bunk, where he dug up a bottle of something Anders guessed
was alcoholic.

"Seriously?" Anders said. "He still needs fluids. He shouldn't be drinking. It'll dehydrate him."

"He's gonna drink anyway, Sparkles." Oghren said. "May as well be with me."

"Oh come on," Anders rolled his eyes. "I said maybe. And besides, aside from being a little down,
I'm sure he's fine. He's barely known me a few months."

"You know, Sparkles, sometimes it's not about you." Oghren said, rummaging through the mess on
his bunk for another bottle. He stuffed both bottles under his arm, and headed for the door.
"Sometimes people are just fuck-ups, and they know it, and it gets 'em down. And when that
happens, there ain't nothing you can do but drink until it goes away."

Chapter End Notes

Elvish Translations
Dareth: Be safe
Ma Serannas: Thank you

An optional Apple and Apostate's chapter set immediately after this one from Oghren's
perspective.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I hope you're all still enjoying this story. We're finally taking our first step towards Justice! Thank you so much for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 13 Parvulis Afternoon

Amaranthine

"Ugh," Velanna wrinkled her nose. It had been a nice nose, pert and pretty, until her scowl narrowed her nostrils and pinched up her tattooed face. It was a shame, really. The little elf was gorgeous, right up until she opened her mouth. "So many humans in one place. Look at them crawling all over, like rats. The sight of it sickens me."

"You know, for someone who harps on humans all the time, you sure have a lot of human friends." Anders said.

"Do I?" Velanna asked. "This is news to me."

"Oh, ouch," Anders stumbled, and put a dramatic had to his chest. "That one hurt, and I already knew we weren't friends. You know they both heard you, right?"

"Ma tu ma'vhenan numin." Amell said.

"Suledin. Tel'abelas." Velanna said.

"Ma emma falon." Amell said.

Velanna rolled her eyes and looked away from him.

"Abelas... Abelas is sorry?" Nathaniel ventured. "Tel'abelas, is that not sorry?"

"It is." Velanna said, smiling. It lit up her face, and made her emerald eyes sparkle, and for a moment she almost looked like a person. Anders could almost see why Nate liked her. Almost.

"Oh I get it," Anders prodded Velanna with his elbow. "Nate doesn't count as a friend because he's bit more than that isn't he, my lady?"

Velanna turned positively red. Anders laughed, and Velanna smacked him in the stomach with her staff. Anders doubled over, wheezing, and Oghren hooted.

"Hoho!" Oghren chortled, "You got him good! Hit him again!"

"No hitting," Amell said.

"Wish you'd said that sooner," Anders pouted, rubbing the bruise on his stomach.
"I didn't know it was something that needed to be said." Amell said.

"It wouldn't need to be said if somebody could take a punch," Sigrun said. She drew back a menacing fist, and Anders darted to the other side of Amell.

"Mom," Anders whined.

"No hitting." Amell said again.

"Remind me why we are in this cesspool of a city again?" Velanna asked.

"Oh come on, it's not a cesspool," Anders said, stepping over a puddle of filth in the street, "Once you get past all the cesspools."

"This city was Kristoff's last known location." Amell explained.

"Because the last warden of yours we found proved so invaluable." Velanna snorted.

"Oh, hey, yeah!" Anders snapped his fingers, "How did that go with uh... Ken..."

"Keenan?" Amell supplied.

"Keenan! With his wife. How'd that go?" Anders asked.

"She was cheating on him." Amell said.

"Oh... well that's... pretty shit." Anders said.

"It was pretty shit." Amell agreed.

Anders laughed. Oghren had him worried last week, but Amell was fine, as far as Anders could tell. It was a much needed weight off Anders' conscience. Anders still wasn't sure if he could handle a relationship with Amell, but being friends was a lot better than being awkward acquaintances. Friends Anders could handle.

"What makes you think this Kristoff will prove any more useful? Or that he will know any more than we do?" Velanna demanded.

"Nothing and no one, but Varel claims he was investigating the darkspawn," Amell said. "If nothing else we can pick up where he left off. The ambush at the Turnoble Estate proved we didn't hit their main breeding ground in Kal'Hibol, and for now this is our best lead if we are ever to find your sister, Velanna."

"And you aim to find him in the markets?" Velanna asked.

Anders hadn't been paying attention to where they were going. The streets all tended to blur together. All the buildings were stone brick and a dreary grey, with mounds of dirt and rubbish heaps on every corner. The cobblestone that lined them had dirty water and feces for grout, and it took up most of Anders' attention just keeping the latter off his boots. Not that he was complaining.

The rest of the city was worth it, once you got to the markets. Right now, they were crowded with street vendors, pitching carts and tables of candies, trinkets, and baubles. Anders had maybe thirty silvers in his boots, and was more than happy for the chance to spend them.

"No," Amell said. "I'm going to search the local taverns. The rest of you are free for the day, so long as you stay in groups of two. We'll meet at the Pilgrim's Rest at sundown. Hopefully I'll have found
whichever inn Kristoff was staying in by then, and we can spend the night there."

"Dibs!" Sigrun jumped forward and latched onto Amell's arm. "Can we do some shopping first? There are so many shinnies here it's making my fingers twitch. You have to buy me something before I lose my self-control."

"We're going to visit my sister," Nathaniel said, not bothering to specify who made up the 'we.' "I'm sure Delilah wouldn't mind if any of you wanted to visit as well. She lives just down that street, the third house on the right,"

Nathaniel left with Velanna down the street he'd gestured towards.

Oghren gave Anders a nudge. "Guess it's me and you, Sparkles."

"I could stand to look around for a bit," Anders said.

"What is it with gals and shopping?" Oghren asked.

"Well maybe if you'd buy me something nice for once I wouldn't have to shop for myself," Anders said.

Oghren rolled his eyes and stuffed his thumbs into his belt. He wandered over to where Amell was waiting for Sigrun, and struck up a conversation.

Anders gave the street a cursory scan before he picked the same table Sigrun was standing over. It was littered with baubles, statuettes, and other figurines. There was one in onyx that vaguely resembled a pride demon. Anders stared at it, wondering if Amell would like it.

Sigrun picked up a snow globe. "What is this? Who are the people inside supposed to be?"

"It's a snow globe." Anders said. "You shake it."

Sigrun gave it a shake and watched the flecks of 'snow' that fell around the figurines, enraptured.

"That's King Cailan and Queen Anora," The vendor said. He was also a dwarf, and a fairly decent looking one. Unlike Oghren, his beard was neatly kempt and his nose, while large, wasn't quite so misshapen.

"King Cailan... that's not the current king, is it?" Sigrun asked.

"It is not," The dwarf said. "The current king is King Alistair. King Cailan died at the battle of Ostagar."

"Okay, good," Sigrun said, "I don't want to offend the Commander or anything. How much is this?"

"Ordinarily, seven silvers, but for a lovely woman like yourself, I could do six." The dwarf offered.

"Seriously?" Sigrun asked, rubbing the casteless tattoo on her cheek. "Didn't you see the, you know..."

"The tabard?" The dwarf asked. "I certainly did, Warden."

Oh he was smooth. Anders looked back at Sigrun and swore he saw a blush. Sigrun bit her lip and dug through her pockets, turning up six silvers for the snow globe. The vendor parceled it and handed it over. "Thank you." Sigrun said. She left the dwarf's table for a different vendor, and Anders hurried after her.
"What are you doing?" Anders asked. "At least get his name."

"What?" Sigrun asked.

"The dwarf fellow back there," Anders said, "He was nice; he had a beard. You love beards."

"I do love beards..." Sigrun said, rubbing her chin.

"So go on. I'll back you up." Anders said.

"Haha, no." Sigrun laughed, "There'd be no point. I'm in the Legion of the Dead, Warden or not. Nothing would last between me and anyone. But that was nice, not being judged just because of my brand... I'm not used to that."

"I'm going to go get his name." Anders said, turning around.

"No don't!" Sigrun grabbed his hand. "Come on, stop it. If you're going to do anything, why don't you try not judging Amell just because of his magic?"

"Where'd that come from?" Anders asked. "Is that why you've been giving me dirty looks lately?"

"I just don't get how you could drop him like that, right after he saved you from that ogre." Sigrun said. "Look it's... none of my business. Nevermind. Have fun with Oghren."

Sigrun headed towards another vendor, and Anders looked around for Oghren. He was still with Amell. They were standing by a cart selling candies, buying and eating a few while they waited.

"Anders, apple something?" Amell offered when Anders came over.

"Sure," Anders said. Amell traded away a few coppers, and handed him a caramel apple. "Thanks."

"I better go follow her," Amell said as Sigrun moved further down the street. "I'll see you both later."

"See ya," Oghren said.

"Later," Anders agreed.

Amell walked away. His warden's tabard covered his ass, not that Anders would have stared if it didn't. Anders turned back Oghren. "So I'm surprised you haven't given me any shit since things between me and him hit the rocks."

"What, the Boss?" Oghren snorted, taking a vicious bite out of his own caramel apple. Anders teeth hurt just watching him. "He's a big boy, he can handle it. You done shopping? Ready for drinks?"

"Ready to drink you under the table," Anders said. "Just-give me a second, I want to buy something I saw back there."

"You're on," Oghren said, following him back to the dwarf's table. Anders coughed up ten of his thirty silver for the statuette. The vendor wrapped it, and handed it over. "That for You Know Who?"

"I never got him anything for getting me Ser Pounce-a-Lot." Anders reasoned. He stuffed the parcel under his arm and licked his caramel apple, instead of biting it, because he wasn't a savage.

"Honestly, Sparkles, I'm surprised you made it as far as you did," Oghren said, leading the way towards Pilgrim's Rest, "I bet you'd cheese it after he went all demon-summony, down in the cellars. Cost me ten silvers."
"Wait, seriously?" Anders asked, "You actually bet on how long we'd be a thing?"

"Yep." Oghren said.

"He's okay though, right?" Anders asked, "I mean, he doesn't care, does he?"

"Why you asking me?" Oghren demanded, taking another vicious bite out his apple. The caramel crunched and caught between his teeth. Anders shuddered.

"Because you're his friend?" Anders guessed.

"I mean, why do you give a shit?" Oghren clarified.

"Well I still like him. You know, when he's not... being insane." Anders said. It wasn't as if Amell had changed. Amell was still nice, still showered him with gifts, and still put up with his bullshit, even when Anders wasn't sleeping with him. After going from having sex every night to having no sex at all, Anders couldn't help admitting he missed having sex with Amell, or at least having sex with someone.

"Sparkles, I'm gonna tell you something, and then you're gonna forget I told you, deal?" Oghren asked. Oh boy. That didn't sound good. This was going to be some sort of story about how Amell had killed his last lover in some sort of demonic rage. Anders could smell it. Anders could smell something. Anders picked up his pace to make sure he was walking in front of Oghren, and not behind him.


"So back during the Blight, the Boss was with this elf. Now I ain't into dudes, but this guy was something. High cheekbones, pouty lips, the works. We're talking so pretty at first I thought he was a gal. And this elf was one of them Crows. Assassin type, cold blooded killer, vicious as a bronto's fart. Archy's dad hired the elf to kill us, and the elf tried, but fucked it up, and the Boss recruited him.

"It was love at first sight. I'm telling you, it was gross. Every night, I gotta listen to these two fuck like nugs. But anyway, time goes by, and the Boss does his thing, and even the elf can't deal with it. They have it out in front of everyone, big fight about how the Boss is crazy, the Boss is gonna get himself killed or possessed, the elf can't take losing another lover, it's the elf or the blood magic.

"You can guess which one the Boss picked. So what I'm getting at here is if the Boss won't stop for a guy like that, and even a guy like that can't handle how fucking nug shit crazy the Boss is, you don't stand a fucking chance. I like ya, Sparkles, I like ya a lot, but if you can't handle the magic shit, you can't handle him, and I don't blame you one lick. So there you go. Forget I said anything. Let's go get drunk."

Drinks sounded nice. Anders finished his apple and tossed the core. He didn't catch Oghren doing the same, and wouldn't have been surprised if Oghren just ate it. Anders followed Oghren into the Pilgrim's Rest, and was greeted with the refreshing smell of whiskey vomit and feet. Mackay was working the counter, and remembered them when they found themselves stools. "Hey boys, get you some of my single malt again?"

"Damn straight," Oghren said, digging ten sweaty silvers out of his crotch and laying them on the counter. "Keep the drinks flowing, Mackay."

"You got it," Mackay said, pouring them both shots.

Anders drank enough to be comfortably tipsy, but kept himself from getting completely sloshed.
They still had to regroup with everyone, and Anders didn't trust himself not to jump into bed with Amell if he got too drunk with how frustrated he was lately. Oghren had no such reservations, and was a drooling mess by the time Amell and Sigrun came and found them.

"We found where Kristoff was staying," Amell said by way of greeting, "Can you walk?"

"Me?" Anders asked, "I'm fine. Can't really say the same about him, though."

"You! There you are! I been thinkin' of you." Oghren slurred, pointing in-between Sigrun and Amell. Anders guessed he meant Sigrun, by his leer. "Where can I get some sauce to go with that rump roast?"

"Right here, you mad dwarven stallion." Amell said.

"Ew." Sigrun said.

Oghren broke into a fit of giggles and fell off his stool.

"... Hm." Amell said.

"I'm not helping you carry him," Sigrun said.

"I got feet to walk." Oghren said from the floor.

"Are Velanna and Nathaniel back yet?" Amell asked.

"No, but-Speak of the Maker," Anders said.

Amell glanced over his shoulder. The door to the tavern was closed.

"Gotcha." Anders said.

It opened a second later, and Velanna and Nathaniel walked in.

"Gotcha." Amell said.

Anders laughed. Amell grinned at him, and Anders pictured Amell wearing the same grin while Anders undressed him. It was a nice memory, one where Anders had knocked Amell down on the couch, and had him naked and sweating underneath him, one ankle on Ander's shoulder while Anders held Amell's leg to his chest and drove Amell into the couch with every thrust of his hips. A heartbeat later, and Anders pictured Amell enslaving him.

Anders really needed to go fuck himself now that they'd finally have private rooms for a night.

"Kristoff was staying at the Crown and Lion," Amell was explaining while Anders was reminiscing. "It's on the other side of the city, near the Guard House. I booked us rooms there for the night, but if you want to stay with your sister just make sure you're back at the Crown and Lion by mid-morning."

"No, she can't spare the space." Nathaniel said, glancing down at Oghren. "I see you two had a productive day."

"Eheheheh," Oghren said from the floor.

Amell knelt and helped Oghren up, and the six of them left the Pilgrim's Rest, and trekked across the city to the Crown and Lion. Oghren was in front, which was a miracle, because his legs were like
noodles, and took him in every direction but forward. He all but crashed into the door of the Crown and Lion, and steadied himself on the handle. "Gotta get my buzz back," Oghren said to himself, stumbling into the inn. He didn't get two feet inside the door before he let out such a shout Anders jumped.

"Haha! Well shave my tits and suckle me dry! If It isn't Wynne!" Oghren squealed, running inside.

"Ugh," Anders groaned, leaning over to whisper in Amell's ear, "Now there's a mental picture I could do without."

Amell didn't laugh, which was very Amell of him, but he also didn't exhale through his nose, or even smile. Anders looked at him. Amell was staring fixedly forward, his shoulders visibly tense. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and took a calming breath before putting his enigmatic face back on. "The innkeeper should have your keys, just give him your names," Amell said, following Oghren inside.

Well that was weird.

Nathaniel, Velanna, and Sigrun all got themselves a table. Anders followed Amell, curious.

The Crown and Lion was a lot cleaner than the Pilgrim's Rest. It smelled like burning pine in place of stale vomit and feet, and a rug was in front of the door to catch mud and dirt. A small stone stage took up the right side of the common room, where a minstrel was playing Andraste's Mabari. Most of the tables were filled with patrons, but Oghren had run to the bar.

Oghren had clambered up onto a stool beside an older looking woman. Her hair was white, drawn up into a bun and accented with a golden headband set with rubies. She was wearing a very fine robe, and a very fine staff leaned against the bar beside her. She looked a little familiar. Anders had a name for the face, but it still wasn't clicking.

"Wynne old gal!" Oghren hooted. "How the fuck have you been!"

"I've been well," Wynne said. "It's good to see you again, my friend."

Amell took up a spot behind Oghren, and a sneer wrinkled Wynne's features into something entirely unpleasant, and much more familiar. Anders knew he knew her from somewhere. It was right there on the tip of his tongue.

"Well if it isn't the man of the hour," Wynne said, directing her sneer at Amell. "You keep turning up like a bad rash."

"I've got some experience with those," Oghren chuckled drunkenly, waving the bartender over to pour him a drink. Anders took the stool next to him. Amell kept standing.

"Wynne." Amell said.

"That's it!" Anders exclaimed, "Wynne! As in Senior Enchanter Wynne. I had you as a teacher in some of my classes."

"Hm?" Wynne forfeit her starring contest with Amell to look at him. Her expression became marginally less hostile. "I remember you. Anders, wasn't it? Should I take this to mean you are a Grey Warden now?"

"That's the word on the street," Anders said with a smile, a little surprised Wynne returned it. He'd never been a very good student, and spent most of his time drawing in the margins of his books
instead of listening.

"Well then perhaps there's hope for the Order yet," Wynne said.

"What are you doing here, Wynne?" Amell asked.

"Not that it's any business of yours," Wynne looked down her nose at Amell, as if the man were a bug that was beneath her even to step on, "But the College of Magi is convening in Cumberland, and I am attending."

"Since when is Magi business not my business?" Amell asked.

The staring contest that followed made even Anders feel awkward.

"Oh, very well," Wynne broke with a sigh, "This is your doing anyway. What were you thinking, asking the crown for that ridiculous boon? 'Autonomy for the Circle' indeed. It's all anyone will talk about now. You'll no doubt be pleased to learn you've made the libertarians bold. They wish to pull away from the Chantry entirely, and if they get enough support..."

"Pull away entirely?" Anders interrupted, "But that's madness! I hate Chantry oversight as much as the next mage, but they can't just decide to leave. This is a recipe for disaster."

"Good." Amell said. "It's about time the mages freed themselves."

"The mages will never be free!" Wynne snapped, throwing up her hands. Anders got the feeling they'd had this argument before. Her shout drew more than a few stares. With a visible effort, Wynne pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath, lowering her voice. "The Chantry would never allow it. Our only hope for survival is to show them we can be trusted. Don't you remember what happened to the Circle here?"

"I remember I saved it." Amell said.

"Greagoir called for the Rite of Annulment!" Wynne hissed. "It was pure coincidence you showed up in time to do anything. Do you want to give the templars another excuse to call for the culling of all mages? This change cannot be forced."

"Then it will never come," Amell said, "Did you hear nothing Evelina said? We deserve freedom."

"Do not speak to me of that girl. She deserved to die for her crimes, and you recruited her. A maleficar." Wynne said tightly. She clenched her fists, angry blue veins straining against milky white skin. "This discussion will get us nowhere. I suppose I should at least be grateful you're finally traveling with a mage of some sense."

"Oh is that me?" Anders asked.

"It is," Wynne said, "At least you understand the madness of this plight."

"Have a little Faith, Wynne," Amell said. "The future might surprise you."

That sounded eerily ominous, Anders thought. Wynne glared at Amell, tight-lipped and seething. Anders could practically see the steam coming off of her. "Is there a reason we are still talking?"

"No. No reason. Take care, Enchanter." Amell said. Anders watched him leave the common room, and made a mental note of which room on the second story was his.

"Give him a break, old girl." Oghren said, "He did right by you."
"He did no such thing." Wynne said. Her glare melted away once Amell was gone, and she looked much more approachable when she looked at Anders. "How have you been, Anders? I haven't seen you in... over three years now, I believe."

"Oh, you know," Anders said flippantly, "I've been busy, moving from cell to cell. I should have written, I know, but they don't give you any paper in solitary."

"Yes, I had heard about that." Wynne said dispassionately, as if he'd actually been on vacation and not locked away. Anders decided he didn't care for her.

"We've all heard about that," Oghren said. "It's all Sparkles talks about. Circle this, freedom that. I missed you, old girl. Sparkles here can't hold his liquor for shit. You staying long?"

"Unfortunately, no," Wynne gave Oghren's hand an affectionate pat. "I have to be off to Nevarra soon, and I still have some preparations to make. In fact, I should probably head back to my room. That exchange was... very draining. Anders, would you be a dear and walk with me?"

Oh boy. This wasn't going to be good. More people telling him Amell was evil and crazy and going to kill everyone and everything with blood magic, probably. Anders was getting a little sick of it. Amell was reckless and dangerous, sure, but he meant well. He wasn't malicious. Anders picked up his staff and his parcel, and Wynne picked up her staff, and they left the common room and headed up the stairs.

"I do remember you, Anders," Wynne said as soon as they were out of earshot from Oghren, "You were a smart boy. Willful and impatient, but smart. What are you doing with him?"

"Who, Oghren?" Anders joked. "He's not so bad once you get past the smell."

Wynne kept silent until they were outside the door to her room on the third story. She waited for another tavern guest to leave the hall before she took Anders' hands and gave them an urgent squeeze. "The Grey Wardens are not your only option for freedom. Look at me, child. Do you see any templars looming over me? Come back to the Circle, follow the rules, and we will take care of you. I swear it."

"Take care of me?" Anders repeated incredulously. He pulled his hands free of her and wiped them off his trousers. He felt dirty. "Is that what you call it? Was the Circle taking care of me the year I spent locked away in solitary? Spending most of my days talking to a cat to stay sane, begging the templars for just one minute of sunlight?"

"You were a runner, Anders, and a repeat offender," Wynne said without apology, "But if you came back willingly, if you were to show them you could be trusted, they would provide for you. In a few years, you'd-"

"A few years?" Anders interrupted her with a bark of laughter, "I'm free now! Amell has done more for me in a few months than the Circle did in a decade."

"That... man," Wynne spat the word, as if Amell was somehow less than that, "Has done nothing for anyone."

"Oh, except save the world," Anders sneered, "Maybe you hadn't heard, but there was this thing called the Blight? The last one took twelve years to stop, and he did it in twelve months."

Wynne opened her mouth to argue, and slowly closed it. She looked at him askance, and her alit with clarity, "Of course. I see it now. You're smitten with him. And love makes us blind. So very blind. That man is a monster, Anders, no better than the darkspawn. Make no mistake, if you stay..."
"How can you even say something like that?" Anders asked. "You're not a Grey Warden. You haven't seen what the darkspawn do to people. I am. I have. There isn't a fuckup so colossal anyone could ever make to be worse than them."

"It was no 'fuckup.' It was deliberate. It was..." Wynne stopped. "Anders, you must believe me. I have no reason to lie to you."

"Well, I don't." Anders said, wishing he had a little more confidence to back up his words. "It was nice talking with you, Senior Enchanter. Good luck in Cumberland."

Wynne stared at him unhappily. "Thank you, Anders. Maker watch over you."

Anders made his way back down to the common room of the inn, brooding. Wynne hating Amell, Anders could understand. He was a maleficar, he made deals with demons, he was reckless, and he wanted freedom for mages. But why did Amell hate her? Just because she hated him? And what was that 'Have a little Faith' snippet that had made Wynne so furious about? The way Amell had paused when he'd said it had made the word seem profound, almost threatening...

Wynne had been Anders' teacher in some of his classes. His spirit healing classes. Amell was worried about spirits getting too attached to their healers, and spirit healers could draw on spirits of Faith. And two plus two was four. Good job Anders.

Maker's mercy, it was her. Wynne was an abomination. Except she wasn't some bulbous mess of too many souls stuffed into one body. She was completely normal. She couldn't be an abomination. Amell just had a healthy bit of caution about spirits and spirit healers. ... Since when did Amell have a healthy bit of caution about anything? Wynne had to be an abomination.

Anders chewed on his lip, so lost in thought he nearly barreled into Sigrun when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"There you are!" Sigrun grinned up at him, and pointed over her shoulder towards a table his fellow wardens were sitting around, "We're going to play a game of Wicked Grace. Want to join us?"

"No Amell?" Anders noticed.

"He's going through Kristoff's things again," Sigrun said with a shrug, "I don't know why. We already found out where Kristoff was headed. I guess he has a thing for dead people. Necromancers, right? Too bad I'm not a guy."

"He still doesn't have a beard, you know," Anders said.

"Don't get jealous," Sigrun said, "I'm still rooting for you two. So you in or out?"

"I'm in," Anders said. "Give me a minute to see if I can convince Amell."

"It only takes a minute, huh?" Sigrun waggled her eyebrows.

"Magic fingers," Anders joked. "Second door on the left, right?"

"That's the one," Sigrun said.

Anders went to Kristoff's room and knocked.

"It's not locked," Amell called back.
Anders let himself in. It was a fairly simple room: a stone basin to Anders' right, a chest of drawers to the left. A bed took up the far left corner, and a couch sat before a small low table on the right. Amell was sitting at it, surrounded by piles of parchment, maps and open books.

Amell glanced over his shoulder at his entrance, and Anders locked the door as an afterthought. Amell stood up so quickly it was almost comical.

"Don't get excited. I just want to talk," Anders said. Amell cleared a quick space for him on the couch. Anders sat. "What are you doing?"

"Going through Kristoff's things," Amell explained, sitting back down. "He had a wife. There's a letter here from her saying she was heading to Vigil's Keep to meet him, but it's dated back in Ferventis. Either she was delayed or she died on the journey-"

"Or she's cheating on him." Anders offered up.

"Or she's cheating on him. She has a sister in Jader. I was trying to find her sister's name in Kristoff's journal so I could write to her, and inquire about his wife." Amell said.

Not really the sort of thing a monster would be doing. "So... I have a question." Anders said.

"Ask." Amell said.

"Is Wynne an abomination?" Anders asked.

"No," Amell said. He didn't so much as blink.

"See, I feel like, if you were telling the truth here, my question would have surprised you a little." Anders said. Amell stared at him, unreadable as ever, but Anders decided to go with his gut. "She is, isn't she? That's why you asked if Compassion would ever possess me, because Faith possessed Wynne, right?"

"Anders, I need your silence on this." Amell said, confirming Anders' guess. "Wynne doesn't have the Wardens to fall back on. If anyone found out, the templars would kill her."

Anders was right. He gambled and he was actually right. Maybe his luck was finally turning up. Anders was suddenly looking forward to that game of Wicked Grace.

"Hey, I'm already keeping your secret, what's one more?" Anders said blithely, "But, just out of curiosity, why do you care? I mean you two didn't really seem to get on."

"That doesn't mean I want her dead." Amell said, frowning a little, "I'm not even sure if she can die, truth be told."

"So how...? I mean, she looks completely normal. No weird fleshy protrusions, unless that robe was doing some serious work. No echoy demon voice. How is that possible?" Anders asked.

"Because Wynne was willing, and reckless," Amell said.

"You're one to talk." Anders said.


"Look... I know, alright?" Anders said. "I know you're sorry. You don't have to keep saying it."

Amell rubbed his hands on his trousers, likely to get the sweat off his palms. Anders gave him a
smile, and Amell continued. "... I don't know how familiar you are with abominations, but it's not what the Circle teaches. They aren't all mindless beasts."

"The Circle lied to me?" Anders joked, hand to his heart, "Andraste's sword, my world is falling apart."

Amell chuckled a little and said, "Possession doesn't always end in a monster. Entering the physical realm is overwhelming for most spirits and demons. It drives them mad, but the more powerful spirits and demons like Faith or Desire can adapt to the change, and keep the physical shape of their host. I've seen it... frequently, but Wynne is the only abomination I've met who holds a spirit."

"So that... I mean, what I just talked to, was that Wynne or a spirit of Faith?" Anders asked.

"Neither? Both?" Amell shrugged. "I can tell you what she told me, but I can't tell you if she was lying."

"... wow." Anders said. "Well that's... I don't know what to say to that. Why does she hate you? Why do you hate her?"

"A lot of reasons," Amell said unhelpfully. Anders wasn't sure if that counted as Amell saying no to him. Anders pouted, but Amell didn't elaborate.

"That bit back there, what you said about the Circles being free," Anders continued, "You just said it to rile her, right? You didn't actually mean all that, did you?"

"Every word." Amell said firmly. "I'm surprised you don't agree."

"I mean, it's a nice fantasy, isn't it?" Anders admitted, "No Chantry treating us like criminals, locking us away, forcing us to choose between Tranquility or fighting demons... but it's just a fantasy. Actually trying to break away? It would be chaos, if not outright civil war between mages and templars."

"Very probably." Amell agreed.

"So... you can see how that's bad, right?" Anders asked. "Thousands would die."

"Anders, do you know what happened back at the Circle?" Amell asked, "During the Blight, with Uldred, and the Rite of Annulment?"

"Sort of?" Anders shrugged, "I mean I heard there was a big mess with blood mages and abominations, and I know a lot of people died, but I was in Harper's Ford at the time. I haven't been back to the Circle in... over a year now."

"Before he became possessed, the mages following Uldred were fighting for freedom," Amell said, "The Circle was going to support Loghain, and he was going to work to free the mages of the Chantry."

"Is that why you didn't, you know, kill Loghain?" Anders asked.

"Yes." Amell said. "If Uldred hadn't lost himself to Pride, I would have put him forward over Irving. We're the lucky ones, Anders, and that's pathetic. Mages should be able to walk free without hiding behind a Warden's tabard. Wardens die in the Joining, or they die ten or twenty years later, and the years in-between are far from freedom.

"Avernus is trying, but mages shouldn't be forced to turn to the Wardens and then to blood magic
just to spend the rest of their lives fighting darkspawn. I asked Anora to give the Circle autonomy, and with any luck this vote at Cumberland will pass, and that will be enough to start something."

"Well that's... definitely something I'd expect you to hope for," Anders said. "If it's all the same, I'll be cheering safely from the sidelines on this one. I've had enough fighting templars for one lifetime. And enough of all this weighty talk for one night. Here, I got you this."

Anders pushed the parcel he'd been carrying around all day at Amell. Amell raised a suspicious eyebrow at him. Anders kept his expression carefully neutral, and Amell unwrapped it. The onyx statuette fell out into his hands, and he turned it over curiously.

"It's... a pride demon." Amell said. "Is this you mocking me?"

"No," Anders said quickly. He hadn't even thought of it that way, but in retrospect buying Amell a pride demon statuette was about as rude as Amell buying him bracers. "I just thought you'd like it."

"I thought you'd like the bracers," Amell countered with a wan smile.

"Does that mean you don't like the statuette or...?" Anders asked.

"No, I like it," Amell promised, "It's not very subtle, but I like it."

"Look, about the bracers... If you wanted to try giving them to me again, I'll probably take them this time." Anders said.

"Probably?" Amell asked.

"No promises." Anders said. "So I know you're busy being all Warden Commandery, but we're going to play a game of Wicked Grace. Do you want to come join us?"

"Alright," Amell said, setting the statuette on the low table. Anders stood up and headed to the door. Amell followed him, and caught his hand when he reached for the lock. "Anders... do you forgive me yet?"

"I don't know." Anders said. "I'm trying, okay?"

"Okay." Amell said.

Chapter End Notes

Elvish Translations
Ma tu ma'vhenan numin: You make my heart weep.
Suledin. Tel'abelas: Endure. I'm not sorry. (Basically: Deal with it)
Ma emma falon: You are my friend.

This is an optional Apples and Apostate's Chapter told from Sten's perspective to provide some background on Amell's breakup with Zevran.

This is another optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter told from Zevran's perspective to provide more background on how his relationship with Amell started.

This is yet another optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter told from Amell's
perspective about the incident at the Circle Tower in Ferelden during the Blight.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. (Spoiler?) I know eavesdropping is a terrible story telling tool, but third person limited is... well, limited. We probably won't use it again, if that's any consolation. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 13 Parvulis Evening
Crown and Lion Common Room

"Alright you blighters, we're playing Oghren style." Oghren said, shuffling his deck of naked dwarven women. "Serpents high, Angels low, fuck the in-between. You draw the Angel of Death, you play that shit. I mean it, Archy, no holding onto the endgame card till you like your hand. There's cheating, and then there's cheating.

"We're playing for shots. Winner drinks, and you wanna drink. This is Golden Scythe, 4:90 Black." Oghren shoved a crystal flask to the center of the table. "They served this swill by the drop back in the army. We're talking so strong it'll make you shit your innards."

"Well when you put it like, who wouldn't want some?" Anders said.

"You'll die happy. Trust me, Sparkles," Oghren said, dealing.

Anders picked up his cards, and had to wipe grease off a few of them. His hand was rubbish, as usual. A knight, a dagger, a song, an angel, and a serpent. Sigrun was already moving cards in her hand, something that only made sense if she had more than one of the same suit. Unless she was bluffing. Anders had no idea. He was terrible at this game.

On his first turn, Anders discarded his angel, and drew another angel. It figured. He ate a handful of nuts from the bowl they were sharing, already resigned to his loss. "So do the Dalish have any card games?" Anders asked. "You know, like Wicked Grace or Diamondback?"

"Not in my clan." Velanna actually answered him. "We played with dice, and gambled our chores. I used to cast a bit of nature magic to stir the ground, and turn the dice in my favor. Seranni knew I cheated, but she could never figure out how. She would get so angry," Velanna smiled fondly. "She pushed me into an icy river for it. Twice."

"I like her already." Anders said.

"Seranni loved halla. She was training to be our halla keeper. I'm sure she would have liked you too." Velanna said. "You bleat incessantly and startle just as easily."

"I have a fire balm in my pack if you need it, Anders." Nathaniel said.

"Nice." Sigrun giggled, "What about songs? Do you know any Dalish songs we could hear?"

"They are mostly in Elvish." Velanna said.
"Most? So not all of them?" Sigrun asked.

"Not all, but I won't be singing anything, so put it out of your mind." Velanna said.

Two hours later, and Velanna still hadn't changed her mind, no matter how Sigrun pleaded. Oghren had enjoyed a winning streak that left him completely sloshed, and had passed out on the table, but they carried on without him. Anders hadn't won a single hand. No surprise there.

"Just sing one in elvish, then." Sigrun begged, for at least the fifth time that evening. "I hear you talk in Elvish all the time, and it sounds so pretty. I bet singing it would be even prettier."

"I said no." Velanna said. "Leave it be."

"But Amell sang a song. I sang one. We could all sing one. It could be our thing." Sigrun said eagerly.

"I don't want us to have a thing!" Velanna snapped, throwing her cards on the table. A damn shame, that. She had a good hand: two angels and two songs. "I joined this Order to find my sister, not to make friends, or to play this stupid card game, or to care about durgen'len or shemlen. Ma din lethallinen."

Velanna shoved back her chair and stood.

"Velanna-" Amell started.

"Leave me be." Velanna snapped. She stormed out of the common room and up the stairs to her room without a word.

"What did that mean?" Nathaniel asked.

"You are not my clan." Amell translated.

"Oh... man," Sigrun sighed. She folded up her cards and set them all down to rub her face. "Now I feel bad."

"Me too, and I'm not even friends with her." Anders said.

"No, ugh," Sigrun muttered. "I mean I feel bad because I pushed her. Most of her friends and family are dead, but she's alive. I know what that's like. Being with you guys, having fun like this... It makes you forget losing everyone, but when you remember... How do you not feel guilty?"

"Dying with them wouldn't have saved them, Sigrun." Amell said.

Sigrun ran her hands through her hair and tousled it. She took another look at her cards, set them back down, and stood up. "I'm out. Goodnight guys."

"As am I," Nathaniel said, leaving with her. "Goodnight, both of you."

Well. Game over. Which meant the Golden Scythe was fair game. Anders poured himself and Amell shot. "And that is why I hate All Soul's Day," Anders said when everyone but an unconscious Oghren was gone. "Who wants a whole holiday to celebrate feeling like that? If you ask me, the past is in the past, and the dead should stay dead."

"He said to the necromancer." Amell said.

"Excluding necromancy." Anders said as his toast.
"Excluding necromancy," Amell parroted.

Anders clicked drinks with him and knocked his back. It was like drinking sunlight; it burned his face, set his blood on fire, and it made his toes tingle. Anders coughed. "So hey. I know you were cheating on a few of those hands. There's no way you got four serpents that last round. I know because I discarded one of them. How did you manage to grab it?"

"Magic." Amell said.

"Haha. You're a riot." Anders gave Amell's chair a kick, "Come on, tell me. We both know I can keep a secret."

"Magic." Amell said again.

"Fine, be that way." Anders pouted. One of the many abandoned cards on the table stood up on its own. It floated midair for a few seconds, and then drifted leisurely across the table. Amell caught it, and rolled it over between his fingers.

Amell wore smug well. His smirk touched only the right side of his lips, and shadowed his eyes. It made Anders think of him on his knees, looking up. "You sneaky bastard." Anders said.

"Telekinesis, right?"

"Mhm." Amell said, still with that painfully provocative look on his face.

Anders knew himself well enough to know Golden Scythe wasn't the only thing making his face hot. Amell set the card down, and made a come hither gesture with his hand. Anders hair fell down around his face, and his hair tie floated over to land in Amell's hand.


"I've got to learn that one sometime," Anders said, forcing himself to stand up instead of doing any of the things his dick was telling him to do. "Anyway, do you need help getting Oghren back to his room, or are you good?"

"I'm good." Amell handed him back his hair tie without any silly finger brushing. Anders appreciated that. "Goodnight Anders."

"Night." Anders said.

Anders went back to his room and locked the door. Stripping impatiently out of his clothes, he threw himself down on his bed. Anders spit on his hand and slapped his cock against his thigh until he was hard. It didn't take long, thinking of Amell's smug grin, and how he always wore it on his knees. That look that always seemed to say he knew exactly how good he was with his tongue, and the ecstatic one that replaced it as if there was nothing more he wanted than Anders' cock in his warm, wet mouth.

"Fuck me," Anders hissed, cumming messily over his thigh and onto his stomach. He needed the release, but it was nothing compared to sex. Anders probably could have found someone, a barmaid here or at the Pilgrim's Rest, or a cheap prostitute if he was desperate, but he didn't want a stranger.

He wanted Amell. Amell was the one who'd protected him from templars, from demons, from darkspawn. Amell was his friend, and Anders didn't have many. Amell had said he was sorry, and Amell was always saying men were more than their mistakes.

Anders grabbed a handful of the sheets and cleaned himself off, and rolled out of the sweat spot he'd
made. He was undeniably tired, but he lay awake anyway. Amell's room was right next door. Anders didn't have to sleep alone. Indecision kept him in bed, and Anders had almost fallen asleep when the walls rattled, and a door slammed.

Curious, Anders climbed out of bed, and threw on his trousers. He unlocked the door and poked his head out into the hall. Velanna was there, in full uniform and fighting to put on her boots. Anders could not imagine the soles of that poor woman's feet. It was sheer madness to him that Dalish didn't wear shoes.

The door to the room next to him opened as soon as Velanna won the battle with her boots. Nathaniel stumbled out shirtless, and still lacing up his trousers.

Oh. Oh boy.

"Velanna wait!" Nathaniel called. "Please don't go. Talk to me."

"Ir abelas." Velanna said, running out of the hall.

Anders blinked. Nathaniel ran after her without sparing him a glance. Poor sob. There was no winning with that woman. Out in the hall, Anders stared at Amell's door, indecision making lead of his feet. ... No. No, best not. Anders went back to his room and lay back down.

He'd been lying down for perhaps ten minutes when he heard someone knocking. Not on his door, but on the door to the next room over. Considering Nathaniel and Velanna had abandoned the room on Anders' left, it had to be someone looking for Amell.

Anders heard the sound of a door opening, and a muffled conversation. A short while later, and he heard the door close, followed by footsteps. Curiosity quickly got the better of him. Anders got out of bed again, and opened his door quietly.

The hall was empty, but Anders heard voices in the common room. Anders wandered out onto the second story gallery and peered down. The Crown and Lion was perfect for eavesdropping, really. A half wall on the second story meant Anders only had to sit to overhear everything going on below.

Not that Anders would do something like that. Anders respected the privacy of his friends. Whatever Nathaniel wanted to talk to Amell about was none of Anders' business. Anders should just go back to his room, beat another one out, and go to sleep.

Anders sat.

"Bottle of brandy. West Hill, if you have it," Amell was saying to the night bartender. "And ten silver for privacy."

"No West Hill," The bartender said. "We got White River, though. Privacy's free, just come knock on the door to the kitchens when you're done out here, Commander."

"Thank you." Amell said. Anders heard the clink of glasses, footsteps, a door closing.

"Thank you," Nathaniel said. The poor sob sounded wretched. "I'm sorry. I didn't know who else to talk to."

"It's fine, Nathaniel." Amell said, and poured them drinks. The sound reminded Anders he could use a piss. It was one of the many things he could have been doing instead of eavesdropping. Anders kept sitting. "I wasn't asleep anyway. Tell me what happened."
"I wish I knew." Nathaniel said. "I went to go talk to her, just to make sure she was alright but she was so distraught. About her clan, about her Keeper's death and what you learned about Seranni... I hugged her, and that turned into a kiss and one thing led to another...

"Maker, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have any experience with this sort of thing. My time abroad wasn't spent chasing skirts. I've only been with one other woman, and it was a scandal that got me sent to the Free Marches in the first place. Velanna and I, I thought we were close, but afterwards...

"She got dressed so fast. Told me it was a mistake, that it never should have happened. I'm not claiming any sort of magical sexual prowess, but I'm not that bad. She said ... I think 'I'm sorry', in Elvish, and ran away, and I can't track that root magic that lets her teleport.

"I tried so hard to show her that human doesn't mean evil, to court her like any man courts any woman, no matter the race. I never meant for this to happen. You're her friend. Before this, did she even like me? Did she talk about me? Do you think I ruined everything? What do I do here?"

"Velanna tolerates me for the memories in my head, Nathaniel." Amell said. "You're the only person who's completely human she spends any time with, and I know she wouldn't do that if you didn't mean something to her. And she does talk about you. When she first came to the Vigil she asked me a handful of questions about you and no one else."

"... Really? What sort of questions?" Nathaniel asked.

"About your family, your past... Your favorite color, recently." Amell said. "I guessed black."

"It's black." Nathaniel said.

"Dalish don't court the way we do." Amell continued. "They have bonds, usually with someone they grow up with, and it's a lot more serious for them. No one ever did that with Velanna. The men in her clan were intimidated by her, and I only know that because she told me after you got her that malachite. For all I know you're the first man she's ever been with.

"She likes you, Nathaniel, but you have to understand the stigma Dalish have around humans. Being with you would mean exile for her, if she wasn't an exile already, and I don't know that Velanna has really accepted her exile. I know she wants to find her clan and apologize, but I don't know if she expects them to take her back, or if she wants to keep being a Grey Warden. I don't know if Velanna knows."

"So what do I do?" Nathaniel asked.

"Give her time." Amell said.

"That's it? I just wait? I don't know if I can just sit and do nothing without going mad." Nathaniel said.

"I could try talking to her, if you want me to," Amell said.

"I do. Thank you," Nathaniel said.

The two were silent for so long Anders decided it was time to slink back to his room. He started crawling away when Nathaniel spoke up.

"How are things with you and Anders?" Nathaniel asked.
Anders sat down so quickly he fell over.

"I don't know." Amell said. "We still talk, but I don't know if he'll ever forgive me."

"I can't say I blame him." Nathaniel said. Anders liked him. "You have to know what you did to him was a gross violation."

"I know what I am, Nathaniel." Amell said.

"I don't mean to say that there aren't merits to your magic, but some verses are in the Chant for a reason. Transfigurations 1:2. Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him." Nathaniel quoted piously, "I can't think of a more fitting verse here."

"I can. Threnodies 8:27. Andraste 7:12." Amell said. Anders had no idea what those verses said, but it probably wasn't 'blood magic is okay sometimes.' "When I say I know what I am, I don't mean a mage. I mean a Warden. I don't have the luxury of easy choices."

"But surely there was something." Nathaniel argued. "Some other way we could have come out of that encounter without putting Anders at risk."

"Of course there was," Amell said. "I've been working strategy for over two years, and I have the memories of a man from an ancient order of warriors. I know there were other ways, but I couldn't talk. I was going into shock. There wasn't time for me to sit down and discuss battle strategy, and if I had left it to all of you?"

"You're a tracker, Nathaniel. An excellent tracker, but a tracker. You see one target, maybe a few more. Oghren is a berserker, and Velanna is painfully similar. They see what's in front of them. Sigrun is a soldier. She follows orders.

"Anders could have called down that firestorm on his own, but he doesn't think like that. He's a healer. He wanted to help me. I pointed to the battle. I tried to tell him, but I'm your Commander for a reason. I have to see the bigger picture. Sometimes that means risking one person to save four."

"There are five of us, besides Anders."

"I had no idea if the spell would kill me until I cast it. Anders is extraordinarily willful, and if he hadn't already been of a mind to help me at the time, with how much blood I let.. Do you want to know what I really should have done back there, Nathaniel?"

Maker, please say yes.

"I want to know what you think you should have done." Nathaniel said.

"I should have let the ogre kill him. He should have let the ogre kill you. We all got caught, and someone should have died. If I'd let the ogre kill him, I would have had time to finish off their commander and enslave the ogre safely. But I didn't. I panicked, and I'm sure you can guess why.

"Someone once told me a Warden's first priority has to be darkspawn, and that's why relationships inside the order are discouraged. I agree with that in theory, but in practice? I care about Anders. I care about all of you. I can't just let you die to win a fight, but I can and I will make choices that risk your lives. I have to.

"I don't expect you, or Anders, or anyone to understand that, but that's what being a Warden is." Amell said. "Vigilance, victory, sacrifice."
"I see what you're saying, and I agree, but I still feel like there had to be a better way." Nathaniel said. "I'm not claiming to be a strategist, but I squired under one. I understand choke points, key targets, the flow of battle. I don't know if this is out of line, but would you be willing to train with me?

"Strategy, I mean." Nathaniel clarified. "Not sword play. You should have a second, in the field. Someone you can rely on, so your first choice doesn't always have to be magic."

"... That's... No, it's not out of line at all. I'd be happy to, thank you, Nathaniel. If you take to it, and you're interested, I could see about having you appointed Warden Constable." Amell offered.

"I am, but do you think the Wardens or the King would allow that?" Nathaniel asked. "Given who I am, who my father was?"

"I think so. You're not Loghain. There's no reason to assume you'd abuse the power, and I know much of the nobility would be reassured to have a Howe in high places again." Amell said.

"Considering the kind of person I now know my father was, I'm not sure I want anything to do with the people who'd want anything to do with me," Nathaniel said, sounding rueful, "But I appreciate the offer and I'll consider it. ... What you said about relationships in the Wardens being discouraged, is that something I should be concerned about?"

"If it is, I'm a hypocrite." Amell said. "Other Wardens in other countries might do it differently, but as long as I'm your Commander, you can court Oghren for all I care."

"Thank the Maker. I'd been waiting for your approval." Nathaniel joked. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, Amell. Are you heading back up?"

"No. I think I'll stay and finish off the bottle, and make sure Velanna comes back. I'll talk to her for you." Amell said.

"Thank you." The sound of a stool scooting across the floor sent Anders scurrying back to his room. Anders slept, but didn't dream. Velanna was back by morning, but Anders didn't know her well enough to say if she was any more or less bitchy than usual. On the walk back to the Vigil, she walked with Amell instead of Nathaniel, the two of them speaking in Elvish or hushed tones.

It made Anders fidget. He liked Nate, and if Nate was brave enough to bed the harpy, then Anders was rooting for him, but Anders wanted to talk to Amell. He didn't know what he wanted to say, but he wanted to talk, and he probably wasn't going to get another chance for a while. After a brief stop at the Vigil, the six of them planned to head out to the Blackmarsh to search for Kristoff.

Sigrun nudged him out of his thoughts. "Hey, you had the other room next to Velanna, right?" Sigrun asked in a hushed whisper. "Did you hear those two last night? Those were definitely not push ups."

"What, really?" Anders feigned surprise. "No, I didn't hear anything. The wall on your side must have been thinner."

"Not to sound like Oghren, but they really were going at it like nugs. My whole wall was shaking, and Velanna? Screamer." Sigrun said.

"No kidding?" Anders said.

"About time, right?" Sigrun said happily. "The way she's always pretending not to smile around him
is too cute."

"'Pretending not to smile.' Right." Anders rolled his eyes. "Is that what we're calling glares now? Pretend smiles?"

"No, for you, they're actually glares. Bet you wish you were a durgenlelelelen now, huh shemmy?" Sigrun asked.

Anders had a comeback, but someone was running their way on the road. A soldier from the Vigil, by the look of their armor. That couldn't have been good. "What do you think this is? Another attack?" Anders asked.

"I don't know." Sigrun said.

The six of them jogged up to meet the runner. It was a young woman, and she was out of breath when she reached them. "Warden Commander, Ser. Private Kallian. Seneschal Varel sent me to warn you."

"Report." Amell said.

"Templars arrived at the Vigil last night, Ser." Kallian said. "There are five in total, led by a Knight Lieutenant, and traveling with a Revered Mother of the Chantry. They've been asking question about Senior Warden Anders, and a templar named Rylock."

And there it was. All Anders' fears laid bare. He never should have gotten comfortable here. His little freedom fantasy was over, and the templars were going to drag him back to the Circle, to Aeonar, to prison, to darkness. He couldn't breathe. Why hadn't he left? Why hadn't he ran when Amell had pushed three gold sovereigns into his hand and given him a chance and a choice?

"Private, this is important. The templars, the Knight Lieutenant in particular, did they have a pendant with them?" Amell asked. "A red vial, set in a circle like a compass? They'd be wearing it like a necklace."

"Yes, Ser," Kallian said. Anders laughed. "The Knight Lieutenant has it, Ser. He plays with it all the time."

"What about a scroll?" Amell asked. "It would have gold handles. It wouldn't be with the rest of their things. One of the templars would be carrying it in a small gold chest."

"I don't remember any fancy scrolls or chests, Ser." Kallian said after a pause. "They have their trunks, so I can't say for certain, but all they carry around the Vigil are their weapons and armor."

"Thank you, Private. You can return to the Vigil. Don't mention us." Amell said.

"Yes, Ser." Kallian said. She bowed, and jogged back the way she came.

"Well. It was nice knowing most of you." Anders laughed, hysteria making his heart skip like a stone over water. He couldn't breathe. "But I think that's my cue to head for the hills, or whatever landform's closest. I think I'll go with ocean? Ocean sounds good. Pesky things, oceans. All sorts of brigands and pirates and water. Great templar deterrent, water. You wouldn't believe how fast those skirts rust, and brown with silver and purple? Well that's just a fashion crime. No templar would risk it. You guys will feed Ser Pounce-a-Lot, right?"

"Anders, calm down." Amell said.
"Calm down?" Anders laughed. He couldn't stop laughing, and started hyperventilating. Velanna slapped him. Anders managed a deep breath, and rubbed his stinging cheek.

"By the Dread Wolf, get a hold of yourself." Velanna said. "You are a mage! You have walked the Beyond. What are these templars to you?"

Anders scowled at her. Entitled bitch. Velanna was Dalish. Her clan had embraced her magic, even revered it. She had no idea what it was like to live in fear. In a cage. In solitude and darkness. "You don't have a fucking clue, do you?"

Velanna sneered. "I know you-

"Mana. Tel'dirth." Amell said. "Anders, it'll be fine."

"'Fine'?" Anders scoffed. "How will it be fine? You don't send that many templars, a bloody Knight Lieutenant, and a Revered Mother for tea and crumpets. You heard her! They have my phylactery. You think they brought it just to give it back to me? Hey, congratulations! You're a Warden now; we don't need this anymore. Oh, and about those five templars we think you killed? Don't even worry about it. No hard feelings!"

Anders couldn't breathe again. A deep inhale won him a sliver of breath. He locked his hands over his head to help air into his lungs.

"Anders, trust me." Amell said. "I swore I wouldn't let them take you back. I meant it. I'll talk with them. They'll leave."

"Oh good. They'll leave." Anders repeated mockingly. "They have me pegged as a maleficar who murdered five templars, but you'll talk to them and they'll leave."

"Yes." Amell said.

"What are you going to say?" Anders demanded. "How can you possibly convince them to leave if they went far enough to bring my phylactery here? You can't just mind control a half dozen templars."

"Watch me." Amell said.

Maker's breath, he meant it. He took it like a dare. Anders could see it in his eyes, practically painted the color of Amell's obsession. This was suicide. This was insanity. "You're not serious."

"I doubt I'll need to, but if you think I won't, you're wrong." Amell said.

"If they got even a whiff of blood, they'd run you through before you could say knickerweasels," Anders said. "You're insane."

"Fine. Then I'm insane," Amell said. "But I made you a promise and I'll keep it. If you let them blame you for these deaths, they'll kill you, and if you run, they'll blame you. You'd rather risk that than trust me?"

Yes. No. Anders didn't know. It wasn't a choice he wanted to make. Amell had said it himself: Amell made the hard choices. Anders didn't make choices. Anders didn't have choices. He just ran.

"Anders?" Amell asked.

"What?" Anders asked.
"Are you staying or not?" Amell asked.

"Where would I even go if I left?" Anders asked.

"... There's an elf in Amaranthine named Alim. He stays at the Fisherman's Rest by the docks. I have five sovereigns on me. If you give him one, he'll get you on a boat to wherever you want to go." Amell said.

Anders stared at him, dumbfounded. It was right there. Freedom. Or a mockery of it. Where could Anders go the templars wouldn't follow? Especially now that they apparently blamed him for Rylock's death. Amell kept talking, some nonsense about something called the Mages' Collective that could help him.

No. No, it wasn't that simple. The templars still had his phylactery. As soon as Anders left Amell's shadow, he was a dead man. He had to stay. He wanted to stay. Amell bound Pride, Desire, Terror. He was right. Velanna was right. What were templars to a mage? They were feared for a reason.

"Anders, are you listening?" Amell's voice finally stopped sounding like it was coming through a film when Anders made a decision.

Anders grabbed Amell's face in his hands and kissed him roughly. It hurt like mad, and clicked their teeth together, but Anders didn't care. The kiss was a mess of teeth and tongue, of gasps half pained and half surprised.

Amell didn't react immediately, and Anders bit his lip for it. Anders wanted or needed Amell's confidence. Amell let slip a moan, and Anders changed his mind. Anders had his own confidence. It was confidence in Amell, but it bloody better count, because it was all Anders had.

Amell kissed back, and Anders lost himself in the moment. Hands clutched at his back, heated moans took up space between each desperate kiss, and Anders wasn't afraid of anything.

"Alright. Okay." Oghren said. "Glad you two got your shit sorted, but this is getting kind of gross."

"Shut up! I love this." Sigrun said.

"Did I say kind of gross? I meant really gross. Hands don't go there." Oghren said.

"Guh." Velanna said.

Anders let go of Amell. Breath came easier, when it wasn't panic leaving him breathless.

"I have no idea what that was for." Amell said, face flushed. "Are you staying or leaving?"


"Atta boy, Sparkles." Oghren said.

Amell ran an ineffectual hand through his hair. Anders had ruined it. He wasn't sorry.

"So... Uh," Amell cleared his throat. "I'm going to talk to them alone. Anders, stay with Oghren, and Velanna, stay with Nathaniel. Don't give the templars an excuse to notice you."

"I am not afraid of templars." Velanna said.

"Trust him, lass. You don't want none of that mess." Oghren said. "I've seen the shit they do to your like, and it ain't pretty. Ain't pretty at all."
Oghren unhooked his hip flask from his belt, and punched Anders in the stomach with it. "Thanks."
Anders said.

The alcohol didn't help, but it also didn't hurt. The sun was still high in the sky, and there were no
ominous shadows in the courtyard, but Anders felt uneasy. A templar approached them when they
stepped into the inner courtyard, and Anders suddenly appreciated the Seneschal's warning.
Templars obviously weren't the sort of guests who waited politely to be seen.

"Warden Commander Amell." The templar said with a bow. He was wearing a helmet, and his voice
echoed queerly for it. "I am Ser Aedan, here with a small retinue of my fellows under the command
of Knight Lieutenant Borris on Circle business. We request an audience at your earliest convenience.
We also request the apostate Anders be present."

"There's no one here by that title." Amell said. "I have a Senior Warden by the name of Anders, and
he will be addressed accordingly. Your audience will be with me and me alone."

"Very well, Commander." The templar agreed with no fuss. Anders wondered if that was blood
magic. Why else would a templar be polite? "Ser Borris is waiting in the throne room. May I take
you too him?"

"Lead on." Amell said.

Amell left, and it was over. Nathaniel and Velanna went to the kitchens with Sigrun. Oghren gave
Anders a shove, and they walked back to the barracks.

"See? Simple shit. No fuss, no muss, no need to cuss." Oghren said when they were inside. He
trundled over to his bunk, and disrobed down to his trousers before throwing himself down on his
bed.

"You realize you just cussed, right?" Anders asked. Ser Pounce-a-Lot ran out from under Anders'
bunk at his voice and circled his legs. Anders picked him up and buried his face in his fur. The smell
and his purrs helped unravel the knot in Anders' stomach, if only by a strand.

"What? No I didn't." Oghren said, digging up a bottle of something from the mess on his bunk. It
was strong enough Anders could smell it from where he stood.

"Are you sure you should be drinking?" Anders asked. "Shouldn't you, I don't know, be in full
armor ready to protect me when the templars come crashing through the door?"

"Alright, Sparkles, come sit on Papa Oghren's lap and he'll tell you a story." Oghren suggested,
patting the space beside him.

Oghren's bunk was covered in crumbs, stains, and dirty clothes. Anders wrinkled his nose, and set
down Ser Pounce-a-Lot. He wouldn't force the poor tabby to suffer with him. Anders sat gingerly on
the edge of the mattress, the frame of it biting into his ass.

"Did you ever ask the Boss about how he stopped the Blight?" Oghren asked, taking a drink.

"No." Anders shrugged. "I mean, I don't really care, honestly."

"Haha!" Oghren laughed, and wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. "See, that's why I like
you, Sparkles. When you're not pissing yourself over templars and mage bullshit, you know what's
up. Laugh, drink, and eat, damn the rest and suck some teats.

"Anyway. Blight shit. Boss shit. You can untie your panties, because this isn't his first Proving.
When I say he does this a lot, I mean a lot. All those stories about how the Boss brought everyone together to fight the Blight, batting his eye lashes and being some silver tongued dick sucker? Bullshit.

"Deshers in Orzammar? Blood magic. Nobles at the Landsmeet? Blood magic. You name it, blood magic. Those templars are gonna walk out of here, and they won't even remember your fuckin name. So have a drink, let's play some cards, and don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Anders took his advice. They played Diamondback, which Anders was rubbish at, ate lunch, and drank. Oghren even took a nap, but Anders wasn't about to sleep with templars in the Vigil.

Anders was sitting on his bunk, lost in his thoughts and petting Ser Pounce-a-Lot when Amell came and found him.

"Do you have a minute?" Amell asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." Anders swung his legs over the edge of his bunk, and hesitated. "Are they gone?"

"All gone." Amell promised. "Could we talk? Preferably in private?"

"Point the way, fearless leader." Anders said.

Amell led him through the Vigil and up to his quarters. When they reached them, Amell locked the door behind them. Anders missed the way his room smelled. Like Amell, with a hint of parchment and cedar. It was comfortable, but Anders wasn't quite confident enough to sit anywhere after the week they'd had.

"So, how'd it go?" Anders asked. "I mean they left, so I'm assuming it went well."

"It went fine." Amell said. "They were investigating Rylock's disappearance, and they had a few questions about you. I told them I didn't know anything and they left."

"And they believed you?" Anders asked.

"So I assume." Amell said.

"Just like that?" Anders asked. "You didn't have to bribe them with cookies, or cake, or blood magic, or anything?"

"... The Revered Mother was there as a mediator. I nudged her a little, and she spoke in your defense." Amell said.

"Right in front of the Knight Lieutenant?" Anders asked. "How did they not notice that?"

"It wasn't noticeable." Amell shrugged. "Without reciting the Litany of Adralla, there's... no real counter for it."

"The what now?" Anders asked.

"A spell, written in Tevene." Amell explained. "It counters blood magic, but something in the magic keeps it from being memorized. It's normally kept as a scroll, when templars expect to encounter maleficarum. I took what I believe is the only copy from Kinloch Hold, but it never hurts to be sure."

"Well that's... something," Anders said. "So... Look. I've been thinking, and I understand why you did what you did. Back at the Turnobles. I don't like it, but I understand. What I don't understand is
how everything just keeps working out for you. You'd figure you'd fuck up at least once, just to spice it up a little, but you don't."

"Anders, I've fucked up almost every expedition we've had." Amell said. "I got us caught by darkspawn in the mines, and again in the fields, I pushed you too hard in Kal'Hirol-"

"No, I don't mean any of that," Anders interrupted him. "I mean the blood magic. You don't fuck up. I keep thinking you're crazy, and you're going to get us killed, but you don't. It just works, every time, and you're such a smug bastard about it, but you're right. You know what you're doing,"

"Do you really mean that?" Amell asked.

"You got me. I'm just fucking with you. I'm that evil." Anders joked. "Of course I mean it. This is the third time you've stood for me against templars, and I don't know, third time's the charm I guess."

"... What about us?" Amell asked.

"What about us?" Anders repeated.

"Do you still want there to be an us?" Amell asked.

"No, I came up here and said all that just so I could officially ditch you." Anders said.

"I'm... not fluent in sarcasm, Anders." Amell said. "Could you try being feely for me just this once?"

"Yes. Alright? I want to keep having sex with you." Anders said.

"You're so romantic." Amell said.

"You can swoon. I'll catch you." Anders promised.

Amell grinned, and crossed the space between them to cup the back of his neck. Anders put his hands on Amell's chest to stop him before he could kiss him.

"One more thing." Anders said. "What you did... was probably the worst thing that has ever happened to me, right up there with solitary and being taken to the Circle. I can't even tell you what I'll do to you if you ever do that to me again, but... I meant what I said. I understand why you did it.

"If you hadn't... we'd probably all have died back there. And I know I'd be in shackles right now if it wasn't for you. If I was alone, if I went with that Mage Collective thing you were talking about, and the templars caught up with me, I'd be dead. Once they cast that smite... That's it for me. I'm on the ground, I can't cast, and the shackles come out, and it's back to the Circle.

"That... scares the shit out of me. It always has. But you? With blood magic? You can actually fight back. You can defend yourself. You can defend me, without even fighting, and I..." Anders stopped.

Anders had been thinking about it all afternoon. He'd thought about it when he'd healed everyone at the estate. He'd thought about it when he'd healed Amell in the storehouse. He'd thought about it when Amell was with him in the Fade. He'd thought about it ever since Amell had offered to teach him blood magic his first night as a Warden.

"I want you to teach me." Anders said.
**Elvish translations**

Mana. Tel'dirth: Stop. Shut up.

An optional [Apples and Apostates' chapter](#) told from Nathaniel's perspective about the events in this chapter.
Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

(Spoilers?) I was always a little peeved that the writers decided to announce Anders was a nickname, so here is my explanation for that, which also explains why Anders never gives out his real name. I don't ever plan to give him one, don't worry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 14 Parvulis Late Afternoon

Vigil's Keep, in the Warden-Commander's Quarters

"You want me to what?" Amell asked.

"Teach me. Blood magic." Anders said again.

"Are you sure?" Amell asked, shifting his grip on the back of his neck to hold his jaw instead. Amell ran his thumb over Anders' cheek; the affection still made Anders a little nervous. "I will, but every time you've used it so far, you didn't have a choice, and you always go to the chapel afterwards..."

"Well, I have a choice now, don't I?" Anders asked. "Look, I've got fourteen... fifteen years of Circle lies to get over. Until you told me I didn't even know 'nice abomination' was a thing. I've never even heard of the Litany of Adria-"

"Adralla." Amell corrected him.

"Right. Anyway," Anders should do something with his hands, beside keep them on Amell's chest. He held Amell's waist instead, "My point is I watch you do all this crazy, creepy shit and come out fine. I thought it was because you were lucky at first, but now I think it's because you know what you're doing. And I'm tired of being afraid of everything. Nothing scares you, and that's... pretty unhealthy, honestly, but I think it's because you know you can get out of anything. I'd give anything to be that confident... why are you looking at me like that?"

Amell was grinning the rueful sort of a grin a person wore when they couldn't believe what they were hearing. Anders wasn't sure he'd said anything quite ridiculous enough to warrant such a look.

"This isn't how I pictured this," Amell said.

"Pictured what?" Anders asked.

"You, thinking I'm the confident one." Amell explained.

"Well, why wouldn't I?" Anders asked, "I mean, I know I'm a looker, and I'm hilarious, and all that, but there's a difference between knowing you're awesome and standing up to templars."

"You stand up to templars all the time." Amell said.
"Since when?" Anders laughed. "Did you miss the panic attack I had back there? Here, stop hugging me, let's go sit on the couch or something."

Amell let go of him, and Anders dragged him over to his couch. Amell sat so close to him their thighs touched, but Anders felt better sitting casually than he did standing and swaying like lovebirds.

"You've been standing up to templars since you first ran from the Circle when you were fifteen."
Amell continued, hand on Anders' thigh, "Fifteen. I can't imagine being that brave. When I was fifteen, I was terrified the templars would decide my interest in necromancy meant I was at risk for becoming a maleficar. I spent every night studying to make sure I got the highest marks in my classes just so I'd be too valuable to be made Tranquil."

"I don't think there wasn't anything brave about that," Anders said, "More like stupid. It's a miracle I wasn't made Tranquil, escaping before my Harrowing."

"And then you did it again. And again. And again." Amell said. "It was all anyone talked about. Anders' latest escape attempt, how long he'd be gone this time, how long until he escaped again. I had such a hopeless crush on you, and you're sitting here telling me I'm the brave one."

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait." Anders said. "Back up. You had a crush on me?"

"Um... no?" Amell said.

"How is this the first time I'm hearing about this?" Anders asked.

"I didn't want to creep you out." Amell shrugged.

"But that's what you do. I mean, you're Creepy, right?" Anders grinned. His ego was never going to recover from this. "I can't believe Irving's Star Pupil had a crush on the Repeat Apostate. That is seriously star-crossed. You should have said something! Back at the Circle. I couldn't even remember your name we met."

"I did, actually." Amell said, with a small smile. "I was... I think sixteen? Which would have made you twenty-one? I was chubby and covered in acne, and you were... something else. I was in the main hall when the templars brought you in from your latest escape attempt. Your jaw was black and purple, your lip was cut, and the templars had you in shackles. They were dragging you, but you had this smirk on your face... Like you knew you were just going to try again, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop you."

"I couldn't decide if I wanted to be you or if I wanted to fuck you. I went and found you in the dining hall, a few days later, and tried to start a conversation. I got maybe a handful of words in when Surana sashayed over, her robe down to here. Amell pinched his doublet between his breasts, "She leaned over you and asked you for 'another healing lesson.' You said 'Nice talking to you, Apple,' and left me there with your tray."

"I did not." Anders said.

"You did." Amell said. "It was traumatizing."

"That's...hilarious," Anders laughed, "No, I'm sorry, that's terrible. I'm an ass. In my defense, I do remember Surana, and she was... really hot. I think she's the only elf I've ever met who didn't end up hating me. I was seriously depressed when she fell for that templar."

"Yes, very sad." Amell said flatly.
"Oh, come on, Apple, don't pout." Anders teased.

"That's not funny." Amell said.

"It's pretty funny." Anders said.

"It wasn't at the time." Amell said. "Jowan saw the whole thing, and thought it was hilarious. He called me 'Apple' for an entire year."

"Well, I won't steal someone else's joke, then." Anders said. "Comedians' Code."

"Technically, he stole it from you." Amell said.

"Are you asking me to call you Apple?" Anders asked.

"No." Amell said.

"Okay, Apple." Anders said.

"Stop." Amell said.

"Never." Anders grinned. "What am I supposed to do if I can't fuck with you?"

"I have an idea," Amell shifted so he was facing him, and ran his hand up Anders' thigh to slip his fingers into his belt, fingertips brushing his hip. "Anders... I don't know how you feel, and I don't expect you to tell me, but I've missed you."

"It was a long week," Anders tried for a smirk. It had been more than a week, but teasing was easier than admitting he felt the same.

"It was a long week," Amell said; his voice was low, his eyes somewhere between warm and hungry. "I understand if you're not ready to trust me again yet, but-"

Anders slid an arm around Amell's thighs and tugged him into his lap. Amell went willingly, swinging his leg around to straddle him. Maker, Anders had missed that familiar weight. "We're good," Anders promised, massaging Amell's hips with his thumbs and asking himself why his hands worked up instead of down.

"Are you sure?" Amell traced along his brow and down the side of his face, as if he'd somehow forgotten the shape of it. Anders tried not to shiver. "I know what that spell felt like for you. If you need more time to decide how you feel, don't let me rush you."

"I said we're good." Anders walked his hands up Amell's sides, feeling Amell's breath quicken against his palms the longer they spent with their eyes locked. "I know you wouldn't use it for that," and somewhere, deep down, Anders knew Amell would never need to.

Amell ran blunt nails across Anders' brow and brushed a few loose strands of gold back from his eyes, "Can I kiss you?"

"You can do a lot more than that," Anders said, wetting his lips with a few eager flicks of his tongue. Amell tilted Anders' head back with a firm hand on his jaw, and Anders left his eyes open for far too long. Long enough that Amell's eyes flicked back to his when their noses brushed, and Amell pulled back to stare into them.

Whatever was in that stare terrified him. Anders couldn't do it. He grabbed Amell's face in his hands to hold him steady and kissed him hard. His were lips insistent, his teeth demanding, and thought
died at the first shared groan that spilled between them. That was how Anders wanted it. Urgent, intense, physical. No feeling. No lingering looks.

Amell surrendered to it. Anders felt it in the rock of his hips, in the hitch in his breath, and the desperate moan that spilled into Anders' mouth. Anders swallowed it, and rocked his hips up to meet him when Amell ground against his lap. Anders stole a hand inside his trousers, squeezing his ass and pulling the two of them closer together. Amell's belt cut into his wrist, but it was worth it to feel the warmth of his skin and the way he tensed beneath his palm.

Amell broke from his lips and leaned back to pull apart Anders' doublet, fingers fumbling over one too many buttons. A hard yank ripped it open and sent them all scattering. The cold air hit Anders' bare chest and his nipples stiffened easily under Amell's exacting touch. "Fuck," Anders swallowed to battle back the eager shake in his voice.

"Buy you a new one," Amell promised, killing the words on Anders' lips in another kiss heavy with hunger. Anders' thrust up into him, and what little friction he could find in the fabric between them. It wasn't enough. It wasn't even close. Static sparked between Anders' fingers, and he swore he hadn't meant to call on the spell, but Amell begged for it, "Yes, fuck, please, Anders."

Anders made it into a current between his hands, and hesitated closing it, "Ready?"

"Yes," Amell rocked back against Anders' hand and forward on his cock. Anders closed his free hand around Amell's thigh, and closed the current. Amell threw his head back and a scream tore from his throat; his back arched, body trembling, and the sight made Anders' cock throb so hard it ached.

Anders cut off the spell, and Amell pitched forward against his chest. Anders freed his hand from Amell's trousers to run it through the his hair and the sudden sheen of sweat on his forehead. "Oh fuck," Amell gasped, "Fuck. Do that again."

"Can you take it again?" Anders asked. Amell shook his head, grinning, and a few damp strands of hair stuck to his forehead. Every breathless pant that spilled from his lips made Anders' hips jerk. Amell moved with him, the grind and rock of their hips a tease of pressure and friction.

Anders leaned back from him and undid Amell's belt. The hiss of leather sliding free of cloth tangled together Amell's sharp inhale, and Anders lost the belt over his shoulder. Amell's lips sought his, hot and wet and still tingling with the aftershock of Anders' spell.

"Fuck me," Amell begged. Anders pulled Amell's lip between his teeth, and let a breath of static play between them. It hummed in Anders' teeth, and won a shaky gasp from Amell.

"Ask me nice," Anders said.

Amell leaned back from him and undid Anders' buckle without breaking eye-contact with him. Anders swallowed past a lump in his throat, and ignored the shiver he could feel tingling along his skin, begging for release. Amell tossed his belt aside and climbed off Anders' lap and onto his knees. Anders unlaced his trousers and half stood to push them and his smalls down his legs.

The air was cold, but Amell's mouth was warm and Anders was aching for it. His cock was stiff and leaking down his shaft, throbbing so hard it twitched. Amell kissed the inside of his thigh, strong hands kneading up and down his legs. Amell took hold of Anders' cock and set it to his lips, a slow sweep of his tongue mapping the head of Anders' cock.
Amell moaned around the lick, the heat of his breath mingling with the slick caress of his tongue. Anders fought to keep his hips from bucking, reduced to nothing more than the pulse in his cock, the tightness in his chest, the tension in the pit of his stomach. Amell's lips closed around his shaft with another eager moan, as if he'd never tasted anything better than the sweat and pearly fluid on Anders' skin.

Amell's mouth was hot and wet and every enthusiastic swipe of his tongue sent a shiver of pleasure through Anders. Anders ran his hands through his hair, raven locks slipping like silk through his fingers, and Anders gathered fistfuls of them while Amell worked his cock. His lips were stretched thin around his cock, and every pass was slicker than the last.

Amell sank low on his cock, his tongue smooth and flat and a perfect bed for Anders to fuck his mouth. The slow, deep swallow left Anders gasping, writhing with pleasure at the warm embrace and wet friction. "Fuck," Anders moaned, "Fuck Amell. Use that spell again, fuck the-... with your tongue."

Anders held his breath when he felt the pull of the Fade, and the first low pulse of heat along his cock sent pleasure cascading through him. "Maker yes," Anders gasped. He felt the second pulse in the pit of his stomach, the third in his feet, and then he was trembling, writhing, barely keeping himself from sliding off the couch with the sweat that built beneath him. "Stop-stop-"

Amell stopped, Anders' cock slipping from his mouth and falling heavy between his legs. Spit and drool were painted across his chin and down his neck, and Anders sucked in a sharp breath at the sight. Amell stripped out of his clothes and climbed back into Anders' lap, damp lips against his ear, "Did I ask nice enough?"

Anders inhaled a rickety breath of mana, and let it out in a pulse of creationism that coated his fingers with oil. Anders worked one finger into Amell's tight heat, his breathy moans deliciously loud against Anders' ear. Anders bit Amell's neck, sucking and worrying at the soft skin with his tongue. Amell pulled Anders' hair free of its tie and buried his fingers in it, gasping and jerking his hips back to fuck himself on Anders' hand.

Anders added a second finger, thrusting into him until he was slick and stretched around him. Adding a third made Amell whimper, shameless pleas of 'Anders' 'More' 'Yes' and 'Fuck' spilling together with gasps and moans. Anders dragged his nails down Amell's shoulders, and Amell arched back into the friction. Anders licked the sweat off Amell's chest and pulled his fingers from him.

Amell whined at the loss, and Anders pressed the head of his cock to Amell's worked entrance, and eased into him with a deliberate slowness that left both of them shaking and desperate for more. "Fuck," Anders gasped, tight heat clenched around his cock, pleasure choking him in its intensity, "Amell-you're-fuck-"

Amell grabbed his face in his hands and kissed him, shaking so hard his lips slipped, and his kiss spilled down Anders' jaw. Amell sank down on his cock, and Anders fisted his hands in the couch to keeps his hips from jerking up into that tight heat. The rise and fall of Amell's hips set a rhythm that coiled heat in the pit of Anders' stomach, and left Anders' skin flushed and sweating.

Anders wrapped his arms around Amell, dragging the pads of his fingers down his back, sliding through sweat and over trembling muscle. Amell was so hot he felt feverish, and Anders kissed him eagerly, mouth slipping, teeth catching, trying to keep a hold on him despite how they pulled apart and crashed together in waves. "Fuck, Anders." Amell nearly sobbed, his voice hoarse, his hands tangled messily in Anders' hair.

The air between them crackled, and Anders couldn't tell whose magic it was, but he embraced it.
when it sent ripples of heat and static cascading over their skin. Amell bit down on his shoulder, muffling screams, and the sharp press of teeth didn't hurt nearly enough. The sensations were overwhelming, pleasure bordering on pain in its intensity, and Anders lost himself to it.

Ecstasy rushed through him, a surge and swell of mind-shattering bliss that left his thighs trembling and his hips jerking. Anders fell apart, broken gasps and blinding heat spilling out of him. He clung to Amell to survive it. His ears were ringing and his feet were numb when he fell down from his high, and Maker, he was too sensitive but Amell wasn't there yet, and every downward drive of his hips made Anders shudder.

Amell already had a hand around his cock, but Anders added his atop it, and Amell pawed at Anders' chest, up his neck, and grabbed his jaw. Amell's thumb slipped into Anders' mouth, and he pulled him forward for a sloppy kiss around it. It pushed Amell over, and Anders held him through his shaking release, and the screams he weathered it with.

Anders chest was sticky and dripping white, his ruined doublet hanging off his shoulders. His trousers were still tangled around his thighs, but he didn't care about any of it. He didn't need clothes, with Amell's warm weight in his lap, draped against his chest. Anders ran his fingers through Amell's damp hair, shivering at the kiss Amell landed on his jaw.

"Again?" Amell offered.

"You're insane," Anders tried for a laugh, but he was too exhausted to manage one.

"I know a spell," Amell explained.

"... seriously?" Anders asked. "Blood magic can really do that?"

"Mhm," Amell said.

"Teach me that," Anders laughed, "Later."

Anders didn't know how he managed a second time, even with the spell. They moved to the bed where the sex was slow and lazy, and there was absolutely no way Anders was capable of moving ever again. He lay atop Amell afterwards, his whole body aching in the best of all possible ways. Even the slightest brush of Amell's fingers made him shiver, and he pinned the man's arms above his head to keep him from running them down his back.

"Thanks," Anders managed.

"For what?" Amell suppressed a laugh, but Anders could feel it thrum in his chest lying on top of him.

"I don't know," Anders said. "That was nice. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Amell said. Anders could hear his heartbeat, with his head on his breast, and it was oddly comforting. Amell fought to free a hand, and trailed his fingers up Anders' wrist to hold onto his forearm. "I missed this."

Anders knew better, but Amell kissed his finger tips, he didn't have it in him to lie. He'd never been good at it anyway. "Yeah."

"Are you going to fall asleep on me?" Amell asked.

"I don't know." Anders said. "Maybe."
"I don't think the sun is even down yet." Amell said.


"I need to use the wash," Amell said.

"Don't care," Anders said.


"Fine." Anders groaned, rolling off him. Amell fled to the washroom. Anders climbed to the edge of the bed and found his ruined tunic on the floor. He kept a change of clothes in Amell's room, unless Amell had thrown them out during the week off. Anders doubted it. Anders dried himself off, and threw the ruined tunic back on the floor.

Amell came out of the washroom, and went straight to his armoire to put on a pair of smalls and trousers over them.

"What?" Anders asked. "Pants? Why pants? Do you really have something to do today?"

"I need to meet with Varel, and Woolsey, and send that letter to Jader." Amell said, getting dressed.

"Right now?" Anders whined.

"I should do it before dinner." Amell said. "But I'll be free after if you want to do anything."

"Like have more sex?" Anders asked.

"Like have more sex. Or we could do a quick lesson in blood magic. Or both." Amell said.

"Both works for me." Anders said.

"I like both, too," Amell grinned over his shoulder at him. He finished dressing and came back to the bed. Amell sat down on the edge of it, and reached out to caress Anders' ankle. "Anders, I know you don't like weighty, but... you understanding about the blood magic, forgiving me for using it on you, wanting to learn it... I've never been with a man willing to do that for me."

"What about a woman?" Anders joked.

It must not have been a funny joke. A shadow passed over Amell's face, and his hand froze on his ankle.

"Wait, have you actually been with a woman before?" Anders asked, sitting up. It was obviously a sore topic, but his curiosity got the better of him. Oghren and Amell had made it sound like Amell treated women like the plague, where sex was concerned.

"I... once. It-... I'm sorry. I can't-talk about this. I have to go see Varel." Amell said, standing quickly and all but bolting from the room.

That was weird. No, it wasn't weird, it was worrying. A reaction like that made Anders think he'd stumbled on some sort of horribly traumatic experience. ... rape, maybe? A templar? Anders felt queasy. No. No reason to jump to conclusions. It could have been anything. Anders pushed it from his mind and got out of bed.

Anders used Amell's wash for a piss and a bath, changed into his spare set of clothes, and dumped his old set in the laundry. He wandered back downstairs to the barracks, and tolerated a bit of jeering
from Sigrun who rightly guessed where he'd been and what he'd been doing by the marks on his neck. Anders spent an hour playing dice with her, and then went to check on the infirmary. He did a quick count of the stores, and helped tidy up a bit after his two day absence, and then went to have dinner in the dining hall.

He ate with Nate and Oghren, and resisted the urge to comment on what he knew about Nate's strained relationship with Velanna. Afterwards, he stole a bit of milk from the kitchens for Ser Pounce-a-Lot, and then went to find Amell again. He had to pester three servants before someone pointed him to the war room, where he ran into the Seneschal leaving.

"Warden," The Seneschal said with a nod. "The Commander is still meeting with Mistress Woolsey, within. He shouldn't be much longer."

Anders looked him over again. He wasn't much like Irving, Anders supposed. He had warm brandy-colored eyes, and while his hair was grey, it wasn't shock with white. And he had the build of a warrior, instead of a doddering old fool. More importantly, he'd warned them about the templars.

"Good to know," Anders said. "Hey... so... can I talk to you, actually?"

"Of course," The Seneschal said, confusion wrinkling his brow. "What can I do for you, Warden?"

"Nothing, really, I was just wondering why you warned me. About the templars. When Ah-" Anders caught himself before he said 'Amell', "-the Commander, recruited me you didn't seem too happy about saving the bloodthirsty apostate who murders innocent templars."

"Ah." The Seneschal said, frowning. "True enough, and yet not quite. I still won't claim to know the truth surrounding the templars who brought you here, and I admit I made assumptions when we were introduced, but the moment the Commander recruited you, that no longer mattered.

"I have nothing but the utmost respect for the Order, and for the Commander. Whatever you were, whatever my feelings on your past crimes, you're a Warden, and you've served well. I hope to serve well in turn. I am for you, and the Wardens, and against any who are against you. Does that answer your question, Ser?"

Well damn. That was heavy. Anders really underestimated how far being a Warden could get him.

"Yep." Anders said.

"Take care then, Warden," The Seneschal said, nodding.

Anders thought of asking him his name, but that felt more than a little rude. He'd just ask Amell. Anders took up a spot in the hall, and had to wait a few minutes before Woolsey and Amell left the war room. Woolsey gave him a scolding frown for being so obvious, but Amell grinned, so really, who cared?

"Couldn't wait?" Amell asked.

"I got bored." Anders shrugged. "And it's past dinner. Did you eat?"

"Before the meeting," Amell said. "Ready for a lesson?"

"Is it a sexy lesson?" Anders asked.

"It could be." Amell grinned, leading him back up to his quarters.
Amell locked the door behind him, and changed out of his doublet into a casual beige tunic and brown trousers, and held out a similar banal outfit for Anders. "Here. You don't want to get blood on your nice clothes."

"Creepy." Anders whistled, accepting the change of clothes and changing into it. It fit well enough. Aside from the fact that Amell was taut, lean muscle where Anders was fluff, they were more or less the same size. "So what are we doing?"

"Something simple." Amell said, fetching a pair of towels from his washroom. He laid them out on the floor in the center of his room, fetched his dagger from his weapon stand, and took a seat. Anders sat next to him.

"I know you already know the basics, but it doesn't hurt to cover it again. To tap into your life force, or anyone's life force, you have to draw from the source, at their heart. With time, and practice, you'll be able to use less blood to cast than you do now. I know you already know how to augment your own spells with it, so I won't go over that. There are other abilities, drawing from a sacrifice, from multiple sacrifices, draining the residual life force from the dead and the dying, blood poison, corruption, influence, or outright control.

"Drawing from the Taint, instead of just the blood, you can even realign your connection to the Fade, or sacrifice blood for an enhanced physical state. Speed, dexterity, strength. And you can cast outside the realm of demons, and make it impossible for them to resist you. But that's all advanced, and we can't practice any of the more extreme spells unless we're in the field. What we can practice is persuasion, which I think is what you're most interested in anyway.

"So," Amell tapped the flat of the blade on his wrist, "Horizontal, always, unless you need an extreme amount, which you shouldn't unless you're binding something like an ogre, or a strong demon. Pick a spot you can cover, and try to use just that one spot, or you'll end up looking like me. For persuasion, you want to plant the seed of an idea. It has to be something your target would have done anyway. The more indecisive the target, the easier the spell.

"Mosley was determined to kill us, so the spell didn't take easily, and it manifested in a headache. The Revered Mother was uncertain about you, so she was easily swayed without any physical manifestations of blood magic. Suggestion is different form outright mind control. You don't want to completely dominate a person's will. Draw from your life force, think about what you want the target to do, and weave that idea into the spell. Then you cast.

"Here." Amell handed him the dagger. "You can try with me."

"Wait... really?" Anders asked. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Amell asked.

"Because... it's horrible?" Anders guessed.

"It's not mind control, Anders," Amell said. "At worst, you'll give me a headache."

"Are you sure I won't... you know, pop any blood vessels in your brain and accidentally kill you?" Anders asked.

"It doesn't work like that," Amell grinned, "If the spell doesn't take, it doesn't take. Remember how you said I knew what I was doing with blood magic? Trust me."

"If you say so," Anders said, staring at the dragonbone dagger. Anders bet Dumat was probably happy his bones were being used for blood magic, wherever in the Void the old god was. "So...
"what do should I make you do? Do a little dance? Get naked? Massage my feet?"

"Something I would be willing to do even without the influence of blood magic," Amell said. "So... any of those things work."

"Could you maybe give me something here?" Anders asked. "I really don't want to guess and do something horrible like accidentally mind control you or something."

"I'm considering kissing you to help you calm down, so why don't you try that?" Amell suggested.

"Alright." Anders said. A stolen kiss was fine, he supposed. Anders rolled up his sleeve, and set the dagger to his left arm, above the bend in his elbow. He made a shallow cut, and inhaled sharply at the sting, setting the bloody dagger on the edge of the towel. Resisting the urge to pull from the Fade for his spell, Anders reached for his heartbeat, and focused on the simple suggestion.

It wasn't hard to bring to mind the thought of Amell's lips against his: the soft press of skin against skin, the taste of cider with subtle undercurrents of salt, the heat of their breath mingling. When Anders was sure he had it, he cast the thought on Amell. Almost immediately, Amell leaned forward and kissed him.

Anders had been lost in thought, not quite looking at anything while he formed the spell, but his eyes snapped into focus at the kiss. A crimson haze hung about Amell's face, sliding into his ears, spilling out his nose, sealing shut his eyes. Anders snapped back from him in horror. The haze evaporated, and he lost the spell.

"Maker's breath, are you okay?" Anders sputtered, grabbing Amell's face in his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Come back. Please wake up."

"I'm fine," Amell said, a dreamy lilt to his voice. He reached out and traced Anders' lips with a dazed expression, proving he was anything but. Anders contemplated slapping him when Amell shook off the spell and his eyes cleared. He blinked at Anders, a look of confusion replacing his old expression. "That was perfect, Anders. Why do you look so upset?"

"You looked-your face-You looked like Rylock. Like a cloud of blood was suffocating you-Andraste's flaming knickers, I thought-" Anders gave up trying to explain and hugged him. The blood on his arm stuck to Amell's back, and suctioned off when Anders moved his hands for a better grip.

Amell stiffened, but returned the hug after a moment's pause. He shifted so he was sitting in Anders' lap, and not leaning awkwardly over his knees. Anders was too concerned to appreciate having him there. "It was your first time, Anders. Of course the spell was going to have a physical manifestation," Amell said kindly, petting his hair. His words weren't comforting.

"Rylock exploded!" Anders said, "Remember? You made her explode. They can investigate her disappearance all they want, because you turned her into a puddle! I'm sorry, okay? It scared me. Just shut up and let me hug you."

Amell shut up. Anders ran his hands over Amell's shoulders, his fingers sticking when they passed over the smear of blood Anders had left on Amell's back. Anders wiped his fingers off on his sleeve as best he could, and cast a quick restorative spell to heal the cut on his arm. Anders turned his face into Amell's hair and inhaled his scent, and felt a little better.

Anders wasn't counting, but he guessed it took around a minute for his heartbeat to slow and his initial panic to fade. Amell was trailing his fingers up and down his back, and leaning against him,

"It's fine," Amell kissed his cheek, and Anders felt his lips move against his skin when he spoke. "This is fine."

Anders didn't know if he agreed. For Anders, the tender moment was almost as terrifying as the one that came before it, but... well. It wasn't hurting him. It wasn't like he had any real reason to be afraid. Amell had already proved he'd stand up to templars for him. No one was going to come and tear them apart. No one was going to use this against him.

"So, hey, this is kind of awkward, but it just occurred to me I don't know your name." Anders said.

Amell exhaled hard through his nose; the hot air tickled the hairs on the back of Anders' neck and he shivered. "It's Amell," Amell said.

"I mean your first name." Anders said. "Everyone just calls you Amell, or Commander, or Boss."

"I don't know your last name," Amell countered.


"I... no. I guess not." Amell said, leaning back into the hug. Anders appreciated that. This conversation was easier without eye-contact. "So what's your name?"

"Anders," Anders said unhelpfully. "I was named after my father."

"And his name was Anders, from the Anderfels?" Amell teased.

"No," Anders said, story tumbling out of him. "... I'm from the Anderfels, originally. My parents were farmers, near Tallo. I told you the templars came for me when I was twelve. Well, my magic manifested when I was a lot younger. When I was ten, I lit our barn on fire."

"The whole barn?" Amell repeated. He sounded impressed. He wouldn't be when Anders finished his story.

"The whole thing," Anders agreed. "One of the beams caught fire, and carried the flames straight into the hayloft, and burned the whole thing down. See, most of the other children in the village could tell I was different. They avoided me, so my mother got me a cat. Remember, I told you I had a cat named Princess, when I was younger? She was a calico. Adorable little thing.

"Well," Anders continued, "The other kids in the village saw me playing with her one day, so they took her. I was a twig. Hadn't hit puberty yet. I couldn't stop them, so I just followed them yelling for them to let her go. They took her all the way out to the old bridge and threw her in the river, just because I was different. That damn cat never did anything wrong. Kids, right?"

"Anyway, I jumped in after her while all the other kids were just standing up on that bridge, watching and laughing. But I was a great swimmer. Still am, hence the whole swimming to freedom thing five years later. Anyway, I got that cat and ran all the way home with her. Made it back to our barn, and realized she was freezing. We both were. I was a kid; I didn't understand what I was doing. I just knew we needed a fire; we needed to be warm."

"Should have named her Andraste," Anders said ruefully, "I burned that damn cat alive. I tried shaking my hands to make the fire stop pouring out of them, and spread it everywhere. I probably should have died in that barn too, but my father came and dragged me out before it collapsed. But
when he realized I did it? From the look on his face, you knew he wished he hadn't pulled me out in the first place.

"My mother tried. Sweetest woman I ever met. I still dream about her sometimes. For two years she hid me, tried to keep me safe, but there were more incidents, more accidents. My father turned me over to the templars when I was twelve. My mother was there, sobbing, begging. The last words I heard my father say were that he never wanted to see me again. So they put me on a boat, and shipped me all the way to Ferelden.

"My common tongue was terrible. I had the worst accent. Took me years to get over it. The other kids all called me Anders, so... there you go. I'm Anders. My father's name... I don't want that name. I hope it dies with him. But that cat... I never meant for that cat to die. Sorry. Seeing you like that... reminded me of the last time I accidentally killed something."

Amell ran his fingers through his hair, and kissed his cheek again. His touch was a lot more soothing than any words of comfort could have been. "Alright," Anders said, giving Amell a gentle push. "Legs are going numb. Get off."

Amell exhaled bemusedly and climbed off him. Anders wiped his bloody dagger off on the towel, and handed it back to him. Amell set it aside. "So... your turn." Anders said.

"My turn?" Amell repeated, "You're going to think I'm copying you."

"Well, what mage doesn't have a sob story?" Anders said, "I want to hear it anyway, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Amell promised. Anders stretched out legs, and set his feet in Amell's lap. Without asking, Amell started massaging them. Anders could definitely get used to this.

"Alright," Amell said, "I was seven when I was sent to the Circle, so I didn't learn most of this until later, but I'm from Kirkwall, in the Free Marches. My family was nobility there. My great uncle was in line for the position of Viscount, which is like a teryn, I suppose, until my brother was born. He was a mage, and so was the brother after him. By the time I was born, the family was 'tainted with magic.'

"They were also in debt, and desperate for an heir. I was their last chance for that. One mage child was unlucky, two was disgraceful, but three? Three ruined any family. My mother put all of her hopes on me. She named me after my grandfather, I think to get back in his favor. I don't remember her much, except that her name was Revka, and every night when she put me to bed, she'd say, 'Sleep light, no Fade dreams tonight.' I don't remember my father at all.

"My grandfather I remember. He always used to say the Maker was punishing us. He had my brothers sent to far away Circles, so he wouldn't have to bear the shame of having them nearby. He always used to whip me when he caught me doing... queer things. Braiding my hair, playing with dolls, but when I asked him about my brothers, he hit me so hard it knocked me flat. I remember he said, 'You have no brothers. You have no magic. You're going to be normal. You're going to marry the de Launcet girl, and you're going to save this family.'"

"I didn't care about the magic part. Why would I? I was seven. Magic was just something everyone hated. But seven was old enough for me to know I didn't like girls, and I wasn't going to marry one. I already had a 'boyfriend', I guess. Some other noble boy I held hands with whose name I can't remember, but I cared at the time, so I said 'No.' I yelled it, put force behind it, and cast a mind blast that knocked my grandfather flat.
"He walked out of the room without a word, and the next day the templars took me away. The last thing he said to me was, 'You ruined this family.' I know now it was already ruined, but for a long time I thought if I was good enough, if I did everything the templars said, one day I could go home. Then I got old enough to understand how wrong I was, and the sort of person my grandfather was. So I stopped going by his name, but I kept the family name. As a joke, I guess. The last scion of House Amell, the same mage that ruined them."

It was a familiar story, Anders thought. Yet another family torn apart by magic and prejudice. At least no cats had died in Amell's story. "Your brothers. Do you know what Circles they were sent to? What happened to them?"

"Tranquil." Amell said tonelessly. "Both."

"Flames," Anders reached over for Amell's hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry,"

"I never met them," Amell said. "It's fine."

"It's not fine!" Anders said hotly, "It's not right that they do this to mages. Your brothers may as well be dead, and for what crime? It shouldn't be like this. We shouldn't have these stories. You should remember your father. I should love mine." Anders was preaching to the choir. He took a slow breath and forced himself to stop ranting.

"Do you still think the vote in Cumberland is a bad idea?" Amell asked.

"I don't know," Anders admitted. "Maybe not. Someone should do something. Not me, but someone."

"Some people are doing something." Amell said vaguely.

"Because that's not ominous or anything," Anders frowned at him. "Care to elaborate? Does this have anything to do with that Mage Collective thing you mentioned?"

"It might," Amell said. "Do you really want to know?"

"No," Anders admitted, "It's not for me, but if you're a part of whatever that is, you know, that's grand. Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," Amell promised, lifting one of Anders' legs from his lap to kiss the sole of his foot. It tickled, and took every ounce of Anders' willpower to keep from kicking him in the face.

"Did you really know? About yourself, when you were seven?" Anders asked.

"Is that so strange?" Amell asked.

"I suppose not," Anders said, resisting the urge to ask about that one woman Amell had apparently been with. "I just spent my whole life liking the ladies until I met you. I'm still not even sure I'm into men, honestly, but you're... well. You know. You're alright."

"Thank you, Anders, that means a lot to me." Amell said flatly.


"Mouth," Amell decided, grabbing for him when he came near. Amell fell back and pulled Anders atop him. It wasn't the sort of kiss Anders had intended. Anders had planned on something
passionate, but Amell's kiss was lyrium sweet, and lasted so long Anders forgot he cared.

Chapter End Notes

An optional [Apples and Apostates' Chapter](#) that takes place immediately after this chapter from Anders' perspective, if you want to follow both in chronological order. It links back to this chapter.

An optional [Apples and Apostates' Chapter](#) that tells the following passage from Jowan's perspective. It links back to this chapter.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to be you or if I wanted to fuck you. I went and found you in the dining hall, a few days later, and tried to start a conversation. I got maybe a handful of words in when Surana sashayed over, her robe down to here." Amell pinched his doublet between his breasts, "She leaned over you and asked you for 'another healing lesson.' You said 'Nice talking to you, Apple,' and left me there with your tray.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! No one's stopped me yet, so now there are three songs in this chapter. Soon we'll just tell the whole story in songs. I'm kidding. The songs are adapted versions of Tiny Bubbles, She Makes a Living, and Get a Line.

In other news, we've hit 2k views! You guys are awesome. Thank you so much for supporting this story, and thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 17 Parvulis Afternoon

Somewhere in the Blackmarsh

"Figures the darkspawn would pick somewhere muddy and wet," Oghren muttered. "I better not lose a boot."

Anders felt sorry for the poor bastard. The marsh was awful enough for Anders. The ground had up and vanished a mile back. Mud, sludge, and slime took its place. The water was almost up to Anders' knees in some place, which meant Oghren and Sigrun were wading through it.

Oghren's braided beard reminded Anders of a paint brush. The red bristles were tipped with brown sludge. Oghren's armor was in a similar state, and he chose to hold his hip flask aloft in place of his battle axe. Poor Sigrun had fallen at some point, and looked more genlock than dwarf. She was covered in mud, and carried both her axes above her head, and had a waddle to her walk that swayed her like a tiny, dirty, deadly metronome.

"My people say this place used to beautiful, lush..." Velanna said. A gnarled root lifted up from the water to meet her bare foot, and kept her dry. She held her boots in one hand, and her staff in the other. On the one hand, Anders knew it was a gross waste of mana. On the other, he was green with envy. Literally. His trousers were covered with algae or moss or something. It was unbearably itchy.
"Until some unnatural perversion occurred."

"My father used to tell me similar stories when I was young," Nathaniel said. He was taking the trek rather well. Too well, actually. Nathaniel's armor was an oily, mottled black, and it was far too easy to lose sight of the ranger in the shadows. Anders was trying very hard not to let Nathaniel's sudden disappearance and reappearances startle him. "He said evil magic killed everyone here. This was just before the rebellion, thirty years ago. It was a great mystery at the time. They never found out what happened. Once the monsters appeared, the marsh was abandoned,"

"Well I'm scared," Anders said, giving Amell a playful nudge. "Hold me?"

Amell seemed completely unaffected by the marsh, which was no real surprise. He was in full armor, marching like they weren't in knee high water and nothing was impeding him. He reached over and looped an obedient arm around Anders' waist. Anders laughed, and shoved Amell away not two steps later. It was hard enough for Anders to walk without being tangled up in someone.
On the bright side, they were definitely not going to fall into any darkspawn traps this time. They were ridiculously over prepared for this expedition. Everyone was carrying draughts, poultices, potions. Sigrun had a new crossbow to go with her axes. Amell's armor had been repaired with one of the scales from the dragons in the mines. Anders had a satchel full of balms for every element, and he had his bracers.

Not only were they fetching, they were practical. Anders should have let Amell finish talking about them when he'd first offered them. The eagle motif was a lovely bit of symbolism for freedom, but more importantly, the inside of the bracers were lined in reservoir runes. It was like wearing lyrium, and did wonders strengthening Anders’ connection to the Fade. It also meant he was one step ahead of the templars. No one could slap a pair of shackles on him if he was already wearing some. It was delightfully ironic, really.

They had packs for pitching tents, rations for a week, and all of them were fairly decent at sensing darkspawn now. Amell had brought his grimoire, and read aloud from it every few minutes. The Tevene gibberish Amell was muttering would apparently keep any darkspawn emissaries from shrouding the horde with blood magic like they had at the Turnoble Estate.

That part didn't make sense to Anders. According to Amell, the Litany of Adralla was a counter to blood magic. The fact that it was in his grimoire at all seemed like an oxymoron, with emphasis on moron. Amell had bound Maker knew how many demons to the tome, and Anders would have figured two plus two equaled explosion in this case, but apparently that wasn't how it worked.

The Litany prevented blood magic from taking hold, but once blood magic was in full effect, there was nothing anyone could do. Amell reading it meant they wouldn't be ambushed again, but didn't affect his grimoire, so it was a win win, really. Everything was going swimmingly. Literally. Anders staff sunk into a pot hole in front of him, and he waded carefully around it. If nothing else, at least when they found Kristoff, or the darkspawn he was investigating, nothing would go wrong. Probably.

"When I was a boy, I used to dream about coming here and setting things right." Nathaniel continued. "But those were just little boy dreams. When I was in Kirkwall, I thought I would return home to take command of my father's garrison. Sitting a throne, parlaying with the nobility, judging the peasantry...

"But you got saddled with all that instead," Nathaniel said to Amell. "If someone would have told me things would turn out like this, I would have laughed at them. But here I am. Here we are. Grey Wardens, heroes of legend, fighting darkspawn, dragons, demons... Setting things right, just like I dreamed. Interesting, isn't it? The way time changes things."

"Definitely!" The little ball of mud that was Sigrun agreed. "This is so exciting. And this place is so creepy! It's the middle of the afternoon, but it's so dark and damp here. And those trees? They're so strange and twisted. What's wrong with this place?"

"This place is setheneran," Velanna said.

"The Veil is thin here." Anders said.

"That's what I said." Velanna said, glaring down at Anders from the root she was walking on.

"It's really not, sweetie." Sigrun said. "So the Veil, that's like... the wall between our world and your creepy human dream land, right?"

"There is no 'wall.'" Amell said. "The Veil is a concept we rely on to explain the divide between the
Fade and our reality. When you accept its nonexistence, you can walk between the realms. Velanna, when we've dealt with the darkspawn, you and I should practice here."

Sigrun waded through the swamp to Anders' side and gave him a nudge with a muddy elbow. Anders bent down for her. "So it's like a wall, right?"

"It's exactly like a wall." Anders whispered. "Just sort of crumbling here, so it's easier for demons to crawl over. If you see any weird green bubbles, that's a demon trying to climb over. Give me a holler if that happens, and I can cast a spell that sort of shuts the door on them before they can come in."

"Magic is so cool." Sigrun grinned.

"It kind of is, isn't it?" Anders allotted.

"Can you light that bush on fire?" Sigrun asked.

"You need help." Anders said.

A screech pierced the air. Anders threw up a barrier around Sigrun and himself. It sounded like a shriek, but Anders hadn't sensed any darkspawn.

Nathaniel had his daggers out. Velanna had dropped her boots into the swamp, and was brandishing her staff, precariously balanced on her root. Amell had his shield up. Anders was half way through carving a glyph into the layer of slime atop the water when he realized the sound had been Oghren.

Oghren cleared his throat. "I... Uh. I thought I saw... I mean..."

"Stones, man. Really?" Sigrun sighed, lowering her axes.

Anders started laughing. Sigrun joined him a heartbeat later, and Nathaniel soon followed. Velanna lowered her staff and even managed a giggle, when a shadow burst out of the trees and tackled her off her root and into the murky water. "Velanna!" Nathaniel screamed.

Water spouted high, and all Anders could see was a creature of darkness. It could have been anything. A darkspawn, a shade, he couldn't tell. Savage snarls mixed with elven curses as the thing and Velanna grappled with each other, and a tangled mess of roots shot out of the ground and swallowed both of them.

A mound of roots took the place of where both Velanna and the creature had been. A few seconds later, and Velanna burst out of the ground a few feet away. She was covered in mud, twigs, bits of bark, and panting. If she weren't holding her staff, Anders wouldn't have recognized her.

Velanna wheezed. Anders fought his way through the marsh to her side. He channeled an aura of healing energies, and conjured a small sphere of water he dumped over her head. Velanna went rigid, and hissed in shock. It was akin to dumping water on a cat, but she needed it. She had a handful of lacerations Anders didn't want filled with mud, and a respectable bruise where the thing had connected with her. He healed her.

"It is still in there." Velanna said, clutching her staff and shivering. Anders channeled a weak fire spell that was all warmth and no flame and dried her off.

True enough, the mound of roots was pulsating, an occasional thud sounding from within. "From the look of your wounds, I want to guess shriek, but shrieks don't bark, and wolves aren't that strong."
Nathaniel said.

"A were or blight wolf." Amell said. "It's pack will be nearby. Velanna, you can let go."

Amell stood over the mound of roots. One by one the roots slipped back into the ground, and Anders heard savage snarls that ended with a swift downstroke from Amell's sword. All the roots slithered away, and a ... thing, was left on the ground. It looked like a man, covered in fur and hunchbacked.

"Relative of yours?" Anders asked Oghren.

"Har fucking har." Oghren said. He gave the thing a kick that rolled it over. Anders recoiled in disgust. The thing's face was a hideous mess of man and wolf, and a foot long tongue lulled out of it's massive jaw. Amell knelt over it, and pulled a spirit through the Fade to bind to its corpse. The thing climbed to its feet, and sat hunched in the water, two orbs of blue light replacing its eyes. "I knew I saw something. This little fucker's eyes peeping out of the shadows at me. Didn't we cure these werewolf guys?" Oghren asked. "The fuck is he doing, being all... not cured?"

"Most werewolves are just wolves, possessed by demons." Amell said. "They would abound anywhere the Veil is thin, and wolves exist. This one is blighted, as well. Kristoff must have been right about the darkspawn being here. Velanna, walk on the ground so you don't draw attention."

"Found 'em!" Sigrun said, holding up Velanna's boots. A dip in the swamp had turned them into little gravy boats, mud and sludge pouring out the top. Velanna wrinkled her nose, and Anders really couldn't blame her.

"Must I wear these?" Velanna demanded. "They inhibit my every step, and make it impossible to balance. I fail to see the point. The soles of my feet are as hard as any human leather."


"Not if they're impeding you." Amell said. "But don't discard them. Tie them to your pack, in case you change your mind."

"I am not so fickle." Velanna huffed.

Anders snorted. He couldn't help himself. Velanna glared, and Anders did his best to look innocent. He really wasn't one to talk, but hypocrisy was always funny. As far as Anders knew, Velanna and Nate were still on the rocks. No one had told him anything, but she was still walking apart from Nate, which seemed a good clue.

Sigrun handed Velanna her shoes, and Velanna dumped them out before tying them to her pack. "How much further to this village?" Velanna demanded.

"Some time yet." Nathaniel said, after checking his map. "It would be easier going were the roads not in such disrepair."

"Stay quiet and alert." Amell said, his pet werewolf shambling after him. "It's pack is bound to be about."

They fell silent, or as silent as they could. There was no quieting the slosh of water and mud as they trudged through the marsh, but the marsh was noticeably creepier with no one talking. Frogs croaked in the distance, an autumn wind whistled, and ravens occasionally took flight from the blackened branches around them in a shower of black feathers and creaking bark. Nathaniel took to humming nervously, and Amell's hushed mumbling in Tevene wasn't helping anyone.
"Okay, this is freaking me the fuck out." Oghren said suddenly. "I'm pretty sure I pissed myself a while back. Come on, Boss, you gotta let us talk."

"Maybe a song would help?" Sigrun suggested hopefully.

"Yeah, sure." Oghren said quickly. "Singing's great. I know a few songs. Why the fuck not? Right Boss?"

"... Not too loud." Amell relented. "Nathaniel, stay sharp, and call out if you see any movement."

"I will." Nathaniel said.

"Alright, here we go, this one's a classic. S'called 'Makes Her Living.'" Oghren said.

"I know that song," Nathaniel said. "Are you sure it's entirely appropriate?"

"See that lady wearing brown? She makes her living going down." Oghren sang.

"Ancestors, really?" Sigrun sighed.

"Why do you know this song?" Velanna demanded of Nathaniel.

"She's a shoe shiner! A shoe shiner!" Oghren sang.

Anders started laughing.

"See that lady from the south? She makes her living with her mouth. She's the town crier, the town crier! See that lady wearing jet? She makes her living getting wet. She's a fisherwoman, a fisherwoman!"

"Maker, stop. I can't breathe." Anders laughed.

"Yes, desist." Velanna said.

"Do you know any real songs?" Sigrun asked.

"That is a real song!" Oghren huffed. "Alright, fine, how about Tiny Bubbles?"

"Tiny bubbles in my beer, Make me happy and full of cheer! Tiny bubbles in my wine, Make me happy all the time!"

"I love you." Anders laughed. "You know I love you, right?"

"Come on, please?" Sigrun begged. "Don't you know any songs that aren't gross or about getting drunk?"

"You mean do I know any boring songs?" Oghren asked. "Fine, fine, just for you, my juicy little persimmon. How about 'You Get the Cards'? That work?"

"I don't know," Sigrun squinted at him. "I've never heard it, but I don't trust you now."

"Trust me." Oghren said. "This one'll get some hot blood pumping through those dead legionnaire veins."
"Oghren, I don't want anything to do with you where the words 'hot' and 'pumping' come into play."
Sigrun said.

"I'll get through to you yet, lady." Oghren grinned. "Oghren'll keep ramming up against that armor of yours."

"Just... sing the song." Sigrun sighed. "Please. You're embarrassing."

"Alright, Alright. Here goes.

"You get the cards, and I'll get the dice
Honey, honey,
You get the cards, and I'll get the dice
Baby, baby,
You get the cards, and I'll get the dice
You and me, we can play real nice
I had a girl who lived down the street,
Honey, honey,
I had a girl who lived down the street,
Baby, baby,
I had a girl who lived down the street.
She was cute, and she was sweet.
I had a girl who looked good in blue,
Honey, honey,
I had a girl who looked good in blue,
Baby, baby,
I had a girl who looked good in blue,
She could make a fool out of you."

"Wow, Oghren," Sigrun said. "That was actually... pretty sweet."

"Heheh," Oghren chortled. "Stop by my bunk one of these days and I'll show you something else that's 'pretty sweet'."

"Ugh." Sigrun groaned.

Oghren giggled, and took a drink from his flask, but his expression quickly turned somber and he went quiet, falling back several paces. Sigrun started up a conversation with Velanna, and didn't seem to notice, but Anders did. He picked up his pace to walk with Amell and his werewolf.

"So... Hey." Anders whispered after Amell finished his latest read through of the Litany. "Who's Fells?"

"Who?" Amell asked. He was wearing his helmet, and his voice was tinny for it. Anders seriously hated helmets.

"Fells." Anders said again. "Oghren mentioned someone named Fells, a while ago. He said he didn't do right by them, or you, or his son. I mean, it was seriously a while ago, but..."

"... Fells. Felsi? His wife?" Amell asked, glancing over his shoulder at Oghren. "He hasn't said anything like that to me about her... Why would he say he didn't do right by me?"

"It was... I think a month ago at least," Anders said. "After the incident in the mines. I'm sorry, I'm an ass, I didn't even think about it afterwards."
"No, it's fine. Thank you for telling me." Amell gave Anders' hand a squeeze. "I'll talk to him."

"Alright. Good." Anders was glad that was settled. He liked Oghren, but he was rubbish at relationships and definitely not the person to go around offering advice on them. "So hey, I've got a good one. Three blood mages walk into a marsh-

"I have to keep reciting the Litany, Anders." Amell interrupted him. "If I don't focus, the magic will keep me from remembering the words even while I'm reading them. I'm sorry." Amell gave his hand another squeeze. "We can talk later."

"Fine, fine," Anders pouted. "You owe me now though."

"Anything you want." Amell promised, and went back to reading.

That man was seriously going to get himself into trouble with how complacent he was. Anders fell back to walk with Nate, but he hadn't gotten two words in when the archer called out. "Movement to the northeast."

A wolf howled nearby. Everyone stopped.

"Anders, glyphs." Amell said.

Anders started casting. Nathaniel strung his bow.

"These beasts are unnatural," Velanna said. "Wolves are creatures of the night. They should not prowl during the day."

"Well I mean, it's kind of night here." Sigrun said.

"Light." Amell said.

"Right?" Sigrun said. "It's seriously dark for no reason. It's like the sky is broken."


"Incoming." Nathaniel said.

A werewolf burst out of the trees and dove into their midst. Oghren caught it mid-flight with a downward stroke from his battle axe. His blade struck the beast between its shoulder blades, and sent it crashing down into the knee high water. The werewolf's spine broke with a loud crack, and severed arteries sent blood spraying high into the air. Red drops fell into the water like rain all around them, and a fight erupted.

Werewolf after werewolf dove into their little patch of light. The fight would have been easier if any of them could move, but mud caught Anders boots with every step, and everyone looked to be suffering the same fate. Anders' glyphs and Velanna's nature magic saved Nathaniel from being mauled twice, and Amell's blood magic did the same for Sigrun.

Anders couldn't spare the time to count how many were in the pack when he had to redraw glyph after glyph. He channeled Compassion for an aura of aptitude, and the knee high water ceased to be such a hamper on their movement. Sigrun seemed to benefit from it most, the little dwarf darting through the shallows to hamstring the werewolves.

She cut one down as it was charging him, and the beast hit the ground with a splash. Mud sprayed across Anders' chest, and got on his chin and in his hair. The werewolf continued to thrash and wail.
on the ground, snapping up water and moss in its futile efforts to reach him. Sigrun put an axe through the back of its head.

The audible thunk of her axe breaking through the werewolf's skull made Anders a little queasy, but for the most part he was desensitized to it all. The fight was over a few minutes later. "Score one for our heroes," Anders said brightly. "Does anyone need healing?"

"Not so fast, Sparkles." Oghren said. He was standing over a werewolf, encased in an oval of sapphire. The beast was still very much alive, its eyes twitching in its skull as it surveyed them all with mindless malice. Oghren had his battle axe poised to strike. "Hey, Boss, you saving this for later or what?"

"Yes, actually." Amell said, hooking his shield onto his back and cleaning off his sword. "Velanna, Anders, do either of you want to try enslaving it?"

"Woah, what?" Sigrun asked. "You're learning blood magic too? That's so cool!"

"What?" Velanna scoffed, looking at Anders in disbelief. "You humans are such hypocrites. You show nothing but contempt for Amell's magic, but the second he uses it on your templars, you come begging for lessons."

"Oh please," Anders said. "Don't act like you know me. If you'd been paying any attention you'd have noticed I've been all for every spell he's ever cast except one."

"Yes, the one you would be learning now, and using on this creature." Velanna waved at the trapped werewolf. "Could you be any more hypocritical?"

"Do you have any idea how idiotic you sound right now?" Anders asked. "I know plenty of lightning spells I'm not afraid to use, but that doesn't mean I want to be electrocuted."

Amell snorted.

"You be quiet," Anders frowned at him. "That doesn't count."

"I seriously do not want to know." Oghren said.

"I kinda do." Sigrun said. "Wait, oh my gosh, are there like, dirty bedroom spells? There are! There so are! Oh I'm so jealous."

"Ugh. Enough." Velanna said. "I will make an effort. I need a knife."

"Are you sure the Veil here can take a lot of blood magic?" Anders asked. "I saw you cast a few spells already in the fight back there."

"It can't," Amell agreed. "But we should be fine as long as we don't make a concentrated effort to summon any demons, or expend too much mana in the same area. One enslavement spell won't tear the Veil. Velanna, do you remember what we discussed about binding?"

"I remember. I've commanded sylvans. One little wolf should not trouble me." Velanna held out her hand. Nathaniel handed her a knife. Velanna took off her glove, and made a brazen cut on her wrist that only long sleeves would cover.

"Oghren, be ready to kill it if the spell doesn't take." Amell said.

"Guh." Oghren muttered, flexing his meaty fingers around the hilt of his battle axe. "Alright, but I'm
pretty twitchy. Might kill it either way."

"I am ready." Velanna said. A glove of red hovered menacingly around her hand, spell woven and waiting. Amell dispelled his force field, and Velanna cast.

The net of blood fell on the werewolf as it tensed to lunge. The beast seized violently, and Oghren took a cautious step back. Blood poured out of the werewolf's ears, and foamed in its mouth. It took two unsteady steps forward, and exploded.

Blood, fur, bone, and chunks of meat went everywhere. Water and mud sprayed over all of them with the force of the explosion. A chunk of fur-covered skin landed on Anders' face. It was disturbingly warm. "Oh Maker. I'm gonna barf." Anders gagged, peeling the bit of flesh off his cheek.

"I don't understand," Velanna said. Blood had dyed her hair a cherry blonde. "I did everything you said. I wove my will into the spell and aimed to dominate the creature's blood."

"And you did, for a few seconds." Amell said. "That was more than respectable for your first attempt, but you need to think of it as a channeled spell. Sylvans can act without direction because they have their own spirits, but you're tethering your target to your will with blood magic. Werewolves are weak of will, and with how much force you put into the spell, it was bound to explode when you let go."

Velanna nodded, and handed the dagger back to Nathaniel. Anders healed the cut on her arm.

"Bluh," Sigrun shuddered, wiping mud and gore off her face. "I think some got in my mouth. Ick. Next time you try that I am standing so far away. Like, so far."

"We probably shouldn't try any more with how thin the Veil is anyway." Amell said. "But that was good, Velanna. Don't get discouraged."

"I am not discouraged. Do not coddle me," Velanna huffed, putting her glove back on and striding forward. Everyone followed, and Amell went back to reading from his grimoire.

"Hey, look what I found back there," Sigrun nudged Anders, and held up a tooth the size of her palm. "No way this came out of a werewolf. What do you think it's from?"

Anders took it, and turned it over in his hands. "Someone with a serious sweet tooth?" Anders guessed.

"That's a dragon tooth." Nathaniel said. "I visited a traveling fair when I was a child that had a whole skeleton on exhibit."

"Neat!" Sigrun said. "Give it back. I want to keep it."

Anders handed it back.

"Anders," Nathaniel said quietly, "I know it's not my place to ask, but are you sure? About the blood magic?"

"Yep." Anders said.

"Alright then." Nathaniel said.

That was an easy conversation, Anders thought. The six of them kept on through the marsh, until the
wetlands finally gave way to dry. The road reappeared, and led them to a strange stone circle with a pedestal in the center. Off in the distance, Anders could see the outline of the abandoned port city. "Finally." Anders said. "Can we take a break here and dry off?"

"Be careful. The Veil is thinner here." Amell said, but he stopped, and leaned against one of the many stone pillars.

"Anders!" Sigrun exclaimed, jumping in place and pointing off into the twisted tree line. "Green bubble! Green demon bubble!"

Anders ran towards it. Amell and Velanna went with him, but it wasn't a demon crossing. It was a Tear in the Veil. It floated like a cloud with the texture of glass, colored green and black. Looking through it, Anders could shapes and shadows moving on the other side. "Fascinating." Amell said.

"We must be wary." Velanna said. "Spirits will abound in this place."

"No kidding." Anders agreed, looking to Amell. "Do you know how to fix one of these?"

"Not without a very involved ritual, or entering the Fade and slaying the demon that controls the demesne for this Tear." Amell said. "Keep an eye out for demons crossing, both of you. Dispel what you can."

They went back to the stone circle and took a rest. Oghren wrung out his beard. Sigrun cleaned off her axes. Anders conjured a fire and Nathaniel passed out rations. Amell sat with his werewolf, still reading the Litany every so often. All of them cleaned mud off their armor.

"There are darkspawn nearby." Amell said. "Around a score, to the southwest. Not enough for a nest, but worth investigating."

"Hey, guys, look at this!" Sigrun called. Anders looked over, and found her tossing sticks and refuse aside to reveal a massive skull that had been hidden underneath. "Look! Look! Is this a dragon skull? It's huge! And busted! Look, it looks like someone kicked it in here. I wonder where this piece of its skull went."

"I am more curious about this stone circle." Velanna said, running her fingers over one of the stones. It was taller than Nathaniel, and thicker than Oghren. "The runework on them reminds me of an elgar'arla. A... Ah... A binding circle, for spirits."

"My tooth fits!" Sigrun exclaimed from over by the skull. "Oh man. Can we take this back to the Keep? Maybe hang it up in the barracks?"

"Sure," Amell agreed. "We can plan another expedition here, and try to find as many of the bones as we can. They make for exceptional weapons and armor."

"Oh I'm so excited!" Sigrun said.

"That fucker is about as big as the Archdemon." Oghren observed, nudging the dragon skull with the toe of his boot. "Now that was a fight. Remind me to tell you sob's about it sometime. Nothing gets your blood pumping like fighting a dragon on top of a fort, wind in your beard, whole army at your back, ballistas thrumming... Good times."

"Do we head towards the village, or the darkspawn first?" Nathaniel asked when they were rested.

"... Village." Amell decided. "Kristoff might have camped out there. The darkspawn aren't moving, for some reason."
"Another trap, perhaps." Velanna said.

"It's likely," Nathaniel agreed. "Perhaps they are lying in wait, believing themselves shrouded by blood magic."

"Dumb fucks." Oghren said.

Anders laughed. They set off towards the village.

It was a mess of moldy, rotten buildings. Cobwebs were strung up in the alleys, and rubbish and skeletons littered most of the corners. Oghren kicked the door to one of the houses, and it collapsed in a heap of rotten splinters. "Heheh," Oghren giggled. "Looks like no one's home."

"I am not surprised," Velanna said. "I don't expect us to find any trace of Kristoff in this graveyard."

"Oh come on, it's not a graveyard." Anders said, punting a skull down the street. It landed in a pile of bones beside a building that might have been a tavern once. "Aside from being ruined and haunted, it's kind of picturesque. And speaking of haunted, I think that skeleton is moving."

The skeleton was definitely moving. The little pile of bones apparently only needed a skull to pull itself together. Magic hummed in the air, and its joints cracked and clattered as it formed.

"I got it." Oghren said. He strode over and brought his battle axe down on the creature before it finished forming, and split several of the bones in half or into dust.

"There's another one!" Sigrun said, pointing. A skeleton shambled out of a building, and Velanna killed it with a vicious lash from one of her magic roots. "At least they kind of suck. This is fun. Like wack-a-nug, but with skeletons."

"Don't get complacent." Amell said. "These are wisps: mindless half formed thoughts. If a demon crosses and takes hold of a corpse, it will be far stronger."

"Okay Ser Frowns-a-Lot, I won't have fun." Sigrun said.

"I didn't say you couldn't have fun." Amell said. "And I don't frown a lot."

"You kind of do, sweetie." Sigrun said. "I mean you're not Nate, but you almost never laugh."

"I have a creepy laugh." Amell said.

"It's true, he does." Anders said.

"Here," Nathaniel called, emerging from one of the buildings still boasting a roof. "Kristoff camped here. Months ago, I'd say. There are old tracks in the dirt, but his camp is untouched save for an ancient blood stain on his cot. I think the darkspawn killed him in his sleep, and dragged his body somewhere."

"Time to go find the fuckers, then?" Oghren asked.

"Era'harel!" Velanna yelled.

Anders didn't need Amell to translate. A corpse was floating through the city square, radiating magic. It was a mangled thing of elongated limbs, with flesh like dried jerky, and dark pits of black in place of eyes. It clenched a fist, and three shades ripped through the gossamer thin strands of the Veil quicker than Anders could dispel them.
Velanna reached for fire, and the corpse waved a hand in her direction. It sent her crashing through the rotted walls of the nearest building. Anders ran after her, confident everyone else could handle the horror. He found her picking herself up out of a pile of rubble, a splinter the size of fingers cutting through where her armor was thin, in her upper arm. She pulled it loose with a hiss, and started when she saw him.

"No, I am fine," Velanna said, dusting dirt off her trousers and using her staff to climb to her feet. "Do not heal me. I want to try binding one of those shades."

"You know three blood mages is probably serious overkill," Anders said, healing her anyway with a simple rejuvenation spell. "Why don't you let Amell handle the blood magic here? Remember, he said no more enslaveing things, because the Veil is thin, and a demon-possessed corpse just threw you through a wall? I know this was all ages ago, so it makes sense you don't remember, but..."


Anders was feeling pretty good about himself when he rejoined the fight. He was a nice, responsible blood mage, and a spirit healer to boot. Take that, Circle. Admittedly, it put a bit of a damper on his confidence to see Amell had bound the shades anyway, but Amell knew what he was doing. Probably.

Anders surveyed the rest of the battlefield, and found Oghren caught in a prison of telekinetic magic. Anders dispelled it, and the resulting explosion knocked over Nathaniel who was standing nearby. Nathaniel stood back up quickly enough, and Oghren rushed to rejoin the fight in time to see Sigrun take the horror's head off. It crumpled to the ground, a harmless headless corpse.

"So... is that safe?" Anders asked, gesturing to the three shades.

"No," Amell admitted, "Not at all. Please kill them,"

Velanna and Anders dispelled raw mana and ripped the little things to shreds, sending them back into the Fade.

"So anyway," Oghren said. "Darkspawn now, ya?"

"Yes." Amell agreed.

Nathaniel led them back to Kristoff's camp, and from there they followed the tracks towards the darkspawn they could all sense now. The drag marks led out of the small coastal town, and up a hill, lined with white sacks identical to the ones they'd found in Kal'Hirol.

"Anders, cast a grease spell on the path down the hill," Amell said. "Velanna, ignite it when the darkspawn charge."

"Why would they charge?" Velanna asked.

"Because Anders is going to cast a chain of lightning through these sacks," Amell said.

"Oh is he?" Anders asked.

"I'd be surprised if the screams of their young didn't provoke them into fighting." Amell continued, ignoring him.

The simple little plan worked exactly as intended. The lightning made the sacks burst in explosions
of white pus and green slime, and the children fell out screaming. Hurlocks and genlocks charged
down the hill in response, and Anders' and Velanna's combined magic set them all ablaze. Only a
handful made it down the hill, and Nathaniel's arrows and Oghren and Sigrun's axes dispatched them
easily enough.

"Easy." Anders said.

"There are still a few left, atop the hill," Amell said, "Around a half dozen."

"Well let's go kill 'em." Oghren said.

Everyone agreed. It was a short climb up, and Anders kept a barrier channeled, but the darkspawn
didn't use their elevated position to their advantage. The darkspawn didn't do anything. They crested
the hill, and found a half dozen hurlocks waiting with the corpse of a man in Grey Warden armor,
who must have been Kristoff.

"The Grey-" One of them started.

Velanna set them all ablaze with a well placed fireball. The darkspawn scattered, shrieking in pain.
Oghren chortled. "Haha! Atta girl! Ain't got much to say now, do you, you blighters!?"

"Pathetic." Velanna said.

Five of the hurlocks collapsed, but the one who had spoken was still alive, if horribly charred from
Velanna's spell. "The First may be dying," The monster coughed, scrambling backwards. "But the
mother-she is never being wrong! This is her gift to you," The darkspawn lifted up a small green
sphere, and crushed it in its hand with its final act.

The sphere exploded, but instead of being thrown backwards, all of them were wrenched forward.
Anders lost his footing, and heard the soft sound of fabric ripping. He hit the ground, and fell
through it. The world fell away, turned upside down and inside out, and all was black and pain.

He woke up in a field of reeds.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! I hope this chapter is everything you guys expected it to be. More Justice next chapter, don't worry. I'm sure these guys are all going to be good friends. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, and as always, thank you for reading!

Anders lay on the ground, staring up at the sky. It was a crystal clear blue, with rivets of emerald and black. Demesnes floated through the sky like clouds, crumbling islands dripping chains and rocks into the Void. Among them, as always, was the Black City, the twisted spires of the shadowy metropolis seemed to stretch off into forever. Around him were the faint smells of the sea, of magic and burning sugar, with a subtle undercurrent of decay.

"I hate the Fade," Anders sighed. "Don't get me wrong, gorgeous, I'm always happy to talk to you, but getting knocked out and waking up like this is seriously going to leave me with brain damage someday."

"Aw, that's so sweet," Sigrun cooed. Anders sat up with a start. Sigrun was sitting next to him, a glint of mirth and mischief in her bright blue eyes. "You really think I'm gorgeous?"

"Okay first, yes, you're lovely, but second, what are you doing here?" Anders asked.

"Beats me," Sigrun shrugged, snapping off a reed and tickling his nose with it. Anders bit back a sneeze and smacked it away. "I don't even know where 'here' is. It smells funny, and I think I must be high on something because everything is suddenly bright and floating. All the darkspawn we killed came back to life, even that ugly one that called itself the 'First'. They all ran away when we tried to kill them again.

"Oghren ... kind of had a freak out. He ran off after them, and Amell ran off after him. He told me to stay with you guys, which is great, because I'm kind of freaking out too. Please tell me you know what's going on. Nathaniel and Velanna are still unconscious, and Amell said I shouldn't try to wake anyone for some reason and that you guys had to do it on your own."

Anders looked around. This wasn't Compassion's demesne. For all intents and purposes, they were still in the Blackmarsh, on the very same hill where they'd found Kristoff and the darkspawn. If this was the Fade, it felt backwards. Where the real Blackmarsh was dark and haunted, this place looked peaceful. There was a chicken coop nearby, the sky was clear, and scattered memories floated all around. Fishing boats, favorite ales, and the like.

"Right. Dwarf. Okay." Anders said, "Well... I don't know what happened, but I guess we're in the Fade now? It's just like a reflection of the real world. A spirit or demon rules over this place, and all these things," Anders pulled a bottle of ale out of the air and handed it to Sigrun. She uncorked it and took an uncertain sniff, "Are the memories from the people that used to live here."
"So... we're in a dream of a forgotten place?" Sigrun asked, setting the bottle down. It floated away. "Wow... that's kind of profound. The darkspawn were here too though. What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Anders said. "Maybe they sent us here somehow? Like a forced Harrowing? I didn't know darkspawn had magic that powerful."

"Ugh," Velanna moaned. She was lying a few feet away from him, and crawled up onto her hands and knees, taking in their surroundings with a frown, "What is... where-... is this the Beyond? Creators... another trap. We are all such great fools."

"Hey sweetie, how are you doing?" Sigrun asked.

"Lovely." Velanna said flatly. She spotted Nathaniel lying next to her and crawled over to him.

"Amell said-" Sigrun started.

Velanna rolled Nathaniel over and slapped him. He jolted upright, panicked, "Get down! He has a bomb! I-... what happened?"

"Seriously, what is it with you and slapping people?" Anders asked.

"We are in the Beyond. We need our wits about us." Velanna said unapologetically. "Get up, all of you. Where are Amell and the dwarf?"

Velanna picked herself up, staff in hand. Anders had assumed he was in Compassion's demesne, but summoned his staff on learning otherwise. Sigrun shrieked when it appeared in his hand.

"Oh my gosh!" Sigrun squealed, "How did you do that!? How how how? You conjured that out of thin air!"

"Uh... I just..." Shit, how would Amell explain this? 'According to a Dissertation on the Fade as a Physical Manifestation by Senior Enchanter Who-Gives-a-Shit you can make your will manifest if you focus on Who Cares.' "... I needed a staff?"

"Can I do that?" Sigrun asked.

"Sure, why not?" Anders shrugged, "I mean I'm not positive, since you're not a mage, and you really shouldn't even be here right now, but if you think about a weapon or armor or something you need, it should just come to you."

Sigrun balled her fists and put on a look of such intense concentration it was almost comical.

"You are in full armor with your weapons ready," Velanna said, "What could you possibly-"

Sigrun's armor and weapons vanished. She wore a dress of gold and peach in their place, studded with sapphires and fire opals. A thick belt was clenched tight about her waist to flatter breasts her armor usually hid. Anders whistled. "Did it work?" Sigrun demanded, looking down at herself. She screamed. "It worked! It worked, I look just like her! Oh... Oh I want this so bad..."

Anders shook his staff away and held out his hand. "Can I have this dance, my lady?"

"Oh! Yes! Yes you may, Ser!" Sigrun giggled and grabbed his hand. Anders spun her, laughing.

"Stop that, both of you," Velanna said, "We are trapped in the beyond the Veil with no foreseeable means of escape by darkspawn magic. Amell and Oghren are missing. We need to be vigilant least we draw the attention of powerful spirits. This is hardly the time for you to be dancing without
Sigrun stopped mid-twirl and rubbed the back of her neck at the lecture, "Sorry. I'll um... try to think about wearing armor and stuff,"

"Oh will you shut up for once?" Anders demanded, "What do you want us to do? Charge out into the Fade and pick a fight with the first demon we see? We have to wait here for Amell to get back anyway. Let her wear a fancy dress and be happy for a few minutes, you heartless harpy."

"No, Velanna's right, I shouldn't be messing around." Sigrun said. Just like that, the dress was gone, and she was back to being a little legionnaire again. Sigrun wandered over to a boat floating a few feet off the ground, and hopped up into it. She sat there swinging her feet over the edge and dutifully watching the road down the hill.

Anders shot Velanna a glare and went to sit with Sigrun. "Hey there. This seat taken?" Anders asked after he'd already sat.

"It is now," Sigrun said. "So you come here every night when you dream?"

"Every night." Anders agreed.

"Creepy." Sigrun said with a grin.

"So hey, whose dress was that?" Anders asked.

"Oh... No one." Sigrun shrugged, "It was just a pretty dress I saw a noble lady wearing back in Orzammar once. I never had anything like that, back in Dust Town or the Legion. This seems nice. Being able to dream, and make yourself into anything you want."

"Why would you want to be anything else?" Anders asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" Sigrun snorted. "I'm-

"An absolute looker already." Anders interrupted her, "I mean it, tattoos on women? Ridiculously attractive. And you with those axes? It's no wonder Oghren won't leave you alone. Who doesn't love powerful women?"

Sigrun rubbed the back of her neck again, a flush creeping onto her cheeks. "You're such a flirt," Sigrun mumbled, giving him a shove.

"You love it," Anders said, looping an arm around her shoulders. "Admit it,"

"You're a good husband," Sigrun said, leaning on him.

"So you're not bumping me down to fuck after all, huh?" Anders asked.

"Naw. What about you?" Sigrun asked, "You going to marry Amell yet?"

"Nope." Anders said.

They watched the road for several long minutes before Amell and Oghren finally came back. Amell had abandoned his armor in favor of a rather fanciful robe, which Anders was definitely going to give him shit over, but Oghren was wearing a scowl so fierce his whole beard seemed to droop. He stormed up the hill without a word and took a spot apart from everyone, clutching his battle axe like it was the only thing that was real, even though nothing was.
"Are mommy and daddy fighting again?" Anders asked.


"A little," Sigrun snorted, and whispered to Anders, "That was a panic attack if I ever saw one. You should have heard the stuff he was screaming. I grew up in Dust Town and I think I learned a few new curse words."

"About time you returned. What has happened?" Velanna demanded.

"We're in the Fade," Amell said. "The darkspawn emissary sent us here with that sphere he had. A concentrated lyrium explosion, if I had to guess. The village is still here, a short ways off, and I think whatever controls this demesne lives there. We ran into a demon who mentioned a baroness, which is interesting, but there are also countless Tears scattered throughout the marsh. There are demons here keeping them open, from what I could tell, and I want us to kill them before we head to the village."

"Ain't fucking right," Oghren muttered.

"Do we not want these Tears open?" Nathaniel asked. "How are we to escape this place?"

"I'm not sure yet, but we can't cross Tears the way demons can," Amell said, "We need to close them."

"What kind of demons?" Anders asked.

"Desire." Amell said. "At least at the Tear we passed. They were tethered to an apparatus of sorts which was weakening the Veil. A stronger demon might have bound them there, but I doubt it. It looked complicated, and deliberate. Something a mage might have done, a somniari possibly."

"Ain't fucking right," Oghren muttered again.

"Velanna, Anders, I know both of you already know this, but I need all of you to be extraordinarily careful in here," Amell continued, "Trust and talk to no one but each other. Let me talk to whatever we encounter. Every person or thing in here has the potential to be a demon or a spirit in disguise."

"But... it's just a dream, right?" Sigrun asked, "I mean, nothing here can really hurt us, can it?"

"If you were actually dreaming, dying here would be... a shock, but not necessarily lethal. People dream about dying all the time, but you're aware right now. Your mind will accept death here as death in the real world." Amell said.

"Oh... goody." Sigrun said with a queasy smile, hopping off the boat. "Anything else?"

"Stay near Anders, Velanna, or myself always and you'll be fine. There's nothing in here that the three of us can't handle." Amell said. "Are you all alright and ready to set out?"

Everyone gave some form of agreement, and they set out. The Blackmarsh looked like a mirror opposite in the Fade. The swamp lands were gone, replaced with lush grass and reeds, and all the trees were straight and sturdy with vibrant green leaves. Elfroot and other herbs took the place of felandris weeds, and the roads were all repaired, and lined with silly copper lampposts shaped like fish. It was terribly deceptive.

Anders took a spot next to Amell, and plucked at the sleeve of his robe. "What happened to not getting stabbed?"
"Nothing here can stab me," Amell grinned, "Or you, for that matter. You know this is all just a matter of willpower."

"Sure, but I figure it helps a lot with my will if I'm not running around in my smalls when I know I'm going to be fighting demons." Anders said.

"I'm not in my smalls," Amell said.

"You may as well be, with how much armor you're usually wearing." Anders said.

"If I can't be a mage in here, where else can I be one?" Amell asked. "Why don't you wear those Tevinter robes you like so much? You know that leather isn't actually protecting you; it's just a manifestation of your will."

"You know, I knew you would say something like that." Anders said, pointing to a swath of green shadows lifting off the ground in the distance, "Is that our Tear?"

"That's it," Amell agreed.

They came to a small clearing, where three desire demons were clustered around what looked like a sacrificial table. They were tethered to it, their life-force being drained in slow drops, and painfully easy to kill. There was so little left of them to put up a fight Anders almost felt sorry for them. They found three such instances of Veil Tears, and sealed all of them before they set out to the village.

At some point, Anders decided he wanted to wear his Tevinter robes after all. Amell nudged him when he made the change. "You look handsome," Amell whispered.

"Like a regular magister, right?" Anders joked.

"Like sin incarnate." Amell said.

"That's good, right?" Anders asked.

"It's good," Amell said.

The gates to the city weren't the same rusted ruin they were in the real world. In the Fade, they were a polished silver, and the walls around the city were garnished with vines and rose bushes. Homey, really. There was a spirit or person standing before the gates, dressed as a city guard, and he started at their approach.

"Halt! Who enters the Blackmarsh?" The guard demanded.

"This isn't the Blackmarsh," Amell said.

"This... no. It's not. I don't know where this is," The guard admitted. "We've been here so long at her mercy, and never see any travelers. A spirit came here, before you, seeking to free us. Are you here to help him?"

"Her. You mean your baroness?" Amell asked.

"Yes... She is evil incarnate," The guard said with a shiver, "The countless evils I've seen her perpetrate... I'm too ashamed to recount them aloud. The spirit has been gathering the townsfolk in the village square. I don't know what you're doing here, travelers, but this is no place for anyone to be. Enter, if you like, but you should know no one has ever left."

"Thank you," Amell said. He walked readily through the gates, Oghren following so close behind
him the dwarf smacked into him every time Amell stopped.

"So that wasn't ominous or anything," Anders said, "I guess we want to find this Baroness person? I think it's pretty obvious this is her demesne, whatever she is."

"I agree," Amell said.

"As do I," Velanna said.

The village was beautiful, compared to the rotten skeleton left behind in the real world. The houses were whitewashed walls with red brick corners, and pretty painted red shingles decorated every roof. Tiny plots of land were devoted to flowers and vegetable patches beside every house. It was also filled with spirits, or people, most of them trapped in the vicious loop of their own memories, but a few of them were aware and watched them with curious eyes as they walked past. Still, no one approached them until they passed the village square on their way to the manor in the center of the town.

A score of townsfolk had gathered there, some of them raving about their respective fates, but most of them were silent and listening to the spirit who stood on a small soapbox before them. Anders had it pegged for a spirit of Valor, or maybe Fortitude, considering it had taken the shape of a soldier. "Be wary, all spirits are dangerous, and this one has many under its thrall." Velanna said.

"Ignore it." Amell said, "It's an interloper; it doesn't control this demesne."

"You there!" The spirit called out in its echoing voice, spotting them. It flickered, and reappeared in front of them. Amell summoned a staff. "Hold. If you are not minions of the Baroness, I mean you no harm. Your faces are not familiar to me, and I have long watched this place and seethed at the wrongs visited on these poor folk. I am Justice, and I seek to aid these people, but they are no warriors. I see differently in you."

"What do you want?" Amell asked.

"Justice," The spirit said, as though it were obvious, "It is all that I am. The baroness has long tormented these helpless souls. They are dead, but their spirits remain trapped here by her vanity and pride. I am seeking help for a reckoning too long in coming. Will you aid us in this righteous task?"

"We have our own concerns," Amell said.

"Whatever your situation, you must see it underscores the need for these people to be avenged," The spirit pleaded, "Can I not persuade you to help us?"

"Vengeance avenges, not Justice," Amell said, "The time for these people is long past. Go back to your own demesne, spirit. You have no place here."

The spirit clenched a fist, and Anders drew on his well of mana. "My place is here, where there are wrongs to be righted. I am troubled by your refusal, mortal, but I understand it." The spirit flickered, and returned to proselytizing on its soapbox.

"Should we not have helped him?" Nathaniel asked. "I would think such a spirit would know the Fade. He might have been able to send us home."

"We have no quarrel with this baroness." Velanna said, "Why start one?"

"Said the Queen of Quarreling," Anders said.
"Spirits don't cross the Veil, Nathaniel." Amell said, "Blood mages and demons do. If we want to escape from this place, that's what we need to deal with, whether we like it or not. This baroness sounds like a blood mage, or a pride demon. Either would be able to help us."

"What he said," Anders said. "Besides, that guy seemed like a prick."

They continued through the town to the mansion at its heart. It was a beautiful work of Orlesian architecture, with white washed walls and stained glass windows, surrounded by high walls lined in rose bushes, with a wrought iron gate decorated in more roses.

"So..." Anders said.

Amell knocked.

"Aren't you polite," Anders said.

"The mistress says away!" A voice called from the other side of the gate. "Away with you, you hooligans! How dare you try to assault perfection!"

"I want to speak with your mistress," Amell called back.

"Have you come to hurl insults at the mistress, as that spirit has been doing? Because I won't allow it!" The man yelled back.

"No," Amell said, "I want to negotiate with her."

"Hmm, the Mistress isn't really one for negotiating. She likes things to be just as she likes them." The man mumbled.

"She sounds like my mother," Nathaniel said quietly.

Anders laughed.

"I'd at least like to speak with her," Amell said.

"She might deign to speak with you, I suppose. You seem marginally less reprehensible than the rabble out there," There was a pause, and the gate was unbarred and eased open. A guardsman with a chin three times too big for his body peered at them from the other side. "I'll leave it up to the Baroness to decide what's to be done with you, then. She'll know. She always knows. Come in, I'll take you to her."

They stepped into the courtyard, and the guardsman shut the gate behind them. The guardsman led them across the courtyard, and up the marble steps to the mansion. "Are you sure we'll be able to trust this Baroness?" Nathaniel asked.

"I'm a little worried, too. She seems kind of... you know, evil," Sigrun agreed.

"Well that's just mean," Anders said, "Nate just said she sounded like his mother,"

"I stand by it," Nathaniel said.

Anders snorted.

"Trust me," Amell said.

The guardsman led them through the mansion. The inside was markedly Orlesian. There was gold
filigree on everything, marble pillars, golden statues of winged lions and other mythical beasts. Red tapestries lined the walls, interspaced with sconces lit with veilfire, and red carpets were laid out in every hall. The guardsman led them to a parlor room, where a gorgeous woman was reclining on a divan. She had black hair done up in a net of rubies, striking emerald eyes set in a sharp face, and she was wearing red Tevinter style robes Anders accidentally matched.

She also must have noticed, because she looked straight at him and smirked, "Now this is unexpected... I could have sworn I said that I was accepting no visitors, especially from out there."

"Many apologies, mistress!" The guardsman squealed, "These strangers have come to speak with you. I thought."

The woman silenced him off with a single wave of her hand. "Hmm... You are all from the lands beyond the Veil, I see. How interesting. I will grant this audience."

"Very good, mistress," The guard bowed, "I will return to my post."

"May I?" Amell asked, with a wave to the chair closest to her.

"Of course," The baroness agreed. Amell sat, so Anders took a seat along with him. Everyone else kept standing. "So, what brings such powerful mages into my parlor, hmm? You seek my aid, perhaps?"

"We do," Amell said, "We need to return to the real world."

"You are trapped here, then?" The baroness asked, sitting up and leaning over to trace her lacquered nails down Amell's arm. "Yes, I can see the magic on you. How interesting... You realize, of course, if I am to help you, I will need someone from your world with an actual life force to plunder. It is no simple matter to tear the Veil, after all, especially when the magic that keeps you here makes it strong..." She looked up from Amell and surveyed the rest of them disinterestedly, "Did you have a sacrifice in mind?"

"I did," Amell said, "A darkspawn is trapped here with us. I'll find it and bring it to you for your spell."

"Excellent." The baroness smiled toothily. "But first, there is a loathsome spirit of justice that has wandered into my domain. Rid me of it, and any of the fools of that stand with it, and then I shall return you from whence you came."

"I'd also like to learn from you," Amell said, "Whatever you can teach me of blood magic; this ritual to wake from the Fade at will, for example,"

"Oh? Truly? How delicious. It has been so long since I encountered a kindred spirit. Very well, mortal. Succeed in dispersing this rabble for me, and I'm sure there will be blood enough to permit your wildest fantasies. That, and your freedom," The baroness held out her hand with her signet ring, like any ruler might. Her nails were painted an emerald to match her eyes, "Are we agreed?"

"Agreed," Amell promised, taking her hand and kissing her signet ring.

"Now go and serve well," The baroness said, "I think I will watch from my balcony. This is sure to be a delight."

Amell stood up. Anders stood up with him, and they left the parlor.

"So... this feels kind of bad," Sigrun said.
"These people are already dead, Sigrun." Amell said. "Killing them would be freedom at best, or cause them to forget themselves at worst."

"What about the spirit?" Sigrun asked. "The Justice guy?"

"It's a spirit," Amell said, "If its pursuit of Justice is genuine, it will reform in its own demesne. If it's weak, it will disperse. Either way, we can't escape this place without help, and it can't provide that."

"And it's a prick," Anders said.

"That too." Amell said.

"He's just trying to help," Sigrun said.

"All spirits are dangerous, Sigrun." Velanna said. "That creature outside knows nothing of any other emotion. Not Compassion, nor Love, nor Mercy. Anything to excess is dangerous. Humans make a distinction between spirits and demons when there is none. They are all deadly, and not to be trusted."

"If you say so," Sigrun said. "So was that lady in there a demon or a blood mage?"

"I don't know," Amell said.

"Who gives a shit?" Oghren muttered, "Let's go kill these fucks and get the fuck out of here."

They'd made it out into the main hall when they heard the banging. Anders had heard it before, in Vigil's Keep, when the darkspawn had laid siege to the gates with a battering ram. "I guess somebody didn't want to wait." Anders said.

"I guess not," Amell agreed.

They jogged the rest of the way to the courtyard in time to see the spirit blast the gates apart with a burst of raw magic. The metal gates were bent by the force of the blast, and struck the poor ugly doorman when they were blown from their hinges. He was crushed, and evaporated in a puff of smoke. Justice stormed through the wreckage, an army of villagers and darkspawn behind him. Anders could barely process it. All the darkspawn they'd killed in the real world interspersed with the ghosts of the dead, and led by a spirit of Justice and an awakened darkspawn. That was not an alliance he saw coming.

"This is some surreal shit," Oghren said.

"Maker, spirits are stupid," Anders sighed. "No one tell Compassion I said that."

"This mansion will not protect you, fiend!" Justice bellowed, "Come out and face your crimes!"

Almost obediently, the balcony doors opened directly above them, and the baroness came out to lean lazily over the banister and watch them all.

"And there she is!" Justice yelled, "Now you answer for your crimes, witch!"

"Do I, now?" The baroness giggled, "Perhaps you haven't met my new protectors? Do say hello."

"You are not the only one who has sought allies from the mortal world, sorceress!" Justice yelled. "These creatures have agreed to stand against you and end your reign of terror! And you, fiends, it is a sad day when evil finds such ready accomplices!"
Amell started laughing. He grabbed Anders' shoulder to hold himself upright, cackling wildly. Unable to speak, he gestured between the spirit and the darkspawn.

"No, no, believe me, I'm with you," Anders laughed, "This is fucking hilarious. The irony is killing me,"

"Okay, you were right, your laugh is creepy," Sigrun said.

"Enough!" The First yelled, "The Grey Wardens are doing too much speaking! The battle must be done now!"

The darkspawn charged with a roar, and Amell's laughter cut off in an abrupt wheeze. He cast a quick spell, and the First was encased in a force field. It put a bit of a damper on the charge, Anders thought bemusedly. The darkspawn ghosts who had been about to follow the First stopped, and stared at their leader in confusion. The villagers looked at each other uneasily.

"This one is your sacrifice," Amell called up to the baroness.

"Indeed." The baroness called back. "Deal with the rest,"

"Take heart, good people!" Justice yelled. "We can defeat these monsters!"

"I want the fuck out of here!" Oghren roared suddenly, and charged down the steps with his battle axe raised high. He ran straight for Justice, who flickered, and vanished before the axe connected.

The darkspawn came to a decision even without their leader, and charged Oghren. One fell over with an arrow through its forehead, and vanished in a puff of smoke. Another was devoured by a mess of roots. Sigrun ran down the steps after Oghren. The villagers charged with the darkspawn, but they were ghosts. Stupid, stupid ghosts. Anders summoned ice, and froze a half dozen of them. Oghren tore through them like tissue paper, and they evaporated. It was admittedly disturbing to watch, but they weren't real. Both they and the darkspawn had died once already, and died easily again.

They had the high ground, they had an angry berserker, and they had blood magic. The fight was over almost before it started. Everything died with puffs of smoke, and there was no sign of battle aside from the ruined gates, and the lone darkspawn caught in a force field in the center of the courtyard. The so called 'First' really was ugly once Anders got a good look at it. The thing had a face like a skull; its eye-sockets were a mess of blood and muscle that stretched up its forehead and down into its cheek, and it had no nose. How any spirit could be dumb enough to side with it was beyond him.

"I will be right down, my little heroes," The baroness sang from the balcony, and went back inside.

"What happened to Justice?" Sigrun asked. "Where did he go?"

"It ran, I think." Amell said.

"After luring all these fools to their deaths." Velanna said.

"I thought you said they were just ghosts?" Sigrun asked.

"After luring these fools to having their essence dispersed throughout the Beyond," Velanna corrected herself.

"I still took no joy in that," Nathaniel said. "These people suffered in life, at the hands of this woman."
I wish there was something we could have done for them in death."

"Killing her might have freed us, but it also might have left us trapped here forever," Amell said. "It wasn't worth the risk."

"Indeed," Velanna said, "We did not know these people. Why mourn them?"

"Someone should." Nathaniel said quietly. "Draw your last breath, my friends, cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky. Rest at the Maker's right hand, and be Forgiven."

"Spare me," Velanna muttered. "Are you going to say that ridiculous prayer every time we stumble upon those already dead?"

"I know other prayers," Nathaniel said.

"Ugh." Velanna groaned.

The doors to the mansion opened, and the Baroness came out to join them in the courtyard. "Ugh. Look what they have done to my beautiful estate. How bothersome," She waved her hand, and the gates lifted from the ground and reformed as if Justice had never smashed them in in the first place. "It seems you were as good as your word, mortal. Now then, I did agree to a reward, did I not? This ritual, I think, is too much for a mortal, but perhaps there is something else I know that might interest you,"

Magic stirred between the baroness' fingers, and the dirt and dust around them swirled and took shape, forming into creatures of shadow. Their bodies were like massive jaws, lined in teeth and pulsating fire within. They had arms of twisted claw and sinew, and their heads were simple skulls made from shadow. They were obviously powerful shades, or a variant thereof. Anders didn't know if dust and dirt counted as a demon holding a physical form. "What do you think of these?" The baroness asked.

"I think they look extraordinarily useful." Amell said.

"Oh, you are delightful," The baroness giggled, "I trust you do not mind if I borrow your mind for a moment?"

"How else would you teach me?" Amell asked.

"How else indeed?" The baroness agreed. She set a finger with one long green nail under Amell's chin, and lifted him off his feet. Shadow engulfed him. It still made Anders sick with stress to watch. Knot after knot formed in his stomach, in his shoulders, until he felt like he might throw up, but a painfully long minute later, and the shadows receded. The baroness set Amell down. "So many memories, so few are yours. How many times have you done this, I wonder?"

"Many," Amell said, holding himself up on his staff.

"I am feeling generous," The baroness decided, looking Anders over, "Am I teaching any others today?"

"I'm good," Anders squeaked, a little embarrassed his voice decided to pitch so high.

"I am also content without receiving any knowledge in such a fashion," Velanna said.

"Thank you for helping us." Amell said.
"And thank you, for the lovely visit," The Baroness said.

Amell dispelled the force field he kept around the First. The darkspawn bolted. It slammed up against the newly re-formed gates, and banged futilely against them. "No! No! The First is no sacrifice for blood! I was not to even be in this place! The Mother, it is her deceit! Her doing!"

"It seems you have someone else to thank for your freedom, then, mortals," The Baroness giggled, magic swirling at her finger tips. The First seized, and was dragged back to the center of the courtyard. It was lifted up into the air, red and black energies swirling about its chest while it screamed in protest. "Farewell."

The magic condensed, then exploded. All of them were wrenched forward. Anders lost his footing, and heard the soft sound of fabric ripping. He hit the ground, and fell through it. The world fell away, turned upside down and inside out, and all was black and pain.

He woke up in the dirt, to a black sky with countless stars, no Black City, and two moons.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I thought this chapter and the next one were going to be one chapter, but we're already at 5000 words, so I guess we get two chapters. I hope you're all still enjoying this story. Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, and most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 17 Parvulis Night
The Blackmarsh

The sky was beautiful at night. The winkings of a thousand stars and the dull glow of the moons was far preferable to the far off lurkings of the Black City and its absent Maker. The smell of rotten wood, mud, and death greeted Anders on his first inhale and couldn't have been more welcome. Thank the Maker that was over so easily.

Anders did not relish the idea of being trapped in the Fade forever. Especially when it wasn't the demesne of his spirit. Maybe if it was Compassion, Anders could stand it, but trapped forever with a self righteous spirit of justice and a terrifying, if ridiculously attractive, demon of pride? The Void sounded better.

"By my ancestors' hairy tits, thank the Stone, it's over." Oghren said from somewhere nearby. Anders rolled onto his side and found the dwarf on his hands and knees, kissing the ground or his beard when it got in the way. "Sweet, sweet reality. I could fuck this marsh right now. I've been in worse swamps, old gal, we can make it work."

Anders laughed, and sat up, summoning a small wisp for light. They were still on the hill, the charred corpses of darkspawn all around them. Everyone woke up, with varying degrees of groans. Anders crawled over to where Amell was sitting, a bit of blue magic at his fingers stirring the dust and dirt beside him in a small whirlwind. "So you going to try that spell she gave you?" Anders asked.

"Someday." Amell said, letting the dust fall back to the ground. "The Veil is already thin here, and thinner at night. Summoning wraiths would Tear it, but... Did you feel them, in the Fade? The strength of their auras? To summon something like that without a complicated ritual... I almost want to go back into the Fade and learn more from her. Imagine what else she's capable of."

"Killing all of us with a thought, probably." Anders said. "Don't get me wrong, powerful women are great and all that, but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have been half as hospitable if that spirit hadn't been bothering her."

"Probably not," Amell sighed. "Still..."

"Uh, guys?" Sigrun said, taking a few cautious steps back from the pile of corpses she'd woken up beside. "Don't freak out, but I think... I think Kristoff is alive."

"That's impossible," Nathaniel said, "Over three months with no rations in this marsh? Even if he were alive, Velanna's fireball would have killed him."
"Well then that's weird cause he's totally moving." Sigrun said, drawing her axes. "Commander, please tell me you're doing this."

"I haven't cast any reanimation spells since I woke up." Amell said, standing.

Kristoff was very much moving, if not necessarily alive. The Warden had pulled himself up onto his knees, and had a hand to his head. He had to be dead. He had the pallor of a corpse, his skin was slack and stretched in all the wrong places, and he was horribly charred from Velanna's fireball. But he was moving. Talking. "What... Where am I?" Kristoff asked.

Kristoff rolled over, and landed on his ass. He stared up at all of them in confusion, his eyes bright pools of blue light. "What is happening?"

"That's not Kristoff," Anders said.

"You have an unprecedented talent for stating the obvious," Velanna said.

"You're a bitch," Anders said.

"... No!" Not-Kristoff screamed, standing unsteadily on legs wracked with rigor mortis. He stumbled away from them, panicked and pawing at his face. "This is the world of mortals, beyond the Veil! And this is a mortal body of flesh and I... I am trapped within."

"Ah, great," Oghren sighed. "Really, Boss?"

"I didn't do this!" Amell said. "The spirits I pull across Veil are bound to my will, not-"

"You!" Not-Kristoff interrupted, blue fire cracking through his withered flesh at his veins, his eyes radiating fury. "You did this! You sided with that foul sorceress, and now she has sundered the Veil! I have been sucked into this world against my will!"

"Justice?" Sigrun asked, "That's Justice trapped in Kristoff's body? That's... so sad. Can we help him? Maybe send him back? He looks so scared."

"Sure, I'll send him back," Oghren said, bouncing his battle axe on his shoulder.

"That might kill this spirit," Velanna said. "Not return it to the Beyond."

Justice surveyed them all, and the fire slowly died from his eyes. He held up a hand in truce and said, "Please, I have no wish to die."

"Hey, little guy, it's okay," Sigrun said gently, taking a few cautious steps forward, "We're not going to kill you, right guys? How do we send you back?"

"I... I do not know." Justice said, staring at his hands with a look of such profound sorrow Anders felt sorry for him. "I am confused. I feel trapped. I think... Wait. I sense the aura of something most foul nearby."

"Oh, uh... Sorry." Oghren said.

"The baroness must have returned to this realm as well!" Justice exclaimed. The spirit suddenly seemed to forget its fear, and glowed with righteous fury again. "Can you not feel it? Both she and the Tear are nearby. I can feel demons pouring into this world, likely at her beckon. She must be slain! This Tear must be closed! Mortal, tell me you at last see the injustice here, and you will aid me,"
"Not with the baroness," Amell said. "We spoke civilly once; I'm sure we can do it again."

"Because you were her ally when it was convenient?" Justice sneered. "Do not be a fool! The baroness is not mortal as you are, she is a creature of pride."

"That changes very little." Amell said. "Do you know how to close a Tear in the Veil from this side?"

"I am not sure..." Justice admitted. "But I must try. I might be able to drive back the Fade's magic."

"Where is the baroness and where is the Tear?" Amell asked.

"I sense both at her mansion," Justice said. "So you will aid me?"

"With the Tear." Amell said. "I want to try talking to her again."

"I doubt such a thing will be possible, but I accept this compromise for now." Justice said. "We should move quickly, mortal, before this Tear gets any worse."

"I agree," Amell said.

They set out.

Justice had the most comedic walk Anders had ever seen. The spirit marched stiffly forward, armor rattling queerly. Its joints barely bent, and it twitched erratically every so often. It looked like a very crude reanimation spell, reacting badly to the spirit inside. Considering Justice had already made it clear it had no wish to be in Kristoff's body, it made sense.

"So, corpse dude, no hard feelings, right?" Oghren asked. "Trying to kill you back in the Fade was nothing personal, there just wasn't any other way out of that shithole."

"It's true," Sigrun said, "Darkspawn trapped us in there, but the baroness sent us back home. Maybe she can send you back home, now that you're trapped."

"I am conflicted." Justice said stiffly. "The baroness is a vile creature, but if you sought to rectify an injustice against yourselves through your alliance with her, at least I understand your motives."

"That's fair I guess," Sigrun said. "But hey, don't worry, okay? I get that you're mad at us, but the Commander is a really strong mage, and he does a lot of stuff with spirits and demons. If the baroness lady won't help, I bet he can figure out a way to send you home."

"I would like that." Justice said quietly.

Anders walked to the front of their group and gave Amell a nudge. "So, hey, you sure about this? Talking to her, I mean?"

"It couldn't hurt to try," Amell said. "She seemed reasonable in the Fade."

"Alright, well..." Anders trailed off, not sure where he was going with this.

"I'll be careful, Anders," Amell promised, squeezing his hand. Anders wished Amell wasn't wearing his helmet. It made his voice metallic, ruined his hair, and meant he couldn't give Anders any reassuring smiles. "If she's unreasonable, we'll kill her."

"Well I'm glad the option's on the table." Anders said.
"It is. In fact... You're right. Hang on." Amell held up a hand to call for a halt.

"I love it when you say that." Anders said.

"Spirit, you're sure the baroness is a pride demon, and not just a blood mage?" Amell asked.

"I am certain." Justice said.

"Anders, how many grounding elixirs do you have?" Amell asked.

"Uh..." Anders opened his satchel. Maker what a mess. Bandages, poultices, way too many lyrium potions, felandris he'd picked on the walk through the marsh, a handful of balms and salves, and dust. So much dust. The lid to his incense must have been knocked off. Anders dug through it all until he found grounding elixirs. "Four. No, wait. Five."

"Give one to Sigrun, Nathaniel, and Oghren," Amell said. "The rest of us should be fine with spell shields. If it turns into a fight, drink them. Pride demons rely mostly on lightning."

"This is gonna taste like shit, ain't it?" Oghren asked, accepting the flask and promptly stuffing it down his pants for safe keeping.

"I made that myself you know," Anders said.

"In other words, yes." Oghren said.

"That hurt," Anders said. "I'm hurt now."

"Well I ain't kissing it better." Oghren snorted. "Go bug the Boss."

"I think you're just jealous I stole him from you." Anders said.

"I cry myself to sleep about it every night." Oghren agreed.

Anders could feel the Tear when they got to the village. The Veil was painfully thin, and Anders could hear the whispers of wisps and demons beyond the Veil. Magic crackled almost unbidden at his finger tips, and Anders felt like he could have reached through the Veil and held Compassion's hand if he wanted.

At the mansion, the baroness stood in the courtyard, surveying the crumbling ruin that had been her mansion once. She looked for all intents and purposes still a woman, and not a pride demon.

"The Veil Tear lies within her mansion." Justice said.

"Are you sure she's a demon?" Sigrun asked. "She looks pretty human to me."

"She is not." Justice said.

"Let me talk to her." Amell said.

They approached the mansion, and the baroness turned and smiled winningly, "There you are, pet. Come here,"

Amell walked over to stand beside her. Anders couldn't decide whether or not they were supposed to follow. No one else seemed to be able to make a decision either, and lingered uncertainly a few yards away.
"Look at what has become of my beautiful estate," The baroness complained. "And here I am, powerless to fix it. How very dull your world is, so immutable and unchanging. I confess, I had no idea my spell would send me into the mortal world with you. I was already working on my own way to cross, sacrificing demon after demon to weaken the Veil. It was so tiresome."

"I don't like this," Oghren whispered. "Boss's normally the one doing all the talking with these things."

"Had I known I could cross so easily..." The baroness trailed off. Amell continued to say nothing, standing idly next to her. Anders didn't like it either. "Ah, but I am here now, yes? You will want another reward, I think. As the first of my subjects, you deserve one,"

"You have no subjects, demon!" Justice yelled, drawing Kristoff's sword. It didn't come easily from it's scabbard, after months of neglect in a swamp. The sound of rusted metal pulling free was grating. "Release that mortal at once!"

Justice charged across the courtyard, and made it half way before he was lifted off his feet and caught in a crushing prison. Amell didn't so much as glance at him. Realization made Anders feel sick, and then it made him angry.

"You spirits, always so judgemental," The baroness sighed. "Where was I?"

"Let go of him, you bitch!" Anders screamed, conjuring ice and throwing it in a lance. It struck the baroness' shoulder, and scattered the black feathers on her spaulders. The ice caught, and spread down to her elbow.

Then it melted, and she glanced at him. "How dare you. This was my favorite robe. It is mine. He is mine. You will all be mine!"

Anders was in the middle of conjuring another spell, but couldn't finish it before the baroness cast her own. It wasn't lightning at all, and the spell shield Anders brought up did nothing against it. His blood lit on fire, with all the agony of templar's smite, and he collapsed.

All around him, Anders heard his friends screaming as they suffered similar fates. Damn Justice. Damn Amell. Damn everything. This was blood magic, and if resisting it was a matter of will power, then Anders was a dead man. He couldn't move, and he could barely think past the pain in his veins.

A few yards away, the baroness forgot about them to talk to Amell. "Stop resisting, little mortal. You let me in once, what is one more time?"

Justice. Justice was a spirit. Justice could do something. Or Compassion could. Anders tried to summon her, but he couldn't focus past the pain.

"What was that, pet?" The baroness asked, but Anders hadn't heard Amell say anything. She could have been reading his thoughts, Anders guessed. "You want your book? This book?"

The baroness reached out to touch the grimoire hooked to Amell's belt. As soon as her fingers connected, she recoiled and clamped her hands over her ears. Anders could have warned her, if he didn't want her very, very dead. The shock of the grimoire's scream must have made the baroness lose her hold on all of them. The pain stopped immediately.

Amell fell to his knees. Oghren ran past Anders, screaming fury. A shower of dirt and bark exploded beside Amell, and Velanna burst out of the ground next to him. The baroness' hands glowed green, but no spell cast. Amell had his grimoire open, and was reading the Litany.
"How dare you!" The baroness screamed. A root burst out of the ground, and wrapped around her left leg, and then her right. She struggled for the two seconds it took Oghren to reach her and bury his axe in her chest. Her chest cavity split open, blood sprayed messily, and she fell backwards.

Anders dispelled the prison crushing Justice. The spirit hit the ground, and landed on his feet.

"Ow." Sigrun whined.

"Everyone still alive?" Anders asked.

"Take care, mortals!" Justice yelled. "The baroness yet lives!"

"My hairy ass she does." Oghren spat, wrenching his battle axe out of the baroness' chest.

"Oghren get back." Amell said, stumbling to his feet. "Get back now!"

Oghren bolted. Velanna grabbed Amell, and roots swallowed both of them. They reappeared a foot away from Anders. A pulse of green energy radiated out from the baroness' corpse, and shook the ground. "Elixirs," Amell ordered. Their three non-mages drank. "No blood magic. We'll make the Tear worse. Justice, can you get to it and close it?"

"I must slay this demon." Justice said.

The baroness' corpse pulsed again.

"If that Tear isn't closed she'll summon more demons through and overwhelm us, and then no one will slay her," Amell said. "Go. Close it. Quickly. Velanna, Sigrun, go with him to help with any demons crossing. Hurry back."

"Here, Sigrun, spirit," Velanna grabbed both their hands, and roots swallowed all of them. They reappeared just outside the steps to the mansion, and ran inside.

"Oghren, take her focus," Amell said. "I have to read the Litany. Anders, keep him up. Nathaniel, wear her down."

The corpse pulsed a third time, and exploded. The force of the blast sent them all staggering, even yards away. Shadows danced with dark emerald light, swirling to form a giant pillar that resembled a Veil Tear in its own right. It pulsed once more, and a vicious crack ripped through the ground, tearing a chasm all the way to the courtyard wall, where it split the stone and kept on past Anders' line of sight.

A pride demon burst out of it. It was massive, near the size of a small house. It stretched, and ran a massive hand over its head in a perverted mockery of the feminine form it had held until recently. "Much better." The pride demon purred, it's voice deep and echoing and not Orlesian at all. "It was so cramped in that form. Now, where is the dwarf I have to thank for this new one?"

"Right here, fugly!" Oghren bellowed and charged. The pride demon's hands glowed green, but no spell cast. Oghren swung his axe and cut a vicious gash through the demon's leg. The pride demon didn't even seem to feel it. Green blood oozed down its ankle, and it turned to look at Amell.

"Stop. Casting. That. Spell!" The pride demon roared, charging straight past Oghren for Amell. Three arrows peppered across its face, but they might have been gnats for how much the demon cared. Amell brought up his shield, but Anders doubted he could read and fend off a pride demon's assault at the same time.
Anders cast a barrier over Amell, and reinforced it with a spell shield. The pride demon took a vicious swipe at Amell, a chain of lightning six feet long forming in its hand and connecting with Amell's shield. It should have knocked him over, if not ripped him in half. Instead he was briefly staggered, and retreated several paces, still reading.

"Oghren!" Amell yelled in between incantations.

"I'm fucking trying!" Oghren yelled back, hacking madly at the demon's legs. The pride demon kicked him, and Oghren went toppling end over end through the courtyard. An arrow hit the pride demon in the eye, and it finally reeled, and focused on someone other than Amell. "Nate, run!" Anders yelled.

Nate wasn't a better option. If anything Nate was a worse option. The archer took two uncertain steps backwards when the demon looked his way. Anders channeled aptitude through Compassion, and focused it at Nate. "Nate, run!" Anders yelled.

Nate ran. Anders summoned ice and cast it at the demon's feet when it charged him. The spell missed one foot, but hit the other, tethering the demon to the ground. The pride demon roared, ripped free, and looked at him. Anders channeled Compassion, and took the brunt of the pride demon's lightning whip with his spell shield, dispersing the magic into the air around him.

Amell yelled something. Anders looked over and found him with his dagger out. "Stop! You'll Tear the Veil! I can hold it!" Anders yelled and hoped the stubborn bastard listened. The pride demon drew back, and lashed at him again, and the magic dispersed again.

Anders didn't have it in him to focus on anything other than sustaining the magic holding up his barriers. An age seemed to pass, and Amell must have listened, because Anders blocked lash after lash. He drank a lyrium potion, in between blows, and hoped someone was trying to kill the damn thing.

Eventually the pride demon turned away from him. Anders stumbled back, and had to drink another potion before he could take stock of the battle. Somehow, it looked to have gotten worse while also getting better. The pride demon switched its focus to Justice, who must have closed the Tear, but not before two rage demons and three shades had climbed through.

Sigrun and Velanna were doing their best to handle them. Anders threw out another frost spell for one of the rage demons. The creature turned to hard rock, and Velanna smashed it in half with her nature magic. By then Sigrun had killed two of the shades, their drain completely negated by Amell's grimoire.

They killed the last of the demons together, and turned back to the pride demon. The beast was a mess. Nathaniel had emptied his quiver into it, and was relying on his daggers. Oghren had torn the beast's legs to shreds, and as far as Anders could tell it was completely immobilized. The pride demon was oozing green blood, and every so often it's hands would glow green with a failed spell.

After one such attempt, Justice stabbed his sword into the pride demon's chest, and an explosion of white light blinded Anders. His vision came back in spots, and the Pride demon was gone. Green motes of dust drifted through the air where it once stood.

"Does anyone need healing?" Anders called out.

"Yep." Oghren said.

"Me too." Sigrun said.

"As do I." Velanna said.
Anders made his way over to the ancient marble steps and took a seat. The injured joined him, while Amell went to talk with Justice. He was cradling his arm, despite not having said anything about needing healing. Anders frowned.

He had other concerns. Oghren had taken a serious beating and come out of the fight with eight broken bones, a contusion, and a mild concussion. The rage demons had left Sigrun and Velanna with second and third degree burns. Nathaniel came to sit with Velanna, exhausted but uninjured. Anders healed Oghren first, and was working on healing Sigrun when Amell and Justice came over.

"Mortals, I would like to take a moment to thank you," Justice said. "You helped me fulfill my vow, and with her death, the victims of that woman's madness should be able to rest in peace, wherever they have gone to now."

"Aw, you're welcome," Sigrun said. "I'm glad we got to help those ghost people after all. So what now? How do we send you home?"

"I do not know that I can go home." Justice admitted, looking down at himself. "I do not know how to return to the Fade, nor does your Commander know of a way to send me back. It appears I am trapped here in the body of this... Grey Warden.

There are memories within this poor man's mind. I understand now that he was murdered most ignobly by the darkspawn, the one called the First. The same creature I so foolishly allied with, and who was your pursuit when you were tricked into the Fade.

My actions have not been above reproach, and for that I am sorry. I know nothing of this world, nor what I will do here, but..."

"Why don't you come with us?" Sigrun asked. "You could fight darkspawn, like we do. Like Kristoff did. They're evil. You hate evil. It could be great."

"You mean continue this mortal's mission as a Grey Warden?" Justice asked. "I understand this 'Mother' who commanded the First yet lives... And avenging this man's death might be a worthwhile purpose, but... Your leader seems unconcerned with virtue. Whether or not I am too quick to judge, I know my presence is unwanted."

"What do you mean 'unwanted'?" Sigrun asked. "Can't we keep him, Commander? We can't just leave him here. How is he going to survive on his own? You heard him, he doesn't know anything about our world. And don't we kind of owe him for trying to kill him in the Fade?"

"Sigrun... I'm a necromancer," Amell said. "A well known one, and reanimation this advanced is something that can only be done with blood magic. I can't even imagine the kind of scrutiny that would fall on me for having a possessed corpse as an ally. And even if we could convince everyone I had no part in this, the Chantry would still brand this spirit a demon and call for its death because it possesses a corpse, willing or not."

"What if we just said he was Kristoff?" Sigrun asked. "He could keep his helmet on, and I bet we could do something for the smell. I mean, we keep Oghren around, and even let him sleep in the barracks, so next to that 'Kristoff' would be easy."

Oghren belched.

"I do not like deception." Justice said stiffly. "My name is not Kristoff. I have no name, only a virtue to which I aspire."

"Okay, sure, but I mean... Work with me, here," Sigrun said. Anders finished healing her, and
moved onto Velanna. Sigrun took advantage of her newly healed state to give her argument standing. "It wouldn't be that hard. You never know. Your Chantry might not even care about him, and we can't just leave him. I'll take care of him."

"He's not a puppy, you know." Anders said.

"You get Ser Pounce-a-Lot," Sigrun said. "Why can't I have Ser Justice-Pants? Besides. He can close Veil Tears, and he ripped that Pride demon apart! Imagine what he could to darkspawn."

"I'm not denying it's useful, Sigrun." Amell said.

"Then come on! Let's keep him." Sigrun said. "I like him. He seems really nice."

"Thank you, mortal." Justice said.

"The 'mortal' thing needs work though." Sigrun said. "I'm Sigrun. This is Anders, Velanna, Nathaniel, Oghren, and Amell."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintances under better circumstances than our first meeting." Justice said.

"Oh he's so nice please let us keep him." Sigrun said.

"I'll... I'll think about it." Amell relented. "We should probably make camp for tonight before heading back to the Vigil anyway, but not here. The Veil is still thin, and I don't want us waking to another Tear."

"What about back at that stone circle, with the dragon skull?" Sigrun asked.

"I know this place of which you speak," Justice said. "The villagers in the Fade spoke often of the dragon, and how the baroness defeated it."

"That's fine," Amell said. "Whenever you're all ready."

"Not so fast," Anders said, giving Velanna a push when he finished healing her. "You come sit down. You're not fooling anyone with that arm."

Obediently, Amell came and sat. Anders dug through his satchel for another lyrium potion. Sigrun went to talk to Justice, and Velanna went with Nathaniel. Oghren stayed on the steps with them, drinking from his hip flask.

Anders took off Amell's left gauntlet, along with his chest armor. It was his shield arm, and the Pride demon's assault had broken it in multiple places. Anders would have been making a lot more of a fuss if he was Amell. "She really did a number on you, huh?" Anders asked, channeling Compassion.

"I'm fine." Amell said.

"Liar," Anders pinched him. "What was that back there?"

"What was what?" Amell asked.

"Don't play dumb. You're too smart for it," Anders said. "Before the fight, when you were just standing there."

"I was fighting off a mind control spell." Amell said. "It was... very difficult, considering she'd
already had access to my mind before. I couldn't do much other than resist the command to kill all of you and mouth 'Help' about as soon as we walked into the courtyard."

"Well shit." Anders said.

"Well shit." Amell agreed.

"Are you okay?" Anders asked.

"I'm fine." Amell said. "Are you?"

"Peachy." Anders said. "So, not to get my hopes up or anything, but I don't suppose you learned anything from all this?"

"Aside from how to summon ash wraiths?" Amell asked.

"I was going for more along the lines of maybe we don't invite every demon we come across into our heads for tea and crumpets." Anders said.

"That doesn't sound like me." Amell said.

"Seriously?" Anders pinched him again. "Did you miss the part where it was a Pride demon that got the better of you? Are we going with coincidence on that?"

"It didn't get the better of me." Amell argued stubbornly. "I was resisting it, and given a few more seconds I'm sure I would have managed to break out of its hold."

"In a few more seconds we would have all died horribly to that spell it put the rest of us under." Anders said.

Amell didn't argue.

"So, I'm going to throw you a ladder so you can get out of this hole you dug yourself into," Anders said. "You're going to say, 'Anders is right. I fucked up,' and we'll be good."

"Good fucking luck, Sparkles." Oghren laughed.

"Anders is right. I fucked up." Amell said obediently.

Oghren jaw dropped so fast Anders heard it pop. "How the fuck."

"See," Anders said smugly. "That wasn't so hard, was it? If you take off that horrible helmet, I'll even give you a kiss."

Amell took his helmet off. His hair was a mess, as usual, but Anders didn't mind. It was almost endearing, really. Anders leaned over and gave him a quick peck. "Arm's all healed." Anders said.

"What the fuck, Boss," Oghren said. "There's no way Sparkles is that good in bed. Since when do you say no to blood magic?"

"Never?" Amell shrugged. "But I should have been reading the Litany when I walked into the courtyard. I had nothing to barter with, and she wasn't in a binding circle. It was a bad position to start from, but she was... so powerful. I wasn't thinking."

"Literally." Anders said. "You sure you're okay? Mind control is pretty awful."
"The spell never fully cast, Anders," Amell said. "Resisting gave me a migraine. That's all."

"Well... Good." Anders said.

"Thank you for healing me." Amell said.

"Thanks for listening to me," Anders' mouth said without any consent from his brain. Amell gave him a confused look. Well... Too late now. Anders braced himself and finished the thought. "Back there when the Pride demon was focusing me. I thought for sure you'd try to enslave it anyway and Tear the Veil."

"You said you could handle it." Amell said, setting a hand on his thigh. "I trust you, Anders."

That wasn't so bad. That could have been weightier. Anders managed a smile, and Amell gave him one back, and leaned forward to kiss him. The soft brush of his lips was slow, and soothing, and Anders enjoyed it for less than a minute before Oghren kicked Amell and knocked him off the steps.

"Pitch a tent." Oghren snorted.

"Oghren you know I still love you," Amell said, picking himself up off the ground. "Have I been neglecting you? Do you want a kiss too?"

"No. No!" Oghren shrieked when Amell moved towards him. "I will punch you in the nuts. Do not kiss me."

"Just one." Amell said. "Just a peck."

"No!" Oghren aimed a wild kick at Amell's legs.

Anders laughed. The exchange eventually landed Oghren with a kiss, and Amell with a black eye which Anders was not allowed to heal because 'the little thunderhumper deserved it.' Anders healed it anyway on the walk back to the stone circle. Sigrun had found another piece of bone she was certain fit in the skull, and ran to test the theory as soon as they reached the circle.

"You guys it fits!" Sigrun called over. "How cool is that?"

A ring of fire flared into life around one of the stone circles. A line of fire sped off towards the pedestal in the center of the stones, where another ring of fire encircled the pedestal. A second line shot off and encircled a second stone, and Anders barely managed to dart to the side as the flames sped past.

"Great. More magic shit." Oghren sighed.

The flames spread, encircling stone after stone until the entire circle was alight. The bowl atop the pedestal lit with veilfire when all six stones were lit, and a burst of magic knocked Anders off his feet. The dragon skull lifted off the ground, and floated to rest just above the pedestal.

"Oh... Oh no," Sigrun said, "What did I do?"

Bones seemed to manifest from all across the marsh, flying through the air to latch onto the skull, and form the skeleton of a dragon. Anders backed up to the edge of the binding circle, and bumped into an invisible barrier keeping them trapped inside the stone circle.

"Mythal protect us," Velanna whispered.

"I'm sorry!" Sigrun said, "I'm so sorry!"
"How do we fight a dragon?" Nathaniel asked.

"Maybe it's just here to chat?" Anders joked.

Lightning struck, and two eyes, bright lyrium blue, took shape in the skull's empty eye-sockets.

"Boss? Boss, what do we do here?" Oghren asked nervously.

"I... " Amell took an uncertain step back from the skull, and bumped into the barrier. Maker save them, for the first time since Anders had met him, he looked afraid. "I don't know."
Hello everyone! Welcome back. Not much of a comment for this chapter. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 17 Parvulis Night

The Blackmarsh

"What the fuck do you mean you don't know?" Oghren demanded.

"I don't know!" Amell said. Above the pedestal, the dragon continued to form. Bone after bone built it up into the sky, as if it were mid dive. Lightning pulsed over its bones, and gathered in the dragon's chest cavity, where a heart might have lain in life. The barrier locking them inside the binding circle held strong whenever Anders tested it.

"Well fucking think!" Oghren yelled. "We killed the sodding Archdemon. This fucker should be nothing!"

"We had ballistas, we had an army!" Amell yelled back. "We weren't trapped in a binding circle! The Archdemon's wings were crippled! It had blood! I can't keep a dragon on the ground if it doesn't have blood!"

"I can." Justice said.

"What?" Amell asked.

"This creature is of the Fade," Justice said. "It is the memory of a dragon, created by the joining of a thousand wisps. I can draw their focus, as I drew the focus of the baroness."

"... Alright." Amell said. "Alright... Okay. We have to break this circle. Velanna, Anders, help me destroy the stones."

"Destructive forces of nature coming right up," Anders said, channeling for an earthquake. "Everyone brace yourselves."

Holding the magic it took for an earthquake made Anders feel like he was sinking into the ground. Bone after bone flew to shape the dragon while he channeled, and by the time he released the spell the only things missing were the dragon's wings and tail. The ground beneath them quaked and split, chasms ripping through the lines of flame and cutting through stone. Five out of six pillars crumbled. Velanna lifted a chunk of the broken ground with her magic, and flung it into the last stone.

The stone crumbled, and the flames died. The barrier around the circle fell, but the veilfire in the pedestal remained, as did the slowly forming dragon.

"We have to break it back apart," Amell said. "Nathaniel, Sigrun, I doubt your weapons will be able
to affect it. Both of you stay back, unless we need your blood. Give Oghren both the grounding elixirs we have left."

Anders dug through his satchel for the potions, and handed both to Oghren. The dwarf stuffed one down his pants, and kept a tight hold on the other.

"Won't blood magic Tear the Veil?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yes, but if it turns out we don't have a choice, Justice can close the Tear." Amell said. "Stay to the sides, don't go near its tail, or anywhere in range of its breath. Anders, if you're going to support anyone, support Justice. If this dragon gets off the ground, we'll all die."

"No pressure or anything." Anders said.

The dragon's wings finished forming. Only its tail remained, bones flying in from all across the marsh to form a tail five, then ten, then fifteen feet long. It didn't inspire much confidence in their ability to stay out of range, Anders thought. Nathaniel and Sigrun fell back, and Oghren took a spot by the dragon's front leg.

Velanna and Amell stood together just outside the range of the dragon's wings. Anders stood with them. Justice stood directly in front of the skull, staring defiantly into its lyrium blue eyes. No fear in that one. Then again, Justice was already dead, and not the brightest spirit in the Fade, so it was less inspiring than it could have been.

The dragon finished forming. Its heart pulsed, and electricity crackled outward to give the creature skin. It dropped to the ground with a thud as powerful as the tremors from Anders' earthquake. The dragon swung its head up into the sky, and roared. Anders flinched and covered his ears, but the sound deafened him anyway.

Anders' ears were ringing when the fighting started. True to the spirit's word, the dragon was fixated on Justice. Anders channeled aptitude for him, and the spirit was able to dodge the dragon's snapping jaws. Despite having its focus, Justice did no damage to the dragon with his weapons. Occasionally, a burst of white light would emanate off him, but it seemed to do little more than annoy the dragon.

Oghren managed to break a few toes, and Velanna was making a bit of a dent throwing the broken pieces of stone into the dragon. Anders cast whatever element came to him, but the magic washed ineffectually over the dragon's innate spell shield. Amell didn't look to be making much progress with spirit magic either.

The dragon roared again, spewing lightning from its skeletal jaws. It swung its long neck across the battlefield to spray all of them with its breath. The three of them brought up spell shields, and the magic washed over them, but Anders heard Nate scream behind him. The poor bastard should have stood farther away.

Before Anders could run to check on Nathaniel, a root wrapped around Anders' foot. Another grabbed his hand, and then a multitude swarmed over him and cast him into darkness. Cramped, tight, constricted, horrible darkness. Anders screamed, and lost his center of gravity. He felt upside down. He couldn't breathe. A second later and it was over, and he was standing over an unconscious Nathaniel. Velanna was standing next to him.

Anders grabbed her by her collar and pulled her so close all he could see was her bright green eyes, wide in surprise. "Never do that to me again," Anders said through grit teeth.

He gave her a shove that sent her staggering back, and knelt to heal Nathaniel. Anders felt sick, his
every muscle tied into a knot. Movement came stiffly, and it was hard to focus past the rapid beat of his heart.

Later, Anders. Have a panic attack later. Anders summoned Compassion, and healed Nathaniel. The lightning had stopped Nathaniel's heart, and it took a concentrated effort to revive him. Anders kept his spell shield spread over both of them while he worked. It took near a quarter hour to get his heart beating, his burns healed, and get him conscious.

"Thank you," Nathaniel coughed when he could speak, massaging his heart.

"Stay back," Anders said.

Anders ran to rejoin the battle, and his heart sank at what he found. Oghren was lying against one of the stone pillars, not moving. Justice was between the dragon's jaws, and the beast was toying with him like a rabid dog with its food. Velanna must have taken a blow from the dragon's tail, because her stomach was ripped open, and Sigrun had run into the fight to drag her to safety.

"Amell, this isn't working!" Anders called.

"I know it's not!" Amell yelled back. He drew his dagger, threw off his gauntlet, and cut vertically down his arm. "Get Nathaniel and Sigrun!"

The dust and dirt kicked up from Anders' earthquake swirled to form an ash wraith. The creature was burning fire, teeth, and shadow. It turned towards the dragon, and stretched out a hand. Magic drained off the dragon, and was slowly sucked into the shade. It glowed brighter as it gorged. Anders ran to where Sigrun was hiding behind a stone pillar with Velanna.

"I got you, sweetie, it's okay," Sigrun said, tears streaming down her face. Copious amounts of blood made Velanna's stomach slippery, and Sigrun struggled to keep her hands from plunging into the wound while she kept pressure. "It's okay. We're gonna be fine. Oh, ancestors, I'm so sorry."

"I got her!" Anders grabbed Sigrun by her shoulders, and had to drag her to get her away from Velanna. "I got her! Get Nathaniel. Go to Amell. Hurry."

Sigrun nodded and ran. Anders summoned Compassion, and heard the soft rip of fabric. He ignored it, and focused on knitting Velanna's flesh back together. He didn't blame Sigrun her tears. Anders didn't even like the bitchy little elf, but the wound was familiar to him now, and he was tired of seeing it end in death.

"Anders..." Velanna said faintly. No blood spilled from her lips. That was a good sign.

"I got you. Nate's fine." Anders said. "Shut up."

Anders heard Amell's manic laugh in the distance while he healed Velanna and took heart. The wraiths must have been working. Another quarter hour, and he had Velanna back on her feet. He pushed a stamina draught into her hands, and moved on to where Oghren had collapsed.

Thank the Maker, the dwarf wasn't in the middle of a brush with death. He was just stuck. The dragon had kicked Oghren so hard he'd been imbedded the stone. He had a mild contusion, and matching concussion, but it was far less serious than it could have been. "Get me out of here, Sparkles." Oghren snarled, kicking his feet. He looked like a fussy baby put down for an early nap. Despite everything, Anders laughed. "Don't you fucking laugh you little nug humper! Get me the fuck out of here!"

Anders kept laughing. He healed Oghren easily, and shattered the rock with his magic to set him
free. Oghren punched him in the stomach, picked up his battle axe, and ran back into the fight. Anders went with him.

Amell had three wraiths bound, and they were sucking the life force from the dragon. Nathaniel and Sigrun stood behind him, their arms with matching cuts that tethered the six of them together. Amell was laughing, as usual. The dragon had dropped Justice at some point, but the shades had rendered it too weak to catch the spirit a second time. Justice dodged the snapping jaws easily without any help from Anders' magic.

The dragon's electric skin seemed to melt away, and Oghren and Velanna had an easier time breaking its bones apart. Velanna's nature magic knocked the bones from their joints, and Oghren's axe chipped and fractured them. Anders summoned the magic for a fist of stone to help, when he heard a laugh not Amell's.

It was low and threatening, and Anders turned around. A rage demon slithered towards him, dripping molten lava. It lurched down a small cliff left by Anders' earthquake, and started the climb back up another. Anders let go of his spell, and channeled ice instead. He loosed it into the demon, and the lava hardened. A fist of stone shattered the demon.

The Tear was between two of the stone pillars. Anders watched it, and dispelled the demons he saw trying to cross while he waited for everyone to finish with the dragon. He didn't have to wait long. A short while later, and Anders heard the thud of the massive beast collapsing.

Cheering followed, but the Tear was still open. Anders dispelled another would be demon, when Justice joined him. The spirit walked up to the Tear and set both hands to it. He glowed white and blue, and if he weren't already a spirit, Anders would have guessed he was channeling one.

The Tear bubbled and rippled, expanding and contracting like a living, breathing thing. Justice stepped into it and exploded with white energy, and the Tear burst apart. Not even motes of dust took up the space it had occupied. The Tear was just gone, as if it had never been.

Anders turned back to the dragon. Its skeleton lay stretched out across the marsh. Its skull had been broken off from its spine and lay upside down in the mud, several yards away. The massive ribcage was as big as some of the homes in the village. The shades were gone; giant piles of dust blew away with the wind.

His friends were celebrating. Nathaniel had pulled Velanna into what looked like a very one sided dance. Oghren was pissing on the dragon's bones. Sigrun was hugging Amell, visibly shaken if not sobbing.

Anders couldn't tell if Amell was paying attention. He'd thrown off his helmet, and still looked caught up in the thrill of blood magic. He ran a hand through his hair, and the vicious cut on his arm painted dark red veins down his forearm. His eyes were wild, and Anders couldn't see past them when Amell looked his way.

"You are a very talented healer," Justice noted.

"Yeah sure, no problem." Anders said, quickly distancing himself from the possessed corpse. Anders jogged over, and Amell hastily disentangled himself from Sigrun. Amell met him at the dragon's ribcage near where Oghren was fixing his codpiece.

"Looks like we made it," Anders grinned, "So that was-"

Amell grabbed him about the waist and swung him in a wild circle, "Exhilarating!" Amell finished
for him. Anders could still feel the pull of the Fade on him, the scent of blood, of sweat and battle. Amell hitched him further up on his waist and held him by his thighs.

Maker's breath he was strong. Or was it just his magic? Anders didn't know. Anders didn't care. He knew exactly what he'd been asking for running to him. Amell pinned him against the nearest dragon rib with his body, and the suddenness of it made Anders inhale sharply.

Amell was still in full armor, but the hard bite of dragonscale hurt in the best of all possible ways. Amell kissed him roughly, his teeth everywhere. On Anders' lips, at his jaw, on his ear and his neck. Anders wrapped his arms around Amell's shoulders and buried a frantic hand in his hair. Amell ran a hand up one of Anders' dangling leg to his ass and squeezed through the leather of Anders' trousers.

"The second I get you alone," Amell whispered in his ear, lips moving against his skin. Amell squeezed Anders' ass, and a low pulse of electricity cours ed through Anders' veins and radiated pleasure through his whole body. Anders pitched forward and bit Amell's neck to keep from crying out. It didn't quite work, and a muffled moan slipped out of him. "Yeah?" Amell whispered, shocking him again.

Maker save him. Anders grabbed for purchase on Amell's armor, fighting back whimpers. He going to end up coming in his trousers like a troubled teenager if Amell didn't stop, but Anders didn't want him to. Andraste's grace, why wasn't he always like this? Why didn't he use excessive amounts of blood magic more often?

"Okay, settle down, or at least pitch a tent." Oghren said. "Why do you two always get gross around me?"

Amell set him down. A smug smirk, Anders might have been able to handle, but Amell gave him a look of such naked lust Anders grabbed his face in his hands and kissed him again. Anders felt drunk. His head was light, and he could barely think past his own arousal.

Amell's hands were on him again, and Anders couldn't care that one hand still wore a gauntlet. It just made his touch all the more firm and powerful, and Anders suddenly wanted nothing more than to know what Amell would feel like inside him. Why hadn't they done that yet? Anders wanted that same mindless pleasure that made Amell scream whenever Anders had him.

"Oh for fuck's sake, it's the elf all over again," Oghren complained. "I'm having flashbacks. Nightmarish flashbacks. I'm not getting any sleep tonight am I?"

"Woo! Get him!" Sigrun cheered. Tears had made her voice watery, "And then heal me because this cut on my arm really hurts."

Amell finally broke off from him. Anders kept his mouth closed. There were only two words on his tongue, and Anders didn't think 'Fuck me.' was applicable here. Okay maybe three or four words, but they were all just variants of the above, and weren't any better.

Anders cast a quick healing spell for both Amell and Sigrun and turned around. He leaned against the dragon bone with his forehead on his arm to catch his breath and battle down his erection.

"I really am sorry you guys." Sigrun said. "I had no idea that would happen."

"It's fine, Sigrun," Amell said; Amell's hard breathing wasn't helping Anders calm down any. "We're more than our mistakes. You had no way of knowing that could happen."

"I'm still really, really sorry." Sigrun said.
"Anders," Nathaniel's voice said from nearby. Anders lifted his head off his arm and looked for him. Nate was standing a foot away, holding out his sliced arm. "Would you mind healing me?"

Anders waved his hand and a simple spell knit the mangled flesh back together. Nate gave him a queer look, probably for his flushed face.

"Are you alright?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yep." Anders tried flexing a muscle to make his erection go away. It would have been easier if he had muscles. "Just... need to go use the little mage's room,"

Anders fled behind one of the broken stone pillars and trapped his erection under his belt, and made sure his tabard was doing work. What he wouldn't give to skip ahead an hour, when their tents were pitched and Amell was done being 'Commander' and went back to being Amell. Naked, sweating, panting Amell.

Frustrated, Anders rejoined the group.

"So we can keep him, right?" Sigrun was asking. "We're not really going to leave him after he helped us kill that dragon are we?"

"... That depends on if he still wants to stay." Amell said.

"You are referring to the dark magic you utilized in that fight to subjugate demons." Justice guessed.

"Yes." Amell said.

"I will refrain from passing judgment until I know more of your character." Justice said stiffly. "With how little I know of this world, perhaps it is not even my place to judge at all. For now I would be pleased to travel with you all, if you would have me."

"Of course we'll have you!" Sigrun exclaimed, latching onto one of Justice's arms. Anders half expected it to fall off, but the corpse held together. "Come on, I'll show you how to pitch your tent. Or... wait, do you need sleep?"

"I do not believe so, but I will help you with this task." Justice said, still stiff as a corpse. Anders didn't see the appeal. At least Compassion was a sweetheart.

Oghren sighed, watching Sigrun rummage through her pack and set up her tent with Justice. "Can't believe I'm losing to a dead guy."

"I can." Anders said.

Everyone unpacked, and pitched their respective tents. Velanna gathered rocks to contain their campfire, and Nathaniel passed out their kingly rations of jerky, hardtack, and water. Unsurprisingly, Justice didn't need to eat, and volunteered to take every watch. No one argued. With the day they'd had, everyone was exhausted.

Sigrun and Nathaniel didn't come back from their tents after they left to disarm and disarmor. Anders was exhausted, but the memory of Amell's magic burning in his veins kept him awake, and brought him back to the campfire in his tunic and trousers.

Anders was trying to think of a subtle approach to bedding him, like waiting until everyone else went to sleep, when Amell took his hand and led him back to his tent, no shame about it.
Anders had never had sex in a tent before. Not very roomy, tents. Especially with Amell's weapons and armor stacked on one side. And it was dark. Anders sat in the middle of Amell's bedroll, and conjured a sphere of light he let float free in the center of the tent.

"Did you need me to tell you a bed time story?" Anders joked when Amell tied the flaps closed behind them.

"Yes," Amell threw off his tunic, and reached for the laces to Anders' trousers. "Tell me the one about your dick in my mouth." Anders ran his fingers through Amell's disheveled hair, tracing over an ear and the faint scar of an old piercing.

"See, I would," Anders said, letting Amell drag his trousers off, "But I just spent a whole day marching and fighting and I like you too much to pretend that doesn't mean anything,"

"I could care less right now," Amell said, walking his hands up Anders' legs. Did Amell like his legs? He was always touching them. That seemed like a weird question to ask.

"Well I care," Anders said, and took off his tunic. "So thanks but no thanks. I was kind of thinking we could pick up where we left off outside."

"Did we leave off somewhere?" Amell lifted one eyebrow, fingers locked around Anders' smalls.

"Didn't we?" Anders lifted his hips for Amell to drag the final article of clothing off. Amell crawled up his legs, and his tongue carved a path through the sweat on Anders' skin on his way up his chest. Anders caught Amell's hips when they were in reach, and tugged his trousers and smalls down around his thighs.

"You taste fine," Amell said against his collarbone, the warmth of his breath making Anders shiver. "But if you're against it..." Amell rolled off his chest, and kicked his trousers the rest of the way off. He took a spot behind Anders, and Anders felt a pulse of mana from him. He tensed expecting another shock, but the magic must have been creationism. Amell set oiled hands to his shoulders, and Anders sank back against them. Maker, he loved being spoiled.

"What did you have in mind?" Amell asked, working the conjured oil into his shoulders. Knot after knot unraveled under his skilled hands and Anders suddenly wasn't sure if he wanted to have sex at all.

"Right now, this," Anders admitted. Primal magic warmed Amell's hands, and Anders bit his bottom lip to stifle a moan. It didn't quite work, especially when Amell's hands slipped up to his neck and worked behind his ears. "You know everyone is going to know we're having sex, right?" Anders asked.

"I think everyone already knows we have sex, Anders." Amell said, massaging back down his shoulders and the muscles in his arm, worn weary from his staff.

"Well yeah, but that doesn't mean they've ever heard it, or knew exactly when we were doing it." Anders said, leaning back against Amell's chest. Amell's thumbs melted tension Anders hadn't even realized he'd had in his hands. "Maker, where did you learn to do this?"

"It's an Antivan technique," Amell said, wringing oil back up Anders' arms. "I thought we agreed you deserved a reward whenever you save all our lives."

"Me?" Anders reached back to run a hand over Amell's thigh. "That was you, with the shades. You know you seemed-" Anders cleared his throat, "-more intense outside."
"Did you want intense?" Amell slid a hand around Anders to pull him flush against his chest, and teased his nipples with two oiled fingers.

"Yes," Anders said thickly, delighting in the crackle of static he felt on the hand Amell ran down his thigh. Breathless anticipation made him tense, and electricity burned through his veins a second later. Anders arched against Amell's chest with a wild moan, scrabbling to find Amell's hair and fist his hands in it.

"I wish you could see yourself when I do that," Amell said, a sudden shift in primal magic warming the fingers he ran along the inside of Anders' thigh. "The way you tense and shudder," His fingers slid up Anders' stomach, still flooded with creationism, and warm oil ran down Anders' skin through the thin path of hair beneath his navel to drip onto his aching cock. "It's like watching you come."

A second shock of electricity hit him, and Anders cried out. Anders barely had time to process the sharp jolt of pleasure before it was over and he was panting. Any more of it and it would be exactly like watching him come. Anders shook his head, panting and gasping, trying to force out words. Amell's tongue blazed a slick path up Anders' neck to his ear, "No more?"

"Fuck," Anders managed, chest heaving, hands still locked tight in Amell's hair over his shoulder. "Fuck me."

"Fuck you how?" Amell asked, dragging blunt nails down Anders' chest.

"Fuck me, fuck my ass, fuck me," Anders demanded inarticulately. Amell let out a hard breath against Anders' shoulder, and the thought that the fire that licked Anders' skin at Amell's exhale might not have been voluntary sent a shiver of excitement through him.

"Stop me if you change your mind," Amell shifted behind him, and set two fingers on either side of Anders' spine at the nape of his neck. Amell dragged them down through the sweat and oil on Anders' back with deliberate slowness.

"Oh, fuck, you're a bastard," Anders groaned, twisting to grab Amell's face in his hands and kiss him. Anders traced over Amell's lips with his tongue and sucked on the supple skin, anticipation making his heart race faster the lower Amell's fingers fell on his back. Amell wrapped his free hand around Anders' thigh, so close to his throbbing cock Anders whimpered urgently, "Touch me."

"I am touching you," Amell broke from his lips to flick Anders' earring with his tongue. He drew a path through the crack in his backside, and circled the tight muscle of his entrance, pressing faintly with the oil-slick pad of his finger. "Do you want me to keep touching you?"

"Yes," Anders said eagerly, and turned the word into a mantra Amell broke when he eased in a finger. A closed mouth moaned escaped him. It hardly felt of anything, but it was Amell, and he was inside him, and primal magic warmed the oil on his fingers, and as he slid in deeper Anders felt the warmth run straight to his cock.

Amell's arm slid up Anders' chest to hold onto his shoulder, "You can still tell me to stop."

"Don't you dare," Anders swallowed down a gasp. Amell pressed his lips against his shoulder, and crooked his finger. The surge of pleasure that followed turned Anders' gasp into a moan. Amell groaned against his skin, trailing kisses over his back broken by the drag of his teeth.

"You feel so good," Amell praised him, finger working in shallow thrusts. "Fuck, fuck Anders, you have no idea how long I've wanted this."

"How long?" Anders' voice sounded hoarse to his ears, and he tried to clear his throat, but it was too
hard to focus on anything other than the rhythm Amell set, the way Anders' chest pressed against Amell's arm with every hard breath, the subtle, almost imperceptible friction of his scars whenever Amell shifted for a better grip.

Anders held onto the scarred arm Amell had locked around him with one hand and took hold of his aching cock with the other. Even the slight friction of his fingers curling around his shaft made him thrust into his fist, and moved him along Amell's finger, and built a fire in the pit of his stomach. "Too long," Amell said. "Do you want all of me tonight?"

"Fuck-yes," Anders said.

Amell's hand slipped off his shoulder to tap the arm of the hand Anders had wrapped around his cock. "Then don't come."

Fuck. A shiver ran up Anders' spine at the order, and he let go of his cock. He didn't know what else to do with his hand, and reached blindly behind him for some part of Amell to touch. His hand connected with bare skin, and he ran it up and down Amell's side in eager sweeps.

"Tell me when you can take more," Amell said; a low pulse from the Fade built more oil around the finger Amell worked inside him, and it ran warm down Anders' ass and the inside of his thigh. Shivers of ecstasy ran through Anders at every crook of Amell's finger, and more had never sounded better.

"More," Anders begged. Amell pulled from him, and set two fingers to his slick hole. The slow push of Amell easing back into him came with a pressure and fullness that bordered on bliss, and the slightest burn that tangled gasps and whimpers up in Anders' throat.

Anders clawed his way up Amell's arm to his shoulder, and grabbed a fistful of his hair to pull his head forward. Anders turned his head and Amell kissed him without asking. His heady taste clouded Anders' head, and Anders crushed their mouths together. Amell held his fingers steady, a subtle crook pressing at a part of Anders that wrung one hard gasp after the next from him and made him forget the burn had ever been.

"Fuck me," Anders gasped, wet lips sliding off Amell's mouth, "Amell fuck me."

"I am fucking you," Amell promised, pulling Anders' bottom lip between his teeth and sucking hard. Anders moaned, and didn't care that it was shameless. The first stroke of Amell's fingers made him moan again. The slow caress struck up a haze of pleasure that killed every thought in Anders' head. He couldn't imagine existing outside this one moment, and except to picture Amell's cock hitting that same bundle of nerves that set his skin aflame.

"Fuck me harder," Anders grabbed for Amell, his hands sliding for purchase on taut muscle damp with sweat. Amell already had an arm locked tight around his chest, but it wasn't nearly enough. Anders' cock was rigid and leaking down his flushed skin, fluid carving a path down the inside of his thigh with sweat and oil and driving him half mad with the desperate need for friction.

"Wait," Amell said, and the word tore a needy whine from Anders' throat. "I will. Fuck, I will, but wait," Amell kissed his shoulder, "I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me-fuck-I don't care," Anders choked out, "Amell-this-is driving me crazy."

"Do you want me to take your mind off it?" Amell offered.

"Yes, anything." Anders begged, "Bite me, spank me, anything, just touch me."
Amell let go of his chest and took his fingers from him, and the loss made Anders feel empty. Kneeling like this was starting to hurt Anders' knees, and his legs were sweating and sticking to themselves, but Anders didn't care about any of it. Amell brushed his fingers over Anders' ass, barely touching him, "Get on your hands and knees."

The order sent shudder up his spine, and it felt like Amell had pushed him when Anders pitched forward. Amell pressed the pads of his fingers to Anders' entrance, and Anders clutched at the bedroll beneath him, biting his lip to stifle the moan that escaped anyway when Amell eased back into him. The exquisite sensation of being filled took over him, and Anders lifted a hand to bite down on his knuckles when biting his lip wasn't enough.

Amell swept his fingers over his ass, squeezing gently, and another pulse from the Fade coated them with oil Amell worked into his skin. "You can still tell me to stop," Amell promised. Anders shook his head, not trusting himself to words. The first light smack of Amell's palm on his ass did nothing to take Anders' mind off the sensations Amell stirred inside him.

"Amell," Anders whined; if anything the gentle caress that followed and the slide of Amell's thumb over his ass made it all the more overwhelming. Amell smacked him again, and the sting was almost imperceptible but it was there, and Anders tried to focus on it to distract himself, but another caress followed it.

"Harder," Anders gasped, rocking back against Amell's hand to fuck himself on his fingers. It still wasn't enough; he wanted friction, he wanted Amell's cock, his thighs slapping against his ass with every powerful thrust, Amell's hand fisted in his hair and tugging his head back so all of Anders' shameless cries ran together with the sounds of their sex.

Amell slapped him again, and it stung. A blissful, distracting sting that took his mind off Amell's fingers stretching and loosening him for his cock. "Oh fuck, yes." Anders said. Amell crooked his fingers, and a hot wave of pleasure dropped Anders to his elbows. Another spank left him whimpering for more.

Anders dropped his head between his arms, panting. His cock hung heavy and aching between his legs, and swayed with every smack of Amell's hand, but Maker it didn't matter anymore. Amell squeezed his ass, a soft crackle of electricity playing out over the skin left sensitive by his hand. Sweat was falling down over Anders' eyebrows, and he smoothed it back into his hair, his hand catching on his ponytail. Anders dragged it out with the motion, and Amell rewarded him with another slap that brought him near tears.

Anders' whine was half a sob, and Amell ran a hand warm with primal magic over his aching flesh. "You're doing so well, Anders," Amell murmured, voice thick with praise, "Is this too much?"

"I-I don't-know," Anders choked. Anymore and he might cry, and Maker, a part of him wanted to. He wanted Amell to spank him until he sobbed and fuck him until he screamed.

"Three?" Amell asked, kneading the sting out of his ass before Anders could decide if he wanted it gone.

"Fuck, yes please," Anders begged.

Amell slid his fingers from him and shifted behind him. Anders felt the press of his lips against his ass, followed by a hot brush of his tongue, and a graze of his teeth that turned into a bite. It dropped Anders from his elbows to his shoulders, and left him whining into the bed roll. The gentle application of pressure from Amell's fingers working into him turned his whine into a groan.
Anders didn't feel anything but slightly sore and wonderfully stretched, desperate for Amell's fingers to reach deeper, for his cock to take their place and drain Anders of every drop of come in his body and fill him up with Amell's instead. Amell massaged his free hand up his back and over his sides, a tug on Anders' hips pulling him back against his fingers. "Are you okay?"

Anders nodded, a moan eating up the 'yes' he tried to give when Amell curled his fingers, and stroked the bundle of nerves inside him Anders had almost forgotten existed under Amell's spanks.

"You can heal yourself," Amell reminded him, another surge of magic adding another coat of oil to Amell's fingers. The excess spilled down Anders' cock and over his balls, and Amell reached around him to gather it in his hand. The gentle wring of his palm around his cock had Anders' thrusting into his fist even knowing he was supposed to be holding back. Amell ran his hand up Anders' shaft and brushed his thumb over his tip, and a shudder of pleasure ran through him.

"I don't-I don't want to," Anders choked out. "I like it."

Amell worked the excess of oil into Anders' ass. The aching muscle felt as sensitive as Anders' cock, and Amell's gentle touches left Anders shivering in a delicious blend of pressure and pleasure. Amell kissed him again, and Anders felt his lips move against his skin, "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes," Anders begged, repeating the word until he lost all sense of its meaning. Amell eased out of him, and his oiled hands wrapped around Anders' chest and dragged him back up to his knees, thumbs swirling teasingly over Anders' nipples and working them into stiff peaks on his chest. Anders groped blindly over his shoulder and buried a hand in Amell's hair, desperate for any part of him he could hold onto.

Amell kept one hand on his hip; his cock dripped oil down Anders' ass when he guided it inside him. The stretch burned, and Anders half-gasped, half-hissed at the few seconds it took to pass. Amell massaged his hip, and the hot swath of licks and sucks he painted across Anders' shoulders helped him forget it. Anders arched his hips back, and the sensation of Amell sinking into him tore a wild moan from both their throats.

"Oh-fuck-me," Anders felt like he was on fire. Stretched and full and taken with every inch Amell lost inside him.

"Anders," Amell said his name like a dying man might a prayer. He kissed Anders' jaw, his lips locked, breath spilling hard and hot across his skin.

Anders dropped his hand from Amell's hair to wrap his arm around Amell's neck. Anders turned his head and Amell claimed his lips, the heat of their mingled breath the only thing that made up the kiss. Amell pulled him back against his hips, and Anders couldn't have named the sound he made if he tried. His cock was thick and rigid and perfect, and when it hit the right spot inside him the sensations made Anders so hot and flushed with pleasure he almost felt dizzy.

Amell held Anders' hips with one hand, and clung to his chest with the other. A shallow thrust made Anders see stars so bright they left his mind reeling. It was beyond overwhelming, and he didn't have any control over the sounds spilling out of his lips and into Amell's mouth. Anders was writhing and shaking in minutes, toes curling into thin air. He kept his arm locked tight around Amell's neck to keep himself from drowning in the pleasure of it all.

"Harder," Anders croaked.

"You have to-let go of me-a little first," Amell gasped against his neck, and Anders let his arm fall off him. Amell pulled out of him and wrung his hands in a brief massage on Anders' shoulders.
before he gave him an commanding push, "Down." Anders dropped willingly to his hands and knees. Amell's hands ran over his yielding body, guiding the arch in Anders' back before he pushed back inside him.

A devoted hand on Anders' hip held him steady. Anders barely heard the wet smack of Amell's hips hitting his ass around the sounds ripping from his throat. Maker save him, he wasn't screaming, but every gasping moan came close. Amell's thrusts drove him forward, and his hands brought him back, and Anders dropped his head into his clutching hands. He tangled them in his loose hair, and bit his arm to stifle his cries.

It didn't help. Anders gasped against his arm, teeth and lips rocking against his skin and leaving it slick with spit when Anders couldn't bring himself to close his mouth. "Fuck yes, Anders," Amell moaned, and Anders made some sort of sound in response. "You're so good at this. You look so beautiful taking it. The way you sound."

Anders tried for words, but they were impossible with the rising pleasure that had spread past the pit of his stomach and claimed his entire body. Pressure wound tight inside him, blinding and breath-taking, and begging for release. "I-I-fuck-I'm right-"

Anders moans fell apart into tattered gasps, and Amell gave his hip an encouraging squeeze. "Do it. I want to feel come on my cock."

Amell's free hand took hold of Anders' leaking cock, and Anders lasted a handful of stroke before he came. He felt his climax everywhere; in his heart, in his toes, in his face, in his cock. It was mind-shattering, heart-stopping perfection, and it lasted so long Anders thought he might faint.

When the waves of pleasure died down, Anders remembered he was supposed to breathe. He managed a weak gasp, shuddered when Amell pulled out of him. He'd never felt so empty in his life. He collapsed on the ruined bedroll in front of him, exhausted. He heard Amell groan, felt the splatter of heat on his lower back, and Amell's hand smear shakily through it. Anders wanted to hug him, but that meant moving, and moving was definitely impossible.

Anders couldn't feel his face. Amell kissed the small of his back, and the hot swipe of his tongue made Anders shiver. Amell licked up his spine, and Anders made a sound he thought might have been a whimper. Amell reached his ear, and bit down on the lobe Anders didn't have pierced. Anders groped blindly for his head, and ran an tired hand through Amell's hair while Amell kissed along his jaw.

Amell slid an arm under his chest, and lifted his boneless body off the bedroll. Amell pulled back the covers and moved them both under them, pulling Anders onto his shoulder. Anders made a sound he hoped was grateful, too exhausted to think. Amell was warm and wet and wonderful, and Anders fell asleep wrapped up in his bed, his scent, and his sheltering arms.

Anders woke up to the caws of crows, and the thin stream of sunlight through the cracks in the tent flaps. He'd fallen asleep on his side, but he woke up lying on his back, tangled in Amell. He felt horrible. Anders' ass was aching, he was sticky with sweat and dried come, and his back was in knots from a night of sleeping on the ground. Anders groaned, and Amell stirred on his shoulder.

"Good morning," Amell mumbled without opening his eyes.

"No, no, bad morning," Anders groaned. "I did not sleep well at all. I hate camping. I hate you. I hate mornings."

"You hate me?" Amell asked, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.
"Obviously," Anders kissed his forehead. "When does my ass stop hurting?"

"Never." Amell said.

"Oh good," Anders gave him a light shove, "Get off,"

"I already did," Amell said.

Anders laughed and shoved him off. They dressed awkwardly in the cramped tent. Amell grabbed Anders when he was dressed and pulled him back into his chest. Amell didn't say anything, but his tight hug and the way he buried his face in Anders' shoulder and inhaled his scent said enough. Anders didn't know how to react to it. He gave Amell's arms a tentative squeeze, and tried not to think too hard about it.

Amell let go of him, and Anders fled back to his own tent. Nathaniel was already awake, and raised an eyebrow when Anders slinked past, but said nothing. Anders put on his armor, and packed up his tent. Breakfast was jerky and hardtack, again, and everyone else woke, packed, and ate.

They went over their plans for Justice on the way back to the Vigil. For all intents and purpose, 'Justice' was 'Kristoff'. Sigrun volunteered to keep charge of him, but Amell didn't want her overburdened, so they were all going to have days where they more or less babysat the spirit. In the event that anyone did find out the truth about Justice, they'd come clean and hope for the best, but until then, Anders was rather fond of the 'deal with it later' approach.

They got back to the Vigil, and didn't make it past the outer courtyard before a messenger stopped them. It was Private Kallian again.

"Not again," Anders sighed. "Please tell me this isn't more templars."

"No, Ser. No templars, Ser," Kallian promised, "Warden-Commander, Seneschal Varel sent me with an urgent message for you as soon as you returned,"

"Report," Amell said.

"A man arrived at the Vigil last night, Ser," Kallian said, "He says he's your father."

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter!

Fanart of Anders and Amell from this chapter!
The Apple And The Tree

Chapter Notes

I also considered 'Everyone Needs Daddy Issues' as a chapter title, but I'm too fond of this one. I wanted to wait a bit to post this, but I can't resist. It's written so here it is. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, kudos, and most of all, thank you for reading.

9:31 Dragon 18 Parvulis Late Morning
In the Courtyard of Vigil's Keep

"My what?" Amell asked.

"Your father, Ser," Kallian said again. "Arrived last night, he did."

"Nug shit." Oghren said, "Don't you buy this for a minute, Boss. I'd bet my balls this is just some fucker looking for sovereigns, trying to pull the wool over your eyes. Why else would he wait until you were Warden Commander to come calling? Even I ain't that bad a dad."

"I'm inclined to agree with Oghren." Nathaniel said.

"Did he say anything else?" Amell asked. Anders wished he could read him. He didn't know what kind of reaction was appropriate here, and Amell wasn't giving him any clues.

"No, Ser," Kallian said. "Not that I know of. Just that he's your father. The seneschal gave him one of the guest rooms, in case it were true."

"Thank you, Private," Amell said. "Have him meet me in the throne room."

"Yes, Ser." Kallian said and left.

"You're all dismissed," Amell said. "Sigrun, Kristoff, if anyone gives you any trouble come find me."

Amell strode away before any of them could say anything. Oghren ran after him. Anders hesitated. It wasn't any of his business, really. Amell's life was Amell's life. Anders' life was Anders' life. There was no reason to mix the two. Amell could tell him about it later if he really wanted.

"What are you doing?" Sigrun hissed at him. "Go with him! What kind of boyfriend are you?"

Anders shot her a frown. He wasn't Amell's boyfriend at all. He was just Amell's friend. A friend Amell fucked exclusively, and drew sketches of while Anders slept. Fuck. Fine. Anders was his boyfriend. Anders ran after Amell and Oghren, and caught up with them in the inner courtyard.

Amell glanced at him and said nothing.

"Oi, Sparkles, tell Numb Nuts here this guy ain't the guy he says he is," Oghren said.

"Well I mean, you said you don't remember him, so it's not like we really know one way or the other
unless he can prove it." Anders said.

"Thank you, Anders." Amell said.

"Do you have any idea how many casteless brats show up in the noble district, looking for coin saying their dad is some noble or other with no way to prove it?" Oghren asked. "This is that, only backwards."

"It can't hurt to hear him out." Amell said.

"Uhuh. Sure." Oghren said.

They walked through the halls of the Keep, and headed for the stairwell instead of the throne room. "Where are we going?" Anders asked.

"I want to change before I meet him." Amell said.

"For fuck's sake." Oghren huffed, either because he was frustrated, or because his stumpy legs made the climb up the stairs a struggle. "You want this guy to be your long lost dad so bad, he's going to call you 'son' once and you're gonna believe him."

"I'm just going to hear him out." Amell said.

"So... I mean, nothing?" Anders asked. "You don't remember a thing about your father? Not even his name?"

"I was seven." Amell said.

They reached his quarters, and Amell unlocked the door to let them all in. Oghren trundled over to sit on the bed, grumbling to himself. He pulled out a flask from inside his chest armor and drank.

Anders sat next to him, and Oghren offered him a drink. Anders would have thought Amell needed it more, but he wasn't about to turn down a shot.

Amell changed out his armor and rummaged through his armoire for so long Anders got up and went over to check on him.

"You alright?" Anders asked.

"No," Amell laughed; he sounded stricken. He pulled out two doublet and held both of them up. One was silver and blue, the other one was red and white. "What do you think?"

"You are way too worked up about this," Oghren said from the bed. "If this guy turns out to be some cock sucking swindler, which he will, I'm gonna kick his ass for you."

"Well that one's Warden." Anders noted, "What's the red and white one mean?"

"They were the colors for our house crest," Amell said.

"Your house crest," Oghren corrected him. "Don't play dress up for this fuck. Wear the blue one."

"I don't know, red might be nice." Anders said. "Goes well with your eyes."

Amell put on the red one.

"You are seriously not helping, Sparkles." Oghren said. "Honestly, Boss. The last time you wrote to Kirkwall, the only fuck who wrote back was some distant cousin trying to milk you for coin."
"That's not really relevant. Gamlen never mentioned my father." Amell said. He found a pair of white trousers to match and changed into them.

"Do you want help with your hair?" Anders couldn't help offering. "It's kind of a disaster."

"Yes." Amell all but begged.

Anders went and got a comb and a hair tie from Amell's vanity. He came back and found Amell sitting cross legged on his bed with Oghren, cradling the dwarf's flask like a lifeline. He looked young, and terribly vulnerable.

Anders was with Oghren. Amell's 'father' needed a serious ass-kicking if he was lying. Anders sat down behind Amell and brushed his hair.

"What do I say if he's actually my father?" Amell asked.

"Don't look at me." Anders said, fighting with a knot in the matted black strands. "The last thing I want is to see my father again."

"You and me both, Sparkles." Oghren said, leaning back on the bed. "That old man was always giving me shit. 'Oghren stop drinking,' 'Oghren put your pants back on.'"

"What an ass," Anders joked.

"No kidding," Oghren said, watching Anders fight with Amell's hair for a few minutes. His face fell. "This is gonna be my Amell some day, when his old dad finally comes to visit. Nugget ain't even gonna know my name."

"You have leave to visit your family whenever you want, Oghren." Amell said.

Oghren grunted.

Anders finished brushing, and gathered a handful of Amell's hair to weave into a braid along the side of his head. He looked half decent when Anders was done with him. "Alright, go give it a look and see what you think." Anders said.

Amell handed Oghren back his flask and climbed off the bed. Anders handed Amell his comb to take back to the washroom, and Amell left to check his hair.

"I'm gonna fuck this fuck if he's fucking with that kid." Oghren muttered.

"You're such a softie," Anders said.

"Shut up, Sparkles," Oghren huffed.

"You mind if I watch when you do?" Anders asked.

"Nope," Oghren snorted.

Amell came back out of the washroom. Maybe it was the line of worry creasing his brow, but he didn't look anything like the Warden Commander of Ferelden. He just looked like a lost young man in very fine clothes. "Alright?" Amell asked.

"Alright." Anders said.

"Yeah, yeah, pretty as a princess." Oghren said. "You ready or do you need your make up too?"
"I'm fine." Amell lied.

"You know I'm coming with, right?" Oghren asked.

"I was hoping." Amell said.

Alright Anders. Here we go. Relationships aren't hard. You're an adult. You can be supportive and emotional. Say something nice. Tell him you're here for him or something.

Anders took too long. Amell went to the door and unlocked it, and was on his way out with Oghren before Anders had come up with anything to say. Anders followed Amell out, and felt a little awkward for tagging along without asking until Amell found Anders' hand and gave it a squeeze.

Ha. There we go. Excellent job, Anders. Silent support was the best kind of support. Relationships were easy.

They stopped in front of the doors to the throne room. Amell took a deep breath that wiped away his expression. It was a trick Anders desperately wanted to learn. For Wicked Grave, if nothing else. Oghren shoved Amell, and Amell shoved the doors, and the three of them went inside.

A massive fire pit occupied the center of the throne room. The Seneschal was standing before it with a man who must have been Amell's supposed 'father'. He certainly looked old enough. His hair was grey, with a few black strands peppered throughout, and his eyes were framed in crow's feet.

They were the right almond shape, if nothing else, but the sickly green color was wrong. His nose looked right, and he had the feeble build of a man who'd been naturally lean in youth, but hadn't put in any work to stay in shape as he got older. Anders doubted Amell would end up the same, but the stranger might have resembled him decades ago.

Amell might not have bothered dressing up. The stranger's garb wasn't noble at all. He was wearing a plain black tunic, and plainer trousers. He smiled at their approach, and there was something horribly unnerving about it.

"Warden Commander," The seneschal said when they were standing in front of each other. "This is Quentin, formerly of Starkhaven. He claims to have some relation with you."

"That name means nothing to me." Amell said.

"I suppose it wouldn't." Quentin said. His voice was as creepy as his smile: wispy and willowy. "You used to call me papa."

"My family isn't from Starkhaven," Amell continued as if he hadn't heard him. Anders was glad he apparently had a bit of healthy doubt. "Why would you be from there?"

"Have you not heard? The Circle there burned down. It was a terrible... accident." Quentin held up a hand, and conjured a small ball of flame in his palm. "So many mages slipped through the cracks."

"You said nothing of being a mage when you first asked an audience." The seneschal scowled.

"Yes, imagine that." Quentin said carelessly. "Circles are terribly restrictive, and I have no wish to return to one. I risked a great deal coming here, but how could I stay away when I learned the necromancer who stopped the Blight was my own flesh and blood?"

"You haven't answered my question." Amell said.
"No, I suppose I haven't." Quentin agreed, still smiling that unnerving smile. "I was sent to Starkhaven's Circle when my magic was discovered. They didn't want me near the family, you see. A shame. We had such a grand estate in Kirkwall, just outside the Viscount's Keep. It was so much warmer there. Have the winters here been hard on you, dear boy?"

"Anyone who did any research would know the Amells are from Kirkwall." Amell said.

"You don't remember me," Quentin realized. His smile fled, and his face took on a look of pity. "Not even a little. I confess, I expected at least a whisper of recognition, but I suppose it was too much to hope for. You were so very young when the templars took you away. My poor little Fausten. Is there nothing you do remember?"

Amell made a noise that sounded half whine, half wheeze.

"Your brother Daylen? You were four when they took him away. You cried for days. Your grandfather, perhaps? He turned so cruel after cholera took his brother; surely you remember the bruises. The excuses your sweet mother made for him... She never could see evil, even when it was standing right in front of her.

"Do you at least remember her?" Quentin continued, "My poor Revka. How perfect she was. For years she kept my secret, even when they took our children away for the magic we shared..." Quentin took a step closer and caught Amell's chin in his hand, "You have her eyes. That deep red, so very rare..."

Amell made a keening sound and flung his arms around Quentin. The older man let out a surprised huff, and hugged him back. "There there, Fausten. No tears. It'll be better now. We can fix it. We can make things right."

"I... suppose he spoke in earnest?" The seneschal guessed.

Amell whined and flapped a hand to signal them out. The seneschal retreated with a bow. Oghren grunted and followed him. Anders hesitated, but Amell had forgotten all about him. Anders left with Oghren.

"Well I'll be damned," Oghren said when the doors to the throne room closed behind them. "That freaky fuck is definitely the Boss's dad. They both got that creepy way about 'em, you know?"

"I don't know. Amell isn't that bad." Anders said. "That guy gave me chills. Should we be leaving them alone?"

"Eh, he'll be fine." Oghren said.

Oghren started towards the barracks. Anders followed him.

"So his name is Fausten?" Anders asked.

"His name's Amell, and don't you start calling him otherwise." Oghren waggled a menacing finger at him, "I only know his real name cause he got drunk and told me one time. He hates it, but yeah, it's Fausten."

"I've heard worse names," Anders said. His own name, for example.

Everyone else was relaxing in the barracks when Anders and Oghren got there, at the table or in their bunks. They had all changed into more comfortable clothes, save for Justice, who was still in full armor. He was sitting with Sigrun in her bunk, and it looked like the dwarf was trying to teach him
how to play Diamondback. That definitely wasn't going to happen.

"Hey!" Sigrun called at their entrance, "What happened? How'd it go?"

"It went." Oghren grunted. He waddled to his bunk and stripped down to his drawers, and then found a bottle to lose himself in.

"So was he really his dad?" Sigrun asked.

"Seems like," Anders said. Ser Pounce-a-lot meowed from under his bed. Anders went to his bunk and put up his staff and satchel, and changed out of his armor.

"Really?" Sigrun asked. "What was he like?"

"Honestly? Pretty creepy." Anders said. Ser Pounce-a-lot circled his feet, purring. Anders bent to pet him when he took off his boots. "We're barely in there two minutes when he's all 'You have your mother's eyes!' and petting Amell's face. It weirded me out, but hey, if Amell's happy."

"Well I'm jealous." Sigrun said. "A creepy dad has to be better than no dad. My mother was a noble hunter. My father would die before he recognized me."

"A noble hunter? How do you hunt nobles?" Anders asked, peeling off his socks. Maker, the smell. "Do you just lay out stinky cheeses and old wines under a net and wait or what?"

"A fancy prostitute, Sparkles." Oghren said.

"But yeah, that's basically how you do it." Sigrun said. She winked at him, "You should know. You caught one."

"Amell's a mage." Anders said. "It doesn't count."

"Unnerving or not, I'm sure his father could be no worse than mine," Nathaniel said from his bunk, where he was working over his weapons with a whetstone. "We all have our darker sides."

"I still cannot believe you not only forgave Amell murdering your father, but you went so far as to join the Order and befriend him." Velanna said. She was sitting at the table, and had her feet up on it. The soles of her feet looked like leather, and made Anders a little queasy.

"Are you trying to pick a fight, Velanna? Baiting me like this is juvenile," Nathaniel said.

"I was just wondering how you felt." Velanna said innocently.

"How do you feel knowing you murdered all those merchants because you were too arrogant to check your facts?" Nathaniel asked.

Wow. Trouble in paradise, apparently. Maybe Anders should mention how distraught Velanna had been when Nate had been injured.

"Warm and fuzzy," Velanna smiled.

Or maybe not.

"You're a terrible person," Nathaniel said. "And your ears are clownish."

"What!?" Velanna clamped her hands over her ears. "Now who's juvenile?"
"Aw, sweetie, they're not clownish," Sigrun said. "They're just really pointy. Can't you two play nice? What's that thing Amell's always saying... We're more than our mistakes. It's okay to forgive and forget."

"I would never forgive the shem who murdered my parents," Velanna said.

"You never told me humans killed your parents." Nathaniel said.

"And why would I?" Velanna demanded. "It was never relevant. I was nine, Seranni seven..."

"I'm sorry." Nathaniel said sincerely.

"I don't need your pity." Velanna snapped. "My point is that some things can't be forgiven or forgotten."

"You know, that's really something coming from you." Anders said.

"Why?" Velanna demanded. "Do you think I expect forgiveness for anything I've done? Do you think I want it? I know my clan will never take me back. We're not more than our mistakes; we are our mistakes. There is nothing for it but to own them."

"I like Amell's way better." Sigrun said quietly. "Some of the things I've done, I can't own. I always hoped when I joined the Legion, everyone I wronged would know I paid for my crimes, and forgive me."

"Why should you care what anyone else thinks of you?" Velanna asked.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I agree with Velanna." Anders said.

"Because," Sigrun said. "Because otherwise... Doesn't it get lonely?"

No one said anything. Velanna stared very determinedly at her feet. Nathaniel cleaned up his bunk. Oghren drank. Anders picked up Ser Pounce-a-lot and set him on his bed. It was impossible to think weighty thoughts with a cat in your lap. He scratched the little tabby's ears, and thought of nothing while he listened to it purr.

Justice watched him and said, "Sigrun has told me you own this feline."

"It's more like he owns me. Isn't that right, Ser Pounce-a-lot?" Anders cooed, grateful for the change in topic.

"To enslave another creature does not seem just," Justice said.

Anders blinked at him. Justice was wearing a helmet, and his voice was flat, but he had to be joking. Except spirits didn't joke. "Are you serious right now? He's not a slave. He's a cat."

"A cat that lacks freedom." Justice said seriously.

"Ignore the mean spirit, Ser Pounce-a-lot," Anders said, taking his own advice and rummaging through his trunk for a change of clothes. He needed a bath. "They don't have pets in the Fade, apparently."

"Do you do anything besides ponder what is just and unjust?" Nathaniel wondered.

"It is not all I do." Justice said rigidly. "It does, however, define my being."
"So you were born just?" Nathaniel prodded. "A little, self-righteous baby of Justice crawling around the Fade?"

Anders snorted.

"I was not born." Justice said. "I simply am."

"Simply am annoying." Anders muttered under his breath, finding a pair of trousers and a doublet he liked.

"Leave him alone, you guys." Sigrun said.

Anders left for the wash. The wash room in the barracks wasn't much better or worse than the one in Amell's room, save for the fact that Anders couldn't wander out naked. Well, he could, but he wasn't Oghren. Anders still had a bit of shame.

He conjured water for his bath, heated it with a fire spell, and stripped out of his two day old clothes. Anders sank into the water with a happy moan. He definitely needed a bath. Mud, sweat, cum, algae, blood, and Maker knew what else had done a number on him in the marsh. Anders didn't even want to look at his hair until he'd washed it at least twice.

What a nightmare. The last few days had been chaotic. Between templars and werewolves and demons and dragons, Anders could use a break. Add in spirits and blood magic and relationships, and he was ready for a week long nap.

On the one hand, Justice was definitely useful. For a group of three practicing blood mages, a spirit who could close Fade Tears was invaluable. On the other hand, Anders had never been fond of self-righteous pricks. Irving, nobles, Velanna. Anyone who thought they were better than you because they were older, or wealthier, or an elf. Add on the spirit's twisted preoccupation with a concept that didn't exist in the real world, and Anders was not a fan.

If Justice thought owning a pet was bad, the spirit was going to get a serious kick out of the Circle. Anders could already see the spirit causing trouble, trying to force justice into an unjust world. The fact that having it around was a huge risk to Amell also didn't earn it any points in Anders' book.

The poor fellow had enough to worry about without Justice on his plate. Anders couldn't imagine being in Amell's shoes. If Anders' father showed up at the Vigil, Anders would be more liable to throw a punch than burst into tears and hug the bastard. Twelve. Twelve fucking years, and it meant nothing, all because Anders was a mage.

Amell was bloody lucky. Quentin was luckier. How many mages got to know their fathers or their sons? Anders could count the ones he knew about on one hand. Even that little squirrel Finn only got letters from his family at the Circle. He didn't get to hug them. To live with them. To be normal.

His mother, Anders would have hugged. Maybe even cried over. He hadn't seen her outside of dreams in fourteen-no, fifteen years. He hadn't even heard from her. His father had said no contact, and that was good enough for the Circle to keep Anders from writing home. On the run, there'd been no point, but now that he was a Warden maybe it was something worth thinking about.

Anders finished washing, pulled the plug, and climbed out of the bath. He dried off and changed into his new clothes, and put all his jewelry back on before taking a spot in front of the vanity to shave and do his hair.

He looked damn good, as usual. Perfect skin, honey-colored eyes, sharp cheek bones, sharp nose, sharp clothes and sharper wit. Amell was damned lucky to have him. The Wardens were damned
lucky to have him. Anders was awesome. His father could fuck himself.

Anders dumped his old clothes in the laundry and left the washroom. Oghren was lying down, snoring. Nathaniel and Velanna had left. Sigrun was still playing cards with Justice.

"Hey hubby," Sigrun called. "Want to come play cards us? You might actually have a chance against Justice."

On the one hand, Sigrun. On the other, Justice. Anders hesitated. Well, it wasn't like he couldn't leave if the spirit got annoying. He grabbed a chair from the table and dragged it over to Sigrun's bunk.

"What are we playing?" Anders asked.

"Diamondback." Sigrun said. Sigrun shuffled the deck, and held out the pile for each of them to draw a card. Anders drew a priest. Justice drew a king. Sigrun drew a priestess. "I deal," Sigrun said brightly, taking the cards back and shuffling the deck again.

Sigrun dealt, and Anders looked at his cards. Two priests. The lowest possible hand. What was with his luck?

"So it looks like Velanna's not the only screamer," Sigrun teased.

"I guess you heard last night, huh?" Anders asked. Somehow, his face didn't light on fire. It wasn't like they weren't all adults. Well... Adults and a spirit. "I wasn't screaming."

"What do you call it then?" Sigrun asked.

"Manly grunting," Anders said.

"Well that was some loud manly grunting then," Sigrun giggled, "I guess Amell's pretty good in bed, huh?"

"Eight out of ten," Anders said.

"That's an eight?" Sigrun asked. "Jeez. What's a ten, then?"

"I am, obviously," Anders said.

Sigrun laughed and flipped over one of her cards. A priestess. Again. Anders sighed. "Oh come on, at least try to bluff." Sigrun said.

"Sorry," Anders said.

"I believe it highly unlikely that the points assigned to my cards exceed the points assigned to yours, given the card you have shown." Justice said. "I fold."

"You guys are so bad at this." Sigrun sighed. "Okay, we're gonna do this again, and this time if your hand is bad, pretend it's not. Both of you."

"You speak of lies." Justice said.

"No. Ugh," Sigrun pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's pretend. We're pretending. Bluffing. It's part of the game. Aren't there any games in the Fade?"

"I apologize." Justice said. "Revelry is a difficult concept for me."
"I'm pretty sure everything that isn't 'Justice' is a difficult concept for you." Anders said.

"This is true." Justice said.

Sigrun shuffled for another hand. Anders drew the mage. His deal then. He took the cards and shuffled them.

"Does that not distract you?" Justice asked.

"Does what distract me?" Anders asked.

"Your ring," Justice said. "It sings beautifully... The sound awakens an ache I did not know I had."

"What, really?" Anders asked, spinning the silver band on his finger. "It's just a ring with a bit of lyrium infused in it. The Circle gives one to every mage who passes their Harrowing."

"These concepts are unfamiliar to me, but the lyrium is beautiful." Justice said. "Do you know if there is any way I might acquire such a ring?"

"Believe me, it's not worth it," Anders said. He dealt out their hands, and checked his cards. His hand was a little better than before. A king and a queen. He flipped over the king. "A Harrowing is when you take a mage barely over puberty and make him fight a demon or die trying."

"Why would anyone do such a thing?" Justice asked. He flipped over a queen. Bastard.

" Beats me." Anders shrugged.

Sigrun flipped over a priest. The game continued for a few rounds, until they all showed the cards. Sigrun had a priest and a queen. Anders and Justice had the same hand. It figured. The closest Anders could ever come to winning was a tie.

"I'm gonna grab lunch." Anders said. "Thanks for the game."

He left the barracks for the dining hall. The kitchens had just started serving, and none of his friends were about, but Anders spotted his infirmary aide at one of the tables. He grabbed a lunch of roast squash, roast chicken, and a cranberry salad along with a tankard of ale. Anything was better than hardtack and jerky.

Anders ate with his aide, and listened to the fellow tell him about what he'd missed at the Vigil while he'd been at the Blackmarsh. They went back to the infirmary together, and Anders busied himself with checking on the infirmary's three patients and taking stock, but that only took him an hour and a half.

He went back to the barracks and cleaned out Ser Pounce-a-Lot's litter box, and fetched the tabby some milk and chicken livers from the kitchen. He heated both with his magic, and took a nap until dinner. He ate with Oghren and Nathaniel, and then went to the library to read despite the risk of encountering Cera.

Luck was on his side, for once, and Anders made it through a few chapters of Spirit Personages before he got bored. This late, and it seemed a safe guess that Amell was alone in his quarters, so that was where Anders went. He rattled out a little song on Amell's door and waited.

The door opened a short while later. Amell wasn't crying, so that was a step up from this morning. He was also still in his doublet, so at least he hadn't been asleep. "Hey," Anders grinned. "How'd it go with daddy dearest?"
"Still going, actually." Amell said. "We're having drinks, do you want to come in?"

No. No, absolutely not. Anders just wanted a bit of fun before bed. He was definitely not ready to be introduced to his lover's parents. Parent. No. Bad.

Amell was smiling. It touched his eyes, and reminded Anders of autumn. A warmth like being wrapped up in a blanket beside a fire. Damnit. "Sure." Anders said.

Amell pulled him inside, and led him over to the couch. Someone had found Quentin a change of clothes. He was wearing a fine doublet and trousers, and looked much more a noble than he had that morning. The wine glass probably had something to do with that.

"I remember you from this morning." Quentin said. "I never caught your name,"

And you never will, Anders thought.

"This is Anders," Amell introduced him. "He's a Senior Warden of mine, and our resident spirit healer. And I'm seeing him. Do you mind if he joins us?"

"Certainly not if you're seeing him." Quentin said. He held out his hand to shake. His nails needed a trim and his hand was alarmingly vascular. Anders forced himself to shake it. He expected it to be clammy and cold, but Quentin had a warm and firm grip. Well, no one could be all bad.

Amell gestured to his couch, and went to fetch a third wine glass from his liquor cabinet. Anders sat as far from Quentin as possible. "I remember you were fond of that Dumar boy when you were younger, but I can't remember his name." Quentin said.

"I can't either." Amell said. He came back with another glass and poured Anders a drink of whatever they were having. It tasted like all wines tasted to Anders: bitter.

Amell sat between him and Quentin. Anders was glad for the barrier.

"So you're a healer?" Quentin asked. "And mage as well?"

"That's the rumor." Anders said.

"I've always been fascinated by creationism," Quentin said. "The manipulation of natural forces has such an artistry to it. It takes far more finesse to save a life than reanimate one."

"I don't know, I think Amell's magic is pretty handy." Anders said.

"I guess I took after him." Amell grinned, or more accurately hadn't stopped grinning since Anders walked in. He look like someone had given him a puppy. It was a nice bit of change from the enigmatic face he usually wore.

"Would you mind if I observed you in your infirmary sometime?" Quentin asked. "It really is quite fascinating."

Yes.

"No problem." Anders said.

"Excellent." Quentin said. He took a long drink, and Amell refilled his glass. "I suppose I should ask
how you met?"

Anders drank.

"Anders is an apostate too." Amell said. "Or he was. He was a captive here when darkspawn attacked the Vigil and killed the templars who captured him. He helped with the attack and I recruited him."

"Not going to tell him about how I called you Apple, huh?" Anders said.

"That never happened." Amell said.

Quentin grinned. "An apostate? I respect that. The Circles are so restrictive. I could never stand it."

"Well, I never burned one down, but yeah, not a fan." Anders said.

"Nor would I ever confess to doing something like that." Quentin grinned.

Amell snorted.

"So... Not to sound like a total ass, but can I ask why you waited until now to contact him?" Anders asked.

"I had no choice." Quentin said. "Revka and I were never told what Circles any of our sons were sent to, and I was an apostate myself, from Nevarra originally. Inquiring was dangerous, and few Circles answered.

"Fausten, my wife's father, was already suspicious of me. He died a few months after my Fausten," Quentin gave Amell's hand a pat. "Was taken, but not before reporting me. Starkhaven allowed me only one letter a year, and that went to my dear Revka."

"A lot of the Circle's phylacteries were destroyed when it burned down." Amell said. "Isn't that fantastic?"

"Terrific," Anders said. He set down his empty wine glass on the low table and stood up. "So, I should probably let you two get back to bonding, but it was good meeting you."

"And you." Quentin said.

"I'll walk you out." Amell said, getting up with him. Amell walked him out the door, and closed it behind them.

"So... I guess things are going good?" Anders asked.

"Fantastic," Amell said again, grinning. "He's a necromancer, he hates the Circles, he thinks my blood magic is extraordinary. He didn't even pause when I introduced you. This is... I don't know. It's perfect. I can't even believe it's real."

"Well, I'm happy you're happy then." Anders said.

"I've never been happier." Amell said. "I'm sorry we're still talking. Are you going to bed? If you're still up in a few hours, you could come back."

"I think I'm going to hit the sack. I'm seriously exhausted, but uh... You know." Nice one, Anders. Very touching.
"I think I do," Amell said, and kissed him.

Amell tasted like the wine he'd been drinking, and his hands were warm and firm on Anders' neck and at his jaw. Anders caught his waist and pulled him close, and spent a brief minute lost in his scent, the soft flicks of his tongue, and the brush of his fingers.

Amell broke off, smiling. "Goodnight Anders."

"Night." Anders said.

He spent another minute staring at the door to Amell's room after it closed. His feet took him back to the barracks, and Anders undressed and laid down in his bed. Ser Pounce-a-Lot climbed onto his chest and curled up into a ball of purrs. Anders lay awake in the dark for the better part of an hour, and didn't remember falling asleep.

He dreamed of flying, of cinnamon rolls and apple pies, of Amell and other wonderful things.
Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, welcome back! I had a few doubts about these next chapters, but I think I've come to a decision and I hope you all like where we're headed. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 18 Parvulis Middle of the Night

Vigil's Keep, Wardens' Barracks

"Wake up, mage!" Anders felt the words before he heard them. Hands were on his shoulders, shaking him violently awake. "Quickly! Now! Get up!"

Anders fought off the hands on his shoulders and wiped drool off his mouth, "What? What? Stop. Andraste's grace, I'm up,"

The barracks was lit with torches. The dull orange glow made Anders squint, and he rubbed crust from his eyes, his vision spotty. At least a half dozen servants and soldiers were crammed by the entrance in various states of undress.

The light woke Sigrun, who groaned, "What is it? What's going on?"

"Get back, all of you!" One of the torch bearers said. "Get the healer!" It was the Seneschal. Varel was barely dressed, save for a sloppy tunic and trousers, with a scabbard for a belt.

Anders sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bunk, his head still heavy with sleep. "What's going on?" He asked groggily.

"Are we under attack?" Sigrun asked, scrambling out of bed.

"What?" Oghren groaned from his bunk. "Attack?"

"Get up now!" Varel snarled.

"I'm up. I'm up." Anders grabbed his staff from where it was leaning against the wall. He was barefoot, in nothing but his tunic and his smalls, but whatever this was, it was apparently too urgent for anyone to care. A servant grabbed Anders by the hand, and pulled him out into the hall. Sigrun hurried after him, as did Oghren and the rest of the wardens.

The cold stone on Anders' barefeet was a shock that helped him wake up. The Keep was in chaos. Servants ran through the halls, lighting torches and setting them in sconces through the halls. Soldiers were everywhere, pulling on armor and running for weapons. Anders was dragged into the main hall, where the Guard Captain was giving orders.

"You find that bastard, Garavel," The Seneschal yelled to the Gaurd Captain as they hurried past. "Find him and bring him back alive."
"I'm on it, Varel." The Guard Captain promised. "I have the men mobilized. He can't have gotten far."

"Hurry, this way." Varel said, leading Anders towards the stairwell.

"Is anyone going to tell me what's going on?" Anders asked. "Who's injured? What happened?"


"What the fuck happened to the Boss?" Oghren demanded, holding his trousers up as he hurried after them.

"The rest of you report to Garavel for assignment." Varel said over his shoulder. "There's crowd enough on the upper levels as it is."

"What has happened?" Velanna demanded. "We answer to our Commander. Not you."

"If you think I'm going anywhere but up there you've got another thing coming." Oghren said.

"Is the Commander okay? How hurt is he?" Sigrun asked.

"Report to Garavel," Varel said again.

True to his word, the third story stairwell was crowded. A bark from Varel cleared a path for them, and the Seneschal grabbed Anders' arm to lead him up the stairs. Anders wrenched away from him.

"I know where his fucking rooms are," Anders snapped. "What's going on?"

"I cannot say," Varel said. "Not in public."

Calm down, Anders. If they need you, he's alive, and if he's alive, it can't be that serious. Perspective. Perspective is good. Anders took a deep breath, and tried to force his rising panic to subside.

The corner wall at the top of the stairs to the third story was blown apart. Rubble littered the stairs and the floor, and a hole shown through to the broom closet on the other side. Another matching hole was in the wall just opposite them, and shown through to Woolsey's quarters.

"What is this?" Nathaniel asked, tracing over the damage with his fingers. "Was there a fight? What-"

A trail of dried blood painted one wall, at shoulder level. It was smattered with hand prints, as if someone had dragged themselves through the corridor. The floor was a carpet of red. Anders broke into a run. A crowd had gathered outside Amell's quarters, and a ring of soldiers was holding them back.

"Move! All of you!" Varel yelled. "Make way for the healer."

A path cleared for him. Anders bolted through it. The door to Amell's bedroom had been blown into a dozen different planks and innumerable splitters. Anders jumped them and ran inside. The room was a mess. The couch was upside down. The low table had been knocked into the fireplace, and the flames had eaten that entire corner of the room, turning two tapestry and an entire bookshelf into a blackened mess.

A smear of blood led the way to the washroom, as though someone had dragged a body inside. The door there was hanging from its top hinges, swaying unsteadily. Glass was strewn all across the
Anders summoned Compassion, and channeled her to heal the burns and stab wound in Quentin's side. He found other injuries as the first wave of healing energies rolled off him, the most alarming of which was poison. "Andraste's knickers, what is this? Magebane, and something else."

"Deathroot extract, I think. Concentrated," Amell guessed. Anders didn't know anything about poisons, outside of Magebane. Anders also didn't know how Amell knew, until he remembered Amell's last lover had been an assassin.

"Does this need an antidote, or should I keep trying to cleanse it?" Anders asked.

"You can cleanse it, I'm sure," Amell said. "Varel!"

Varel stepped into the washroom. Woolsey followed him. "Yes Commander?"

"Get Anders a lyrium potion," Amell said.

"Yes Commander," Varel said. He stepped back out of the washroom, and yelled out into the hall. "Lyrium potion, for the healer! Now!"

A thought occurred to Anders, and he pushed back the bangs that were stuck to the blood on Amell's forehead. "You have this too, don't you? Whatever this poison is."

"I'm fine," Amell said again, "My father, Anders, please. He's older. It'll take hold quicker."

Anders was tempted to ignore him. He didn't give a damn about Amell's creepy father, but Amell cared, and Amell was right. Anders kept his focus on the old man, a little reassured his cleansing aura would help Amell, even if the rest of the healing energies were focused on Quentin.

"What happened?" Woolsey asked, cautiously making her way over the broken glass, "One moment, I was asleep, the next I hear explosions, and come out into the hall to see you fighting that shadow,
“An assassin,” Amell said. "He must have scaled the Keep. He came in through the window, and knew what he'd be facing. He was laden with immunity runes and anti-magic wards. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was a Crow. I haven't seen anyone move that fast since..." Amell trailed off, "A long time ago."

“What makes you think he wasn't a Crow?” Woolsey asked.

"I have an agreement with them," Amell said, wiping some of the blood out of his face. "They swore not to accept any new contracts on me."

"What about an old one?” Woolsey pressed.

Amell glared thoughtfully at the floor for several long seconds. Varel returned, and handed Anders a lyrium potion. Anders drank it, and kept working on Quentin.

"No," Amell decided, "He wouldn't. It wasn't him."

"It wasn't who?" Varel asked.

"An assassin tried to kill our Commander, Varel, and nearly succeeded,” Woolsey said, running her hands through her frazzled grey hair, "I told you. I told all of you. We needed to endear the nobility and the local populace to us, and we failed. Maker's breath, assassins.” Woolsey sank onto the vanity stool and pressed her palms into her forehead. "In all my forty years with them, I have never before failed the Wardens."

"This arling is not a failure," Varel said. "If anything, the fault is mine. I knew the locals were disgruntled after the rebellion, and I did nothing. I'll speak with Garavel; we'll increase security, post sentries, change up patrols. If nothing else, it's clear we need guards posted outside the Commander's quarters."

"And how will guards help when assassins are coming in through the window, Varel!?" Woolsey demanded. "Are we to post guards on the window sills as well?"

"Bars, then," Varel said.

Woolsey whined unhappily into her hands.

"No doubt this was the work of one of the nobles in the arling,” Varel continued optimistically, "Surely we can discover whoever was behind this conspiracy with a little effort. I've heard talk of a man called the Dark Wolf who knows much of the nobility, and destabilized Howe's reign during the Blight. We could try contacting him-"

"I'm the Dark Wolf, Varel," Amell said.

"I-didn't expect that," Varel said, fidgeting uncomfortably, "But ... I'm sure we can think of something..."

"Maker save us," Woolsey said miserably.

"Hostages,” Quentin suggested, his voice a whisper; Compassion had returned much of the color to his face. Another few minutes and he'd be fine.

"What?" Varel asked.
"When the nobility is against you, you take hostages," Quentin said, a bit of strength returning to his voice. "A son here. A daughter there. The assassins will stop. Parents will do anything for their children."

"Is this what we've come to?" Woolsey wondered. "Is this how the Wardens must rule this arling? I wanted silver tongues, not iron fists."

"One from each House," Amell said. "Until we know who's behind this."

"I'll see it done, Commander," Varel said.

"You should be good." Anders said when he finished healing Quentin. "A few days of rest and lots of fluids,"

"Remarkable," Quentin said, flexing his fingers, "Without even an antidote. You must have a very powerful spirit at your beckon. Love? Perhaps Hope?"

"It's just a spirit." Anders said. He switched his focus to Amell, hand on Amell's forehead though he knew it didn't need to be there. Amell smiled woozily at him.

"This has been a terribly tiresome ordeal." Quentin said, picking at where the blade had pierced his doublet. "Fausten will be fine, I trust?"

"He's fine." Anders said.

"Good. If that blade had cut an inch lower, he would have lost his eyes," Quentin said, as if the thought were worse than Amell actually dying. "What a tragedy this could have been. Ward your windows, dear boy. I'll see you in the morning."

Quentin held out a hand. Amell grasped it firmly. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this, father."

'Father' already. Damn.

"Oh, no," Quentin cooed. "No, no, no. I got myself involved in this, dear boy, and I have been involved in worse. Much, much worse. We can speak more of my research in the morning, and forget this little incident ever happened."

Quentin stood up and wandered out of the washroom in his blood soaked clothes as if it were perfectly normal. "Excuse me," He said politely as he slipped around Varel.


"Boss!?" Oghren bellowed from the other room, "Boss are you in there!? Get the fuck off me, you blighters! Boss! What the fuck is going on!?"

"I'm fine Oghren!" Amell yelled into the other room.

"...Alright! Fuck! Fine!" Oghren yelled, "You're fine! I'm going back to bed! Don't fucking die!"

"I love you too!" Amell yelled back.

Unsurprisingly, Oghren didn't respond.

"Commander... can I ask a delicate question?" Woolsey asked.

"Ask," Amell said.
"Your father is a mage as well, is he not?" Woolsey asked.

"He is," Amell said.

"And an apostate, if I am not mistaken," Woolsey said rhetorically. "Commander, your relationship with Anders is one thing, but you must know we cannot afford to keep an apostate at the Vigil. Especially not one known to be your father. The nobles are already sending assassins, but the backlash when word of this gets out? Templars will come for him, and may even decide to reopen their investigation into Anders, to place scrutiny on Velanna, or Maker forbid, 'Kristoff.'"

"You already told her, huh?" Anders asked.

"Secrets are not easily kept from me, Ser," Woolsey said, squaring her shoulders proudly. Well... good for her. Anders was rubbish at sleuthing. "I met Kristoff. He was a hard man, but also polite and sweet. Were he alive, he would have taken the time to speak with me and a few others after his long absence from the Vigil. Maker rest his soul."

"But Amell didn't do it." Anders blurted. He really wasn't kidding when he said he had no self control. How hard was it to call Amell 'Commander'? Probably about as hard as it would be to call him 'Fausten.'

"You know as well as I the Chantry will never believe us." Woolsey said. "They will brand the Commander a maleficar, and I think, with a little effort, they will find or invent proof. The common people will be up in arms, and we won't last a day before the Commander is reassigned. And when the Wardens put an Orlesian Warden in charge of this arling in the Commander's stead? We are doomed."

"But... I mean..." What was Anders going for here? He looked at Amell, but Amell was staring at the floor. Anders brushed a few bloody strands of hair out of his face. It wasn't fair. Anders didn't even like Quentin, but Amell deserved at least a little time with him.

"I'll make arrangements to get him out of Amaranthine," Amell said. "I can do it quietly. In the meantime, no one knows he's a mage except Varel, Anders, Oghren, and yourself. Unless you two have told anyone?"

"Nope. Not me," Anders said, "I don't think Oghren did either."

"Varel, send a servant, bring Oghren back up here." Amell said.

"Aye, Commander," Varel said, and left the washroom.

"Commander, I appreciate the precautions, but even were your father not a mage, the fact remains that you are one," Woolsey said patiently, "The Vigil is already abuzz with talk of the Commander's mysterious father. People will take him for a mage. They will talk. In this case, the talk will be true."

"A fortnight, Woolsey," Amell begged. "He'll be gone. I promise."

"... I wish that it were sooner, but I suppose a fortnight will have to do," Woolsey said. "Rumors spread like wildfire, Commander. They will reach Kinloch Hold quicker than you think." Woolsey stood up and brushed herself off. "... I suppose it is early enough to start the day. Perhaps with glass of wine. This could have been much worse, Commander. I trust you know how lucky you are. Anders, thank you for your swift response. Take care, both of you."

"I'm sorry about your wall, Mistress Woolsey," Amell said.
"A wall is a wall, Commander," Woolsey waved him off, "Be sorry you missed. Assassins are persistent."

"I know." Amell said.

Woolsey left.

"So..." Anders said.

"So?" Amell said.

"You're a mess," Anders said.

Amell snorted. Anders ran his thumb over where the gash on his forehead had been. A pink line remained, which was a welcome change from blood and gore, but it wasn't perfect. "That's going to scar. You're all healed, by the way."

"Do you still think I'm pretty?" Amell asked.

"Definitely," Anders grinned, "Who doesn't love a good battle scar? I'm surprised you don't have more."

"I think I have plenty of scars, Anders," Amell said, with a meaningful tug on his sleeve.

"You know what I mean." Anders gave Amell's shoulder a shove and sat down. He was exhausted, but the mana he'd expended healing Amell and his father had nothing to do with it. "You know it's a good thing I'm a healer, because being with you is going to give me an ulcer. How is it you're always getting into trouble?"

"Maybe I like trouble." Amell smirked.

"You must," Anders shook his head, "Sticking with me through that mess with Rylock, and my Fear demon, and now with assassins..."

"You didn't have anything to do with this, Anders," Amell said.

"Really?" Anders snorted, "Because it sure seems like it. I mean, hasn't everyone been saying we shouldn't be together or else something like this will happen?"

"Who's everyone?" Amell asked, "Woolsey just said we should be subtle. Has that Circle bitch been bothering you again?"

"I think I just got chills," Anders joked, "Have you ever cursed before? Angry curse, not sexy curse. You must really hate her. I love it."

"You haven't heard the things she says about you," Amell muttered, running a hand over Anders' bare leg. "I... may or may not be intercepting her letters to the Circle."


Anders kissed Amell on the bloody washroom floor. The timing could have been better, and it was hard to find purchase on the blood-slick stone, but Anders didn't particularly care. He got what he wanted out of it: Amell's hands on him. Warm and firm and fine, not weak and feeble and battling for life. Anders had had the shit scared out of him, being woken up in the middle of the night like his very nice friend and lover was on the verge of death.
Amell rolled over and straddled one of Anders' legs. Anders squeezed his ass through the thin fabric of his trousers, "Don't tense," Anders mumbled around Amell's mouth. The kiss got better: a heady mix of blood, saliva, and warm breath that almost made Anders forget the world outside of it.

"Are you fucking with me right now?" Oghren's shout startled Anders out of his daze, "You call me back up here in the middle of the sodding night so I can watch Sparkles kneading your ass like a fucking baker with a ball of dough? What the fuck, Boss?"

Amell fell off him laughing. Oghren turned around and stormed out of the washroom, and Amell stumbled upright and ran after him, his boots crunching over broken glass, "Oghren, wait, we have to talk,"

"I have to wash my eyeballs is what I have to do," Oghren muttered from the other room. Anders picked himself up and inched his way around the broken glass to find one of the few towels still in the toppled cabinet and clean the blood off his hands.

Just one night. Just one damn night with no darkspawn, or demons, or templars, or assassins, or dragons. Was that really too much to ask? Anders dropped the bloody towel in the laundry. His hands were shaking.

Stop it, Anders. Amell's fine. Everyone's fine. Anders ran a hand through his hair, and pulled out a few strands when he encountered a tangle. Maker, it was happening. He was going bald at twenty-seven, stressed out and fretting because he let someone mean too much to him.

Anders supported himself on the laundry basket. No big deal. No big deal, Anders.

A hand squeezed his shoulder. Anders turned around and found Amell staring at him, his concerned expression ridiculously ironic considering which of them had just been attacked by an assassin. "I'm going to stay in one of the guest rooms for the rest of the night," Amell said. "The servants need to clean up the blood in here, and install new doors. Do you want to come with me?"

"Is that really a good idea?" Anders asked. "You know, considering people are trying to kill you for sleeping with me?"

Amell's hands were sticky with blood, and felt awful on Anders' cheeks, but for some reason Anders was glad to have them there. "This wasn't your fault, Anders," Amell said, "It wasn't either of our faults. We're mages. The rest of the world is always going to be against us. If you don't feel safe staying the night I understand, but the only person who's ever going to stop me from seeing you is you."

"Now you're just trying to give me cavities," Anders joked. Amell let go of his face, and Anders caught one of Amell's hands on its way down to his side. "Can we pretend I said something nice back?"

"How nice?" Amel asked, "Are my knees weak? Heart fluttering?"

"Racing, not fluttering, and your palms are sweaty," Anders decided.

"That works for me." Amell said. "I'm going to grab a few things. I think you still have a change of clothes in my armoire."

Anders followed Amell out into his bedroom. Servants were already pulling down the ruined tapestry, and doing their best to salvage any books that had survived the fire. Amell grabbed his grimoire, a change of clothes, and his journal, and double checked the lock on his trunk. Anders grabbed his green tunic and some plain brown trousers from the armoire, and followed Amell out of
the room.

A few servants and guards shot them looks as they walked past. It made Anders nervous, imagining any one of them running to report to some pious noble about the evil malefics who'd survived the assassination attempt, but Amell didn't seem to care. Amell led him three doors over, into much more modest lodgings. There was a four post bed and a stone bath, an armoire and a towel cabinet, and a hearth surrounded by couches and a low table. Mercifully, there was no window.

Anders cast a fire spell to light the hearth, and hung up his clothes in the empty armoire. "I really doubt I'm going to be able to fall asleep after that fiasco."

"I'm okay with that," Amell joked, putting away his things. Anders forced a laugh, but the pathetic truth was that he'd rather get a hug out of Amell right now than sex.

"I could use a bath anyway," Amell said, more seriously. "Do you want to join me?"

"Yeah, sure," Anders agreed, sitting by the bath and letting water flow from his palms into the stone basin. Amell stripped out of his ruined clothes, the fine silks charred from whatever fire had taken place in his room. Ash, soot, and pieces of finery stuck to his tawny skin. Amell brushed them off like he might dirt from a day's hike.

Amell's hands glowed a faint crimson to match his eyes, and he warmed the water as Anders' conjured it. Anders thought of saying something about casting in the nude, but the joke slipped away from him. He looked at the blood caked on Amell's face and down to his neck, and couldn't find anything even remotely humorous in it.

Amell slid into the bath when it was full. Blood stained the water an angry pink almost immediately. Anders stripped and climbed in after him, submerging himself underwater. The caress of warm water slid over every inch of his skin, and did nothing for him. Anders massaged at his heart with the hope it would stop racing.

Amell found him under the water, and squeezed Anders' shoulder. Anders forced himself to break the surface, and told himself his shaky gasp was just for air. Amell slid his arms around him, the slight friction of his scars a familiar comfort when Amell pulled him back against his chest.

"You can hold your breath a long time," Amell said.

"Swimmer, remember?" Anders said.

Amell gathered up a handful of Anders' hair, and pulled it back behind his ear. Water ran down Anders' neck, and Amell kissed the path it followed. "I was expecting a joke," Amell said against his skin.

"What happened in there?" Anders struggled out of Amell's arms to take a seat on the stone bench. There wasn't a set-up good enough for Anders to take right now.

Amell took a seat next to him, finding Anders' hips under the water and turning him so Anders' back was to him. Amell set hands warm with primal magic to Anders' shoulders, and his thumbs worked out the tangled nest of knots all along Anders' spine. "Nothing, really."

"An assassin is nothing, huh?" Anders snorted, "What's something?"

"You're something," Amell said, planting a kiss on Anders' shoulders and following it up with a hot
swipe of tongue that made Anders' shiver despite it all.

"Come on, stop it," Anders rolled his shoulder against Amell's mouth to fight him off. He was done letting Amell deflect everything, "I'm being serious."

"It was nothing, Anders, really," Amell's hand slid up his neck to massage behind his ears, "I've had assassins after me before."

"But what happened?" Anders demanded, twisting away from Amell's too-soothing touch and scooting back along the stone bench, water sloshing at the motion. "Look, I get woken up in the middle of the night, dragged through the Vigil in my smalls, I think you're dying, and I'm there to give you your last rites or something... Just tell me what happened."

Amell leaned back with a sigh. He draped one arm over the edge of the basin, and ran the hand of the other through his hair. Droplets of water rained down on his shoulders and carved paths through spots of soot, catching in the dark hair on Amell's chest, still rising and falling at a slightly winded pace. Anders wasn't giving this up. "It's done, Anders, I'm fine."

"Do you know what magebane does to us?" Anders glared at him, "You almost weren't fine. Tell me what happened or I'm going back to the barracks."

Amell made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, "He came in through the window," Amell said with palatable reluctance, "He threw a fire bomb, and it hit my liquor cabinet, and the explosion took out everything in the corner of the room. We managed barriers for the blast, but he closed in, and stabbed my father in the side before either of us could react. When he went for me, I stepped into the Fade before the sword connected.

"He dodged most of our spells, and the runes and wards on his armor ate up the rest until my father landed a corruption spell," Quentin was a blood mage too, then. Like father, like son, Anders supposed. "He started coughing up blood, and he ran. I chased him into the hall, and missed a few telekinetic blasts when he turned and his blade caught across my forehead.

"I guessed the sting for magebane and gave up chasing to check on my father. I found him in the washroom, bleeding out, and I kept pressure on his wound until you showed up." Amell finished the story with a tiny shrug, as if it were all inconsequential, and not a life-or-death struggle he'd barely survived. "I'm fine, Anders. I've had worse. You don't need to be worried."

"Did you miss the part where you almost died?" Anders demanded; a flush of primal magic rolled across his skin, heating the water and warranting a raised eyebrow from Amell. Anders ignored it, "Because I didn't. Don't you care someone probably sent this guy to kill you because you're running around cavorting with another mage in public?"

"I care enough to kill him when he tries again," Amell said. His own flare of primal magic coated his hand with ice, and shielded him when he took hold of Anders' bright red hand. Steam rose at the contact, and Anders took a deep breath to try and release the cantrip. "But otherwise, no. I don't give up that easy."

Anders wasn't half that brave. If he was in Amell's boots, Anders would have given himself the boot months ago. Nevermind assassins. With templars, with fights about blood magic, with demons... No one was worth that, in Anders' opinion, so why was Anders worth that? A few very probable reasons came to him. Anders pushed them away.

Their laced fingers left the room thick with steam; Anders pulled his hand away so they could let go of their cantrips. A sheath of telekinetic energies encased a bar of soap on the vanity, and pulled it
into Amell's hand. Anders caught Amell's wrist, and stole the bar from him. Amell didn't comment when Anders turned him around to wash the soot off his back. Anders appreciated it.

Anders ran his hands over Amell's skin, sleek and smooth and wonderfully warm, broken only occasionally by an old burn or scar. Anders laid his palm flat against Amell's skin, and felt the shallow rise and fall of his shoulders that came with every breath. Anders shifted his arms around Amell, and run his fingers through the soft hair on his chest. He found his heartbeat, and felt it speed up, and felt a little better.

Amell leaned back against his chest with a relaxed hum Anders felt vibrate in his chest. Anders turned his face into Amell's neck and breathed him in deep. He smelled mostly of soap and ash, but the Fade was there, tangled together with copper and sweat. Amell ran his fingers through his hair, the gentle scrape of his nails on Anders' scalp soothing beyond measure, "Anders... I'm okay."

"Yeah," Anders cleared his throat, "You know, as long as you're not dead."

"I'm not dead," Amell promised.

"Prove it," Anders said.

Amell twisted in his lap and sought out his lips. Anders dropped the bar of soap and held to him tighter, wet hands digging for purchase on wet skin. Amell's lips were firm but soft, and every hot breath that spilled from them was wonderfully alive. Anders swung himself into Amell's lap, the water giving around him at the motion. Amell cradled his jaw in his hand, "Am I alive yet?"

"No," Anders tangled a hand in Amell's hair and pulled his lip between his teeth. Amell caught his hips and slid him forward on his thighs until Anders felt the press of his cock against his own. Anders sucked on Amell's lip, and set a hand to his chest to circle his thumb over his nipples. He won an animated gasp and a shiver for it.

"What do I have to do to be alive again?" Amell asked, a rock of his hips stirring delicious friction along Anders' cock.

"Fuck me," Anders told him.

Amell's hands slid down from Anders' hips to his ass, and a squeeze rocked Anders against his cock again. "Fuck you how?" Amell asked.

"Hard," Anders said.

"Did you want me to spank you again?" Amell asked. His smirk was proud and shameless, and Anders felt like he could have told him anything. Could have asked for anything. Amell would do it. Amell wouldn't judge him.

"... Only if you tie me down first."

"Yes, that's what I meant."

"... Only if you tie me down first." Anders said, throat dry, but he knew what he wanted. He wanted to be spanked until he sobbed and fucked until he screamed and Amell was the only person Anders could imagine trusting enough to give him that. More than that Anders wanted to feel Amell alive and well and in control again, especially of Anders' body.

"I'll have to find some rope," Amell massaged a hand warm with primal magic up Anders' thigh to knead at his hip. "Do you think you can wait?"

"Not if you keep doing that," Anders bit down a moan, and slid his hands through Amell's dripping hair, clenching them into fists to tilt his lover's head back and claim his lips. Amell hummed approval and rocked them together again, a tease of friction on Anders' burgeoning erection. "You're really-
not going to say anything?"

Amell gave his bottom lip a gentle tug with his teeth, "I'll say anything you want me to."

"How are you okay with all of this?" Anders asked, aware he was moving the conversation somewhere dangerous, but he wanted to know more than just Amell's body.

Amell abandoned his lips to carve a path down Anders' jaw and over his neck. The drag of his teeth and hot swipes of tongue left Anders grinding mindlessly against him. "There's nothing you could ask me for I haven't already done," Amell chuckled against his neck, "... I just-no pain play. I couldn't do that to you."

"I don't want that," Anders promised quickly, raking his nails down Amell's back for the groan it provoked against his skin. Amell gave his hips a final hard squeeze and pushed him off his lap.

"I think I have some ropes in my room," Amell arched backwards to give his hair a final dunk under the water. Anders watched the stretch play out across the muscles on his chest and was still staring when Amell came back up, dripping water and smirking for his stare. Amell pinched his chin and gave him a hard kiss before climbing out of the water. "Finish bathing. I'll be right back."

Amell dried hastily, primal magic in one hand and a towel in the other, and pulled a fresh change of clothes onto still damp skin. Thought came back to Anders at the absence of Amell's mouth. The Warden Commander walking back into his quarters while servants were still cleaning them and grabbing a handful of ropes was bound to raise eyebrows. Anders didn't know which of them he preferred people think the ropes were for, but he wasn't about to call Amell back.

Anders kicked for the soap he'd lost on the floor of the basin, snagging it between his feet and tossing it back up into his hand. He scrubbed hastily at his skin and hair, resenting the latter for its length and the former for the time it took to get the blood out from underneath his nails. Amell came back with an coil of rope about one shoulder while Anders was still drying off and draped it over one bedpost.

"No gags," Amell said, watching Anders fumble in his haste to dry off, "At least not tonight. And you say 'Stop' whenever you need."

"What about 'don't stop'?" Anders asked, half-certain it was Amell's stare and not the primal magic on his hand that was making his skin heat up.

"If you think you'll say it on accident, you can pick another word," Amell shrugged.

"Apple?" Anders joked.

Amell frowned at him. Anders laughed and discarded his towel to the floor, grabbing a fistful of Amell's slightly-damp tunic and pulling him into a kiss. Amell grabbed his ass and picked him up with little more than a grunt, and the strain that played out in the muscles on his arms made Anders' heart thud madly in his chest. "I'd never say it," Anders mumbled around Amell's mouth.

Anders locked his legs around Amell's waist, thighs resting on the crook of his hips. Amell held him with one kneading hand on his ass, the other cradling the back of Anders' neck. Anders' back was braced against Amell's arm; copper clouded his thoughts and a hot mouth swallowed the handful of eager moans that escaped when Amell's hands warmed with magic. "I could fuck you like this," Amell groaned against his lips.

"Please," Anders blurted before he could help himself, running his hands over Amell's straining shoulders.
"I thought you wanted ropes," Amell mumbled, shifting his hips to grind Anders' ass against his trapped erection.

"Fuck, I don't know," Anders sucked and bit at Amell's lips, desperate for anything, even the faint friction of his cock sliding against Amell's tunic with every involuntary arch of his hips. "Just fuck me."

Amell walked backwards until the edge of the bed hit the back of his knees. He sat them down and rolled them over, a hand on Anders' hips hefting him up for Amell to rut against his ass. "What do you want?" Amell asked, "Just arms? Legs?"

"Everything," Anders stole his hands under Amell's tunic to rake his nails down his back. Amell arched against him with an eager gasp. He buried a hand in Anders' hair and ran his thumb over his cheek, and his heated stare made Anders' breath hitch.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," Amell said, pulling back from him to grab Anders' hips, and heave him further back on the bed. "Roll over."

Anders missed Amell's eyes the second he was on his stomach. Maker, they were gorgeous. Dark russet, like a burning log, and the rings got redder towards the center. Anders felt the mattress shift with Amell's weight when he knelt between Anders' legs. Hands locked around his hips and lifted him up, and Anders clumsily positioned himself on his hands and knees. Amell set a firm hand between his shoulders blades, and pushed Anders back down so his face stayed in the mattress. "I know how I want you," Amell said.

Anders fought back a shiver. Amell's hands commanded his body, and left him bent and exposed, his ass bared and pressed against Amell's stomach when Amell leaned forward to plant a kiss on his spine. Amell took his wrist and straightened his arm out along his leg. The coarse slide of the rope against Anders' skin as Amell tied the two limbs together sent an eager throb through Anders' cock. Amell gave the ropes holding the joint limbs together an experimental tug when he finished. "Too tight?"

"No," Anders croaked.

Amell kissed his backside, and involved teeth and tongue that made Anders whimper and writhe at the first hard suck. Amell swept his hands over the small of Anders' back and over his ass, squeezing worshipfully on their way down his thighs. A hand stole between Anders' legs, and briefly fondled Anders' cock where it hung heavy and dripping onto the sheets. Anders turned his face into the sheets to stifle a whine at the play of Amell's fingers, and the low ripples of pleasure they sent coursing through him.


Amell's lips broke off his ass with a wet pop and a chuckle, and the cold air over the spot of saliva left by his mouth made Anders shiver. Amell caught his unbound wrist and set it to his leg. The ropes slid around both limbs, and the wonderfully rough drag left Anders' heart racing by the time Amell finished. Another tug at the ropes moved Anders' legs slightly further apart. "Too tight?"

"Perfect," Anders said hoarsely.

Anders felt the pull of the Fade, and Amell set hands warm with primal magic and slick with creationism to his foot, massaging at the soles with his thumbs before working his way up Anders' leg and over his thigh. He spent an age working oil into Anders' ass, thumbs dipping playfully against his entrance, hands kneading softly when Anders wanted them sparking hard. Amell worked
back down his opposite leg and ended the massage at his foot.

Amell squeezed his ass, fingers biting hard into eager flesh, and Anders sucked in a needy breath of anticipation. The first slap was hardly a slap, a gentle swat of Amell's palm that rippled the skin rather than sting it. Anders heart raced anyway at the thought of them building in intensity, until his skin was raw and aching, that blissful sting spreading up his spine and tearing out his throat in eager cries that turned to sobs Anders never let himself have in the Circle.

Amell wrapped his free hand around Anders' cock, rewarding him with a gentle tug between every sharp spank. The air filled with the sound of flesh cracking against flesh and Anders' hard gasps. He wanted to cry out, but the Circle held his tongue. Another smack of Amell's hand burned, and Anders hands strained against the ropes, fingers dancing in the air and clutching at his ankles while he panted into the sheets.

The spank that followed was searing, and Anders' broke with a reckless cry. Every hard smack that followed tore ecstatic shouts from his throat until he was screaming, nails biting into his ankles, tears stinging at his eyes and rolling down his face. Anders dissolved into sobs, and the tangle of relief and release that came with them was everything he'd ever needed. Maker, he'd never felt freer than when Amell untied the ropes from his arms and legs and pulled him into his waiting arms.

The breath of the Fade washed over him again, and Amell set a hand warm with primal magic and slick with oil to his aching backside. Anders rested his forehead against his chest, gasping for breath and shivering at the tender massage that melted away the sting. "Fuck," Anders choked. Amell pulled back his hair to kiss his temple, and Anders clutched at his back, "Fuck, that was-... fuck."

"Glad you liked it," Amell said softly, cradling the back of Anders' head in his free hand.

"Fuck," Anders said eloquently. His skin had never felt more sensitive. Every snap of Amell's hips was going to come with a sharp sting twisted with a jolt of pleasure when Amell fucked him, and Maker Anders wanted it. He untangled himself from Amell's arms and cleared his throat, dragging a hand down his face to wipe away his tears, "Fuck me."

"I think I can manage that," Amell grinned, shrugging out of his tunic. Anders lowered himself back down to the mattress on shaky arms while Amell fought his way out of his trousers. The bed shifted with his weight again, and Amell's hands slid up the backs of his thighs to squeeze his ass. Anders bit down a gasp at the tingle the gentle pressure provoked, but it slipped out at the wet swipe of Amell's tongue over his aching flesh.

Anders fought back the urge to toss his head at every brush of Amell's tongue. He failed miserably, whining when Amell spread him with his thumbs and licked down from the base of his spine, "Do you mind if-"

"No," Anders said so quickly the word twisted into a gasp. Hot wet ecstasy caressed tight muscle, and Anders bucked against the sheets with a whimpering moan for what little friction they afforded. Amell held his hips steady, every soft swipe of his tongue mingled with a moan that spilled hot breath on Anders' aching flesh. Anders writhed under the sensations, legs swimming in the sheets while his hands alternated between knotting in the sheets or his hair. "Fuck-ooh fuck."

Amell's teeth pressed down on the skin left raw by his hand, and Anders let out a mewl, shaking and trying not to thrash. A breath of magic played out over his skin following the bite, ice cool and then blissfully warm, and Anders bit the sheets to keep from sobbing with pleasure. Anders felt the mattress shift, and the blunt pad of Amell's oiled finger against his slickened hole. Amell slid effortlessly inside him, palm flat against his ass when his finger curved and stroked that perfect chord inside him that made Anders unravel in a fit of gasping moans.
"Fuck," Anders whined, his shoulders arching when he buried his face in the sheets to stifle the sounds he couldn't help making. The frictionless glide of Amell's finger left Anders kicking his foot into the mattress, "Fuck, Amell-I don't-I don't know how-how long-"

"You come whenever you want," Amell murmured, running an attentive hand up his back and curling his finger again. "Two?"

"Yes-yes-fuck," Anders begged, tangling one hand in his hair and flailing the other behind him until Amell took it and laced their fingers together. Amell worked a second finger into him, and the stretch left Anders' worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, breath catching.

Amell's fingers thrust steadily into him until Anders was panting hard, gripping at Amell's hand and pulling his own hair to hold himself together. Anders bucked his hips against the sheets, and the slight friction bled together with the pleasure pooling in the pit of his stomach from Amell's touch. "Fu-ah-fuck me," Anders pleaded.

Amell's weight pressed down on his ass and the back of his thighs when his lover leaned over him. Amell slid an arm under Anders' shoulder, and his fingers sought out his mouth. Anders sucked on them eagerly, moaning around the salty taste and the first shallow roll of Amell's hips. Amell groaned against his skin, teeth catching on his shoulder, and Anders made a sound he hoped was eager.

Amell thrust into him, hips connecting with the sensitive skin of Anders' ass and mixing whimpers in with moans. Gasps and drool spilled out around Amell's fingers, and Anders jerked his hips against the sheets for friction he didn't need. He was already teetering on the edge of ecstasy. He felt in every hard ridge of Amell's thick cock, buried deep inside him and stroking that perfect bundle of nerves with every drive of his hips.

"Anders," Amell moaned, a lick of flames caressing Anders' shoulders, and Maker, he knew it wasn't on purpose. Anders fumbled for the hand Amell didn't have clutching his jaw. Amell grabbed his searching hand when he noticed it, and pressed it hard into the mattress to hold himself up.

"Fuck me," Anders whimpered with every hard snap of Amell's hips, "Fuck me, Amell, fuck me."

Pleasure built in Anders' veins and escaped to every part of his body, from his flushed face to his curling toes. He fell apart with a passionate sob, a drenched mess of sweat and searing heat, tight contractions, and desperate gasps. Maker, he shattered. His thoughts, his body, his every emotion, until there was nothing left of him but the frantic beat of his heart trying to pull the man he'd been back together.

He heard Amell praising him, felt his lips on the back of his neck, the continued thrust of his hips, all as if from far away. Anders let out a rickety breath and felt it shake through his whole body, every inch of skin so wonderfully, wonderfully sore.

Amell set a hand to his hip and pulled from him. Anders whined unhappily, and Amell rolled him onto his back. "Can I come on your face?" Amell asked breathlessly, and just the sight of his hand curled around his cock and pumping madly had Anders grabbing feebly for him, mouth open wide. Amell climbed over him, and a handful of desperate strokes ended him with a string of groans, white hot release coating Anders' chin, cheek, and lips.
Anders swallowed what little had landed in his mouth, and Amell ran a shaky hand over his face, "Oh fuck... fuck you look gorgeous," Amell said, a quake in his voice that had Anders grabbing for him. Amell slid down to reach his lips, and shared a wet kiss full of licks and sucks as they drank each other in.

Anders threw his arms around him, exhausted but desperate to stay awake. Seconds stretched into minutes which stretched into more, and Anders didn't remember rolling, but they must have at some point because he wound up on his side, the wet sheets kicked to the floor, Amell's arms tangled tightly around him.

Anders' lips felt swollen and bruised in the best of all possible ways when Amell finally gave up and found a spot on his shoulder. "We should..." Amell sucked in a deep breath, "We should dry off."

"Fuck it," Anders said.

"Okay," Amell yawned, arms locked so tight around him Anders would have to physically pry the man off if he wanted to move, but he didn't. Anders threw a lazy arm around Amell in turn, and buried his face in his hair. The dark strands were as soaked through as they had been after the bath, and sex ate up his scent, but Anders' didn't particularly mind.

Amell was asleep in minutes. Anders stared at him, his thoughts in a fog. He ran his fingers through his hair, and Amell mumbled drowsily and nuzzled his shoulder. Anders traced over the scar above his eyebrow, and down his jaw, and Amell twitched again, "What are you doing?" Amell slurred, "Tickles, stop it."

"Heh, sorry," Anders said. He managed to keep quiet and keep his hands to himself for a few minutes, but his thoughts kept turning over and back to Amell asking him what he liked during sex, and the quiet awe that he finally had an answer. "Hey Amell?"

"Hmm?" Amell mumbled.

Anders slid a finger under Amell's chin and tilted his head up for a kiss. Amell hummed happily into his mouth, and fell back asleep half-way through the kiss. Anders rested his chin on Amell's head, and ran his fingers over the scars on his arms until he fell asleep.

Anders slept well and deep, and dreamed of sitting with Amell in the Fade, alone in a field of reeds, and lost in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

These are two Apples and Apostates' Chapters that take place after the events of this chapter but before the events of the next. Both link back to this chapter.

*Love Sex Magic - 9:31 Dragon 23 Parvulis*
*Let's Get Undressed - 9:31 Parvulis 29*
Fools Gold

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a lot of everything, and I'm sorry for that. Bioware did an excellent job foreshadowing Anders' fate in Awakening, and I feel like some of the in-game dialogue is essential. I hope it's not too much of a chore to re-read. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 30 Parvulis Early Afternoon
Vigil's Keep Infirmary

They found the assassin. Or, more accurately, they found his corpse. Whatever spell Quentin had cast, it had been gruesome. Considering Anders was used to Amell's magic, that was saying something. The scouts had found the assassin two days after the attempt on Amell's life, by the buzzards circling his corpse.

Quentin's curse had slowly drained the man of every drop of blood in his body. The emaciated carcass the soldiers had dragged into the infirmary looked like it had been dead for decades. Anders had had to put on a mask stuffed with potpourri so the smell didn't make him pass out. Amell wanted the corpse checked for a tattoo design, and Anders had found it on the jerky-textured skin of the corpse's thigh.

Apparently, the tattoo meant the man had been a Crow. Amell had thrown a fit. Which, for Amell, meant he'd gotten very quiet and locked himself in his quarters for a day, writing angry letters to Maker knew who. But aside from that one little incident, things at the Vigil were good.

The servants patched up the third story and Amell's room. The stone masons finished their work on the walls, and had the Keep swathed in granite. The blacksmith had the soldiers clad in silverite. They had a disgusting amount of lyrium smuggled from Kal'Hiroli. They had a copious supply of dragon bones from the Blackmarsh, and perhaps most importantly, Anders was getting better at listening whenever Amell wanted to talk about the arling.

Anders had to admit he liked seeing Amell's quiet grin whenever Anders knew what he was talking about. While Anders still didn't really care about all of it, it was nice to be able to give Amell more than a blank stare and force Amell to repeat himself when the state of the arling came up. Anders' own life was far less complicated.

He had the infirmary, he had Ser Pounce-a-Lot, he had days filled with card games and drinking, and nights filled with amazing sex. Whoever said being a Warden was hard was either talking about their dick, or they hadn't given it a shot, because Anders' life was grand. The only bad days Anders ever had were the days he was saddled with 'Kristoff.'

Maker, Anders hated playing babysitter for Justice. The spirit was nothing like Compassion, and all Anders ever did with it was fight. They fought about blood magic, after Anders managed to enslave a werewolf on an expedition to the Blackmarsh. They fought about demons when Amell demonstrated summoning an ash wraith for Anders and Velanna. They even fought about whether or
not Anders was enslaving his cat, for Maker's sake.

It was more than a little ridiculous, and Anders was getting more than a little sick of it. Anders wanted nothing to do with the spirit, and he wasn't the only one. Velanna couldn't stand Justice either, and Nathaniel was far from a fan. The spirit was a nag. It badgered Velanna about the need to atone for murdering the merchants in the Wending Wood, it pestered Nathaniel for the crimes of attempted theft and murder Amell had already forgiven him for, and it had next to no concept of 'forgiveness' or 'shutting the fuck up.'

But Sigrun and Nathaniel were always volunteering for some chore or other around the Vigil, Oghren was always drunk, and Velanna hiding, so Anders got saddled with 'Kristoff' more often than he would have liked. And more often than not, Anders solution to dealing with Kristoff was not dealing with him at all, and just telling the spirit to stay in the barracks. Anders was trying to behave today, and had let 'Kristoff' accompany him to the infirmary, but Maker if the spirit didn't make it hard to like him.

Anders confined Justice to a stool to ensure he stayed out of the way. The spirit sat in silence the entire time, his hands folded politely in his lap, in full Warden armor. It looked ridiculous, and a little intimidating. Unsurprisingly, Anders physician and aide had both decided to leave early. Which meant Anders was alone, cleaning up the infirmary for lunch, when the spirit started up.

"I have spoken to the Commander about the concepts you mentioned." Justice said. "Circles and Harrowings."

"Maker, here we go again," Anders muttered to himself.

"I am led to believe you struggle against oppression." Justice continued, his voice a metallic echo with his ever-present helmet. Had Anders mentioned he hated helmets?

"I avoid oppression," Anders said, losing his count on how many flasks he had left. He started over, annoyed. "Not quite the same thing."

"The Commander confided in me that he is part of an organization called 'The Mages Collective' which seeks to rectify the injustices of your Circle, but that you are not." Justice said. "Why do you not seek to strike a blow against your oppressors? Ensure they can do this to no one else?"

"Because that sounds difficult?" Anders guessed.

"The apathy of mortals gives rise to demons of sloth," Justice said, "It is a weakness."

"So is death," Anders shrugged, "I'm just saying."

Inwardly, Anders couldn't have been more annoyed. The damn spirit was so haughty and condescending Anders wanted to punch it. That would show it. One blow from Anders' noodle arms and the spirit would think twice before lecturing him. A few more months, and Anders might have sticks in place of noodles.

Anders had finally started doing those presses. The past week, he'd joined Nathaniel, Amell, and Sigrun for their early morning regimens. The fact that all three could run circles around him was a little disheartening, but he had to start somewhere.

Anders didn't know where he finally found the motivation. Maybe it was Amell, or maybe it was because carrying his patients was a struggle, or maybe he was just bored, but he'd found it. If nothing else, it was nice to spend time with his friends, and have a little more energy during the day.
Anders finished his count, and did another sweep of the infirmary before he decided he'd done everything there was to do. He picked up his staff, and tapped it against Justice's leg. "All done. Come on,"

"Fear is no excuse," Justice said when they were back out in the courtyard, and Anders had just started to hope it might shut up. "You have a responsibility to your fellow mages."

"Do you ever stop?" Anders asked. "Why don't you go direct all that self-righteousness at Velanna or someone who cares?"

"Velanna has her own sins to atone for," Justice said. "She defines herself by her race, you by your magic. You have seen oppression, and you are now free. You must act to free those who remain oppressed, as the Commander does."

"Or I could mind my own business, in case the Chantry comes knocking again." Anders said. He glanced over both shoulders, and lowered his voice. "Do you know what they do to maleficers? I've got enough on my plate making sure I can defend myself without worrying about anyone else."

"If your blood magic is a crutch, cast it aside," Justice said. "It is the magic of demons. It was a mistake for you to learn it in the first place."

"I think you're kind of missing the point of a crutch," Anders said. "People use one when they can't walk on their own. You can't just 'cast it aside.'"

"You are walking just fine." Justice said.

"It's a metaphor you dim witted-" Anders stopped and took a deep breath. "The Chantry has me branded a maleficar anyway. It's what drove me to learn it in the first place. Believe me, the irony's not lost on me, but this is the only kind of magic that holds up against templars."

"Then you could use it to free your fellow mages," Justice said.

"Maker, it's like talking to a wall," Anders muttered. "I'm not Amell, okay? Anders worries about Anders. The end."

"But this is not right." Justice said. "You have an obligation,"

"Yeah, well," Anders shrugged, and spread his arms invitingly. "Welcome to the real world, 'Kristoff.'"

They reached the barracks and went inside. Anders put away his staff, and found Ser Pounce-a-Lot under his bunk. He gave the little tabby a few apologetic scratches, considering he hadn't been sleeping in his own bed of late. Maybe he could start bringing Ser Pounce-a-Lot up to Amell's quarters at night. Anders doubted Amell would mind.

"Does the spirit you channel for your healing magic condone your decision to neglect the plight of your fellow mages?" Justice asked.

"It's almost like you want me to hate you." Anders said, crawling out from under his bunk and dusting himself off.

"That is not my wish." Justice said. "Sigrun has counseled me to 'make friends' among the Wardens. It is an interesting concept which I am not averse to."

"Yeah, well, don't hold your breath on my account." Anders said.
"I do not need to breathe." Justice said.

Anders rolled his eyes. "I'm going to get lunch. You coming?"

"I am with you." Justice said.

"You're really not." Anders mumbled, heading for the dining hall.

Amell was eating with the rest of the Wardens today. It was a welcome rarity. Amell normally only joined them for dinner. Anders grabbed himself a tray of stuffed pheasant, herb baked bread, mixed vegetables, and a mug of ale, and went to join him.

Nathaniel was sitting on one side of Amell, Sigrun on the other. Both of them scooted to make room for him. As a compromising adult, Anders probably would have forced his way in if they hadn't. Anders sat between Amell and Sigrun, and won an immediate hand on his thigh from Amell when he did.

"Were there a lot of injured today?" Amell guessed. "You're never late for a meal."

"Not really," Anders said, shooting Justice a look when he sat down beside Sigrun. "Someone scared the knickers off my physician and my aide, so they took off early and I had to clean by myself."

"It was not my intent to intimidate them," Justice said stiffly. "Healing is a noble pursuit."

"I'm sure you didn't do anything wrong, sweetie." Sigrun said, giving Justice's hand a pat.

"What about you?" Anders asked. "What happened to daddy dearest?"

"Maybe I just felt like eating with all of you." Amell said.

"Old fart's asleep," Oghren said around a mouthful of pheasant.

"That too," Amell said.

"So does that mean you're free today?" Anders asked.

"It might," Amell grinned.

"Hey, hey. No flirting at the table," Oghren said. "I'm trying to keep food down over here."

"You are doing an excellent job of keeping most of it in your beard." Velanna said.

Oghren glanced down at himself and shrugged, "I'm saving some for later."

"You are saving all of it, at this rate," Velanna said. "Creators, will you at least turn your head? The fell cloud emanating from your gaping maw is like to end us all."

"Well, they didn't call me the ladykiller of Orzammar for nothing," Oghren chuckled.

"Don't get him started," Sigrun begged, "Please."

"So not that we're not pals or anything, but can someone else take 'Kristoff' for the rest of the day?" Anders asked.

"I've got dibs," Sigrun grinned, "I want to show him the garden we've been building. Oh, and that
reminds me, here's your dagger back." Sigrun plucked said dagger off her belt, and slid it back into the sheath on 'Kristoff's belt.

"Did I drop this?" Justice wondered.

"Oh, no. I nicked it from your belt this morning," Sigrun shrugged, "Old habits die hard, you know. Kind of like all of us."

"So I'm missing one of the rings in my set..." Anders said.

"Well don't look at me," Sigrun held up both her hands, "Your rings weird me out. The enchantments make them feel wrong. Like hot and cold at the same time."

"I thought magic was cool?" Anders asked.

"It is cool," Sigrun said, "Most of the time."

"Stealing is wrong," Justice muttered.

"Only if you get caught, sweetie," Sigrun grinned, climbing off the bench. Anders had no idea how she put up with the spirit's constant lectures. Then again, compared to the spiels Justice gave Anders and Velanna, Sigrun's antics earned her little more than a slap on the wrist. She was so cute it was hard for Anders to be mad at her. Maybe the spirit felt the same way. "Come on, let me go show you the gardens."

Sigrun grabbed Justice's gauntlet-clad hand, and dragged him out of the dining hall. A few people gave the spirit curious stares as it left with Sigrun, Anders noticed. He couldn't help wondering how much longer they were going to get away with this.

"Your father leaves tomorrow morning, correct?" Nathaniel asked.

"He does." Amell said.

"That's unfortunate," Nathaniel said, "Do you have plans for him to visit in the future?"

"He promised to write, once he was settled," Amell said.

"... This probably isn't the time, but there's something I've been meaning to ask you," Nathaniel said, "With your father visiting like this, and how much it clearly means to you, I can't get the thought out of my head. That night in Denerim, when my father died... did he-I mean..."

"It was quick." Amell said.

Nathaniel swallowed and nodded. Anders swore his eyes were misted, "Thank you,"

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel," Amell said.

"It wasn't your fault," Nathaniel said. He picked up his tray and excused himself. Velanna followed him with her eyes, and set her hands on the bench as if to stand, only to hesitate.

"Ah, go on, gal," Oghren shoved her, and Velanna toppled off the bench, "You know you want him."

"I want no such thing!" Velanna hissed, and left in the opposite direction Nathaniel had gone.

"Now look what you did," Anders said.
"Hey, it ain't my sodding fault this group's got so much unresolved sexual tension," Oghren huffed.

"No, it's really not," Anders laughed.

"Nice of you to lie to Archy like that," Oghren said with a nod to Amell.

"Wait, that was a lie?" Anders asked, "So Nate's dad... I mean..."

"Death is never gentle, Anders," Amell said.

"... I guess not," Anders allotted, "Still, that sucks."

"It did suck," Amell agreed.

They finished eating. Oghren went back for seconds, and Anders left with Amell. Amell had gotten shameless ever since the assassination attempt, and didn't seem to have any qualms about where he put his hands or who saw them together. On the one hand, it was hard not to be a little unsettled knowing someone wanted Amell dead, but on the other, it was pretty hilarious the attempt to get mages out of the spotlight had backfired so hard.

"So what did you want to do today?" Amell asked. "We could go for a walk on the walls, or get in a few games of Wicked Grace or draughts..."

"Draughts sounds fun, provided it's in your room, and I can take my pants off," Anders said.

"I assumed that was a given," Amell grinned, and led him up through the Vigil.

Anders took off his boots and his socks, and stripped out of his trousers the second the door to Amell's room closed. He gave the trousers a vindictive kick that sent them sliding under the couch. Amell took off his boots, but left the rest of his clothes on.

The room had recovered from the assassination attempt, for the most part. The liquor cabinet had been replaced, the stone had been scrubbed clean, new tapestries and a new low table replaced the ones eaten by the flames. Anders threw himself down on the couch and Amell went to fetch the board game from its place on one of the bookshelves.

Amell set up the board game on the couch, and sat on the floor. Probably to be closer to Anders than he would have been if he set up the game on the table.

"So don't get mad, but have you gotten a sort of creepy vibe from your dad at all?" Anders asked, nudging Amell with his foot.

"Creepy vibe?" Amell asked.

"Yeah," Anders said. "You know, he came down to watch me in the infirmary the other day, when I was stitching up a patient. Sat there for an hour and all he said when he left was 'You have steady hands,'"

"Well, you do have steady hands," Amell grinned.

"See from you, that's a sexy compliment." Anders said. "From your dad it's just weird."

"Maybe a little, but he's my father, Anders." Amell said it like it meant something. Anders envied him a bit.

"How are you doing?" Anders asked. "With him leaving tomorrow?"
"It's... a lot more difficult than I thought it would be," Amell admitted. "I made all the arrangements with Alim. He's leaving early in the morning, and we've more or less said our goodbyes but...

"I always tried not to think of having a father. It made it easier, growing up, if he didn't exist, or if he was like my grandfather, but he's not. He's everything I never hoped for. He knows so much about blood magic and necromancy... he studied under the Mortalitasi, back in Nevarra, before he came to Kirkwall and met my mother.

"To hear him talk, he gave up everything for her. I barely remember her, but I think I could tell you about every single hair on her head after listening to my father talk about her. I always used to think she hated magic, like my grandfather, because of what she used to say when she put me to bed. I never would have guessed she spent a decade harboring an apostate... she's dead now."

"I'm sorry," Anders said.

"I'm fine," Amell said. He reached out and caught Anders' ankle, and kissed the sole of his foot. "Thank you for asking."

"Yeah, well... you know," Anders said.

"I know," Amell grinned. He won the first game, and they set up another.

"I wrote to my mother." Anders blurted.

"You did?" Amell's hand froze over a game piece.

"I guess with your dad showing up, and being the man of your dreams and everything..." Anders shrugged. "I don't know, it got me thinking. The Circle never let me send any letters back home, considering my father said 'no contact.' And then on the run, what was the point? I could never stay in one place long enough to expect a letter back, but...

"When you recruited me, I didn't know what to expect. Honestly, I thought I was jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Trust the crazy maleficar, or trust the templars? But aside from the darkspawn, the crazy walking trees, the dragons, the darkspawn, the demons, the broodmothers, the golems, the darkspawn..."

"I think you said darkspawn already," Amell grinned.

"Well just in case I didn't, aside from the darkspawn, being a Warden is almost tolerable." Anders said. "And someday I'll have to pay you back for those three sovereigns, because this... well it works for me."

Amell wasn't paying any attention to the board game, which was great, because it meant Anders was crushing him. "It means a lot to hear you say that," Amell said.

"Good, because my follow up is me asking for a favor." Anders said.

"Good thing I can't say no to you," Amell joked.

"Well, you might say no to this," Anders said. "I was wondering, if she writes back... Since you gave Oghren leave to see his family... maybe you'd be willing to give me leave to head up to Tallo? Spend a few months visiting there? Or let me borrow some coin to send to her so she could come down here?"

"Of course, Anders," Amell caught his hand and wove their fingers together, forcing Anders to use
his left for the board game. "Why would I say no to that?"

"I don't know," Anders confessed, feeling a weight lift off his chest. "I thought maybe you'd think I wouldn't come back or something."

"If you didn't, then at least it would be your choice," Amell said.

"Alright, pants off," Anders shoved the board game away. He was two moves away from victory, but to the Void with it. Anders rolled onto the floor and on top of Amell. The suddenness of it won him a laugh, and it sounded lyrical. Anders had his face in Amell's crotch, and Amell's trousers halfway off when someone knocked on the door.

"Warden-Commander?" A servant called through the door.

"Ugh," Amell groaned.

"I have to put my pants back on, don't I?" Anders sighed.

"I think we both have to put our pants back on," Amell said. "Give me a minute!" Amell yelled at the door.

They dressed hastily, and Amell conjured a weak frost spell to kill his erection. The sight sent a sympathy pain through Anders' crotch. Anders settled on sitting on the couch, and crossing his legs when Amell got the door.

"What is it?" Amell asked whoever was at the door.

"There are two Grey Wardens here to see you, Commander." The servant said, "Warden Loghain Mac Tir and Warden Jean-Marc Stroud."

"Send them up," Amell said.

"Yes Ser," The servant said.

"Should I go?" Anders wondered.

"You don't have to," Amell said, leaning on the couch behind him, "Unless something confidential comes up. I'm not sure what this is, but Loghain is pretty succinct. I doubt we'll talk long."

"Well alright then." Anders said, "I guess I shouldn't pass up a chance to meet him. ...Is he staying here? Like with the rest of us?"

"I doubt it." Amell said. "He's been recruiting out of Denerim for the past nine months. Queen Anora wanted her father around, after the Blight."

"Doesn't everyone?" Anders asked.

"You don't." Amell gave his ear a playful tug.

"I don't," Anders agreed, chuckling.

Loghain and Jean-Marc were seen in moments later. Anders had never seen such a pair of frowns in his life. Loghain was a black haired giant, with jowls that could put a mabari to shame and a nose so massive Anders wondered how he could even see around it.

Jean-Marc was little better. His eyes were two tiny beads of black beneath a heavy brow, and his
mustache was so thick and heavy it drooped over his lips and had to cause problems when he ate or drank. Someday, Anders bet he would find another man half as attractive as Amell, but it definitely wasn't today.

"Warden-Commander Amell," Jean-Marc bowed, "It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Jean-Marc Stroud, formerly of Ansburg. I am to be reassigned to your command, with the intent of operating in the south western Free Marches, following the completion of my current assignment."

"Because of Amaranthine's proximity to Kirkwall and Ostwick?" Amell guessed.

"Just so," Jean-Marc smiled. Maybe. Anders wasn't sure. His mustache moved, and Anders guessed it was a smile. "A short boat ride is far preferable to crossing the Vimmark mountains every time I am to deliver my reports. I look forward to working with you, Commander."

"And what's your current assignment?" Amell asked.

"That would be me," Loghain said. Maker, what an awful voice. The man sounded like he was talking with a mouthful of marbles. "I have been commanded to join the Wardens at Montsimmard."

Loghain huffed, as if extremely offended by the idea of anyone commanding him to do anything. "Apparently I am not trusted to remain in Ferelden. I'll interfere, I'm told.

"...They're probably right, but still, to send me to Orlais. I thought darkspawn blood would be the last poison I'd have to swallow... No offense, Stroud."

"None taken, my friend," Jean-Marc snorted. "I am based out of the Free Marches for a reason. My homeland is no home to me. I do not envy you."

"I could intervene on your behalf," Amell offered.

"I am afraid that is quite impossible," Jean-Marc said. "Our orders come from Weisshaupt itself."

"In any case, I did not come here to complain of my fate." Loghain said. "I see you have a guest, and we are interrupting."

"No, not at all," Amell lied. "Jean-Marc-"

"Stroud, please." Stroud interrupted. "I prefer it. I believe you can relate."

"Stroud," Amell corrected himself. "Loghain, this is Anders. He's one of my Senior most Wardens, and our resident spirit healer."

Anders waved.

"A pleasure to meet you, Serah." Stroud said. "I look forward to serving with you."

"Quite," Loghain said gruffly. Charming fellow, really. Loghain turned back to Amell. "I had heard you recruited five new wardens in the past four months. No surprise there, I suppose. You always were persuasive.

"Anora told me of the attack. Orlesian or not, the Wardens here did not deserve such a fate, nor did any of the young recruits I found for you. I found only one more since then, a rather bold elven girl. I sent her to the barracks. I trust you don't mind."

"Not at all." Amell said.

"How is life as the Commander of the Grey treating you?" Loghain asked.
"Well enough," Amell said. "It's good to see you again. Can I get either of you a drink?"

"I'll take a brandy," Anders said.

"Brandy would be wonderful." Stroud agreed. Anders wondered if they were going to be friends. He seemed nice enough.

"Nothing for me," Loghain said. "I'm old, I've had a long day, and I need a nap."

Amell went to his liquor cabinet to pour them all drinks. Stroud took a seat in an empty armchair.

"There's one other thing." Loghain said, still standing. "We cleared out the cache in Denerim, and brought all the supplies here, but I doubt you care about that. I spoke to Anora, and I called in a favor for you."

"You don't owe me any favors, Loghain." Amell said.

"You will not want to refuse this one, I think." Loghain said.

"You're going to want to put your glass down." Stroud suggested. Amell put his glass on the low table.

Loghain opened the door to Amell's quarters, put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled an ear-splitting whistle.

"You're joking." Amell said.

"When am I ever?" Loghain asked.

Amell ran to the door and dropped into a crouch. "Barkspawn!"

A few seconds later, and a mass of brown charged through the door and tackled Amell, knocking him onto his back and sending him flying back a yard.

That... was not a dog. That was a small horse. The giant slathering mass of muscle was the size of three Amell's, and its tongue was the size of his face. The mabari slobbered violently over Amell's face, alternatively barking and whining. Amell was laughing his manic laugh.

It was definitely gross, but... Anders couldn't help thinking it was nice to see him happy.

"Apparently, he didn't take well to the kennels." Loghain said. "I'm told exposure to the Taint made it hard for him to sire, and the cramped quarters made him too aggressive for most of the handlers."

"You and me both, dog." Anders said.

"Loghain, I could kiss you," Amell laughed.

"Then I shall consider it thanks enough if you refrain." Loghain said.

"I am familiar with Ferelden customs," Stroud said. "It seems most unusual such a revered beast was taken from you in the first place."

"The fault there is mine." Loghain said. "My son-in-law is surprisingly less than fond of me, and felt the need to punish our Commander here for sparing my life. Hopefully, with my leaving for Orlais, you'll have no more trouble on my account. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll retire to the barracks."
"Wait, wait," Amell protested from under his massive mabari. With a serious struggle, and what looked like magical help, he managed to escape out from under it. "Loghain, I can't thank you enough for this."

"A handshake will do," Loghain said, holding out a hand, "You are far too wet for a hug."

Amell shook his hand, grinning. Barkspawn circled his legs, licking at the hand Amell left dangling. "How long are you staying before you leave for Montsimmard?"

"A few days at most." Stroud said. "I should take my leave as well. I can see we have interrupted a rousing game of droughts. Black wins in two turns."

"I'm black," Anders grinned.

"To your victory," Stroud grinned and down the last of his brandy before standing. "Commander, thank you for the drink. Anders, Barkspawn." Stroud nodded to all of them.

Nice fellow. Definitely a possible friend. Shame about the mustache.

Stroud and Loghain left.

Amell dropped back onto the floor with Barkspawn, babbling to the dog about how much he missed it and how horrible the kennels must have been. Anders did not see the appeal of the slobbering, excessive affection. Anders watched the two rolling on the ground, and couldn't help noticing Barkspawn was decorated with cutting scars terribly similar to his master all along his haunches. Did Amell use the dog's blood for his spells? Did the dog not mind? Mabari were supposedly smart, but the dog obviously didn't seem to be holding a grudge. Anders couldn't imagine hurting Ser Pounce-a-Lot, even for a good cause. Accidentally stepping on the tabby's tail brought Anders near to tears.

"So I guess we're not picking up where we left off." Anders joked, setting down his empty glass of brandy.

Amell crawled out from under Barkspawn, and rejoined him on the couch. "No, I'm sorry, we can, I just..."

"I was kidding," Anders said. "I'm glad you got your dog back."

Barkspawn trotted around the couch and sat down on the floor in front of him. The dog cocked its head at him, and Anders pulled his legs away.

Amell nudged him, "Say hi."

"Seriously?" Anders asked. "It's a dog."

Barkspawn growled at him.

"A very perceptive dog," Anders revised.

"He's a mabari," Amell said. "They understand a lot more than you think. You know Tevinter mages created them by enhancing them with blood magic."

"Everyone knows that," Anders said. "You know sometimes I wonder if you could use the same blood magic on a cat, but it probably wouldn't change much. They already get to eat and sleep all day."
Amell stared at him expectantly. Anders sighed, and looked at the dog. It was drooling. Ew.

"So you're okay with the name Barkspawn, huh?" Anders asked.

Barkspawn barked.

"I guess that's a yes?" Anders asked.

"It's a yes. See, ears forward, head up, eyes on you." Amell said.

Barkspawn barked again. Anders winced.

"Barkspawn, this is Anders. Be very nice to Anders. We like him." Amell grabbed Anders' face and kissed him. He smelled like dog. Maker, he even tasted like dog.

The kiss was horrible, in Anders opinion, but the dog loved it. It jumped back and forth, barking wildly, and leapt up into Anders' lap to slobber on his face. Anders wheezed. The thing weighed more than Amell. "No! No no no! Off! No jumping!"

Barkspawn climbed off with a whine.

"You're mean." Amell said.

"Too bad," Anders said, wiping fur and slobber off himself. "That thing has claws like a shriek and weighs more than you do."

"He's not a thing," Amell cooed, grabbing Barkspawn's face in his hands. The dog licked him. "Are you sure you want to pick up where we left off? How do you feel about drinks? Maybe some music, and a dance or something? Someone told me Anders' spicy shimmy is all the rage."

"You are in a seriously good mood, aren't you?" Anders asked.

"I love my mabari," Amell said unapologetically. Barkspawn barked. "Come downstairs with me. We can go find Stroud, and that new elven recruit, and everyone else and celebrate."

"I've got seriously bad luck with elves, but alright," Anders pushed himself up off the couch. "If you want a party, let's go party."

Amell grabbed his hand, and dragged him downstairs. It didn't take long to gather everyone into the dining hall, find the bards staying at the Vigil and clear a space for dancing, and get drinks flowing. The elven girl seemed overwhelmed by it all. Anders never caught her name, but she spent the entire ordeal hovering near Velanna. But save for the elves, everyone else was ecstatic for free drinks and good music.

The minstrels played Andraste's Mabari more times than Anders could count. They played Blood on the Ramparts, the Ballad of Ayesliegh, and a dozen other songs. Dinner was served around them, and soldiers and servants ended up joining in the revelry. Anders danced with everyone from Amell to Woolsey to Stroud to Sigrun, but mostly Amell.

At some point Amell's father showed up, and the two stood apart to talk for a time. Anders sat on a bench and stared at Amell, drunk and happy and a little horny. It was painfully fun tossing Amell around the dance floor and being tossed in turn, even if Amell did smell like dog. Anders was looking forward to doing the same in bed later.

The dog also smelled like dog. Anders wrinkled his nose when the massive mabari trudged over and
sat at his feet. Barkspawn stared up at him happily, and Anders dared a scratch on its ear. The dog leaned into the pet, so Anders supposed it liked him. "So what do you think about me and him, huh?" Anders asked.

Barkspawn barked.

"That's a yes, right?" Anders guessed, "You're not so bad, I guess. Even if you stink. Kind of like Oghren. So am I better than the last guy Amell was with?"

Barkspawn cocked his head at him.

"You don't know, huh?" Anders guessed.

Anders wrapped an arm around Barkspawn and leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially. "What about that guy?" Anders asked, directing the dog's gaze towards Quentin.

Barkspawn growled.

"Ha." Anders said. He grabbed his drink off the table and knocked it back. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Amell asked, appearing at his side. Anders jumped. He must have been sloshed. Last he'd checked Amell was half way across the dining hall.

"Your dog likes me," Anders grinned.

"Of course he does," Amell grinned back, face flush with drink. He grabbed Anders' hand to pull him back onto the dance floor. "He likes everyone who likes me."

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of Anders and Amell dancing from this chapter.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! I've been waiting to write this chapter for so long, you have no idea. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 1 Frumentum Sometime
Somewhere

Anders tucked his scarf tighter around his neck. Kingsway was freezing, and Harvestmere was little better. The scarf was a nice start, but Anders definitely needed extra padding for any future expeditions, and thicker socks.

"Cold?" Amell asked, slipping an arm around his waist. He was delightfully warm, as always, and Anders leaned into him.

"Not anymore," Anders decided, turning his head for a kiss. He stopped abruptly when he noticed Amell's eyes were gold. Well. No harm in it. Anders gave Compassion a quick peck on the cheek. "Hey gorgeous. What are you doing?"

"... Nothing," Compassion shook off Amell's form, and glowed her usual white glow. "What made you aware of me? You've been dreaming so soundly."

"What? You mean you don't want to talk to me?" Anders pouted. He glanced around her demesne, relieved it looked peaceful. His memories floated through the air, and were imbedded in the ground, no demons in sight.

"I always want to talk with you. I love you, but I did not wake you." Compassion frowned a tiny frown, and ran her fingers down his arm. "... There is magic on you. A veil of sleep."

"Well that's... weird." Anders frowned, taking a seat in the reeds. He stared at his hands, but he wasn't a spirit. He couldn't see the magic. "Maybe I was snoring and Amell wanted me to be quiet? Does it look like his magic?"

Compassion sat with him, and took his hands to stare thoughtfully at magic Anders couldn't see. "I believe so." She said eventually.

"Well, mystery solved." Anders said brightly. "How've you been, sweets?"

"I am well." Compassion smiled. "No demons threaten me, and you dream often of wonderful things. Comforting foods, kind words, fond memories. Your nightmares are few, and the corruption... no longer frightens me so."

"Well good." Anders grinned. "I don't think I could do this Grey Warden thing without you."

"I could not be at all without you." Compassion said.

"Alright, it's not a contest," Anders teased.
"You think it is." Compassion said. "You worry caring for another will make me jealous, or that caring for others somehow makes our relationship mean less. It will not. It does not. Every person you care for is another instance of Compassion for me to draw from. I am happy for you and the friends you have made."

"You just can't stay out of my head, can you?" Anders asked. He picked up one slender hand of light and kissed Compassion's fingers. "Thanks, doll. You'll always be my favorite."

Compassion shifted closer to him to rest her head on his shoulder. Anders sat in the reed covered fields of her demesne, watching the islands of other spirits and demons drift through the green sky above and around them. His dream broken, it was no longer cold, but comfortably warm, as it should have been, considering Anders was actually lying under a thick woolen comforter and cotton sheets with Amell on his shoulder, back in the real world.

"Can I ask you something?" Anders asked.

"Of course." Compassion said.

"...Does it ever bother you, the way I am?" Anders asked.

"What do you mean?" Compassion asked.

"You know... the way I only care about myself." Anders said.

Compassion set a hand on his chest. Anders stared at it. It radiated warmth, and made his fingers and toes tingle. He felt impossibly and inexplicably loved. "This is a lie. You care about so much more than yourself. You care about me, about your mother, about your friends, about your lover. You care for your cat, for the mages you knew in the Circle, for every woman you ever took to bed and every person who ever did you a kindness.

"I was wrong, to think this corruption could ever make you lose your capacity for Compassion. You are so much stronger than it. I see that now. And I see this spirit of Justice, who has put this doubt in your head. Do not listen to it. It does not know you. I know you. It would challenge you to take on an impossible task because it cares not for your happiness or even your life."

"You always know just what to say, don't you?" Anders asked.

She needed a new form. Compassion was white light, in the shape of a woman in her thirties. Her eyes were gold, and matched golden locks that spilled in lovely curls down to her shoulders. She had soft features, a sweet button nose, and lips framed with laugh lines. She wore a plain white dress, and was always barefoot. She looked just like his mother, but she wasn't his mother. She was her own person. Or spirit. They'd have to think of some other form for her.

"What about the blood magic?" Anders asked. "Are you okay with that?"

"I will not pretend to understand the world of mortals." Compassion said. "If there is magic you need that I cannot offer, then I trust you to use it wisely."

"You're too good to be true, you know that?" Anders asked. "I think I'm ready to wake up, though. Do you think you could dispel this sleep spell for me? I can't believe Amell didn't just kick me and tell me to roll over or something."

"He cares a great deal for you." Compassion said needlessly. "Perhaps he wished to let you rest."

"Probably," Anders said. "He's too nice for his own good."
"I like him." Compassion said.

"Change your mind again?" Anders grinned.

Compassion set her hands on his shoulders, and gave his forehead a kiss without answering him. The Fade fell away, and Anders woke to barking.

Anders had definitely guessed wrong. He was in no way ready to wake up. He had a splitting hangover from the night before, and the barking dog wasn't helping. Sex had left him sore, and he barely felt rested. It was still dark in Amell's room, and Anders wouldn't have been surprised if he'd only been asleep a few hours.

"Amell," Anders groaned, dragging his pillow over his head. "Dog."

The barking persisted. Maker, his head. At least Ser Pounce-a-Lot was quiet. Anders groped blindly for his cat, but couldn't find it. The damn dog had probably scared it under the bed.

"Amell, dog," Anders whined again, kicking at Amell's side of the bed. His leg connected with thin air. Anders dragged the pillow off his head, and pawed at where Amell should have been. Nothing. Probably taking a piss or something.

Anders sat up slowly. The room spun wildly, in one direction and then the other. Anders swallowed back vomit. His head felt like someone had cracked it. Anders had definitely had too much to drink last night, but Maker if it hadn't been worth it. Happy Amell was definitely an Amell Anders wanted to stay around. Anders was pretty sure he'd lost his tunic before he'd even made it to Amell's bedroom.

Anders rubbed sleep from the corner of his eyes, and wiped drool off his mouth. The dog was still barking. Anders groaned and looked around for it. The massive mabari was standing right at the edge of the bed, barking at Anders.

"What?" Anders demanded. "What do you want, you mangy monster?"

Barkspawn barked again.

"You're hungry?" Anders guessed. "You need to shit? What?"

Barkspawn barked, ran in a circle, and backed up a few feet to bark again.

"Alright, alright," Anders muttered, stumbling out of bed. He almost fell over. Anders grabbed for purchase on Amell's nightstand, and silently prayed for the room to stop spinning.

Barkspawn shoved him. Anders stumbled, and fell back on the bed. His hand landed on Amell's pillow. It felt sticky, and slightly tacky. Anders might have guessed it for sweat, if the texture of blood weren't so familiar to him. Anders woke up immediately. He snatched Amell's pillow, grabbed a wisp from across the Fade, and bound it to a ball of light.

The pillow was caked with blood. Hours old, if Anders had to guess. What... Anders dropped it and jumped up. The room was a mess. A candle stick and the pride demon statuette had been knocked off the nightstand on Amell's side of the bed. One red hand print stained the hardwood, another on the bedsheets beside where Amell's head usually lay. Another was even on Anders' chest. They were the right size for Amell's hands.

What.
What the fuck?

Had Amell tried to wake him? Amell had been the one to cast him into a deeper sleep. Compassion had said so. Anders thoughts fell out of his head. The window was barred, the door closed. What the fuck had happened? "Where is he?" Anders asked, unable to believe he was asking the dog.

Barkspawn ran to the door to the washroom. He barked again. Anders ran after him. There were more smears of blood on the door, scattered around the handle. Anders reached for the handle and stopped. Don't be stupid, Anders. That's hard for you, but give it a shot. Anders summoned a barrier and a spell shield, wondering how much either would help if he ran into trouble, considering he was naked. It was better than nothing. Anders opened the door.

Anders' heart was hammering madly in his chest, but no assassins leapt out at him. He wiped the sweat off his palms on his thighs. The towel cabinet was in shambles again. Both doors were open, and the towels had been knocked onto the floor. The stool to the vanity had been knocked over, and kicked into the stone tub.

Amell... Amell in the corner of the washroom again. A very vivid flashback froze Anders in place, and kept him from moving and even breathing until he saw Amell's shoulders move. He was fine. He was alive. Perspective, Anders.

Amell was on his knees, hunched in on himself and holding a towel to his face. The towel was dark red. Maybe he had a bad nose bleed. Or something. "Amell?" Anders called hesitantly. "Are you okay?"

Amell sobbed. Actually sobbed. Anders barely recognized the tortured sound when it came from Amell, so laced with pain and anguish it reminded Anders of his grimoire.

"What happened?" Anders asked. He crossed the room to touch Amell's shoulder, and the man's whole body shook with another wretched sob. "Can you talk? Do you need me to heal you?"

"Can you?" Amell choked out around his bloody towel.

Anders knelt down next to him. The hard stone hurt his knees, but Anders barely noticed. "Of course I can. Thedas' greatest healer, remember?" Anders ran tentative fingers through Amell's hair, and summoned Compassion.

Anders stopped the bleeding; there was nothing else for him to do. For the most part, the wound was already clotted. All that remained was an ache and general soreness, behind Amell's eyes. Anders stared at him with a rising sense of dread.

"You can't, can you?" Amell sobbed, still making every effort to hold the towel in front of his face. Anders put one hand on Amell's shoulder. Amell flinched, but he was already in the corner. There was nowhere for him to go. Anders took hold of one of Amell's scarred arms with his free hand and tugged, but Amell was stronger than him. Amell's hands didn't budge. They didn't really need to.

"... Your eyes." Anders said.

Amell curled up to press his forehead into his knees. He stayed there, weeping, and did nothing else.

"Your fucking eyes," Anders said.

Anders wrapped his arms around Amell's shoulders, and pulled Amell against his chest. Amell fit against him as well as he always had. Anders ran his hand up and down Amell's back, but he couldn't tell if Amell noticed. Anders barely noticed.
Anders hugged Amell as tight as he was able. It didn't feel tight enough. Anders kissed his forehead, he kissed his hair, he held him tighter still. None of it mattered. Not to Anders, and not to Amell. None of it gave Amell his eyes back.

Barks spawned crept into the washroom to curl up against Amell's back, whining. Even Ser Pounce-a-Lot wandered in for a curious sniff. The towel fell away at some point, and Amell clung to him, his nails digging into Anders' back. Anders held him, his chest sticky with blood and tears, and his head empty.

It was over an hour before Anders found his voice. "Someone cast a sleep spell on me. I thought it was you. Compassion said it looked like your magic, but it wasn't, was it?"

"Maker, I should have known it wasn't," Anders said, a lump welling in his throat. "I didn't even think... I thought I was snoring, and you just didn't want to wake me or something. I'm so fucking stupid."

Anders ran a hand through Amell's hair, and kissed the top of his head again. He felt like crying, or screaming, but that felt selfish. He breathed in Amell's scent, but it didn't help soothe him any.


"Yeah?" Anders asked.

"Will you get me the wraps I wear on my arms?" Amell asked, his voice hollow. "They're in the bottom drawer of my armoire, next to my smalls."

"... For your eyes?" Anders guessed. Amell didn't clarify. "You should let me bandage them properly. They could still get infected, and I don't know how bad the damage was unless you let me see what happened."

"No." Amell said.

"Amell-" Anders started.

"No." Amell said again. "Just get my wraps."

"Amell, you need to let me treat this properly." Anders said. "I'm your healer. Let me take care of you."

"I don't want you to take care of me." Amell said.

Anders knew he deserved it. He'd said near the same thing after Amell had mind controlled him. It still hurt. More than Anders expected it to.

"Well too fucking bad," Anders said. "Someone has to."

"The Vigil's physician can." Amell said.
"Seriously?" Anders cupped Amell's cheek, and tried to lift Amell's head off his chest. Amell didn't budge. "Amell,"

"Please don't make me beg, Anders," Amell said. "I don't want you to see me like this."

"... Bottom drawer, right?" Anders asked.

"Yes." Amell groped for the towel he'd dropped, and pressed it back into his face.

Anders untangled himself from Amell. His legs were numb, and buckled under him when he tried to stand. He staggered to his feet, and had scarcely taken a step when Amell's shoulders started shaking again.

Anders dropped back onto the floor and hugged him again. Anders eyes watered, and he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. Amell didn't need him crying right now. Anders kissed Amell's forehead again and left the washroom.

Anders stood in front of the armoire without seeing it. What other mages were at the Vigil? What mage had magic that would resemble Amell's? What mage was obsessed with Amell's eyes and commented on them almost daily? Anders slammed his fists against the armoire.

The doors bounced open, and the bottom drawers slid out. Anders slammed his fists against it again and again. "Stupid fucking bastard!" Anders yelled, not sure if he meant Quentin or himself.

Anders punched the door to the armoire. The hard wood hurt his knuckles, and the jolt of pain reminded him Amell was still waiting for him. Anders opened the bottom drawer and found one set of wraps neatly rolled up in the corner.

Amell hadn't moved.

"Do you want my help?" Anders asked, pressing the wraps into the hand Amell wasn't using to hold a towel to his face.

"No. I can do it." Amell said. He touched the wall with the hand holding the wraps, and turned so he was facing the corner. Amell set the towel aside and Anders watched him struggle trying to get the long strip of cloth around his eyes.

Amell managed eventually, wrapping the cloth around his eyes three times before he tied it off. The wraps were meant for his arms, and were ridiculously long, hanging down to the small of his back.

"I need to get dressed." Amell set his hands on the wall, and climbed unsteadily to his feet. There was blood crusted on Amell's eyebrows and on his cheeks, where the wraps cut off. Amell held onto the wall, and stumbled forward. He bumped into his vanity, and Anders took his arm to try to help him walk.

Amell shook him off. "I don't need help."

Amell definitely needed help. Anders watched him blunder around his vanity, and stagger out the door. Anders followed Amell into the bedroom, and watched him search ineffectually for his armoire. It made Anders sick to his stomach. Amell couldn't have looked more helpless, and utterly out of character. His hands were stretched out in front of him, and he took small, lost steps, his fingers never quite touching the piece of furniture.

After less than a minute of searching a wave of telekinetic force exploded off Amell. "Where the fuck is my armoire?" Amell screamed. Barkspawn butted his head against Amell's ass, and knocked
him forward a step into the piece of furniture in question. "Good boy." Amell mumbled, holding down a hand for the dog. Barkspawn licked it and whined.

"Maybe I could pick you out something to wear today?" Anders offered. "You know your fashion sense is kind of rubbish."

"Okay." Amell agreed, defeated.

Anders put a hand on Amell's shoulder and moved him a foot to the side so Anders could get into the armoire. He picked out a blue and silver Grey Warden outfit Amell had worn before, and pulled Amell over to his bed to sit him down. Anders pressed the pile of clothes into Amell's hands, with the assumption Amell would probably insist on dressing himself.

Anders found a gold doublet and a pair of brown trousers he kept in Amell's quarters for himself. Anders dressed. Amell was sitting on his bed with his doublet unbuttoned when Anders finished dressing. Anders buttoned it for him without saying anything, and redid Amell's belt when he noticed it wasn't notched properly.

"...Anders, can you get Varel, Garavel, and Woolsey?" Amell asked. "And the physician? And send them up here?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." Anders said. "Anyone else?"

"No," Amell said. "And tell no one what happened."

"Do you need anything?" Anders asked. "Do you want me to bring you breakfast... Or something?"

He needs his fucking eyes, Anders. An extra breakfast muffin isn't going to mean a damn right now.

"No," Amell said.

"...What about Quentin?" Anders asked.

"What about Quentin?" Amell asked.

"Should I tell someone to look for him or something?" Anders asked. "You know he did this. Don't tell me you don't know. An assassin wouldn't have done this."

"Quentin's gone, Anders." Amell said tonelessly. "I made arrangements for him to leave early today. He'll be halfway to Tevinter or Nevarra by now."

"Then we should fucking find him," Anders said. "Have your Mage Collective track him down and bring him back here."

"Why?" Amell asked.

"Because he fucking mutilated you, that's fucking why!" Anders yelled.

"Can you put my eyes back in if we get them back?" Amell asked.

"That's... I..." Anders sputtered.

"Then why do I care?" Amell said. "Please get my advisors, Anders. I have to talk to them."

Anders stared at him in disbelief. Amell stared at the floor. No... no he didn't. Amell didn't stare at anything because Amell couldn't fucking see because he didn't have any fucking eyes. Anders bit
back a scream, and locked his hands over his head.

"Alright." Anders said when he collected himself. "Alright, I'll go tell them to come up here, and I'll send you my physician, and..." And what? What else was there to do? "And then what?"

"I'll send for you." Amell said.

"You'll send for me. Right. Okay. Can I just come back after I get everyone instead?" Anders asked.

"I need to talk to them, Anders." Amell said.

"You can't talk to them with me there?" Anders asked.

"Anders please. This will be a lot easier for me if you're not here." Amell said. It hurt. Anders didn't know why. "I'm sorry. I'll send for you. I promise."


Anders went to the door and stopped. Amell didn't move from his spot on the bed. Why would he? He couldn't see to go anywhere. Somehow, Anders forced himself out of the room. Ser Pounce-a-Lot scampered out with him, but Barkspawn stayed curled up at Amell's feet. At least Amell had that.

Anders went to get his physician first. The surly old fellow was in the infirmary, smearing a salve on a soldier's backside when Anders came in. "There you are," The old man scowled. "Have you see that fool boy today? He had last night's shift. I've told him, time and again, to make sure the infirmary is clean before he leaves. I think that's a reasonable enough request to make of an aide, but instead I come in this morning and find a bloody scalpel left out on the counter! You'd think—where are you going?"

Anders slammed the door to the infirmary back open and threw up in the grass outside the door. His vomit was all alcohol from last night, and it seared up his throat and burned up his stomach. Anders coughed and gagged, and stumbled back into the infirmary to pour himself a glass of water. Anders gargled it and spat it out in the grass outside, coughing again to clear his throat.

"What in the Maker's name is wrong with you?" His physician asked when Anders came back inside.

Anders made up a bag of everything Amell would need. Gauze, bandages, salves, balms, and a handful of drinks that helped with maintaining fluid levels and fighting off infection. He pushed it into his physician's bewildered hands. "The Commander needs to see you." Anders said.

Anders couldn't say how he'd said it, but whatever his tone or the look on his face, his physician abandoned his current patient and bolted out the door with the bag. Anders finished dressing the rash on the patient's backside before he left the infirmary to find Amell's advisors.

Anders knew he got them all, and sent them all along to Amell, but he didn't remember doing it. His mind was in a fog, and he only emerged from it when Velanna slapped him.

Anders looked up, cheek stinging. He was sitting on his bunk in the Wardens barracks. Velanna was standing beside his bunk. Sigrun was sitting on his bed, a scant foot away. Nathaniel, Justice, and Oghren and the new elven girl were staring at him from the table. Loghain and Stroud were Maker knew where.
Anders rubbed his wounded cheek, "Really though, the slapping. Use your words. You know, the common ones, not the elvish ones."

"We were using our words, you fool," Velanna said, "Sigrun has been trying to talk to you for a quarter hour. Vapid is one thing, but you are near comatose. What is the matter with you?"

I woke up to my lover curled up on the floor in a puddle of blood sobbing because his father gouged out his eyes and I slept through the whole damn thing. You know, Tuesdays.

"I uh..." Anders said. Nothing came to him. He'd never been a good liar. "You know,"

"Sweetie, we really don't." Sigrun squeezed his hand. Anders barely felt it. "What happened? You look like you're in shock."

"Shock. Right. That's it," Anders said. Shock sounded trivial, all things considering. It wasn't as if it was circulatory shock, just emotional. "Yeah, I guess,"

"What happened?" Sigrun asked.

Anders stared at her eyes. They were a bright blue, vivid and expressive, framed in tattoos. They were lovely, but they had nothing on Amell's eyes. The dark russet could look like blood or fire in the right light. Anders thought of all the times Amell had been on his knees, staring up at him with passionate abandon, eye-contact never wavering while they had sex. So much for that.

So much for every glint of amusement when Amell bit back a creepy laugh, so much for every frustratingly enigmatic stare, so much for ever seeing Anders again, and telling him he looked handsome, or that his hair was smart today, or his eyes went well with whatever shirt he had on. So much for all of it.


"Anders, are you alright?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yep." Anders lied, trying for a queasy smile. Sigrun gave him one in return.

"Okay," Sigrun said, giving his hand another squeeze, "Whatever it was, I guess you're pretty shaken. Let me know if I can do anything, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Anders said, "Thanks Sigrun,"

There was nothing anyone could do, but Anders didn't bother telling her that. He spent the rest of the day in an unhappy daze, until well after dinner when he got sick of waiting for Amell to send for him.

Two guards were posted outside Amell's door when he went up, and Anders couldn't help wondering where the bastards had been last night. Probably knocked unconscious by a sleep spell, same as Anders.

"I'm sorry, Ser, but the Commander isn't receiving any visitors," One of the guards said when Anders tried to walk past him.

"I'm his healer." Anders said. "I think I'm an exception."

"I'm sorry Ser but the Commander was very explicit. No visitors. No exceptions." The guard said.
"I'm always an exception." Anders lied, and thought seriously of knocking both men out with a sleep spell, or convincing them to let him in with blood magic. "Go ask him. He'll tell you."

The guards glanced at each other. One of them shrugged. After a bit of hesitation, one knocked. Anders heard a thud from inside, followed by a curse, and winced.

"What is it?" Amell called through the door a while later.

"Warden Anders here for you, Ser." One of the guards explained.

Silence. Miserable, horrible silence.

Eventually, "Let him in."

One of the guards unlocked the door for him. Anders went inside.

Amell was sitting on his couch, Barkspawn in his lap. The crude cloth wraps he'd had tied around his eyes had been replaced with a proper bandage. If Anders looked at him from behind, he could almost pretend it was a headband. Anders shooed Barkspawn off Amell and took a seat next to him.

Amell smelled like dog again. Anders didn't care. He wrapped his arms around Amell's shoulders and pulled him into his chest. He didn't know what to say, or what to ask, and settled imaginatively on nothing. Eventually they both fell asleep on the couch.

Anders had nightmares of darkspawn. By his fitful sleep, Amell must have as well. Come morning Anders offered to bring him breakfast again. Amell turned him down, and sent him away with the excuse that he had to meet with his advisors again. It probably wasn't an excuse, but it felt like one. Anders spent the day drinking with Oghren, until a servant came by in the afternoon, and told Oghren the Commander wanted to see him.

It was fair enough. Oghren was Amell's best friend. He'd have to tell him eventually. Anders drank alone, and sat with Ser Pounce-a-Lot until Oghren came back a surprisingly short while later. Anders didn't think it had been much more than an hour. The way the dwarf slammed the door open as his entrance made everyone jump.

Oghren's face was as red as his beard. He grabbed his blunt training axe from beside his bunk, and stormed back out without a word. Anders followed him. Everyone followed Anders.

Oghren went out to the training yards, stripped off his tunic, and tore into a training dummy, screaming wordless screams.

"What..." Sigrun said.

"What indeed." Nathaniel said, glancing at him. "Anders, do you know what this is about?"

Anders shrugged, envious. Ignorance was bliss, after all. Wisdom... Anders didn't know what wisdom was. Wisdom was a knot in his stomach and a lump in his throat. A servant tapped Anders on the shoulder, and he didn't even jump. Someone should have gotten him a medal.

"The Commander wants to see you, Ser." The servant said.

Anders made it to the third story of the Keep despite the knot in his stomach and the lead in his feet. The guards let him into Amell's room without asking. Amell was sitting on his bed today, eyes still wrapped, Barkspawn at his feet. Mixing things up.
"Hey," Anders said, taking a seat next to him. He put a hand on Amell's thigh. "You're smiling. Smiling’s good. I like smiling. Why are we smiling?"

"Are we smiling?" Amell asked. "I can't tell."

"Sure. We're smiling." Anders lied.

"I was just thinking you were right." Amell said.

"You know I always love hearing that, but what exactly am I right about?" Anders asked.

"Me. Trusting people. Ending up with a knife in the back. Or didn't you say it would hit me in the face? I think you might be a prophet." Amell exhaled once through his nose.

"... Don't take this personally but that's really not funny right now." Anders said.

"Remember how Compassion said jokes comforted you?" Amell asked, his smile faltering a little. "Maybe you could try faking it for me?"

"I never fake it." Anders joked obediently.

Amell exhaled quietly through his nose again. It was something, Anders supposed.

"So I guess Oghren is taking this pretty hard?" Anders asked.

"He'll be fine." Amell said. "Could you do me a favor?"


"I need you to write a letter to the friend I told you about. Jowan, the other blood mage spirit healer."

"What, I'm not good enough for you anymore?" Anders joked.

Amell pawed for his hand and gave it a squeeze when he found it, smiling. "I'd have a scribe do it, but I don't trust anyone else knowing about Jowan."

"Yeah, sure. Of course." Anders said.

"He's staying in West Hill, under the name Levyn." Amell said.

"Hang on, let me get a quill," Anders said. He stood up and went over to Amell's desk, untouched for the past two days. His grimoire was sitting in the corner atop a stack of books, and a few scrolls were pushed up beside the stack. A requisition for materials from the blacksmith was laid out in the center of the desk. It seemed unfair that something so painfully boring had been the last thing Amell would ever read. Anders moved it aside. "Where do you keep your parchment?"

"Second drawer from the top on the left." Amell said.

Anders found it, along with pounce. He laid the parchment out, grabbed a quill, and opened the jar of ink on Amell's desk. "Alright, go ahead."

"Levyn, I need you to come to Vigil's Keep immediately. This counts as the favor you owe me. Amell." Anders said.

"That's it?" Anders asked.
"That's it." Amell said.

"Well that was easy," Anders said. He shook out a handful of pounce over the ink and waited for it to dry. "Where's your wax and your seal?"

"Top drawer on the left." Amell said.

"It's locked," Anders said. "Do you think I'm magic or something?"

"Right... I forgot. The key should be..." Amell stopped and frowned. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think. "I don't remember where I put my keys the other night. Just break the drawer. I don't care."

"Seriously?" Anders asked.


"I'm going to look for your keys," Anders decided. He found them after a bit of searching, pushed under Amell's nightstand, and picked out the right key for Amell's desk on his second guess. Anders melted the stick of wax and pressed a blob onto the letter to seal it. He wrote the name and address on the front.

"So does your friend Jowan or Levyn know any sort of magic that could help here?" Anders asked.

"No." Amell said. "I just want to see him. Or you know. Not see him."

Anders faked a laugh for Amell's sake and asked, "Who do I give this to?"

"Varel." Amell said. "He has a few trusted runners. Tell him it's urgent."

"Alright." Anders said. "I'll be right back."

Anders left with the letter, and after checking with two different servants on the first floor of the Vigil was sent all the way back up to the third. Varel was having tea with Mistress Woolsey, and didn't so much as question him when Anders gave him the letter and instructions. Both of them gave Anders looks of pity that made him feel queasy.

Anders went back to Amell's room. Amell hadn't moved. No real surprise there. "Hey. Guess who's back?" Anders joked, taking a seat next to Amell and running his hand over his shoulder.

"Have I ever told you you smell nice?" Amell asked.

"I don't think so." Anders said. "I never forget a compliment."

"Well you do," Amell said. "It's this sort of warm clean smell. Like the way it smells to stand out in the sun in summer."

"Thanks." Anders said.

"There's something else I wanted to ask you." Amell said. "It's not a favor, exactly. More like an offer. I was wondering if you'd be interested in my grimoire."

Anders felt like he was drowning, only slowly. It got harder to breathe, and he had to shake himself to focus on what Amell was saying. "What do you mean? Like... to copy a few pages from it or something?"
"I mean to have it." Amell said. "I think I could bind it to you, even blind."

"But it's yours." Anders whined. He felt like a child.

"I don't need it anymore, Anders." Amell said patiently. "... Orlais is sending us reinforcements from Jader. Just a few, but they're Senior Wardens. Experienced men. They're expected to arrive at the Vigil towards the end of the month.

"When they get here, I'm appointing one of them Warden Constable, and Oghren and I are leaving for Soldier's Peak. We're going to see Avernus, and see if he knows any sort of ritual or magic that might be able to help me. ... If he doesn't then we're going to Orzammar, and I'm going to my Calling."
Blame it on the Night

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back! I'll confess, I wasn't expecting that much of a reaction from our last chapter, but I absolutely loved it. I just want to take a quick minute to say I have this story tagged as "Horror" and "Dark" but that's pretty general. There are things we're going to cover that aren't tagged, because I don't want to give any spoilers, but they'll continue to fall under "dark" and "horror". I'm sure you're all okay with that, but just consider this a warning that nothing is really off limits for this story. With that out of the way, I love all of you, and all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos. Thank you so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 2 Frumentum Late Afternoon

Vigil's Keep Warden Commander's Quarters

Anders felt a pain like a knife in his gut, or what he imagined such would feel like. It was sharp, and it was severe, and it stole his breath away in the worst of all possible ways.

Amell's head was tilted wrong, as if he was looking just past Anders and not at him. Amell wasn't actually looking anywhere, but it drove Anders mad. Anders caught Amell's jaw, and turned his head so he was facing him. Two days without shaving had left Amell's jaw with a shadow Anders might have found attractive under better circumstances.

"This is a joke." Anders said. "This is a bad joke, right? You're not seriously serious, are you?"

"I'm seriously serious." Amell said.

"No. Just-Maker no." Anders tore out his hair tie and scratched at his scalp. He felt wrong: itchy and tense. "You can't. You can't just kill yourself if some two hundred year old biddy doesn't know a spell to give you new eyes. There has to be something else. The Circle-"

"Knows nothing." Amell interrupted him. "Don't you remember Senior Enchanter Sweeney? There's no cure for bad eyes, or no eyes."

"I remember he was alive." Anders snapped. "Maker, you don't have to kill yourself just because you're blind."

"... Did you leave my keys on the desk?" Amell asked.

"What?" Anders asked. "I mean yes, but why?"

Amell stood up, and kept a hand on the edge of his bed while he walked slowly around it. He reached the corner post, and started forward with a hand stretched out until he connected with his desk. From there he felt blindly across the surface of the desk until his fingers touched the keys.

It was painfully slow going... but Amell had lost his eyes yesterday. Sweeney got around. Amell would get better. He'd get used to it. He didn't have to kill himself. The man had talked about using
blood magic for immortality when Anders had met him, for Maker's sake. He couldn't just give up like this.

Amell found the key he was looking for, and stumbled back to his bed. He felt his way to his nightstand, and unlocked the drawer with a great deal of fumbling. Finding his journal, Amell walked back around the bed, free hand outstretched until he bumped into Anders' chest.

Anders took his hand and kissed his palm. Amell sat back down beside him, and pushed the journal into Anders' lap. "Open it." Amell said.

Anders felt like a bastard. He'd already gone through Amell's journal months ago. Obediently, Anders opened the book. The sketches were still there, between journal entries. Of darkspawn and dragons and golems, of Anders himself. There were three new sketches of Anders to join the one Anders had found the first time he'd gone through Amell's journal.

Two were of him sleeping, again, but the third was him sitting on Amell's couch, reading. Anders hadn't even noticed Amell had been sketching him at the time. "I like to draw." Amell explained. "...liked. Ever since I first opened a book back at the Circle, and saw all the diagrams illustrating different spells. I thought one day I'd write my own book about blood magic, for the Wardens, where it would be appreciated.

"I like drawing the monsters we fight. The people we meet. I like drawing you, when you're asleep and your hair is a mess... Do you really remember Sweeney? The way the apprentices used to laugh at him? How he was allowed to leave the tower, but never could? I'll never see Tevinter. I'll never fight again. I can't draw; I can't walk. I can barely find my chamber pot to take a piss. I can't live like this, Anders. Don't ask me to."

"You're just being melodramatic." Anders set the journal aside. Looking at Amell's sketches of him made his heart hurt. "You've only been blind a day. It'll get easier. You can find other hobbies, other things to live for. You could get reassigned to Weisshaupt, and give more lectures on blood magic and necromancy. They might even send you to Tevinter. Someone there might know something. Some way to help you. Amell, you can't." Anders grabbed Amell's hands; his voice caught and he had to clear his throat. "You can't just kill yourself."

"This is my choice, Anders." Amell said.

"Your choice is fucking stupid!" Anders shouted. He sucked in a deep breath, struggling to get a hold on himself. So what? What did Anders care if some man he'd barely known a few months wanted to off himself?

Anders cared so much it hurt. His breath came in staccato gasps, but Anders wasn't about to cry. Amell was fine. Anders could deal with it later, like he always did.

"I'm glad you care." Amell said.

"Of course I fucking care!" Anders yelled. So much for later. "You stupid fucking bastard, why the fuck wouldn't I care?"

Anders grabbed Amell and crushed him against his chest. Anders buried his face in Amell's shoulder, and sucked in a rickety breath full of blood and the Fade. Maker damn that intoxicating smell, that addictive taste, Amell's electric touch and those gorgeous, absent eyes.

"Anders, it's okay." Amell said, running his fingers through Anders' hair. Comforting when he should have been comforted, as usual. "I'm not dead yet. Avernus might know something, and if he
doesn't... I'm okay. I got to escape the Circle, I got my dog back... I got you. How many people can say they ended up with their crush, even for a little while?"

"You are seriously not helping right now," Anders said, hating himself for the few tears that escaped him. "Since when do you just give up like this? Don't you remember the storehouse? What happened to that Amell? Grr, rawr, no templar can kill me? If a templar had done this to you, I bet you'd keep living just to spite them."

"Everyone has a limit, Anders," Amell said. "...This is mine. I'm sorry,"

"You're sorry," Anders repeated incredulously. He laughed, but felt miserable. "You better be sorry. What were you thinking, letting Quentin gouge your eyes out like that?"

"That he must have really wanted them?" Amell guessed.

"Fuck," Anders exhaled shakily and sat back, scrubbing his face clean with his sleeve. He felt like he was walking on a fault line, with every unsteady step risking shouts or sobs. He hated it. Caring might have made Compassion strong, but Anders had never felt weaker.

"... Did you want my grimoire?" Amell offered again.

"No, I don't want your fucking grimoire." Anders said. "I want you."

"I..." Amell reached out and found Anders' chest. He walked his hand up to Anders' shoulder, and up his neck. His fingers found Anders' earring and toyed with it before moving on to Anders' jaw and dancing over his lips. "I wish I could see you."

"I'll bet." Anders sniffed, taking his hand to tangle their fingers together. "I'm ridiculously handsome, you know. Swoon worthy."

Amell grinned. "You are, though."

"You say that like I don't know." Anders said.

"I can never tell if you're being serious." Amell confessed.

"I'm always serious about my looks." Anders said. "So... What now?"

"What now, what now?" Amell asked.

"I mean what now? What are we doing?" Anders asked.

"Well... I thought maybe I would sit here and stare at nothing until I fell asleep." Amell said.

"Riveting." Anders joked.

"I thought so." Amell said.

"Maker, Amell, I'm so sorry," Anders pulled Amell back into another fierce hug. "If I wasn't such an idiot I could have had Compassion wake me up right away. I could have done something. I could have stopped him."

"It wasn't your fault," Amell said.

"He took a scalpel from my infirmary." Anders said. "I don't know if he convinced my aide to give it to him, or if he broke in after my aide left, or how he got past your guards..."
"It wasn't your fault, Anders." Amell said. "It doesn't matter."

"Don't you even care?" Anders asked.

"It's done." Amell said.

"I guess." Anders said. "Are you going to tell everyone else? The other Wardens?"

"I will," Amell said. "Eventually. The rest of the Vigil can't know."

"I haven't told anyone." Anders promised.

"I know you haven't." Amell said. "I trust you."

They stayed that way for an age, arms around each other, legs tangled together, heads on each other's shoulders. It would have made Anders uncomfortable a month ago, but he didn't care anymore.

"I used to draw too, you know." Anders said eventually.

"Really?" Amell asked.

"In the margins of my textbooks." Anders said. "Horrible drawings by a horrible student. I never had an 'impress the templars' phase. I thought I knew everything right from the get go. I was a country bumpkin who could barely write his own name, but magic was easy for me, so I never really paid attention in any of my classes. Got held back a year for it."

"So you had even less than four years of training before your Harrowing, considering you were held back for one." Amell said. "That's even more impressive."

"I could tell you anything and you'd find some way to twist it to make me the hero, wouldn't you?" Anders asked.

"Probably." Amell said.

"When I first escaped the tower, when Ferrenly turned me over to the templars, they didn't bother with shackles. I was fifteen, and it was my first offense. We made camp, and that night I ran for it. One of templars hit me with a holy smite for the first time, and I literally pissed myself." Anders said.

"But you didn't pass out?" Amell asked. "That's remarkable for fifteen."

"Alright, we need to talk about this crush of yours." Anders joked.

"Go ahead." Amell said.

"What do you mean 'go ahead'?" Anders asked.

"I mean go ahead." Amell said. "... Avernus managed to retain his eye sight and the rest of his senses for two-hundred years, but keeping something you already have has to be easier than getting back something you've lost. I know you don't want to hear this, but odds are he can't help me. So if there's anything you want to talk about or anything you want to ask me... Go ahead. I don't mind."

Anders didn't like this offer. He'd only started exercising weeks ago; there was no way he could handle something this heavy. "I'll ask you whatever I want to ask you when you get back from Soldier's Peak," Anders said, voice thick.

"Alright." Amell let him have it. It was merciful of him, Anders thought.
"Are you hungry?" Anders asked. "Do you want me to grab you lunch?"

"And something strong to drink." Amell agreed.

"Brandy? Whiskey?" Anders asked.

"Anything," Amell said.

Anders caught Amell's chin and kissed him. Amell was already doing better, after a day. Amell answered him with parted lips and slightly quickened breath. Anders involved his tongue, and Amell responded to him with his own. His lips were soft and yielding, and Anders cupped the nape of his neck, the soft hairs under Anders' fingers a pleasant contrast to the bite of Amell's stubble.

Anders grazed his teeth over Amell's bottom lip. Amell whimpered and Anders felt the heat of his breath spill over his lips. In a quick motion, Anders pushed Amell back onto the bed and straddled him. Amell gasped, and Anders ravished his mouth, neck, and jaw with tongue, teeth, and lips.

Amell bucked his hips up into him, and Anders pushed back against him. "Fuck, Anders," Amell groaned, walking his hands up Anders' thighs to find his waist. Amell looped his fingers into Anders' belt, and slid them around to find his buckle.

"Please fuck Anders," Anders said, his heart in his throat and his pulse in his cock. Anders dragged down the collar of Amell's doublet to lick his collarbone, and won another gasp. Amell managed to get Anders' belt off without help, and shoved Anders' trousers as far down his thighs as they would go with Anders straddling him.

Anders caught Amell's face in his hands and held him steady for another kiss, and something in Amell snapped. He smacked Anders' hands away, almost violently, and shoved him hard. Anders fell back, and Amell rolled out from under him. He rolled too far, blind, and banged against the post of his canopy bed.

"Fuck," Amell swore, and sat up. He dug the heels of his palms into his bandages, and Anders winced knowing it must have hurt. "I can't. I can't. I'm sorry. Brandy. Or nothing. You don't have to get me anything."

Anders touched Amell's shoulder and almost expected him to flinch. He didn't. Anders hugged him. "I'll get you lunch, and a bottle of West Hill."

"Thank you." Amell said.

Anders stood up and fixed his trousers, not surprised by how quickly his erection died in the face of Amell's reaction to him. Amell pat the bed, and Barkspawn jumped up next to him. Anders went to the door, and chanced a glance back. Amell was hugging his dog.

Anders let himself out, and started down the hall. Ridiculously, he thought of Justice. The spirit should have died in a puff of smoke the second it set foot in the mortal world. Justice was a concept. It didn't exist in real life. The real world wasn't just. It wasn't fair. It wasn't anything but cruel and unusual and no one ever suffered who deserved it.

Just walking past the guards made Anders angry. What were they even there for? They hadn't helped Amell. They hadn't protected him. Quentin had walked right past them, probably without any magical help. The man could have just said he wanted to say goodbye to his son, and been let inside. The guards would have had no reason to expect such a monstrous betrayal. And if they hadn't let Quentin inside, one sleep spell was all it would have taken for Quentin to let himself in. Two guards without any sort of magical wards or magical abilities couldn't be expected to resist the magic of a
talented maleficar. So really, what was the point?

Anders sighed, frustrated. It wasn't anyone's fault, but he wanted to blame someone. Someone within range. Someone whose neck he could wring. Maybe he could talk to the Seneschal or the Guard Captain and try to convince one of them Amell wasn't in the right frame of mind about his father. Someone had to find Quentin. Someone had to make to him answer for what he'd done.

Maybe Anders could head to Amaranthine, and talk to that Alim fellow. At the very least, he could probably learn where Quentin had gone. At the very most, maybe if Anders told the Collective about the bastard, some vigilante would come along and Quentin would turn up dead. Anders entertained a rather vivid fantasy of gouging Quentin's eyes out with a rusty spoon on his way to the dining hall.

Surprisingly, it didn't put him off eating at all.

Anders filled up a tray with roast squash, beef stew, and cranberry salad. He asked one of the kitchen scullions for two bottles of West Hill brandy with the assumption Amell wanted to drink himself silly. The minstrels were playing Andraste's Mabari again. Anders was starting to get tired of that song. That damn dog hadn't helped any either.

Anders was on his way out of the dining hall, laden tray and brandy in hand, when he ran into his aide. His aide was a young pockmarked boy named Edan. Edan was all limbs, and horribly clumsy, but he had a good heart. Anders put on a smile for him.

"Anders," Edan said, "I'm glad I found you. Torin won't listen to me."

No surprise there. The surly physician didn't listen to anyone.

"He's been lecturing me all day." Edan complained. "Over a scalpel! I tried to tell him you were the last one to use it, but he won't believe me. He called me a dirty liar because you always put your supplies away. I told him, 'everyone makes mistakes' but he wants to give me to the Seneschal for the day and put me on latrine duty!

"He said it would be a good lesson for me to put up with other people's shit because he's always putting up with mine. Could you talk to him for me? Tell him you just forgot to put it away, and it's no big deal? You're a Warden. Torin can't make you clean latrines."

Anders ears were ringing. His aide's voice faded in and out, and seemed to come at him from far away. "What?" Anders asked.

"What, what?" Edan asked.

"What did you just say?" Anders asked.

"Torin can't make you clean latrines?" Edan repeated himself.

"About the scalpel." Anders said.

"You were the last one to use it?" Edan said.

"I haven't used the scalpel since I cut that skin lesion off that soldier, weeks ago." Anders said.

"... You came by the infirmary two nights ago and took it with you. For an emergency procedure, you said." Edan said. "Don't you remember?"

"Okay, not funny," Anders said. "I was drunk, but I wasn't that drunk. I'd remember stopping by the
infirmary."

"But you did," Edan said. "You grabbed the scalpel and some frostrocks and said it was an emergency. You seemed kind of distracted, and you weren't wearing a shirt, but it was pretty late. If you were drunk then fine, but could you at least tell Torin it wasn't me so he stops riding me about it?


Edan sat Anders down on the nearest bench, and set his tray on the table, and ran to the kitchen. He came back a short while later and pushed a cup of water into Anders' hands.

His aide kept talking, but his words were noise. The bards had just finished playing the Girl in Red Crossing when Anders and Amell had stumbled out of the party together. They'd gone upstairs, had sex, and gone to bed. Had Anders gotten back up? He didn't remember getting back up.

Quentin was a talented blood mage. He could probably mix mind control and sleep walking to get Anders to steal the tools he needed for a crude surgery. That made sense. There'd been too much blood on the sheets for it to have all been from Amell. A little bit of blood magic made sense.

Anders drank his water, and cradled the cup in both his hands. He'd been asleep. He couldn't remember anything. Just his conversation with Compassion. Anders finished his water and set the cup on the table.

"Thanks for telling me. I'll talk to Torin for you." Anders picked up his tray and his drinks and left the dining hall.

So Quentin used him to steal some supplies. So what? No big deal. It wasn't like Anders hadn't been mind-controlled before. He didn't even remember the other night. It could have been worse. At least Quentin had apparently had Anders put on trousers before he puppeteered him through the Vigil. That was nice of him. And he'd let him take them back off before going back to bed. Or Anders had kicked them back off in his sleep.

Really, it could have been worse. Anders hated sleeping in trousers. And at least now Anders knew it wasn't just a hangover that had given him such a headache when he'd woken up. Amell had claimed he was 'extraordinarily willful' but apparently will didn't count when you were blackout drunk.

Anders made it back to Amell's room without incident. A bit of breather and he was fine. Anders was fine. It didn't matter. It was over. The guards unlocked the door and let him in. Amell hadn't moved from the bed.

"Guess who," Anders said.

"Whoever you are, your voice is sexy," Amell joked. Or was utterly serious. Anders was awesome, after all. He set the tray down on the low table, and shooed Barkspawn off the bed.

"I got you beef stew, roast squash, and some cranberry salad," Anders told him, taking Amell's arm to walk him over to the couch.

"And brandy?" Amell asked.

"And brandy." Anders said.

He sat Amell down on the couch. Amell's stomach rumbled. "I haven't eaten since the party," Amell
"I promise to laugh if that happens again," Anders joked. It was probably tasteless, but it earned him a tiny grin. Anders set his own plate aside and picked up Amell's spoon, pressing it into the man's hand. He took Amell's free hand and made him touch the bowl holding his stew. "Spoon. Stew. Mouth." Anders said helpfully, mimicking one round of eating. "Easy."

"You say that, but close your eyes and try to eat." Amell said.

"You know what? Fine. I will." Anders picked up his own spoon, "You can't see but I am totally doing it, and if I can do it then you definitely can."

"He's lying, isn't he, boy?" Amell asked Barkspawn.

The dog stared at him. There went Anders' brilliant idea. Well, it was probably easy. Anders closed his eyes, and aimed for his bowl. He missed. Barkspawn barked happily.

"Tell me if he cheats," Amell said.

Anders frowned, found the bowl with his free hand, managed a scoop, and brought it up to his mouth. He smacked his lower lip once before the food got into his mouth. "Okay, so maybe it is a little tricky," Anders admitted.

Amell laughed. Anders liked hearing it, creepy cackle or not. He opened his eyes and wrapped an arm around Amell's shoulder. "Well that's enough of that for me. It's too bad they weren't serving sexy food or I could just feed you."

"Sexy food?" Amell asked.

"Yeah, you know, like grapes, or chocolate covered strawberries, or something," Anders said.

"I think I'd feel like an invalid no matter what you were feeding me," Amell said.

"I'm a healer," Anders said. "I deal with invalids all day long, and you know what they're not? Invalids. They're just people. When I was in Harper's Ford, I stayed with this family for a while. Their grandfather took a spill, and broke his leg, but they were poor and couldn't afford to do anything for him. So they risked harboring an apostate to treat him, and it was a damn good thing they did. He fell because his leg cramped up on him, because he'd come down with cholera. Have you ever seen cholera? It's awful. It's like a distant cousin to the Blight. Vomiting, diarrhea-"

"I'm glad you're telling me this right before we eat," Amell said.

"Shut up," Anders pinched him, "So anyway, he has it. I stayed out in the barn with him, not because they were trying to hide the apostate, but because it was so bad they couldn't keep him in the house. I poured fluids down his mouth for five days, and cleaned him up every time they came right back out. I fed him with one hand and wiped his ass with the other. It was a mess. He threw up, I threw up. No one was happy.

"But he got better. He got through it. He started keeping food down, and gained back the weight he lost, and started walking again. And when he was better, he shook my hand and thanked me, and that was it. He wasn't embarrassed, and he didn't need to be. People get sick. They get hurt. It happens. They're not less than people while they're ill.

"You're always saying you're fine and shoving off help, and I get that you have to do the Commander thing, but there's a limit. You're always saying we're more than our crimes, so why
wouldn't we be more than our injuries?"

"I'm still not letting you feed me." Amell said.

"Fine, feed yourself," Anders gave him a playful shove. Amell didn't see it coming and didn't brace for it, and Anders couldn't help feeling a little guilty when Amell flailed and almost fell over, "As long as you're eating. You really think I care if you spill a bit? I think I've had like, three panic attacks in front of you so far, at least."

"I don't think that's exactly the same thing, but I appreciate what you're trying to say," Amell said. He ate leaning over the table, and got the hang of it after a few minutes.

It was fine. He was fine. They were fine. It would get better.

Anders poured him a drink after lunch, and pressed it into Amell's hand. Drinking was easier. Drinking they could definitely handle. Anders sat on the couch with Amell on his shoulder, his thoughts running between Harper's Ford, and Kinloch Hold, and Tallo, and Vigil's Keep. Maker, his life was a mess. Everything had been coming up Anders, and then this. Were things ever going to settle down for him?

Probably not. Definitely not, if Amell went through with his Calling. Anders tried to push the thought away, but it haunted him. Sure, he liked the Wardens, but he liked them because of Amell. However experienced the Senior Wardens coming in from Orlais, they hadn't conscripted him in the face of templars. They hadn't killed templars for him, or used blood magic to keep templars away from him. They hadn't sworn to keep him safe in every fight, promised to give him leave to see his mother, turned the Vigil into a home instead of a prison.

Amell shifted to drape his legs over Anders' lap. Amell kept his snifter in his lap with one hand, and idly caressed Anders' chest with the other. Anders stared at him, thinking of the bloody hand print Amell had left on his chest. Maker, why hadn't he woken up? Involuntarily, he pictured Amell shaking him, begging for help, blood dripping from his empty eye sockets while Anders slept like a rock. A bastard rock.

Except that didn't line up. There'd been just the one hand print on his chest. Nothing on his shoulders. No drops of blood on his chest. Why his chest? Why the middle of his chest, when Anders had woken up under the covers? Anders ran his fingers up and down Amell's arm, and gave him a squeeze. Amell hummed happily, and Anders toyed with his hair. After a few seconds, Anders stopped, and stared at his hand.

You have steady hands.

"Amell?" Anders said, unable to bring his voice about a whisper.

"Hm?" Amell mumbled.

"... were you conscious?" Anders asked, "When Quentin... took your eyes?"

"It's done, Anders," Amell said, "Don't worry about it."

That sounded like a yes. Maker, that was definitely a yes. Anders tried to remember the previous night. He couldn't. He got drunk. He had sex. He went to sleep. He talked to Compassion. He woke up.

Compassion had touched his chest, right where Amell had touched his chest. Anders remembered feeling powerfully loved when she had, and Compassion had to draw from somewhere. Had she
drawn from Amell, when Amell touched him? Anders had woken up with one bloody hand print on his chest, as if Amell had tried to push him off or away, because someone as old as Quentin needed an assistant with steady hands.

Andraste's grace, Amell had been conscious. He'd seen all of it, until he couldn't see at all. Had Amell forgiven him right in the middle of it? Was that why Compassion liked him now, despite the demons, despite the blood magic, despite everything?

"I'm going to be sick," Anders said.

"What?" Amell asked.

Anders scrambled away from him and ran to the washroom. He didn't quite reach the chamber pot before his mouth filled with vomit. Anders fell to his knees and grabbed the chamber pot, and threw up beef, cranberries, brandy, and squash to the smell of fresh shit and piss. His throat burned, and his stomach roiled, and he couldn't help crying while retching. Maker's breath how could Amell still let Anders touch him? No wonder Amell couldn't bring himself to have sex with him.

"Fuck," Anders swore, gagging when his stomach was empty.

"Anders?" Amell called from the other room. "Anders, are you alright?"

"Maker, kill me," Anders dry heaved.

Barkspawn whined from the doorway. Anders glanced over and found Amell with his hand on the dog's head, using the mabari to help him find his way around. Because he had no fucking eyes. Because Anders carved them out of his fucking skull in his sleep.

"Is the food bad?" Amell asked, "Should I be expecting something like this in a few seconds?"

"I ran into my aide," Anders' throat was dry, and his voice was hoarse. "Downstairs. He said I took some things from the infirmary. Said I needed them, for an 'emergency procedure'. That was the magic Compassion saw on me. It was more than just sleep; it was blood magic. I thought... I thought maybe Quentin just used me to steal a few things...

"Maker, that's why he was so into me. Complimenting my steady hands, talking about how much finesse creationism takes... He used me to-remove your eyes, didn't he? You were conscious. You saw it. You saw me do it, some sleeping walking mind controlled-fuck. Maker-I-" Anders dry heaved again. He didn't have anything left to throw up.

"Anders, no he didn't," Amell said. He stumbled forward, and crashed into his vanity. "Fucking-" Amell swore, staggering around the vanity and towards Anders' voice. Barkspawn gave him a helpful nudge, and Amell hands hit Anders' shoulders. He knelt down and hugged him next to the rancid chamber pot. "No he didn't."

"You're lying," Anders said, tense and tempted to shove him away. How was Amell even touching him right now? "You're lying to me like you lied to Nate. You must have fought off whatever magic Quentin was using to hold you still. There was a hand print on my chest. Like you tried to shove me off, before Quentin restrained you again."

"That never happened," Amell said. Liar. "It never happened. You were asleep." Amell's hold was so fierce it was almost painful, an arm around the small of Anders' back and another around his shoulders. There was no reason for it to be, if he wasn't lying, "You were asleep."

"But I did it." Anders said. "Don't lie to me. How can you even-" Anders stopped himself before he
said 'look at me right now?' Amell couldn't look at him right now. Amell couldn't look at him at all. "How can you even touch me right now? Maker, no wonder you couldn't stand to fuck me."

"Anders-That doesn't-No," Amell kissed his jaw; his stubble was a pleasant scratch that didn't help calm Anders any, "That was just me. That didn't have anything to do with you." Amell found his hair and ran a hand through it.

Anders' chest constricted. A shiver ran up his spine, and he bit back a sob. His shoulders shook anyway. "I'm sorry," Anders choked out.

"You didn't do it." Amell lied. "You were asleep. It wasn't you. It was Quentin."

"But I-" Anders tried again.

"It wasn't you." Amell walked a blind hand over Anders' face, found his mouth, and held his fingers to his lips. Amell bent his head and kissed him, despite the vomit, despite what Anders knew he'd done, no matter what Amell said. "It wasn't really you. It's okay. I knew it wasn't really you."

Chapter End Notes

This is an optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter that provides something of an introduction to Quentin and his motives.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! We hit 3000 views! You guys are amazing, thank you so much for supporting this story! I know these chapters are rough, and we're moving through them pretty slowly, but I hope you'll all bear with me. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 3 Frumentum Early Morning

Vigil's Keep Warden Commander's Quarters

Amell was still asleep. Barkspawn was at the foot of the bed. Ser Pounce-a-Lot had stolen Anders' pillow at some point, which was fine considering Anders always had Amell's shoulder. He was lying on said shoulder at the moment, staring at Amell and thinking.

The bandage needed changing, the wound needed to be checked, and Amell needed glass eyes. Maker willing, if Amell was ever going to get new eyes, he needed glass eyes in the in-between to ensure the sockets and eyelids kept their shape. Anders didn't know if new eyes were possible, but he had to pretend they were. Pretending this wasn't permanent, that it was just another injury, was the only way Anders could cope with what he'd done.

Maybe Anders could cope with Amell being blind if only Amell could cope with it, but Anders couldn't stomach the thought of being the reason Amell went to his Calling. It didn't matter how many times Amell said it wasn't his fault. It didn't change the fact that Anders had been the one to cut out his eyes. Every time Anders pictured it, he thought he was going to be sick, and it was almost impossible to stop picturing it.

He wondered if Amell had pleaded with him to wake up. He wondered if Amell had refrained from violent magic for fear of hurting him. He wondered how much it had hurt, how long it had taken, how long Amell had lain paralyzed after Quentin had left with his eyes, and Anders had gone back to bed right next to him. More than anything he wondered how anyone could ever be so forgiving.

If not for his aide, Anders probably never would have learned what he'd done. Anders didn't doubt Amell would have kept up the lie forever. To hear Amell talk, it wasn't even a lie. The most Anders could get out of him was what it 'wasn't his fault' and it 'wasn't really him'.

Anders ran his fingers over the scar above Amell's eyebrow from the assassin, the one between his ribs from Rylock, the one on his chest from the Hurlock Commander. His fault. All of them were Anders' fault. Or Amell's fault, for being so damn infatuated with him he couldn't see that Anders was more trouble than he was worth.

Anders had no idea what he'd done to warrant such a crush. Anders hadn't been that impressive back at the Circle. If anything, Cera had been right about him. Anders had been a cocky bastard. Between his escape attempts, his constant trouble making and rule breaking, the women he bedded and the templars he riled, Anders had treated nothing sacred in the Circle.
It was all just a game to him. A game he knew he couldn't win, but he could at least do a little better at it each time he tried. And when he lost, someone else suffered the consequences. The other apprentices, the senior enchanters, the templars... and now Amell.

Anders traced over the scar on Amell's chest again. It cut through the dark hair on his chest, an impressive length and worrying width. Whatever he said to make Amell feel better, Anders wasn't naive enough to find it rugged or sexy. It was just upsetting. All of them were upsetting, except for the scars on Amell's arms.

They were the only scars that weren't from a brush with death. The only ones that weren't Anders' fault. Anders looked at his own scar on his forearm, just below the bend in his elbow. Justice could blow him. Blood magic wasn't evil. People were evil.


"Your breath smells." Amell yawned.

"You're no Prince Charming right now either, you know." Anders huffed. "Do you want help shaving? Your shadow is getting kind of scraggly."

"No," Amell said. Anders rolled his eyes, wondering why he'd bothered. "It's autumn. I'll just let it grow out."

"Okay, but you could at least let me trim up the edges so it looks clean." Anders said. "There's sexy stubble and then there's 'I haven't bathed in days' stubble. Guess which one you have."

"You tell me. I can't see." Amell said.

"You don't have to see. You're not the one who has to look at your face every day," Anders joked. He grinned to take the edge off, and then realized what an idiot he was. "It's the second one, by the way.

"And while we're on the topic of baths and being clean, your bandages need to be changed, and we should find a glassmith in Amaranthine, or ask your blacksmith to make you a pair of glass eyes. And your wounds probably need to be cleaned."

"I have a physician, Anders." Amell said, sitting up. He scratched at his bandages, and Anders had to fight back the urge to take them off and check on him. "I told you, I don't want you taking care of me."

"And I told you there's nothing wrong with letting people help you." Anders said.

"I said no," Amell said. He got out of bed, and started his slow blind shuffle towards his armoire. Let it go, Anders. Don't be stupid. Keep your mouth closed for once in your life for the love of-

"That's the best you've got? Because I said so? Have you met me? I don't really go for that kind of authority."

"I don't care." Amell said.

"Since when?" Anders asked. He got up and made it to the armoire while Amell was picking out a pair of trousers to go with his doublet. "Those don't match."

"Please stop." Amell said.
"Let me help you." Anders said.

"I don't want your help!" Amell snapped at him. "I'm not one of your patients, Anders. I'm not going to get better. You can't heal me. I'm blind. In a month, I'll be dead. Do you really think I want you remembering me like this?"

"Avernus might know something. You said you were going to see him," Anders reminded him. Amell grabbed for a different pair of trousers. "Those don't match either."

Amell threw his clothes on the ground. "I lied!" Amell sank to the ground next to his armoire, and leaned back against it. "I lied so you wouldn't... I'm not. I'm not going. Avernus won't know anything. I'm just going to my Calling. Oghren knows. He agreed to take me. That's why he was so upset yesterday."

Anders heart had been hurt so many times in the past three days the pain had almost reached a numbing point. He couldn't think of anything to say. His chest ached, a dull and persistent throb that threatened tears with every heartbeat.

"... Can you head downstairs and get everyone?" Amell asked. "I should tell them. The Senior Wardens. And Loghain and Stroud if they're still here. Not the new recruit."

"You don't want my help, remember?" Anders swallowed back tears and sneered. "Do it yourself."

Anders grabbed his trousers off the floor and stepped into them on the way to the door. He snatched up his tunic as well, and damned his smalls to the Void. The guards didn't say anything when Anders stormed out, fighting his way into his tunic with his trousers half laced.

Anders made it all the way to the base of the stairwell before he turned back around, cursing himself for how pathetic he was. Anders did remember Sweeney. He remembered the laughs. He thought of Amell giving a solemn address in mismatched clothes, and thought of the looks and the giggles, and thought of Amell taking them to his grave.

The guards didn't say anything when Anders came back. Amell was where Anders had left him, sobbing into his knees. Ser Pounce-a-Lot was curled up on Amell's feet, apparently having chosen a side. Barkspawn was curled up next to him as well, and growled at Anders' approach.

"Oh shut up." Anders said.

"No, down," Amell mumbled, swatting blindly at his dog. His hand connected with its shoulder, and Barkspawn quieted.

Anders knelt down next to Amell and pulled him against his chest. Amell was still crying, and ruining his bandages. Anders throat closed up on him, and he wept into Amell's hair.

Anders never fully recovered. It might have been minutes or hours, but eventually they pulled themselves together enough to move. Amell stopped protesting against his help, and Anders picked out an outfit for him. He helped Amell dress, and dressed himself properly, then sat Amell down at his vanity to help him shave. Anders tucked a towel into Amell's collar, got out his straight edge, and lathered his face.

"You look nervous," Anders said to test his voice. He sounded awful. Watery and stuffy.

"A little." Amell said. He didn't sound any better.

"You'll let me practice blood magic on you, but you're scared of a shave?" Anders joked.
"No one ever accidentally cut themselves using blood magic," Amell said.

"Hey, don't worry about. Steady hands, remember?" Anders joked. It was too morbid, even for him, and his jaw quivered with the threat of tears. "Fuck." Anders swallowed to get a hold on himself. "Okay. Alright. I'm fine. Hold still."

If nothing else, the bastard had been right. Anders hands were ridiculously steady, and he cleaned up the frame of Amell's stubble in a few easy minutes. Amell cleaned off his face on his own when Anders finished and Anders wiped off the few spots he missed.

"Was that so hard?" Anders joked, cleaning up the washroom. "Can I check your eyes now?"

"Anders..." Amell sighed.

"Please." Anders begged. He hated begging. Not for the sake of his dignity, the way Amell hated help, but because in the Circle begging had never worked.

"Thank you for helping me shave," Amell said. He stood up, and stumbled blindly out of the wash. Anders followed him, dragging his feet. Amell wasn't the same. This wasn't right. This wasn't him. He was so defeated Anders may as well have already killed him. Anders caught Amell in the middle of the room, and pulled him back into his chest. "Please change your mind."

"Anders," Amell sighed again.

"Please." Anders squeezed him. "You can't say no to me, remember?"

"I know I can't," Amell said. "Why do you think I suddenly don't want to sleep with you? I don't want you changing my mind about this. I don't want us getting into a routine where you help me with everything, and I get used to being like this. I'm not happy, Anders. I'll never be happy like this, and I know if you really pushed me I'd settle on being unhappy for you, so please don't."

"Avernus-" Anders said.

"Won't know anything." Amell said.

"At least ask him," Anders begged. "At least ask the Circle. I'm not asking you to live like this, but at least try to fix it." Amell didn't say anything, but at least he didn't say no.

"Look, the clothes and the shaving doesn't have to be a routine. You don't need me for that. You could have a servant help you. With your eyes... I did it. I know I can't undo it, but I'm better than any physician. I don't know why you want him and not me.

"I'm not going to judge you for something I did to you, and I can handle the gore, and it won't change the way-" I see you? I feel about you? "How I think about you. You're more than just a pair of eyes, and if you're trying to impress me with this machismo bullshit you can stop. I'm already impressed, okay? You impress me. I've been impressed for a long time."

Silence.

More silence.

Anders kissed Amell's neck and rested his forehead on his shoulder. He smelled like shaving cream and soap, with a hint of cedar on his clothes. Amell relaxed in his arms, and sighed after a few minutes. "Alright."
"Alright what?" Anders asked.

"Alright I'll try," Amell said. "You can pen a letter for me to Avernus, and make up a fake patient to write to the Circle about and see if either of them know anything."

"What about the Collective?" Anders asked eagerly, thinking mostly of Amell but also of Quentin and rusty spoons. "We can ask them too, can't we?"

"Alright." Amell said.

Anders kissed Amell's neck again. He locked his arms tighter around Amell's waist and tried to spin him. He got maybe a quarter of the way through a circle, and Amell snorted.

"Are you sure you don't want me to teach you physical magic?" Amell joked.

"Oh shut up." Anders laughed and wanted to cry.

Amell turned around in Anders' arms and found his waist. Amell picked him up easily and spun him once. Anders kissed him. He tasted wet, and salty. "I'll go get my bag from the infirmary, and we can take some measurements so we can get started on glass eyes."

"Anders wait," Amell said, pawing at the space Anders had recently occupied. Anders stepped back into it, and Amell grabbed his arm. "The letters are fine, and if someone knows something I'll go and give it a chance, but if no one does then I am going to my Calling."

Anders swallowed around a lump in his throat. It didn't go down. "As long as you try."

"I still don't want you to work on my eyes." Amell said. "Shaving, the rest of it... Fine, you can help me, but not with my eyes."

It sounded like a good deal, but Anders was rubbish at quitting while he was ahead. "Please?"

"Please don't beg me." Amell said. "Let me have this. Send your physician to handle the measurements and everything else, and when he's done get everyone and bring them up here."

"Alright." Anders relented. He was sure he'd bring it up again tomorrow, if not tonight, but he forced himself to settle for now. "I'll send him up with breakfast."

"And a glass of wine." Amell said.

"Alright." Anders wasn't about to argue against a drink. He wouldn't mind one for himself, right now. He took a step towards the door, and changed his mind. Anders pulled Amell into a hug that turned into a kiss before he left.

It was the third time Anders had walked past them, and the guards still didn't say anything. Anders couldn't imagine having that much restraint. He was on his way down the stairs when he ran into Cera coming up.

"Anders," The angry little elf apparently still had eyes. Good for her. "Good. I need a word."

"No," Anders said. "That word work for you?"

Cera blocked him from continuing down the stairs. Maker, he did not have the patience for this right now. Anders glared at her.

"We need to talk about your infirmary," Cera said. "You're overgenerous with your supplies, which
lest you've forgotten are requisitioned from the Circle. I've been reviewing your notes, what little you keep, and they're absurd. Eight ounces of lyrium resin for a headache?"

Anders remembered that fellow, "Recurring headaches."

"Two frost and fire balms for cramps?" Cera demanded.

Anders definitely remembered that poor girl. "Recurring cramps."

"And you still have not turned over your staff for study." Cera said.

"For Maker's sake," Anders rubbed his temples to ward off an incoming headache. "I'm not doing this with you right now. Get out of my way and leave me alone."

Anders shoved past the tiny elf and kept on down the stairs.

"What were the frostrocks for?" Cera called after him.

Anders stopped.

"I had to talk to your aide this morning, seeing as you've been neglecting your post," Cera said. "He tells me you've been getting drunk and stealing supplies in the middle of the night. I can't say I'm surprised. Whatever ridiculous prank you used them for, I doubt it was worth the fifty silvers they cost."

Anders kept walking. It was the mature thing to do, after all. He took the stairs at a bit of a jog, and felt better when he hit the bottom. He just wasn't going to think about it. He walked through the main hall, and to the kitchens to grab breakfast and a bottle of wine.

From there Anders went to his infirmary, ignored his aide, and made up another bag for the physician. He gave the man the breakfast tray as well, and then stopped by the blacksmith. A short conversation later and Anders learned blacksmith did not equal glassmith.

That left Amaranthine. Anders could find someone there, and talk to that Alim fellow while he was at it. He'd get Amell glass eyes, find out the Collective could make him new eyes, and find Quentin and kill him for taking his old eyes. It would work out. Everything would be fine.

Anders went to the dining hall to break his own fast. The rest of the wardens were eating together, as usual. Stroud and Loghain were absent. They'd probably already left the Vigil, but the new elven recruit was there, sitting between Velanna and Sigrun. Oghren was absent. Anders backed out of the dining hall and went to the barracks instead.

"Hey, Sparkles," Oghren slurred from the floor beside his bunk. Maker's breath he was a mess. His bright red mane was tangled and damp with sweat, his face was flush, and he had on nothing but his trousers. He was sitting in a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor, a bottle of something in his hand. "Wasn't expectin' you back here. You ditch him again?"

"No, I didn't ditch him." Anders picked his way through the mess to sit on the edge of Oghren's bunk. "He changed his mind about his Calling. You can stop drinking. We're going to write to a lot of people, and see if anyone knows a way to help him."

"Uhuh," Oghren belched. "And then what?"

"And then he gets new eyes." Anders said. "Things go back to normal."
Oghren laughed. Massive amounts of muscle under massive amounts of fat made his whole body shake when he chortled. "You're fucking stupid, Sparkles."

"Hey, I'm serious." Anders said. "I've reattached severed fingers, and I've read accounts of spirit healers reattaching whole arms and legs. Eyes will be easy."

"Oh yeah?" Oghren asked, taking a long drink. "Then how come you don't already know how to do it? Where you gonna get new eyes? Stop thinking with your dick and open your eyes, Sparkles, while you still got em,"

"Look, you're a dwarf," Anders said. "You don't know. Magic can do a lot."

"I don't know." Oghren chuckled. "You think I don't know. What do you think the kid is to me, chopped nug liver? You think I don't know what magic can and can't do? Go fuck yourself, Sparkles."

"He told me-"

"He lied." Oghren interrupted him. "You ain't caught on yet? He lies. You wanna know how he gets new eyes? He steals a pair from another poor sod, and uses a blood magic ritual to make them fit. That's how. He already knows how to fix this. He fucking told me, but do you think he's gonna fucking do it?

"Look at us blighters. Look at the people he recruits. We got a mass murderer. We got an assassin. We got a fucking tyrant who damn near ruined this country. You bring that kid's dad back here, after what he did, that kid is gonna give him a hug, make him a Warden, and call it even. He ain't taking no one's eyes. Things aren't ever going back to normal. Go away, Sparkles. Let me drink."

"... He's going to tell everyone today. After breakfast." Anders said.

"Good for him," Oghren snorted.

"Are you coming?" Anders asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Oghren said.

"Are you going to put a shirt on?" Anders asked.

"Sparkles, right now, you're lucky I got pants on." Oghren said.

"What are you drinking?" Anders asked.

"Dragon's piss." Oghren said.

"Mind if I share?" Anders asked.

"It'll burn your nose hairs off." Oghren warned him.

"Sounds perfect." Anders said. Oghren held out the bottle, and Anders took a drink. It burned going down, and it burned coming back up when Anders coughed. It was sour, with a bitter aftertaste, and one of the worst things he'd ever tasted, but it was definitely strong.

Anders drank with Oghren in place of having breakfast. Eventually, a few of the other Wardens trickled back into the barracks, followed by Anders' physician. Lorin wrinkled his nose at the sorry state of Oghren's bunk when he made his way over.
"I left the measurements with him," Lorin said, frowning. "I did what I could with the cleaning, but the right one looks infected. You'll have to heal him yourself."

"Thanks," Anders said.

"Thank me by remembering to put your tools away from now on." Lorin huffed. Anders stomach turned over. He forced a nod, and the physician left.

"He seems friendly," Sigrun joked, coming over to squat next to Anders and Oghren. "Hey, hubby. You feeling any better?"

"Not really," Anders grinned.

"Oh wow," Sigrun stared at him, wide-eyed. "A real answer. No joke. I'm scared. This must be serious. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really, but here we are," Anders stood up from Oghren's bunk. Dragon's Piss was dizzying, but it helped loosen his tongue. "Amell wants to talk to all of you. Are Loghain and Stroud still at the Vigil? Do you know where Velanna is?"

"They left this morning." Nathaniel said. "Velanna was going to show Lyna the library. We could stop there on the way to Amell's quarters."

It sounded like a plan. Anders found a shirt, in the mess on Oghren's bunk, and pushed it at him. The dwarf dressed reluctantly, and stood unsteadily. The five of them left the barracks together.

"So who's Lyna?" Anders asked.

"The new recruit Loghain found." Sigrun said. "She's Dalish too."

"Oh good." Anders said. "Is she crazy too?"

"We don't have a verdict on that yet." Sigrun grinned. "She's pretty shy. She doesn't really talk to anyone but Velanna."

"She seemed of a perfectly sound mind." Justice said.

"No, sweetie, it was a joke." Sigrun said. "Anders was asking if Lyna is a bitch."

"She did not seem of a malevolent nature," Justice said. "She asked me the purpose of my helmet, and I claimed to be disfigured beneath and that my visage would unsettle her, as you suggested I should."

"Which isn't a lie, because you're a corpse." Sigrun said helpfully.

"She told me there is no physical ugliness a beautiful soul cannot overcome." Justice said.

"That's really sweet." Sigrun said.

"No kidding," Anders said. "What's she doing with Velanna?"

"Sounds like she was making a pass, if you ask me," Oghren snorted. "Way to go, 'Kristoff'. You gonna put that physical body to use? Does everything even still work? All the plumbing's good?"

"Oh, ew." Anders said.
"You are alluding to something." Justice said. "I do not know what."

"You can't be that stupid." Oghren said. "Come on, you've got Kristoff's memories, right?"

"Yes." Justice said.

"And Kristoff was married. You have memories of that, right?" Oghren asked.

"Yes." Justice said.

"Aha!" Oghren exclaimed. "So you must know what I'm talking about."

"Must I?" Justice asked.

"Don't be gross, Oghren." Sigrun said.

"Just saying, I know what I'd do if I suddenly became a complete man." Oghren said.

"They'll drop someday," Anders joked.

"Shut up, Sparkles." Oghren chuckled and gave him a shove. Anders shoved him back, and laughed.

"So what's this meeting for?" Sigrun asked.

Anders stopped laughing. Oghren took a drink out of the bottle he'd brought with him. "It's just... you know." Anders said.

They reached the library, and separated Velanna from Lyna. The little Dalish had a wiry build, with dark brown skin and darker hair, and intricate tattoos all across her face. Her eyes were dark amber, almost russet, and pained Anders to look at. She gave them all a polite nod when they stole Velanna from her.

From there it was up the stairs and down the hall to Amell's quarters. The guards didn't comment on the large entourage. Anders was beginning to suspect they were mute. One of them unlocked the door to let them in without being asked, so Amell must have told them they were coming.

Amell was sitting on his couch. From this angle, all anyone had was a profile of him, but Anders thought the bandage was rather hard to miss. "Guess who," Anders called. "I got everyone. Stroud and Loghain left for Montsimmard already."

Oghren stumbled straight to Amell's liquor cabinet, and started pouring drinks.

"You can all sit down. If you're not already." Amell said.

Velanna was apparently bravest. She walked over to the sitting area, took one look at Amell, and slapped a hand over her mouth. "Ma inan, tu melava suv?"

"Ir melava harel" Amell said.

"Elgar'nan. Who? Who did this to you?" Velanna asked, sitting on the low table in front of Amell.

Everyone else seem to take that as a cue to join her. Nathaniel hovered by the couch. Sigrun jumped up and sat next to Amell. Justice stayed by the door, with Barkspawn growling at him.

"No, hey." Anders frowned at the dog. "Bad dog. Sit. We like Justice. Sort of."
"Down, boy," Amell called.

Barkspawn whined, and wandered over to the sitting area to lie down on Amell's feet.

Justice took a seat in an armchair. Anders sat on the arm of the couch, next to Amell, and noticed he was sitting with his grimoire in his lap for some reason. It was handy, if nothing else. Anders siphoned some of the magic off of it for a cleansing aura to handle the infection in Amell's right eye. Oghren handed out drinks, and sat in the other armchair.

"So you're just... what's happening here?" Sigrun asked. "I mean, I see the bandages, but... how bad is it?"

"Take a wild guess," Oghren snorted.

"I'm blind," Amell said. "We're expecting three Senior Wardens in from Orlais by the end of the month. Nathaniel, I'm sorry, but I'm appointing one of them Warden-Constable. I'll request the Constable continue your training, but I can't promise anything. When they get here, I'm leaving to find a way to restore my sight, and if I can't then I'm going to my Calling. Oghren is coming with me, and if I don't come back with him, then that will be my official resignation to send along to Weisshaupt."

"Ancestors..." Sigrun said.

"... Are you sure that response isn't a bit... extreme?" Nathaniel asked. "I won't pretend to understand the trials and tribulations that accompany blindness, but-"

"Thank you," Amell interrupted him.

Nathaniel closed his mouth.

"Fenedhis," Velanna said, running her hands through her hair, "Tell us who has done this. Var shem'nan."

"Atisha, Velanna." Amell said, "Halam."

"Halam, ma halam?" Velanna said. It sounded like a question.

"Emma." Amell said.

"Banal!" Velanna said, "Mala suledin nadas. Din mala melana. Inan banal, lethallin. Ma dirthara ven tel'in."

"Lethallin?" Amell smiled.

Velanna stood up and stormed out.

"Did she leave?" Amell guessed when the door slammed.

"Yep." Oghren belched.

"Nathaniel, could you bring her back, please?" Amell asked, "I still need to talk to her."

"I'll be right back," Nathaniel said, jogging out after Velanna.

"Wow, Amell." Sigrun said, "I don't know what to say. Do you want me to come with you? When you go to your Calling? We could go together."
"No," Amell held out a hand. Sigrun caught it and squeezed it. "No, I don't want that. I want you to stay here, and take care of Justice, and deal with the vestiges of the Blight. The Architect is still out there somewhere with Velanna's sister, and the Mother is still breeding. You're an excellent soldier, Sigrun. The Wardens need you."

"I'm pretty sure the Wardens need you more, but I understand," Sigrun said, "You shouldn't have to live like this. Are you going to let a demon possess you? Like in your song?"

"Yes." Amell said.

"No," Anders said. "Can we stop talking like you're dying? Did you all miss the part where we're going to try to find a way to fix this?"

"This is a grave mistake," Justice said. "Such a thing would be abominable. Your final act should not be to allow a demon a foothold in this realm. You should seek retribution against those who have wronged you."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I agree with Justice," Anders said. "Can I tell them?"

"It doesn't matter. Both of you. It's done." Amell said.

"I can't believe you just want to let it go," Anders said.

"Revenge won't change anything," Amell said.

"It would change something," Anders said, "He'd be dead, for one thing, and I'd feel better, for another."

"All should answer for their transgressions," Justice said.

The door opened, and Nathaniel and Velanna rejoined them. Velanna stood off to the side, arms folded over her chest, her expression torn between outrage and despair. It was a rare day when Anders could relate to her so strongly.

"Why am I here?" Velanna demanded. "You are blind. In a month you are dead. What else is there to say?"


"I need to talk to you and Anders about the new recruit." Amell said.

"Her name is Lyna," Nathaniel said.

"The two of you should learn the ritual for the Joining." Amell said. "I used the last of the first batch I prepared on Velanna's Joining, so one of you will need to learn the spell to make another, but you don't have to administer the Joining yourself. Anyone can do that. I'm sure you all remember the words."

"I would be comfortable with it." Nathaniel said.

"Thank you, Nathaniel." Amell said.

"Do you mind if I hang out, while you guys do your magic stuff?" Sigrun asked. "Now that I know we only have a month left together, I really don't want to waste it."

"I don't mind," Amell said. "I'll leave orders with the guards that any of you can come visit, but this
needs to stay between all of us. The rest of the Vigil can't know."

"I'm glad you realize," Nathaniel said, "And I understand why you delayed telling us. If word got out, I don't doubt we'd see another attack by another assassin,"

"Oh my gosh, I totally forgot about that!" Sigrun exclaimed. "What if someone tries to kill you while you're like this?"

"Anders is staying with me, and I have guards outside my quarters," Amell said. "I'm fine."

"Least if someone kills you, it'll save me a trip to Orzammar." Oghren said.

"Fingers crossed," Amell said.

Oghren snorted.

Amell opened his grimoire, and slowly counted through the pages with his fingers. Anders watched the pages flip past, runes and inscriptions and diagrams containing all manner of arcane secrets, most of them blood magic. In Tevinter, Amell's grimoire might have been worth a fortune. In Ferelden, it was more like a death sentence. Amell stopped counting, and left the book open on a page with a rather detailed depiction of a woman transforming into a crow.

"Is there a picture of a chalice on this page?" Amell asked.

"No. There's a woman with a crow." Anders said.

"Maybe we could find it for you?" Sigrun offered, reaching out to touch the grimoire. Anders dove off the arm of the couch, leaning over Amell to grab Sigrun's hand before she could touch the book. "Woah!" Sigrun said.

"Don't touch it," Anders warned her. "Amell's the only one who can touch it,"

"Wow, okay," Sigrun said, taking her hand back. "Creepy."

Amell flipped back a page. A picture of a chalice was on the page. "You got it," Anders said.

"Velanna, come and read this with Anders." Amell said. "Ask me if you have any questions."

"I'll get out of your way, sweetie," Sigrun said, hopping off the couch so Velanna could sit beside Amell and read from the book in his lap.

Anders leaned on Amell's shoulder to read the ritual. From the look of it, there were two options. Either the corruption in darkspawn blood was amplified with energy and blood magic, or a drop of archdemon blood among darkspawn blood was used. In either case, the resulting blood was infused with lyrium.

"What are these numbers?" Anders asked, pointing. He realized he was an idiot a few seconds later. "In the margins. Ratios?"

"Page numbers, for advanced magic tied to the Joining," Amell said. "Disregard those."

"I think I've got it," Anders said. "This charm here, it's the same one the Chantry uses for phylacteries. So is this one, that keeps the blood from forming clots. I know both of these."

"Did you want to try the ritual first?" Amell asked.
"Sure." Anders said.

"Could you get my keys and unlock my trunk?" Amell asked. "You'll need the chalice, and there's a small maple box with plenty of vials of darkspawn and archdemon blood inside. There should be a few bottles of lyrium in there too."

Anders went and got Amell's keys, and unlocked his trunk. There was a lot more than just a chalice and a box inside. There were mage robes, and a handful of books, a few jars of what Anders guessed was kaddis, runes and crystals... a shield, white and red, with a heraldry Anders guessed belonged to Amell's family. There were two boxes. Anders open one. It was full of letters. He closed it, and grabbed the other along with the chalice.

Anders went back to the sitting area and laid out the supplies for the Joining ritual on the low table before a thought occurred to him. "So, this is blood magic, but I know you didn't cut yourself when I watched you cast it."

"Not all blood magic takes a cut, Anders," Amell said. "With enough practice, you can draw on your life force without drawing blood. I can only manage it for simple spells, like this one."

"So, should I use a cut for this, or...?" Anders asked.

"For your first time, I would," Amell said.

Nathaniel drew a blade from somewhere on his person and handed it to Anders. Anders cut his arm, and set the blade aside. He started casting.

"This is so cool," Sigrun said.

"Is there no other way to perform this ritual without blood magic?" Justice asked. "This tome you are holding, I can sense a great many evils within. Anguish. Agony. Terror. Despair. Desire. It is a terrible thing to behold."

"They're demons," Amell said. "I'm surprised you care."

"They were demons." Justice said. "They are something less, now. It is concerning."

"They're bound to me, Justice," Amell said. "The magic they give off is extraordinarily useful against other demons, or for augmenting magic. I'm not sure of the affect on a spirit, but Velanna or Anders could tell you their connection to the Fade is enhanced just having this book near and open."

"I can hear them screaming." Justice said. "It is disconcerting, and made only marginally more tolerable by the knowledge that they are demons and not spirits."

"You can leave, if it bothers you." Amell said.

"There are a great many things in the mortal world which unsettle me," Justice said, "I must weather them if I am ever to understand them."

"I'm glad you're willing to learn," Amell said.

Anders finished the spell. The Joined blood sat in the silver chalice in front of him, and Anders enchanted a few empty flasks to hold what Lyna didn't drink. "Got it," Anders said, and healed the cut on his arm. He started cleaning up everything and putting the unused supplies back in the trunk.

"Are we finished here?" Velanna demanded.
"We're finished." Amell said. "Ma serannas, lethallan."

Velanna grunted and left.

"Where should I hold Lyna's Joining?" Nathaniel asked. "In the throne room?"

"Traditionally," Amell said.

"I want to be there," Sigrun said. "Lyna's really sweet. You'll like her. When she's a full-fledged Warden, can we bring her up here and introduce her? I bet we could trust her to keep your eyes a secret."

"If you trust her," Amell said. The man had had his eyes gouged out for trusting people so readily, and hadn't learned a thing. Anders wasn't surprised.

"I would also like to attend her Joining," Justice said. "I do not enjoy maintaining this false identity. It will be a relief to speak the truth."

"Go get her, lover boy," Oghren chuckled.

Nathaniel picked up the chalice, and left with Sigrun and Justice.

"Is anyone still here?" Amell asked when the door closed.

"I'm here," Anders said, squeezing Amell's thigh.

"Same, so don't get gross," Oghren said.

"Neither of you wanted to be part of Lyna's Joining?" Amell asked.

"I'm an ass," Anders said.

"She ain't gonna make it," Oghren said. "It's been a while since you and I got proper drunk. What do you say we change that?"

"That's fine with me," Amell said.

"Same here," Anders grabbed Amell's shoulders, and moved him so Anders was sitting in the corner of the couch, with Amell in his lap. Oghren emptied out the liquor cabinet, and set all the bottles up on the low table in front of them before joining them on the couch. Apparently, Amell in his lap didn't count as 'gross' which was great because Anders wasn't letting him anywhere else.

The three of them got sloshed. Oghren did most of the talking for them, telling what Anders assumed were outrageously embellished stories about the Blight. Amell corrected him on occasion, but the occasions were rare. Anders did very little talking, and spent most of the time drinking, or running his hands over Amell, or burying his face in his hair.

It felt bittersweet. Anders wanted to be happy. He wanted to laugh at Oghren's impressions of werewolves and elves, and Amell's quiet one-liners. He wanted to tell his own stories, about everything from Harper's Ford to Kinloch Hold, but every time he tried his tongue felt thick and swollen and he couldn't find the words.

"You're quiet," Amell noticed eventually.

"No, I'm Anders," Anders joked.
"Everything alright?" Amell asked.

No.

"Yep," Anders said.

Amell found Anders' hand, and brought it to his lips for a sloppy if earnest kiss. It helped a little. Anders ran his fingers through Amell's hair, and kissed the top of his head, almost surprised when Oghren didn't comment. Anders supposed if there was ever a time for allowances, it was now.

A knock came at the door, and Nathaniel let himself in a few seconds later. "Lyna died." Nathaniel said.

"I told you." Oghren said.

"Thank you, Nathaniel," Amell said.

"I thought you should know," Nathaniel said, and let himself back out.

"... Do you think I did something wrong?" Anders asked. "With the spell?"

"No," Amell said, finding his hand to give him a reassuring kiss on his knuckles. "Not a lot of people survive the Joining... The spell you wove amplifies the corruption to a potency that's almost always fatal. It takes physical and mental fortitude to survive it.

"... I hated recruiting you. When you came back after I let you run, during the attack on the Vigil, I thought I was going to be sick. I knew you wouldn't have another chance to escape, and I thought I'd have to turn you over to the Circle. I recruited you in a panic when Rylock showed up, and I gave you those sovereigns hoping you'd run.

"When you stayed... I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd killed you. I sat next to your bed after the Joining, checking your pulse every few minutes, wishing I believed in the Maker just so I'd have someone to pray to."

Amell took a long drink. Anders traced a finger over Amell's ear and down his jaw, and Amell shivered. "You didn't even know me," Anders said.

"I know," Amell said. "But I thought I did. Have you ever been sweet on someone? You think you know them, just from watching them. It's vain, and a little creepy. You're not the man I imagined you were."

"Is that good or bad?" Anders asked.

"You're fucking him, Sparkles, what the fuck do you think?" Oghren snorted.

"Well I mean, what kind of person did you think I was?" Anders asked.


"Wait, back up," Anders huffed, "What do you mean I'm not that kind of person? I'm all of those things."

"You're one of those things," Oghren said.

Amell squeezed his hand, "You're all of those things and more."
Chapter End Notes

Translations (I think these will always go at the end, from now on)
Ma inan, melava tu suv? - Your eyes, what caused this to happen?
Ir melava harel - I was betrayed
Fenedhis - Fuck
Var shem'n'an - Our revenge will be swift
Halam, ma halam? - It's done, or you're done?
Emma - I am
Banal! Mala suledin nadas. Din mala melana. Inan banal, lethallin. Ma dirthara ven
tel'in. - No! You must endure. It's not your time. Eyes are nothing, cousin/clansman.
You will learn to go without.
Ma serannas, lethallan - Thank you, cousin/clansman.
Hello everyone, welcome back! This chapter was a bit of a struggle to write, considering all of the things we had to cover, but things should pick up next chapter. I promise all of this is leading somewhere. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 3 Frumentum Evening
Vigil's Keep, Warden Commander's Quarters

The rest of the Wardens had a funeral for Lyna. Oghren, Amell, and Anders had dinner in Amell's quarters. Anders felt a bit the bastard, but he hadn't known the little elf. The only thing Anders had known about her was that she had amber eyes, so close to Amell's old eyes it made Anders' heart hurt to see. The fact that she was dead....

The fact that she was dead meant she didn't need them anymore.

"Lyna!" Anders exclaimed.

Oghren squealed and jumped. Amell stiffened a little and grabbed Anders' thigh.

"You little nug humper!" Oghren said, drying himself off after spilling ale down his shirt. "You scared the tits off me. What are you yelling for?"

"Lyna!" Anders said again. "Her eyes. They looked like your eyes. Not really, but they were close. We could use her eyes, for the ritual."

"What ritual?" Amell asked.

"What do you mean what ritual?" Anders laughed, "The one that gives you new eyes! We can use her eyes. She's dead. She doesn't need them."

"What are you talking about?" Amell asked.

"Oghren said you told him you knew a ritual that could give you new eyes," Anders said eagerly. "He said you just had to get a pair from someone first."

"What?" Amell asked.


"I said a ritual like that might exist." Amell said. "I didn't say I knew it. And if it did exist it would probably require a human sacrifice... Neither of you have been listening to me at all, have you?"

"But... I thought...you knew..." Anders fumbled.

"Why would I know something like that?" Amell asked. "I know combat magic. Persuasion.
Corruption. I told you, I'm not a healer.

Anders had never had his hopes raised and dashed so quickly before in his life. Oghren drank in shameful silence, but Anders didn't have it in him to be mad at the dwarf for misunderstanding. Anders didn't have it in him to be anything.

"Human sacrifice, what does that mean?" Anders asked. "Does someone just have to die near you for the spell to work? Because I mean... People die in the Joining all the time."

"Anders, I don't know how to fix this." Amell said. "If I did, I would."

"I'm just asking." Anders said.

"No." Amell said. "It means I'd have to voluntarily kill someone for the spell to take effect. I know a few spells that take a sacrifice, but nothing for my eyes."

"Are you sure?" Anders asked. "I mean you said so yourself, you're not a healer. Maybe I could get Lyna's eyes and we could try something. Like a reattachment, but with blood magic."

"Blood magic isn't the sort of magic you 'try something' with, Anders." Amell said patiently. "There's a reason I have demons imprint their thought patterns into my head to learn my spells. Trying to come up with something on your own? The spell would be nothing like you intended. The consequences for doing something like that..."

Amell twisted his lap and ran his hands up Anders' chest to cradle his face in his hands. "Anders, promise me you'll never try to use blood magic to make your own spells."

Wouldn't you know it, it was a lot easier to lie when you didn't have to look someone in the eyes. "Alright, I promise."

"Thank you." Amell leaned forward and kissed him. He missed Anders' lips, and kissed his chin. After a bit of maneuvering, Amell found his lips and the kiss went better for it, right up until Oghren shoved Amell and knocked him forward. Their teeth clattered together painfully.

Anders swore. Amell laughed. Oghren laughed. Anders laughed. The night went easier, and Anders finally found it in himself to share a few animated stories. They stayed up well into the night, until Oghren fell asleep on the couch, and Anders and Amell moved to the bed.

Barkspawn slept with Oghren. Ser Pounce-a-Lot stole Amell's pillow, so Anders pulled him onto his shoulder. The warmth of his body made Anders forget it was autumn, and Amell fit against him so perfectly he felt like an extension of Anders' self. Anders ran his hands through Amell's hair and over his shoulders, almost surprised he couldn't feel his fingers through him.

"I'm sorry Oghren got your hopes up," Amell said. "He was distraught, when we last spoke. I'm not surprised he misheard me."

"Hey, whatever. We'll figure something out... You want one of my eyes?" Anders offered. "We could run away together, start new lives as pirates."

"Arrrr," Amell said sleepily.

Anders stared at Amell's outline in the dark. There had to be something. Amell just wasn't trying. Anders could find something.

"Amell?" Anders said.
'Hmm?' Amell yawned.

"... I changed my mind." Anders said. "I want your grimoire."

"Okay." Amell said. "I'll bind it to you in the morning."

"Thanks." Anders said.

Anders slept light, with no dreams, but also no nightmares.

Come morning, Oghren was still asleep. Anders helped Amell to the wash, where they had another fight about whether or not Anders was allowed see Amell without his bandages on. The answer was a resounding 'No' that eventually led to Anders taking half a bath with Amell and leaving so Amell could take off the bandage and wash his hair.

Anders comforted himself with the thought that Amell might change his mind once he had glass eyes in place of empty sockets. Eventually, Amell finished in the wash and they dressed before Oghren had ever woken up. Anders didn't blame the dwarf for oversleeping. Anders had a bit of a hangover himself, but it was nothing compared to the one he'd had the night of the party.

Anders left to get the three of them breakfast, and the smell woke Oghren, who locked himself in the washroom to be sick rather than eat. It was his loss, really. It was bacon and eggs, and it was delicious.

"Did you want my grimoire now?" Amell asked after they ate.

"How long do you think this will take?" Anders asked. "I want to get those letters out, and go to Amaranthine today and talk to that Alim fellow about your eyes, and find a glassmith."

"Not long." Amell said. "A half hour, maybe."

"Alright," Anders said. "What do I need to do?"

Anders needed to do a lot. Oghren emerged from the washroom while they were setting up, and fled at the sight of 'more magic shit.' Anders donated Oghren's untouched breakfast to Barkspawn, and the dog took a rather obsessive liking to him afterwards. Anders drew a binding circle in the enter of Amell's room on his hands and knees, and the dog seemed to take it as an invitation to press its wet nose into Anders' face and try to lick him every few seconds.

"You need to stop." Anders frowned when the dog almost stepped on the wet paint of a glyph. "Daddy is working. Go bother Other Daddy."

Barkspawn whined.

"Come here, boy." Amell said. Barkspawn trotted over to where Amell was sitting on the floor against his bed, and laid down at his feet. "Don't mind him. He's mean."

"I am not." Anders said. "I've never set up a binding circle before. I'm trying to focus."

"What made you change your mind?" Amell asked.

Shit. Um. I want to look through your grimoire and see if there's any dangerous and morally questionable rituals I can twist to conjure you new eyes? No. No best not. "I just figure it would be a lot easier for me to learn blood magic if I could actually touch the manual I was learning from."

"I've been working on my grimoire for three years, now." Amell said thoughtfully, "There's a lot
more than blood magic in there."

"Like demons?" Anders asked.

"Like demons." Amell agreed. "I'm glad you want it. Someone should have it, and I can't give it to
the Wardens without binding it to someone."

"All done." Anders said.

"Good." Amell said, picking up his grimoire. "Alright, help me into the circle and don't let me step
on any of the glyphs."

Anders took Amell's hand, and walked him into the circle. "Can I sit?" Amell asked.

"You're good." Anders said.

Amell sat. "Now you'll need five bottles of lyrium, and my dagger. It's over on my weapon rack, by
my armor stand."

"Andraste's holy knickers. Five?" Anders asked.

"Five." Amell said. "I have five demons bound to this tome. We're going to unbind them from me,
and bind them to you."

"I'm having some doubts." Anders said.

"It'll be fine," Amell said.

"If you say so." Anders said.

Anders found the bottles of lyrium in Amell's trunk, and retrieved his dagger from his weapon stand.
Anders came back and sat with Amell in the circle he'd drawn. Amell opened his tome to the very
first page, which contained a diagram of the binding circle Anders had just drawn. On the page
opposite, there were details for the magic required to bind a spelltome.

"I guess all this makes your grimoire pretty hard to steal, huh?" Anders said.

"Your grimoire now, and yes." Amell said. "The demons won't answer to anyone else once you bind
them." Amell set his fingers to the pages and flipped through the book until he stopped on a picture
of a Terror demon. "Is there a broken circle on this page?" Amell asked.

"Terror demon." Anders said.

Amell flipped back a page.

"You got it." Anders said.

"I'll unbind them from me first," Amell said. "I need you to read this chant aloud, slowly, so I can
repeat it. I don't have it memorized. Cut me," Amell said, holding out his arm.

Anders rolled up Amell's sleeve, kissed the myriad of scars on his forearm, and made a shallow cut.
Amell put his free hand over his grimoire, and Anders read the chant with him. It was painfully
similar to the one Amell had cast on the shade down in the cellars. 'By blood you were bound, by
blood unbound,' and all that mess again. Only a few words were changed, but the spells were
completely different.
The room grew dark, and Anders swore he saw a shadow pulled from Amell's chest and sucked into the book.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

A second shadow followed the first, and then another, until there were five in total. Almost immediately, Anders felt a shift in the room. It grew cold, and uncomfortably damp, and Anders swore he could hear whispering, like the sensing of darkspawn.

"Now you need to bind them." Amell said, turning back to the first page of the grimoire, where the original ritual lay. Anders wondered why the book didn't scream at him, if it wasn't bound to him anymore. Probably because it had no master for the moment. "Use the lyrium for the first half of the spell. For the seal, cut length wise down your arm."

Come on, Anders. No turning back now.

Anders steeled himself, opened the first bottle of lyrium, and started casting.

It was surprisingly simplistic. Each of the demons was neatly compartmentalized to a rune inside the tome, and binding them involved activating said rune with lyrium. When Anders had finished with all five, he made a deep cut along his left forearm, and bound the tome to him with a magical seal he doubted anyone could break.

The shadows withdrew, the cold was banished, and the sickly, clammy sensation was gone. Anders healed both of their arms. The whispers had stopped, but Anders did feel a very strong pull towards the tome and an overwhelming urge to pick it up. Well... What could it hurt? Anders braced himself and reached out to touch it.

No screams. Instead there were whispers. Blood. Anders picked up the tome and set it in his lap. Freedom. Anders flipped off through a few of the pages: ritual after ritual, chants, charms, incantations, enchantments, rune-bound demons. Kill him. Anders set the tome down and scrubbed his hands off on his knees. "So... hey, does it always do that? The whispering thing? That's supposed to be happening, right? I'm not going crazy?"

"No, it always does that." Amell said. "The demons are still alive, just stripped down to their base essences. You shouldn't be hearing more than a few disjointed words, at most."

"Cause that's not totally creepy or anything," Anders said.

"You get used to it," Amell said.

"Right. Okay." No big deal, Anders. Don't be a piss baby about it. "Alright, so I'll write your letter to Avernus and then I'll head to Amaranthine, and be back by tonight. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a plan." Amell agreed.

Anders helped Amell up, and picked the tome up off the floor. Die. Anders set the tome on Amell's desk, and cleaned up the paint from the binding circle. He wrote out a letter to Avernus and the Circle, and Amell had him search through his armoire for a book strap that attached the grimoire to his belt. Practical or not, Anders didn't like the thought of his hand accidentally brushing against the tome when he walked, but he forced himself to deal with it.

Before he left, Amell had Anders fetch a smell crest from his trunk, and attach it to Anders' belt along with the grimorie. It had Amell's house crest on it, and apparently it would make the Collective more amiable to talking with him, as would the five sovereigns Amell lent him. And then Amell
asked him to do something utterly and absolutely unthinkable.

"Bring Justice with you," Amell said.

"What?" Anders asked.

"Justice," Amell said again, "Bring him with you to Amaranthine, and see if the Collective knows of a way to send him back into the Fade."

"You hate me," Anders sighed.

"Don't pout," Amell said.

"I'm not pouting," Anders lied.

"You're pouting," Amell said.

"You can't prove anything," Anders said.

"Let me touch your face," Amell said. "I bet you're pouting."

"You don't trust me," Anders said, "I'm hurt."

"Come here," Amell ordered. The command in his voice made Anders shiver and brought him over to where Amell was sitting on the edge of his bed.

Anders touched his shoulder to let him know he was in front of him, and Amell reached out and found his thighs. He slid his hands up over Anders' ass, up his sides, and grabbed his tunic, giving Anders a tug that forced him down so Amell could touch his face.

Amell definitely did not care about whatever expression Anders was making. His hands kept to Anders' jaw, and traced his mouth, his thumb sliding along the inside of his bottom lip. Anders licked him, unable to help himself, and Amell pushed his thumb past his lips for Anders to suck on. "So uh..." Anders cleared his throat, "Before I go..."

"Yeah?" Amell asked.

Anders cupped Amell's jaw and ran his thumb over his cheek, enjoying the scratch of his stubble, "Are you still against sex or...?"

"You should leave now, if you want to get back by tonight." Amell said.

"You're such a tease," Anders said, trying to catch his breath. Amell was still touching him, tugging at his clothes, "You can't take your hands off me, but you don't want to have sex?"

"I do. I want you, I just..." Amell let go of him. "I'm sorry."

"You just what?" Anders asked. Amell didn't answer him. Well... fine. Anders was better at the touchy part of relationships anyway. He straddled Amell's right leg and kissed him, and coaxed his lips apart with a few impatient flicks of his tongue. Anders let his hands crackle with the static he knew Amell adored, and ran them along his shoulders, down his arms, over his chest.

It worked a little. Amell arched into his touch, but he didn't respond with any sort of reckless abandon. "I don't know if I can do this," Amell said.

"Why not?" Anders asked. "Just put your hands on me. We've had sex in the dark before. Just
pretend it's a blindfold or something."

"Pretend it's a blindfold," Amell snorted.

"You've tied me up before," Anders reminded him, "Why can't I blindfold you?"

"... I guess you can." Amell allotted, mapping over Anders with his hands.

His hands felt the same to Anders, blind or not. They were still strong, and every firm squeeze on his ass or the backs of his thighs still left Anders sighing. Amell slid a hand beneath Anders' tunic, and traced over the trail of darker brown hair beneath Anders' navel to where it vanished into his trousers. Anders shivered, and Amell massaged his crotch. Anders pushed against his palm, eager for his belt to come off.

"I still think you should leave now," Amell said. "Alim doesn't like meeting with anyone in the evening."

Anders saw spots, "Are you fucking-"

"But if you want I'll suck you off before you go." Amell said.

"Fuck yes I want," Anders unbuckled his belt in a hurry. It was laden with Amell's grimoire and crest and dragged his trousers down his thighs, where they caught on Amell's leg Anders was still straddling. Their heights didn't quite work out like this. Anders gave Amell a light shove to knock him back onto his elbows, and knelt over him.

Amell lay on his elbows where Anders had left him, mouth open and trousers tented. Anders freed himself from his smalls and set the head of his cock on Amell's lips. Amell licked down his shaft and back up before taking him into his mouth. Anders missed the eye-contact, but he didn't need it. Anders ran a hand through Amell's hair, and closed his eyes, losing himself to the wet warmth of Amell's tongue.

Amell pleasured him eagerly, despite his earlier reservations, moaning like their positions were reversed. The gentle vibrations killed every thought in Anders' head, aside from how much he wanted this, needed this, craved this connection more than the euphoria that followed it. He came with Amell's name on his lips; intense spasms of pleasure left him shaking and gasping for air.

Reality came back to him slowly. Eventually Anders' eyes had to open, knowing Amell's couldn't. Anders wiped his cum off Amell's chin with his thumb, and Amell grabbed his wrist and sucked it off his fingers. Reality wasn't so bad. Amell seemed alright; he even grinned a little.

Anders took heart in it, and gave him a long and drawn out kiss, hands wandering shamelessly until Amell shoved him off. "Go see Alim. Bring Justice."

For once, Anders did what he was told. He cleaned himself up, fixed his trousers, and left the room. He gave the letters to a messenger, and then went and got 'Kristoff' from the barracks and told him they were heading to Amaranthine together for what was bound to be a very uncomfortable time. If Anders could have ridden a horse to Amaranthine, it might have been quicker and therefore more tolerable, but the horses were due to arrive with the Orlesians, which meant Anders was walking.

They'd barely started down the Pilgrim's Path when Justice started bothering him.

"The tome you carry is a reliquary for demons," Justice said. "It was bound to the Commander last I saw it, but I see the magic on you now."
"How about that?" Anders said, walking a little faster.

"This is a dangerous thing you have done," Justice said. "The demons within are somehow less than what they once were, and all the more deadly for it. They have been stripped of their identity, and clamor for yours instead."

"Yeah, I kind of already knew that." Anders said.

"Why would you risk such a thing?" Justice asked.

Anders was about to give him a snide reply when he stopped himself. Justice was staring at him, helmet on, but... Well, eye contact wasn't all that important. Justice had his head tilted curiously to once side. It was an innocent question, by an innocent spirit.

Anders sighed. Justice wasn't lecturing him. He just didn't understand. "Look, I don't like it either, but if there's a spell out there that can give someone new eyes, it's going to have something to do with blood magic. I have to start somewhere."

"This is an attempt on your part to heal the Commander, then?" Justice asked.

"You got it." Anders said.

"Then I question your methods, but I respect your intent." Justice said.

"You and me both." Anders said.

"This man we are meeting with. Alim, of the Mages' Collective. Am I correct in assuming I am accompanying you in the interests of finding a way to send me back to the Fade?" Justice asked.

"That's the plan." Anders said. "I could never stand the thought of being trapped anywhere either. I bet you're eager to get back."

"I... do not know if that is my wish anymore." Justice said. "I have had experiences here I cannot even begin to explain, and there is beauty in this world. Beauty we spirits often overlook."

"Like what? Dog shit and darkspawn?" Anders joked.

"The people." Justice said. "You mortals. You are complex creatures of virtues and vices, aspiring to many ideals in place of one."

"Well look at you, learning." Anders whistled. "Color me impressed,"

"I am trying." Justice said.

"Isn't everyone?" Anders said.

It was a while before Justice spoke again, "Lyna did not deserve her death."

"Not a lot of people do, Justice." Anders said.

"But it came at our hands." Justice said. "It was... a most aggrieving experience."

"... Did you like her?" Anders asked.

"I do not understand this question," Justice said. "She was innocent of any wrong doing. Her death was undeserved."
"I'll take that as a yes." Anders said. "You know it's okay to like people. Spirits seek out mages all the time to talk."

"You speak of demons." Justice said. "I am not a demon."

"You know Velanna thinks there's no distinction between spirits and demons," Anders said. "She thinks demons are just spirits with unique and sparkling personalities."

"This is wrong." Justice said. "Demons are spirits who have been perverted by their desires."

Well that sounded worrying. Anders chewed on his bottom lip, and touched the tome at his hip. Escape. Perverted spirits, huh? What kind of spirit turned into what kind of demon? "So... You're saying you could become a demon?"

"I said no such thing," Justice said.

"You just said demons were spirits perverted by their desires. Couldn't that happen to you?" Anders asked.

"No." Justice said. "I have no desires."

"You must have some desires." Anders said, thinking of the spirit's fascination with his ring and its affection for Lyna.

"I have none!" Justice barked. "Desist your questions!"

Okay there, Rage demon. Settle down.

Anders kept walking, wondering what kind of demon a spirit of Compassion could be corrupted into. He couldn't think of anything. Compassion was a sweetheart. She didn't have outbursts, or lust after anything. She was just compassionate.

She definitely wasn't a self righteous prick who couldn't handle a little bit of introspection.

"... Your commander, are the two of you in love?" Justice asked.

"That is ridiculously personal and totally out of nowhere." Anders said.

"I apologize." Justice said. "I was thinking about your question. This man I inhabit, Kristoff. He had a wife, and loved her dearly. His essence and the memories of their life together cling to his every possession like dust. It is beautiful... And at times I envy it. But envy is what a demon feels, a desire for something it cannot have... Do you truly think I could become such?"

"Not if you're asking me that." Anders said. "Look... I'm sorry Justice. I apologize. I didn't mean to suggest you could become a demon... This whole thing is probably pretty confusing for you, isn't it?"

"Very." Justice said.

Anders sighed. It was just a spirit. A spirit with one little concept it was used to pursuing in the Fade, where nothing was complicated and everything was separated into memories and ideas spirits could pick apart as they pleased.

"Look, I know you and Sigrun have kind of a thing going on, but if you get confused about something and you want to talk about it, you can talk to me," Anders offered. "I'm a spirit healer, and spirits kind of come with the territory, so maybe I could explain things a little better for you than
Sigrun could.

"... I would greatly appreciate that. Thank you, Anders." Justice said.

"No problem." Anders said.

They reached Amaranthine towards the end of the afternoon, and Anders set about to finding a glasssmith and giving him the measurements for Amell's eyes. He took Justice to the docks afterwards, and after a bit of searching found the Fisherman's Rest where Alim supposedly stayed.

Fish. Fish, fish, and more fish. The smell was everywhere. On the bright side, it made it a lot harder to notice the smell emanating from the corpse Anders was walking besides. The dockside tavern was wet, a greasy sheen on the floors, the tables, and even the walls. The wood that made up most of the furniture and the building itself was swollen and bulbous from the moisture and the humidity of the docks. There were dips and humps in the floor, and the ambiance was dark and terribly seedy.

Anders tried to picture Amell here, in full dragonscale armor, striding confidently through the crowds. No wonder the man kept his coin in his boots.

A boy bumped into Anders, and immediately leapt backwards, hands clamped over his ears. Anders touched the tome at his side. Kill. It was still firmly belted to his waist. Well, that would teach the little would be pickpocket. The boy stared at him wide eyed. Anders grinned, and the boy bolted out of the tavern.

Anders went to the bar, where a portly older woman with a mottled complexion was serving drinks. "Hey Wardens," The woman said after a glance at their tabards. "What can I get for you?"

"An ale would be grand. Nothing for my friend though." Anders fished out a few coppers from his boot and slid them across the counter. The woman poured him a drink. It tasted like fish and piss.

"I'm looking for someone named Alim." Anders said.

"Don't know anyone by that name." The woman said, and abandoned him to his drink.

Oh for Maker's sake. Not this game. Anders didn't want to sleuth through the seedy underbelly of Amaranthine, bribing and threatening every other person to find one elusive apostate.

"Alim is an elf, correct?" Justice asked.

"That doesn't really help us." Anders sighed. "There are at least a dozen elves in here."

"I see only one elf who is also a mage." Justice said. "That man there, in beige, in the booth beside the window."

Of course. Spirits could see magic. "I could kiss you right now," Anders grinned. "Come on, let's go have a chat."

Anders got up and walked over to the booth Justice had pointed out. The elf glanced up at their approach. He was...

Andraste's knickers he was hot. His eyes were a sparkling hazel, his skin was a dark and polished bronze, and his hair was black as ink and pulled back into a smart ponytail.

"Alim?" Anders cleared his throat and tried to stop staring. So much for not finding men attractive.

"Who's asking?" The ridiculously handsome elf asked.
"I'm not good at this sort of thing. That means yes, right?" Anders asked. "Can we pretend I know whatever secret password or handshake goes here and just talk like normal people?"

"That's Amell's crest." The elf, who must have been Alim, said with a nod to Anders' belt. "And his grimoire. Sit. We can talk. What's going on?"

Anders sat, scooting into the bunk to make room for Justice. The spirit sat, armor clunking against the misshapen booth. "So... I don't know how all this works-"

"I can see that." Alim said.

"Oh fine, tease the newbie." Anders said. "That's a brilliant recruitment strategy. No wonder I've never heard of you guys before."

"Who says we're recruiting?" Alim asked. "Do you have a request to submit? Something from Amell?"

"Sure. Sort of," Anders said. "I need to know if you know any spells that can restore a person's sight."

"Elaborate." Alim said.

"New eyes. Following enucleation of the eyes." Anders said.

"... Two sovereigns. I'll inquire." Alim said. "No promises. One sovereign repaid if we come up with nothing."

"How long will inquiring take?" Anders asked. "I only have till the end of the month."

"Then you'll know by the end of the month." Alim said.

Anders took off his boot and fished out the coins. Alim pocketed them. "Is that all?" Alim asked.

"Not exactly," Anders said. "I don't suppose you know anything about unbound spirits involuntarily possessing corpses, do you?"

"Say that again." Alim said.

"That again." Anders said.

"... We have inquired on the Commander's behalf," Justice said. "Our purpose here is finished. Might we move on?"

"You seriously don't even want to know if there's a way for you to go home?" Anders asked.

"Kristoff has not yet been avenged. I have an obligation." Justice said.

"... Well alright. It's your life, I guess." Anders said, turning back to Alim. "There's one more thing. Quentin Amell, can you find him?"

"To what end?" Alim asked.

"To kill him? To blacklist him? He's the reason I'm here. Amell means something to your Collective, doesn't he? Well Quentin took his eyes." Anders said.

"That is a bold accusation. Do you have any proof?" Alim asked.
"I have a man with no eyes!" Anders hissed. "What more do you need?"

"Proof." Alim said. "A statement from Amell himself. Otherwise I can't help you."

Anders seethed. He told himself to be rational, but rational wasn't happening with his heart and his head in so much pain and so many pieces. He glared at Alim, and the elf stared impassively back. "Fine," Anders gave up. He'd find Quentin some other way. "I guess that's all. So how does this work? Do I come back in a month, do you come to the Vigil, do we meet in some dark alley at midnight?"

"We'll write," Alim said. "You're asking on behalf of Amell. We'll send the letter to him."

Lot of good that would do. It wasn't like Amell could do read it. Then again, with Amell's trust issues, he'd probably be fine with Anders reading his mail. "That works. Thanks."

Anders left with Justice.

"Are you sure about this?" Anders asked when they were out of the docks, and on their way back to the glasssmith to pick up Amell's eyes, "Staying?"

"I have an obligation," Justice said. "'Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten.' It is not an oath I took, but it is one which resonates with me, and which mattered to Kristoff."

"These darkspawn are a cancer at the heart of this world. Eradicating them is a noble pursuit from which I cannot turn away, any more you could turn away from your Commander."

"Look, it's not like we're married. I just want to fix this. I have to fix this. It's... I..." Anders stared at his hands. It didn't matter what Amell said. Anders knew what he'd done. "It was my fault."

"Then you have an obligation to set things right," Justice said.

"I'm trying." Anders said.

"That is all that can be asked." Justice said.

Chapter End Notes

An optional Apples and Apostates Chapter told from Amell's perspective following this chapter if you want to read both in chronological order.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I hope this arc isn't too much of a chore to get through. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 20 Frumentum Afternoon
Vigil's Keep Warden Commander's Quarters

Nothing. A multitude of summonings and bindings. Dozens of corruption spells. Persuasion, control, mental manipulation, three pages in elvish. Detailed instructions and diagrams for physical magic, and stepping into the Fade. Five runes bound with demons, three runes as place holders for more demons. Instructions for a Harrowing, for a Joining, a ritual for preparing dragon blood.


The necromancy was the only thing Anders found even remotely helpful. Amell had a few recent notes, hypothesizing rebuilding a corpse with telekinesis and binding a wisp to the result. When Anders realized why the notes were recent, he threw up. His imagination ran wild, thinking of Quentin's 'research' and what he had planned for Amell's eyes.

Anders pushed past it, and had a moment where he stood over Lyna's grave, and the small tree Velanna had planted for her, but the moment passed. He wasn't a grave robber. He didn't know enough to warrant mutilating the poor girl's corpse. He didn't know anything.

He requisitioned a handful of books on advanced spirit healing from the Circle, despite the fact that he had to talk to Cera to do so. He read Amell's grimoire, and he waited. He hated it. The days never felt normal. They sped or crawled past him, and all the while Anders felt like he was just waiting around for Amell to die.

The rest of the Wardens felt it too. They visited frequently. Queer visits, filled with drinking and reminiscing, forced smiles and awkward laughs. Amell got his glass eyes, and traded his bandage for a blindfold which never came off. For the most part, Amell seemed fine. He got better at maneuvering around his quarters, and learned to do most things on his own, but while they never talked about it, Anders knew he hadn't changed his mind about his Calling.

Sex was... different. Anders wasn't used to cuddling, but that was apparently a thing that they were doing and Anders honestly couldn't say which of them had started it. With Amell blind, the only positions he wanted to keep using were ones that left them tangled in each other, so Amell could find him easily. Anders hadn't decided how he felt about it, and preferred focusing on simple things, like the fact that Amell wore a beard well.

Jowan, or Levyn, or whatever his name was was nothing like Anders anticipated. A blood mage
who betrayed his best friend to escape the Tower and later went on poison an Arl and destroy an arling seemed like an intimidating sort of fellow. Ten feet tall, with blood dripping out his sleeves, and an evil laugh worse than Amell's. Whatever Jowan was, it wasn't that.

Anders was sitting with Amell, playing chess with him as best they were able, considering Anders often had to remind him where the pieces were on the board, when Jowan finally arrived at the Vigil and was seen up to Amell's quarters. He was a squirrelly-looking fellow dressed in cheap, un-dyed wool, meekly clutching a satchel to his chest, with a furrow to his brow that made him look like a beaten dog. He had nappy black hair, a shadow of stubble, and he was about as thin as Anders expected an apostate to be.

That demeanor vanished when he saw Amell. Relief flooded over him, and he just looked like a normal man. "There you are!" Jowan said, throwing his satchel on an armchair and walking into the sitting area. "What were you thinking, making me come here? I think I had eight heart attacks just going up the stairs. You know I hate soldiers. And vague letters. What's going on?"

"Jowan?" Amell said. Anders moved the chess board out of his way so Amell could stand up, and stumble towards his friend's voice.

"Levyn, remember?" Jowan said, "I'm digging the blindfold. Very mysterious. You look like you're about to tell me my future."

"Where-" Amell frowned. He took another step and his hand connected with Jowan's chest. Amell grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

Jowan patted at Amell's back with one hand, and waved at Anders with the other. Anders waved back. "So... this is a thing." Jowan said. "A thing that's starting to freak me out a little. What's going on? Why are we hugging so much?"

"Maybe I just missed you," Amell said.

"Oh boy," Jowan said. "That's not good. Are you dying? You're dying, aren't you?"

"He's not dying." Anders said.

"You look... really familiar." Jowan said.

Jowan seemed familiar too, but not in the sense that Anders had ever met him before. Amell must have had a type, and that type was apparently 'flippant shithead.' "I get that a lot." Anders said.

Amell finally let go of Jowan, and bumbled back towards the couch. "Is there room for him to sit?"

Anders scooted over. "There is now."

Amell accidentally sat on Ander's thigh. Anders moved Amell so he was next to him, and Jowan sat on the other side of him.

"You really don't remember Anders?" Amell asked.

"Anders? Wait, like, the Anders?" Jowan eyebrows vanished up into his bangs.

"I'm 'an' Anders. I don't if I'm 'the' Anders." Anders said.

"So are you two...?" Jowan said vaguely. Amell's shit-eating grin answered him before Anders could think of anything glib to say. "No way. You seriously turned him? Wow. I owe you that dessert after
all. What was it that day? Was it an orange? I don't remember."

"It was an apple." Amell said.

"It was not." Jowan said.

"It was." Amell said.

Jowan laughed, a perfectly normal laugh, and held out a hand over Amell. Anders assumed it was for shaking, so he shook it. "Well hey that's... my condolences, Anders."

"Thanks," Anders said.

"So what am I doing here?" Jowan asked. "What's with the blindfold? Am I interrupting the naughty mage and the helpless recruit or something?"

"One of us would have to role-play a templar in that one, so definitely not." Anders said.

"I'm blind," Amell said.

"Taking off the blindfold might help with that," Jowan joked. Amell snorted. "So uh... did you want me to take a look at it? That wasn't a pun, I swear. Hope and I might be able to do something."

"No," Amell said. "I just want to talk. Catch up."

"Do you want me to leave you two alone?" Anders asked.

"If you're uncomfortable," Amell said.

"Hey, no, stick around," Jowan said. "That's the whole point of introducing friends to lovers, right? Seeing how uncomfortable we can make each other? You should have heard this ass when I introduced him to Lily."

Anders spent the rest of the day listening and trading stories. Aside from the part where Jowan's lover left him and was sent to Aeonar, Jowan sounded like he'd gotten Anders' dream life. The man lived in a small town in West Hill with a group of refugees he'd saved from the Blight. He was happy hedge mage who worked as the town's healer, and thanks to their history, none of the villagers were in any hurry to turn him over to the templars.

Amell set Jowan up in one of the guest rooms, and arranged for him to stay until the end of the month. It was well into the evening before the man actually retired to it, and Anders was alone with Amell again. They sat together on the couch, sharing a bottle of wine, and it felt deceptively domestic. Or, more appropriately, it felt like how Anders had always pictured domesticity.

"So Jowan seems familiar," Anders said.

"I'm not surprised," Amell said, "You probably ran into him a few times at the Circle."

"No, I mean he reminds me of someone," Anders said. "Did you ever have a crush on him too?"

"Jowan?" Amell snorted, "No. I'm not sure what he looks like now, but in the Circle, he never brushed his hair, and he was always forgetting to shave. We got there at around the same time, and just sort of found each other. He's like a brother to me."

"I kind of envy that, honestly." Anders said. "I didn't have anyone like that. Since the Circle expects magic to manifest early, there weren't a lot of accommodations for someone who didn't fit the mold."
Most of my classes were with apprentices a lot younger than I was, until after my Harrowing, and by then everyone already had their cliques."

"I thought you were popular," Amell said.

"Well yeah, popular, sure," Anders shrugged. "I had plenty of friends, and plenty of 'friends' but no one I'd call a brother to me. Honestly, and don't laugh, the closest relationship I had back at the Circle was with one of my mentors."

"Anyone I know?" Amell asked.

"Maybe," Anders said, "Probably not. Did you ever meet Karl? Karl Thekla? He taught primal magic, and I know that's not really your thing."

"Of course I know Karl," Amell said, "He's a member of the Collective. They transferred him to Kirkwall, I think not long after the Blight. We needed it. We don't have much of a foothold there."

"No shit?" Anders asked.

"No shit," Amell said.

"Well... that explains a lot," Anders took a drink, "He never gave me any of the lectures the other senior mages did. You know, about following the rules and keeping my head down and all that. I knew he was a libertarian, but I never had him pegged for a member of a creepy shadow guild that operates outside the Chantry."

"Were you two close?" Amell asked.

"I mean... He was a friend," Anders shrugged. "We haven't spoken in a long time. I wouldn't mind hearing from him."

"You could write," Amell said, "Alim handles letters to members of the Collective. He could probably get something through for you."

"Yeah, but it would probably cost me a sovereign," Anders snorted, "That man is an extortionist." A very attractive extortionist, but an extortionist.


"Well... then I guess I'll send him one," Anders said.

"Have you heard from your mother yet?" Amell asked.

"No," Anders said. "Tallo is a long ways off. I wouldn't be surprised if it took till Firstfall or Haring for me to get a letter back."

"I'll give orders to the Constable to approve your leave," Amell promised, finding Anders' hand after a bit of searching and giving it a squeeze. "And ten sovereigns, in case you want to bring her down here and you need anything when I'm gone."

"I really doubt I'll need ten sovereigns worth of anything." Anders said, "I could buy a piece of Andraste's shin-bone with that much coin."

"Her shin-bone?" Amell asked with a small smile.

"I hear they sell pretty well in the markets at Amaranthine," Anders said.
"You're ridiculous," Amell said.

"Don't pretend you don't love it," Anders grinned.

"I do," Amell reached for the low table to set his drink down. He managed eventually, and claimed a comfortable spot on Anders' shoulder.

"You're getting better at that," Anders said.

"I guess." Amell said.

Anders wanted to ask him if he'd changed his mind about his Calling, but he was too afraid of the answer. "Anything on your mind?"

"A few things." Amell said. "You, mostly."

"That's my favorite topic," Anders said. "What about me?"

"Just you in general." Amell said unhelpfully. "... Tell me something I don't know about you."

"That's a little random." Anders said. "Like what? My favorite annum or something?"

"Satinalia?" Amell guessed.

"Nope." Anders said. "First Day. Don't get me wrong, I love getting presents, but I hate giving them. Apostate isn't the most lucrative lifestyle, and I could never afford to get anyone anything good."

"You get a stipend now," Amell reminded him. "And you got me my statuette, which I liked."

"That doesn't count. That was you." Anders said.

"What does that mean?" Amell asked.

"It means now that I have you figured out you're pretty easy to think up affordable presents for." Anders said.

"So if you were going to get me something right now what would it be?" Amell asked.

"Right now?" Anders asked. "Sex, probably."

"You're right, you do have me figured out." Amell said.

Anders laughed, and kissed the top of Amell's head, and inhaled soap, copper, and magic. "Is that what we're doing right now, then?" Anders asked.

"It could be." Amell said.

Anders didn't need much more encouragement than that. He set his drink down on the low table, and embraced Amell from behind. Anders started on Amell's doublet. Amell tried to push Anders' hands away when he heard the first button snap free. "I can do it."

"I want to," Anders kissed Amell's neck. Amell stopped protesting, and Anders took his time with the rest of the buttons. The doublet fell off, and Anders' own doublet soon joined it. Anders pulled Amell back against his chest, and unbuckled Amell's belt.

Anders loved the way Amell's cock felt beneath his fingers, and later tasted on his tongue. He loved
the sounds Amell made for him and the way he sighed his name. Anders had never found a more
perfect way to forget the rest of the world and its horrors than to lose himself in someone else.

Amell's soft skin was damp and dripping with sweat in minutes, and the firm muscle it covered
looked all the more perfect when he tensed or trembled for Anders' touch. They lost the rest of their
clothes, and Anders ended up on his back with Amell over him. Amell pushed two fingers inside
him, and stroked him until the mounting pleasure of it almost made Anders queasy.

"Amell-just-" Anders moaned and couldn't finish.

Amell bit the leg Anders had draped over the back of the couch, and traded his fingers for his cock a
few seconds later. A sound half a shout, half a moan ripped from Anders' throat, and a roll from

Anders felt like he was on fire. His skin tingled and burned, and the sensations Amell stirred in him
were so passionate and pleasurable they were almost unbearable. Choked with ecstasy, he watched
Amell fuck him, his hair damp and dark and dripping beads of sweat on Anders' chest, his lips parted
and spilling tattered breaths.

"Harder," Anders begged, and begged again until Amell's hips connecting with his ass filled the
room with wet slaps Anders barely heard over the rush of blood in his ears and the frantic beat of his
heart. Anders' climax felt like falling off a cliff and plunging into an ocean, the wild currents dashing
him against the cliff face until he was breathless and sore and utterly spent.

Anders were ears ringing. His cock throbbed, and all the feeling fled from his fingers and toes.
Anders wiped his cum off his chest and fed it to Amell, who licked it greedily off his fingers. "Cum
inside me,"

"Fuck, Anders, I-... I really-" Amell gasped.

"Do it." Anders said. Amell screamed, raw and deep and perfect. Anders felt him tremble, and felt
the heat of him fill him up inside. Amell collapsed on top of him. Anders kissed him, and kissed him
again, and kissed him even more. Anders' lips were swollen and bruised by the time he stopped, and
stumbled to the washroom to clean himself up.

He came back and found Amell abed. Anders climbed over him, pulled him into his arms, and rolled
over so Amell was lying on his chest.

"Anders?" Amell said.

"Hm?" Anders said. Amell kept silent. Anders ran his fingers down Amell's spine, wondering if he'd
fallen asleep. It won him a shiver. "What is it?"

"Tell me something else I don't know about you." Amell said.

"This again." Anders tugged Amell's ear. "Why don't you just ask me whatever you want to ask
me?"

"I don't have anything I want to ask," Amell said. "I just want to get to know you better."

"Come on. You already know me." Anders said. "I'm handsome, I'm funny, I like cats, and I've got a
killer fashion sense. What else is there to know?"

"Favorite color?" Amell asked.
"Depends on the season and what the color is for, obviously." Anders said.

"Favorite season?" Amell asked.

"Spring." Anders said. "These questions are boring."

"... Do you have a perfect life?" Amell asked. "The one you imagine if everything had gone right for you, or if you'd been born as someone else?"

"Are you saying I'm not perfect already?" Anders asked.

"I'm not saying that at all." Amell said.

"... I mean, sure," Anders shrugged. "Who doesn't? I guess I used to picture the country cottage, the pretty plump wife and five kids under foot, same as everyone else."

"Five?" Amell asked.

"I like kids," Anders shrugged again. "You know, in another life. One where I wasn't born a mage, or templars didn't exist."

"I thought you hated kids," Amell said. "From how you talked about them when you were growing up, what they did to your cat."

"I hated those kids." Anders said. "Not all kids. Do you ever think about kids? I mean, I know that doesn't exactly mix with you, but..."

"I have a kid." Amell said.

"Is that some kind of joke about Oghren?" Anders asked.

"No," Amell said. "I told you I'd been with a woman. Once. It got her with child, and that child should be... a month or so old now, I think."

"Wow." Anders said. "Is she... I mean... What?"

"I've never told anyone that before," Amell said, exhaling bemusedly through his nose as if surprised by his own confession, "Oghren doesn't even know."

"... Did you, I mean did you want-you weren't-" Anders said.

"No, she didn't rape me. Thank you for asking." Amell said.

"Hey look-" Anders started.

"No, I'm serious. Thank you. I'm glad you know me well enough to ask," Amell found Anders' hair and ran his hands through it. "It was complicated. She was a friend. I guess you could say she wanted a child. We made a deal, and part of it was that I'd never see her or the child again."

"A deal? Like a blood magic deal? What did you get out of it?" Anders asked.

"A ritual that helped me defeat the Archdemon." Amell said.

"Sounds worth it" Anders said. "Not really how I'd want to go about having kids, but you play the hand you're dealt I guess."
"If you want kids, you should know it's rare for Grey Wardens to have children after the Joining," Amell said. "The Taint makes it hard to conceive or sire."

"...well I think it's extra hard in this case, but we can always keep trying." Anders joked.

Amell snorted, and the snort turned into a cackle. "I meant-" Amell wheezed, and laughed so hard he started coughing.

"Come on, I know what you meant," Anders laughed. "The kids thing was just something I used to think about. I'm good with the way things are. With what I've got right now." With you, Anders should have said, but didn't.

Anders wondered if Amell heard it, unspoken though it may have been. Amell toyed with Anders' hair and traced the features on his face, and Anders fell asleep never knowing.

A week passed. Jowan stayed at the Vigil, his visits intermingling with the other Wardens. Anders spent almost every moment with Amell, talking about things he'd never meant to talk about, and telling him things he'd never told anyone. Then the letters came. The Circle sent a guide cane and their condolences. The Collective sent back a sovereign.

Anders had a small panic attack. He locked himself in Amell's washroom for close to an hour, hyperventilating and crying until exhaustion and a headache forced him to get a hold on himself. It was almost impossible, with Amell's response. When Anders read the letters to him, all Amell had to say was that he 'expected as much' and that it was 'no big deal.'

There was still Avernus, but the Orlesians arrived before Avernus' letter did. The three Orlesians brought six horses with them, five Orlesian coursers and one Anderfel courser as a gift for Amell. They were a dwarf, an elf, and a human, but Anders was too distraught to catch their names.

Amell wanted to fill them in on the state of the arling as soon as they arrived. Anders went to the barracks to wait for him, and found Oghren drinking with Jowan and Sigrun. "Hey Sparkles, you drinking?"

"I think you can stop asking me that at this point." Anders said.

Anders took a seat at the table and caught the bottle Oghren shoved his way. He uncorked it without bothering to ask after the contents. It tasted like alcohol, harsh and hot.

"So I guess this is it, right?" Jowan asked. "The Orlesian Wardens take over and he goes to his Calling?"

"Yep." Oghren said. "You heading back to West Hill, Greasy?"

"As soon as he leaves," Jowan agreed. "I know it sounds horrible but I kind of wish he hadn't asked me to come. It's a lot easier, not knowing. I didn't used to think that, but with some things, I think he's got the right idea. You know, lying."

"I should be going with him." Sigrun said. "I'm already dead. The Legion is waiting for me. He's the one who told me I shouldn't go to my Calling alone. Who else am I going to go with when all this is over?"

"Right. Great plan," Anders rolled his eyes. "I'm having a bad hair day. Is there room for me on the suicide bandwagon?"

"I think this is a little worse than a bad hair day, sweetie." Sigrun said.
"So he's blind! So what!?" Anders demanded. "It's not the end of the world."

"But it's the end of his world." Sigrun said. "You don't understand. I get it. I'm holding on to avenge the Legion, but if I didn't have that? None of you could stop me from going to my Calling."

"I'd still give it a shot." Oghren said.

"Wardens. Fun bunch." Jowan said.

"You're telling me." Anders said. "Look, you're his friend. Can you go talk to him? Convince him he's making a mistake?"

"I... don't think you know Amell that well." Jowan said. "No one convinces him to do anything."

"You did," Anders said. "You convinced him to destroy your phylactery. He said you were like a brother to him. I bet you could talk him out of this."

"That's really not what happened." Jowan said. "I mean, it was my idea, but we were going to destroy our phylacteries together. I didn't have to convince him to help me, he wanted to... and then everything just kind of fell apart.

"You know that thing we have in common?" Jowan asked, needlessly vague. There wasn't a soul among them who would say anything against his blood magic.

"Yes." Anders said.

"Well, I only taught myself how to do... that, because of who he was." Jowan said. "He was always something else. I could never keep up with him. I just wanted be as good at one thing as he was at everything. If he sees me as a brother, then it's a stupid little brother. There's nothing I can say that he'll hear.

"I don't know what your relationship with him is like, but jokes aside, he had a huge thing for you in the Circle. Whatever you've got going on, it probably means a lot to him. So you know... Thanks. I know what it's like, thinking you're going to die with a mountain of regrets, wishing you'd done things differently. I'm glad Amell's not going like that."

"He shouldn't be going at all!" Anders snapped. "How can you all just sit here, commiserating over something that hasn't even happened yet? That doesn't have to happen? This is so fucked."

"The world's fucked, Sparkles," Oghren said. "Get used to it."

"Fuck you." Anders stood up and left.

He went back upstairs, and spent a productive hour sitting outside Amell's quarters. Anders could have tried reading more of the tomes he'd requisitioned from the Circle, or reading Amell's grimoire, but he was worried his eyes would start misting if he tried.

Towards the end of the hour, the three Orlesian Wardens finally left Amell's quarters, and Anders went inside. Amell was still sitting on the couch. Anders sat next to him, and pulled Amell into a hug. "Promise me you'll wait for Avernus to write back." Anders begged.

"I'll wait," Amell promised.

It was something.

Two days later, the letter came. Anders read it aloud for Amell with his heart in his throat and sweat
on his palms.

"Commander,

"You have my sincere condolences for your predicament. I might have a solution for you, but I cannot promise anything, except that you may find the methods unscrupulous. I am reluctant to commit my ideas to paper, given the circumstances. Come to Soldier's Peak at your earliest convenience, and we can discuss it.

"Avernus."

Anders set the letter down, laughing. "See? Didn't I tell you? Someone would know something. Avernus knows something! Just like you said he would. I mean you were lying at the time, but who cares? This works. This'll work."

"He said he might know something, Anders," Amell said. "And you don't know Avernus. If he thinks the methods are unscrupulous-"

"Who cares?" Anders interrupted him. "It's something. It's something, and you can go, and whatever it is, you can go and you can do it. And if whatever it is doesn't work, then you can come back, and we can find something else. This isn't the end of the world."

Amell smiled.

Anders kissed him, letting his head rest on Amell's forehead when he broke off. "So when are you going?"

"Tomorrow night." Amell said. "I don't want the Vigil to see me leave. I need my things packed and put into storage, and Oghren needs to do the same."

"Alright." Anders said. "Do you want me to go tell him?"

"Please." Amell said.

Anders fled downstairs to find Oghren. The dwarf wasn't in the barracks or the kitchen. After a bit of searching, Anders found him out at the training grounds. He was shirtless, with his hands wrapped, and doing his best to punch the stuffing out of a training dummy.

"Hope that's not me." Anders said over the thud of the dwarf's fists on the leather.

"What?" Oghren stopped punching, and turned around to frown at him. "It's a dummy, dummy. It ain't anyone."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you the other day," Anders said.

"Shit's hard. I get it," Oghren wiped his nose off on his fist. "What do you need, Sparkles? You come out here just to apologize? You wanna braid my beard or something? Go spend time with the Boss, while you still can."

"Will you stop saying things like that?" Anders asked. "Look, Avernus wrote back. He says he knows something. Amell wants you to pack your things. He says you two are leaving tomorrow night."

"Sparkles, do me a favor, yeah?" Oghren asked.

"What kind of favor?" Anders asked suspiciously.
"Let's pretend for a bit this ain't all gonna be rainbows and butterfly farts," Oghren said, unwrapping the bandages around his hand. "Say we go, and shit doesn't work out, yeah? What then, Sparkles?"

"Then you come back, and we find something else." Anders said.

"Yeah? Let's say we don't. Then what?" Oghren asked.

"Just pack your things, alright?" Anders made to leave.

"Sparkles." Oghren called after him. "I still got that favor to ask."

Anders stopped, frustrated. "What?"

"You know what I'm getting at," Oghren said. "I know you're in serious denial about this, but get it out now. Before he leaves. Just in case,"

There was nothing to get out. Anders left Oghren in the yard, and spent the rest of the day packing up Amell's things. Everyone said their goodbyes the next day. Anders didn't see the need. Amell would be back in a month. There was no reason for Amell to want to talk to him alone, the evening before he left, but Amell asked anyway.

The other Wardens were ushered out, and left the two of them alone. Anders stood in the center of Amell's packed up quarters, shuffling his feet and wringing his hands. Please don't say it. Please don't say it. Maker, please don't let him say it.

"Anders, could you do me a favor?" Amell asked.

Sweet merciful Maker, thank you.

"Of course I can," Anders said, relieved. "What do you need?"

"Can you take care of Barkspawn for me?" Amell asked.

"What do you mean?" Anders asked. "Just take him with you. Does he not like Avernus or something?"

"He's fine with Avernus, but I can't take him with me." Amell said.

"Why not?" Anders asked. "I get not wanting the Orlesians to go through your things while you're gone, but you're coming back. Just bring him."

"I'll ask Sigrun." Amell decided.

Amell started towards his door. It was clearly the end of the conversation, but Anders wasn't about to let it end there. He grabbed Amell's arm. "You're coming back."

"Anders... I told you," Amell sighed, "If no one knows anything, I'm going to my Calling. Avernus might not."

"There are other options!" Anders yelled. "Tevinter might know something. I might know something. You have to come back."

"Why would you know anything?" Amell asked.

"I can find something, okay? I'm an amazing healer. Just... Just give me a few months to study your grimoire and the tomes I got from the Circle-"
"No." Amell interrupted him.

"What do you mean 'No'?'" Anders demanded. "You can't say 'no' to me."

"No." Amell said. "I told you, you can't use blood magic to make your own spells. You have no idea how unpredictable and volatile it can be. Read my grimoire. Some of those spells, the difference is a single word. A single thought."

"I don't care!" Anders grabbed Amell's arms with both hands. Amell's neutral expression cracked, and he seemed torn between a smile and a frown. Anders had lost a long time ago, and his eyes were welling with tears that blinking made stream down his cheeks. "I don't care. I'll risk it. Please. We can risk it. You said so yourself, sometimes blood magic is worth the risks."

"Not this time." Amell set his hands on Anders' chest and slid them up cradle Anders' face in his hands. Anders let him, despite the fact that Amell would know he was crying. "I'm sorry, Anders. This is my choice. I'll keep my promise. I'll go to Soldier's Peak. I'll try. But that's it."

"Why the fuck do you want to die so badly?" Anders demanded, smacking his hands off.

"My father used my lover to cut out my eyes and now my livelihood is ruined." Amell said, so dispassionately it scared Anders. "The only reason I even made it until the Orlesians got here is because I didn't want you to find my body and feel guilty."

"Fucking," Anders dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "We can fix this. Just try. You're already getting better at being blind. You seem fine."

"I'm not." Amell said. "Will you take care of Barkspawn or should I ask Sigrun?"

"You should be less of a selfish stubborn bastard." Anders said.

"I'll ask Sigrun." Amell said.

Anders let him go. The door shut behind Amell, and the oak was heavy enough that Anders couldn't tell if everyone was talking outside or heading to the courtyard. It wasn't so bad. Avernus said he knew something. Amell would come back. No reason to be melodramatic.

Anders left Amell's quarters. The hall was empty, and lit only with sconces. Anders went downstairs, and out into the inner courtyard. Moon and starlight were dim, so Anders summoned a ball of mage light and saying their final farewells.

Sigrun had Barkspawn. Oghren had the Anderfel Courser by the reigns. It was white and russet, like someone had poured blood over an ordinary horse and left it to dry. Apt, as always. Oghren gave Amell a nudge, and said something to him. "Anders?" Amell asked. "Did you need a minute with me?"

"Just... Here to see you off." Anders said lamely.

Sigrun gave Amell another hug. Velanna called him an idiot. Nathaniel and Justice wished him luck. Jowan should have been Anders. He grabbed Amell and burst into tears, and everyone backed up to give them some space.

"You guys already get your goodbye in?" Sigrun asked, giving Barkspawn a pat on the head.

"Sure." Anders lied.
Eventually Jowan and Amell pulled apart. Oghren got on the horse first, with the aid of a stepping stool that looked akin to stairs. He held down a hand for Amell, who searched for it blindly. "Left. Left. Your other left, numb nuts."

Amell found it. Oghren heaved him onto the horse, and Amell wrapped his arms around him. Oghren set the horse to a trot. Anders felt like he should say something. Do something. No words could escape around the lump in his throat, and his feet were lead.

The damn dog was braver than Anders. Barkspawn bolted after the horse, barking happily. Sigrun ran after him. "No, boy! We have to stay!"

The dog ignored her. Oghren pulled on the reins, and the horse stopped. "Boss?" Oghren said.

"No, boy, stay." Amell said.

Barkspawn cocked his head at him. Oghren let the horse walk forward a few feet. Barkspawn followed it. "Yeah he ain't staying." Oghren said.

"Damnit." Amell swore and swung his leg over the horse. He fucked up, blind, and ended up falling off and onto his ass. A plume of dirt rose up around him with the fall, and Barkspawn ran over to lick Amell's face. "No!" Amell yelled. "No, you have to stay! Bad dog! Stay with Sigrun."


Sigrun nudged Anders. Anders moved one leg, and then the other, and eventually made his way over to kneel next to Amell. "I'll cast a sleep spell on him." Anders offered. "I'll wake him up when you're gone."

"Thank you." Amell said.

Anders cast the spell. Barkspawn yawned and fell over with a heavy thud. Anders helped Amell up off the ground, but couldn't bring himself to let go of Amell's arm. Words tumbled out of him unbidden, and Anders pulled Amell into a hug to whisper them in Amell's ear.

"Amell, I'm begging you. Please. Please come back if it doesn't work. You can't say 'no' to me. I saw the sketches, I've heard everyone talking, I listen to everything you almost say. Can't I be reason enough? You love me, don't you?"

"... I wasn't going to say anything." Amell ran gentle hands over Anders' shoulders. "I know we haven't been together that long, and I thought it might be creepy."

"Fuck it." Anders said.

"Of course I love you." Amell pulled back from the hug to kiss him. Anders poured all his emotions into it before they could strangle him. He was rough, and he was soft, and everything in between. Amell clung to him, and Anders told himself to remember the way his hands felt on his shoulders, as if hanging on for dear life.

Eventually, he had to let go.

"Take care of yourself, Anders."
Fanart of this chapter! (Spoiler Version)
More fanart for this chapter!

An optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter told from Jowan's perspective to provide some insight into his character. The chapter links back to this one.

An optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter told from Oghren's perspective, immediately following this chapter, if you would like to follow both in chronological order. It links back to this one.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. We hit 200 kudos! Thank you so much for supporting this story, it really means a lot to me. Thank you all for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 1 Umbralis Morning  
Vigil's Keep, Wardens Barracks  

"Atrast vala, friends. My name is Eram Kader," The Orlesian dwarf said. He was a barrel of a man with a thick brown beard, and a bulbous if symmetrical nose. His skin was dark, and it contrasted nicely with his white teeth, seen often in his wide smile, "Warden Commander Amell has appointed me as Warden Constable in his absence.

"I'm sure you've all seen me and my comrades around the Vigil these past few days, but I wanted to wait until things had settled down to give official introductions. While we are from Orlais, I hope we can all agree that there are no borders within the Order. This is my second in command, Leonie Caron," Eram gestured to the human beside him.

The woman was a giant. Easily over six feet tall, she wore a sleeveless shirt with her tabard to show off her arms. They were thick ropes of muscle, and riddled with battle scars. She had brown hair tied into a bun at the back of her head, and ice blue eyes. Anders didn't doubt she could tie him into a pretzel if she tried.

"And this is Elyon Andras, a talented force mage." The dwarf gestured to the elf. Elyon was alarming short, barely taller than the dwarf. Half his face was tattooed green, and the other half was covered in freckles. Anders guessed that meant he was Dalish. Great.

"Aneth ara, lethallin." Velanna said. She had her bare feet up on the table they were all sitting around. Anders couldn't see her soles, so he didn't really care.

Elyon sneered at her.

Or maybe not Dalish.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintances," Eram continued. "Commander Amell told me of you all, but I prefer to know the men and women under my command personally. If you're all comfortable, I'd like us to go around and introduce ourselves. I'll start.

"As I said, my name is Eram Kader. I was of the Warrior Caste in Orzammar, so I have a great deal of field experience with darkspawn and consider myself a competent tactician. If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to ask me. You'll find me on the front line for all of our engagements. Why don't we go right from here?"

"Leonie Caron," The giant said. "Former chevalier. I fight as Eram's second."

Charming girl.
"Nathaniel Howe," Nathaniel said. "I'm our tracker, and forward scout. Amell was training me in strategy to be appointed Constable... before the incident."

"I was told of that." Eram said. "And I'd be more than happy to continue your training, and have you lead a few expeditions in the future."

"This is ridiculous." Velanna muttered to Anders while the others kept talking, and Sigrun had her turn. "We are not children. What is the point of this exercise? This man is to be our Commander but he thinks himself our hahren."

"Maybe you should slap him," Anders whispered.

"Maybe I should." Velanna muttered. Anders exhaled hard through his nose. One corner of Velanna's lips twitched up towards a grin.

Maker save him, Anders liked her a little.

Barkspawn nudged his hand, and Anders gave his ear a scratch. Despite the fact that Anders had knocked the poor boy unconscious, the dog seemed to have developed a fondness for him. He smelled rancid, he drooled excessively, and he was ridiculously overbearing, but he was Amell's.

Anders didn't mind so much, especially considering the dog got on with Ser Pounce-a-Lot. The dog sat next to his chair, while Ser Pounce-a-Lot sat in his lap. Anders felt like a regular ranger.

"My name is Velanna," Velanna said when it was her turn. "I am here for my sister,"

"The Commander mentioned," Eram said. "He also mentioned she seemed to have some form of blight sickness. I will do everything in my power to retrieve her alive, and see if we can't put her through the Joining to cure her,"

Velanna shifted in her seat, and uncrossed and crossed her feet, "... You have my thanks."

"Anders, at your service," Anders said when it was his turn, "I run the infirmary, and sometimes I do tricks." Like carve out my lover's eyes in my sleep. Or juggle.

"The Commander mentioned you were to be given leave to visit your family in Tallo." Eram said. "I would approve it, but I think we can all agree the Wardens find themselves in dire straits at the moment, caught between two warring factions of darkspawn, assassins, and open rebellion. A healer is invaluable in these dark times, and I can't in good conscience see you off until things in the arling settle down. I'm sure you understand."


"I am conflicted," Justice said. "How do I proceed with my introduction?"

"Justice, isn't it? I was told of you," Eram said. "I agree with the decision to keep your identity a secret, but we're all Wardens here. You can tell the truth among us. I confess, I don't know or understand much of magic. I'd be reassured if you were always in the company of a mage."

"I refuse." Velanna said.

"Constable, this creature is more a risk to mages than anything else." Elyon said. "It still has the potential to possess us."

"Justice would never do that!" Sigrun exclaimed. "And besides, I'm already taking care of him. You
don't have to worry."

"Such a thing would be abominable," Justice said. "It is for demons, of which I am not."

"All the same," Eram said.

"I'll watch him." Anders volunteered. "It's fine."

"Thank you." Eram said with a nod.

"My name is Eylon," The elf said when they reached him. "And I am not Dalish. These marks on my face are a mistake I joined the Wardens to atone for."

"How can you say such a thing?" Velanna demanded, dropping her feet off the table. "You wear the vallaslin of Elgar'nan, the All Father."

"God of vengeance." Elyon said disdainfully. "The Dalish are a vengeful people, and I believed in them once, but not now. You and I are not kin."

"At ease Eylon," Eram reprimanded the little elf, and planted his elbows on the table when he leaned forward. "As I said, and I'm sure you all know, these are dark times. I'm not sure how Commander Amell handled things, but under my command, you can expect transparency from me.

"First things first, we need to start recruiting. Heavily. We are eight Wardens against what sounds like the start of another Blight. We'll need to start weekly expeditions into the Deep Roads to search for this 'Architect' and 'Mother,' but we also need to address the state of this arling.

"It is my understanding that there is a contract of some sort on Commander Amell. Seneschal Varel and Mistress Woolsey believe the contract exists as a result of public fraternization between two mages flaunting their autonomy, and I'm inclined to agree. While I may not understand magic, I do understand surfacers have an unhealthy preoccupation with prejudice against it.

"As the Warden Commander is no longer here, I see no further need to keep hostages at the Vigil. This is an ugly bit of business that will not serve to win us the hearts and minds of the populace, which we as Orlesians so desperately need. I will be sending them back to their families, and will give a public address to the nobility in the interests of uniting them in common cause against our real enemy."

"A mistake." Leonie said. "This is bigger than the late Commander Amell-"

"Maybe late," Anders corrected her.

"The Game is afoot here, Constable," Leonie continued, ignoring him. "You play it poorly."

"Well, Leonie, when you're Constable, you can play it differently," Eram said. "My decision stands. Now, I know all of you have just lost your Commander and possible friend-"

"Maybe lost." Anders interrupted him.

"Just so." Eram allotted with a nod. "But I'd like for us to blow off the dust and find the vein of silver in all this. It's Satinalia, and if I've learned anything about you surfacers, it's that you love your holidays. While I haven't been here long enough to get to know any of you, and the sort of presents that might be appropriate, I think we can all agree on stiff drinks, good food, and loud music.

"We'll be holding a feast in the dining hall this evening. I understand if any of you would prefer
mourn or pray, but I hope that you'll all attend, and we can get off on the right foot, as Brothers and Sisters. Atrast tunsha. Dismissed."

The dwarf stood, and gave a polite nod before departing. The giant got up from her chair and followed him.

"Would any of you be of a mind to give me a tour of the Vigil?" Eylon asked. "It is vast, and I am unfamiliar with Fereldan architecture."

Anders made a valiant effort to avoid eye contact. There wasn't really a need. He didn't doubt Sigrun would volunteer herself. An uncomfortably long moment past, with no volunteers. Nathaniel stood up. "I will."

The two left. Anders stayed in his chair, alternatively petting Ser Pounce-a-Lot or scratching Barkspawn's ears whenever the dog butted against the hand Anders left hanging.

"Wicked Grace?" Anders offered.

"I'll get my cards," Sigrun said. She hopped off her chair and went to her bunk. It was against a wall with shelves for trinkets and baubles, snow globes and flowers, figurines, and statuettes. Anders wondered how many were from Amell.

Sigrun came back with her deck, shuffled, and dealt the four of them in. Anders picked up his cards: two daggers, a serpent, an angel, and a song. He discarded the angel.

"So, no tour?" Anders asked. "I thought you were supposed to be our perky little mascot."

"I guess I'm not feeling it today." Sigrun shrugged.

"You owe him nothing." Velanna said, playing a knight.

"You've just got your knickers twisted over him not being Dalish." Anders said.

"Kristoff has memories of your kind, Velanna," Justice said. "I understand that you are unwelcome in almost every land. Why is that?"

"Why do you care?" Velanna demanded.

"He's just asking, you know," Anders said. "He's a spirit. He doesn't understand. You don't have to get uppity every time he asks a question."

"What is there to understand?" Velanna huffed. "Humans hate my people. My people hate humans. We make our own path. We always have."

"The life of an outcast seems an odd one to choose." Justice said. "I find it strange that you mortals find so many differences to hate when you have so very much in common. To one such as I, it is difficult to tell you apart. Is it not preferable to rejoice in your similarities, than rage against your differences?"

"So we should all hold hands?" Velanna snorted, "Ridiculous. Do not speak of what you do not understand, spirit."

"Sweetie, he's trying. And his name is Justice, not spirit," Sigrun said patiently, drawing a card. "Angel of Death. Play your hands."

Everyone revealed. For once in his life, Anders won. His hand was three daggers and two serpents,
and almost wished they were betting so he could have gotten something out of it. He took the cards from Sigrun to shuffle and deal. Ser Pounce-a-Lot abandoned him when Anders stopped petting him, the way a proper pet should, but the dog stayed.

"You are correct Velanna." Justice said. "I do not understand. Your world is confusing for me. Even the Fade was confusing for me, at times. My entire existence is spent seeking out wrongs to right. I know little else."

"You'll get the hang of it." Anders said. "I know it's hard for spirits to learn and retain things, but it's possible. You just have to try."

"Perhaps you are right," Justice said. "But what am I if not a seeker of justice?"

"You're our friend." Sigrun said.

"None of this changes the history between my kind and humans," Velanna said.

"Oh come off it," Anders said. "You like plenty of humans. You like Nate, you like Amell-"

"We all liked Amell," Sigrun said quietly.

"My point is obviously all humans aren't all bad, and you know it." Anders said.

"You have no idea how your kind has wronged mine." Velanna snapped.

"We can all of us be held accountable for only our own actions." Justice said. "Our own judgments. Is this not true of humans as well as elves?"

Velanna grunted.

They played for a few more rounds before lunch. Anders ate with both ladies while 'Kristoff' sat beside them, stoic as ever. Sigrun was unusually quiet, but Anders didn't think too much of it. He went to the kitchens afterwards to get some milk and gizzards for Ser Pounce-a-Lot, and a ham bone for Barkspawn. He went to the infirmary afterwards, wondering how he'd ever let Amell saddle him with so many responsibilities, and why he didn't mind so much.

The festivities started towards dinner, but Anders didn't have it in him to participate. He took The Search for the True Prophet with him to the chapel, and let Justice come with him if only because the spirit was quiet, and seemed to like Anders' company once Anders stopped being such an ass.

The chapel was deserted, with the upcoming feast. Anders walked past the many tapestries depicting scenes from the Chant without quite seeing them. He lit the sconces on the walls and the candle stands between the pews with a simple fire spell, and sat in a pew at the front. A marble statue of Andraste stared down at him. Anders wondered how blasphemous it would be if Compassion took her form.

Anders had already read the book, but he wasn't brave enough to pray. He re-read the first chapter, before the words started to slide off the page and blur together. Anders set it down, and looked at the armor clad spirit next to him, "Are you okay just sitting here?"

"I am not just sitting here." Justice said. "I was attempting to pray."

"Really?" Anders asked. "So... You're an Andrastian? You believe in all this?"

"Kristoff did." Justice said. "Some spirits... We believe a creator gave us life, and separated us from
this world. I often wonder if we believe in the Maker only because we see him in the dreams of mortals.

"So much of the Fade is created by spirits desperate to emulate your kind. Many do not care about the possibility of a Maker. Demons live in the moment, but I wonder... Faith, it requires structure and belief. In the Fade there is neither, but here you can be certain what is has always been. I find that comforting. The events that occur, occur within context. There is a structure to this world I suspect you take for granted."

"Wrong." Anders said. "Spirit healer, remember? I spend a lot of time in the Fade. I know what it's like, but I think you're pretty unique to want something different. Most spirits and demons are driven mad when they cross the Veil."

"It was a most distressing experience," Justice agreed.

"... So do you believe in the Chant?" Anders asked.

"Kristoff did." Justice said.

"You're pretty cheeky, aren't you?" Anders grinned. "I bet you knew what Oghren was talking about when he asked about Kristoff being married."

"It was... as you said, 'ridiculously personal.'" Justice said.

Anders laughed.

"May I ask what it is you are reading?" Justice asked.

"It's a book Amell lent me," Anders said. "I don't know how much of the Chant you know, but mages kind of get the short end of the stick. The Chantry likes to blame us for just about everything."

"Black City? Mages. Darkspawn? Mages. Shoes too tight? Mages. This book tells it a little differently. It claims Andraste was a mage herself, and that the magisters of Tevinter weren't responsible for the creation of darkspawn."

"These things are irrelevant." Justice said. "You were not privy to these events. You are innocent of any wrong doing and do not deserve to share blame."

"Well... It's kind of like Velanna said, Justice," Anders shrugged. "The world doesn't work like that. One mage does something wrong, all mages get the blame."

"But this is wrong." Justice said. "You should teach others that your magic does not warrant condemnation."

"It's teaching now, huh?" Anders asked. "What happened to striking a blow against my oppressors?"

"You should do this as well." Justice said.

"You're demanding, you know that?" Anders joked. He made his heart sick for it, and stared at his hands, feeling wretched.

"You are contemplating the many injustices of your world, and you have chosen to do so rather than engage in revelry, which I am led to believe is important to you." Justice said. "I thought you might have reconsidered."

"Sorry to get your hopes up, then," Anders said. "I care about this stuff, but I'm just here because I
don't know where else to be right now. You know I forgot all about today? With... with everything, I didn't get anyone anything. I thought about it though, when you and I went to Amaranthine last month.

"One of street vendors in the market was peddling tomes. Blank tomes. I saw one with a mabari on the cover, and for a second I thought it would make a nice sketch book or something. For Amell. How stupid is that?" Anders laughed, and rubbed a kink out of the back of his neck.

"I also purchased no gifts for today." Justice said.

"That... actually makes me feel a little better," Anders said. "I'm sure no one expected you to, but it's nice not being the only one."

"Is it not permitted to attend the festivities without these gifts, then?" Justice asked.

"No it's permitted. You look like an ass, but it's permitted." Anders sighed, and slouched in the pew. "I'm just trying to deal with Amell being gone, Justice, that's all. I know what Constable Craven said but you don't have to sit here with me. You can go to the feast with everyone. I'm sure a mage or two will be there."

"I prefer your company." Justice said.

"Thanks." Anders said.

"It was good of you to attempt to atone for your crimes against him." Justice said. "Whether or not his venture proves successful, you have done all you could."

"That's not good enough. It's not even close... Maker, it's so hard to sleep without him." Anders' throat closed up on him, and he was grateful for it. He didn't trust himself to keep talking.

Anders didn't keep track of how long it took him to recover, but he did. "Still trying to pray?" Anders asked.

"I was listening to your ring." Justice said.

Anders stared down at his hands. He had an enchanted set of rings from Amell. He didn't need the one from the Circle. What had the Circle ever done for him, except lock him in solitary for a year, and send him their condolences and a guide cane? Anders twisted the ring off his finger and held it out to Justice.

"Keep it," Anders said. "Happy Satinalia."

"Truly?" Justice asked, gingerly pinching the lyrium-infused ring between two gauntlet clad fingers. "This... is a beautiful gift. I do not know quite how to thank you. I shall keep it at my side as a reminder that in even in misfortune, good can be found."

"You're welcome." Anders said.

Justice took off one gauntlet, and slid the ring onto a bony finger before putting his gauntlet back on. Well. That was disgusting. Definitely no taking it back now.

The sound of footsteps echoed against the vaulted ceiling. Anders glanced over his shoulder and was surprised to see Sigrun walk down the aisle to stand next to him.

"Change of faith?" Anders joked.
"Andraste could just be one of your human ancestors, if you really want to look at it that way," Sigrun shrugged. She looked tired, dark circles beneath her bright blue eyes. Anders wondered how late it was. "The feast is still going, but we were going to have our own little thing. Just the five of us. We're going to open presents now, and you still owe me a song. You coming?"

"I didn't get anyone anything." Anders said.

"That's okay," Sigrun said. "People got you things, so you should still come."

"I don't think I have it in me right now, but thanks. Really." Anders said.

"... Do you think you're the only one upset about Amell?" Sigrun asked.

"What?" Anders asked.

"He was my friend too, you know," Sigrun said. "Next to Varlan he was the best friend I ever had. He never treated me like dirt or dust, he gave me a reason to keep fighting... Stones, he gave Mischa fifteen sovereigns for my ring just so I could keep it, so don't act like you're the only one he meant anything to. We've lost enough without losing each other, so just come open presents, or I'll bump you straight down to kill."

"You wouldn't dare." Anders said.

"I'll do it," Sigrun threatened. "I'll marry Cera. I'll marry Velanna. I'll marry a nug, I don't care."

"Alright, alright. I'm coming." Anders picked up his book and stood. Sigrun gave him a smile, and he managed one back.

"So... Eram, Eylon, Leonie." Sigrun said.

"Oh come on," Anders sighed.

"Come on yourself," Sigrun shoved him. "Either we keep our spirits up or we keep our spirits down. This way at least we don't wake up naked in the courtyard with our smalls over our heads."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Anders said.

"You are referring to alcoholic beverages correct?" Justice asked. "I wish you would not call them spirits. It is a humiliating word for these drinks."

"Alright, alright. I guess... Marry Eylon, fuck Leonie, kill Eram." Anders said.


"You and beards," Anders said.

"Mmm beards." Sigrun said. "Don't get jealous, but I was giving Amell a couple of looks those last few days."

"Why would I get jealous?" Anders asked. "He was blind, who do you think styled his beard?"

"I never thought of that. Also, wow, you're really good at styling hair. Where's your beard?" Sigrun asked.

"In the Void, where it belongs," Anders said. "My hair does this thing where the curtains don't match
the drapes. Head and chest are blonde, face is red and brown.

"I think that sounds kind of hot." Sigrun said, staring at him thoughtfully for so long Anders cleared his throat.

"I'm not a piece of meat, you know," Anders joked. "My eyes are up here."

"But your chin is down here." Sigrun teased.

"So did you get anyone anything?" Anders asked.

"Of course I did." Sigrun said. "I'm a nice person."

"Ow." Anders said.

"I'm teasing," Sigrun said. "We all knew you'd forget. It's okay."

They reached the barracks, and walked in on Velanna and Nate in a rather compromising position. The dark archer had the little elf pinned against a bed post, less than an inch between them while he whispered Maker knew what in her ear.

Well, good for him.

Velanna bolted out from under Nate's arm when they entered, face flush red beneath her tattoos. Anders snorted.

Drinks were set out on the table, along with cards and dice. Barkspawn was asleep in a corner. There were wrapped parcels on everyone's bunk. Ser Pounce-a-Lot had chewed through the wrapping on one of the parcels on Anders' bunk, and was still chewing. The tabby's eyes were scrunched up in concentration and facing different directions while he gnawed the paper to ribbons. Anders loved that stupid cat.

"We weren't expecting the three of you back so soon," Nate said, straightening imagined wrinkles on his tunic.

"We can leave and come back later if you want," Sigrun offered, waggling her eyebrows.

"Do not be ridiculous." Velanna huffed, grabbing a seat for herself. "We were only talking."

"Talking, huh?" Sigrun asked. "You and Amell did a lot of 'talking', didn't you Anders?"

"Oh yeah, we 'talked' all the time." Anders agreed. "Our jaws would get sore from all the 'talking'."

Sigrun laughed. Velanna turned even redder and glared at the floor. Nathaniel snorted, and took a seat next to her. Anders went to pry Ser Pounce-a-Lot off his presents and sit with him in his lap. Justice sat next to him.

"Someone pour drinks, I'll hand out presents?" Sigrun suggested. "Does anyone have a song?"

"Nope." Anders said.

"A song?" Justice asked.

"It's our thing." Sigrun explained. Nathaniel poured drinks for everyone but Justice. "Everyone sings a song that means something to them, you know, to keep... Uh... morale up. And get to know each other. It's fun. Do you want to go, Nate?"
"I already went." Nathaniel said. "I sang Andraste's Mabari, when Amell sang Blood on the Ramparts."

"That doesn't count," Sigrun pouted. "That wasn't personal."

"It was to me," Nate said. "It reminds me of home, it speaks of loyalty and bravery, and it encourages a healthy amount of doubt in the Chantry's teachings."

"I guess I'll let it slide," Sigrun said. She came back to the table with an armful of parcels, and passed them out to everyone. "These are all from me,"

Anders opened his. It was an earring. A tiny silver stud he guessed wasn't real silver, but was thoughtful anyway. He caught Sigrun with an outstretched arm when she walked past him to fetch more presents, and pulled her into a hug. "You're a real sweetheart, you know that?"

"Oh I know." Sigrun grinned, "You're lucky to have me."

Sigrun fetched more gifts for everyone from everyone, though the only other one Anders got was from Oghren. The bottle of Aqua Magus came with a note that was almost illegible chicken scratches, smeared with grease and Maker knew what else.

"Sparkles,"

"This one's on me."

"Oghren."

"Well I'm going to cry." Anders said. "Who wants to hold me?"

"I cannot read this." Velanna frowned, glaring at the note that had come with her bottle from Oghren. Nathaniel held out a hand for the note, and Velanna passed it over to him.

"... You don't want to," Nate said after a pause.

"It is my gift." Velanna said. "Read it to me."

"Nice tits." Nathaniel said. Velanna turned purple. Anders choked on his drink laughing.

"Alright guys, last round." Sigrun said. She dumped a mountain of parcels on the table, and took a seat. "These are all from Amell."

No one moved. Every gift had a bit of parchment attached to it. Amell must have had a servant pen them. Eventually, Justice reached out and picked his up. He unwrapped a book, and spent a short while reading the note accompanying it. "... This is most thoughtful."

"Alright guys, they don't bite." Sigrun said, picking up her parcel and unwrapping it. A spyglass tumbled out into her hands. Sigrun put it to one eye and and stared at Anders with it. "Oh... Oh it's just like Varlan explained it to me..."

Nathaniel unwrapped a bow. Velanna a book. Anders didn't touch his. He didn't need to. It was obviously a staff.

"Oghren did say Amell gave 'damn good gifts,'" Nate said after reading his note. He cleared his throat, and traced over the crest of a bear engraved in the bow. "How did he even find this..."

"Speak for yourself." Velanna said. "This book is empty. What does he expect me to do with this
"useless object?" She tossed her book onto the table, and picked up the note accompanying it. Her hand leapt up to cover her mouth, and she snatched the book back up with tears in her eyes a few seconds later.

"Sweetie?" Sigrun nudged Anders with her foot under the table. "Are you going to open yours?"

"Maybe later." Anders said.


How bad could it be? Amell had already said he loved him. A note couldn't hurt.

The door to the barracks creaked open. Private Kallian poked her head inside. "Warden Anders, Ser?"

"Oh boy." Anders sighed. "What did I do now?"

"Nothing, Ser." Kallian said. "I couldn't find you this afternoon, and I have a few letters for you, along with some of the Commander's mail. I don't know who else to give it to for safe keeping. The Seneschal suggested you, since you've been handling his mail lately."

Anders set them on the night stand beside his bunk, and leaned his wrapped staff up against the wall. That made three now. Cera was going to kill him. Anders rejoined his friends for cards and dice and other games. The Orlesian Wardens trickled in throughout the night, even Eram, who was apparently willing to sleep with the rest of them despite his position as Constable. Anders might have been too hasty voting to kill him just because he didn't approve his leave.

Anders lay in his bunk later, animals all around him, unable to sleep. It wasn't the same without Amell's weight on his chest, or pressed tight against his shoulder. It was colder. Lonelier. Anders got up at some point, pulled on a pair of trousers, and picked up his letters and his wrapped staff. He left the barracks, and had barely started down the hall when a voice from behind made him shriek and drop everything.

"May I accompany you?" Justice asked.

Anders stumbled back against a pillar in the hall, and clutched his chest. His staff clattered noisily to the ground and his letters fluttered down around him. "Maker's breath, Justice. You scared the shit out of me."

"I apologize." Justice said. He was still in full armor. Anders wondered how lost in thought he must have been to miss the sound of his heavy metal footsteps. "This was not my intent. I do not require sleep, and I find nights are often uneventful."

"Trust me, you don't want to see an eventful night around here." Anders said, picking up his scattered things. "I'm just going to go sit in the chapel and read my letters. It'll be pretty boring for you."

"If this is your intent, perhaps I could retrieve the book I was gifted and read with you by the light the chapel affords." Justice said.
"Sure," Anders said. "Go ahead and get it."

Anders waited in the hall for Justice to come back with his book. Anders went to the chapel with him, lit the sconces, and sat down in a pew. "... What did he get you?" Anders asked.

"A book of poetry, inspired by the Fade." Justice said. "... It is comforting to have something to remind me of my home."

Anders leaned his staff against the pew and opened the letters first. The first one in the stack was for Amell, but Anders had never respected his privacy before and didn't see a reason to start now. Anders warmed the wax with a fire spell and peeled it back to read the letter without breaking the seal.

"My poor stupid Warden,

"I warned you, did I not? We Crows are a dastardly sort. You should know better than to trust us, but blind trust was always a weakness of yours. How is it you are not dead yet? I cannot say why there is a new contract on you, and Ignacio went back on his word. We are on less than friendly terms these days.

"The Crows hunt me as well, you see, and I have my own battles to fight. I confess, I was surprised to receive your letter. I thought I had put you behind me, and not in the naughty way, but here we are. I expect the Guildmaster will agree to meet with me soon. Or perhaps I will kill him. In either case, I will do what I can for you. For old time's sake.

"Z."

Anders folded the letter and stuffed it back in the envelope. He had a very sudden and petty need to hear something from Amell, and unwrapped his staff next.

It was beyond exquisite. Intricate runes ran up and down the shimmering white staff, glowing blue with lyrium and radiating energy. The staff had been carved to make a cage out of its head, and a brilliant white crystal sang with power from within. Anders could hear it humming and crackling. It made the hair on his arms stand on end, and his fingers tingled from touching it.

Anders had sudden pang of guilt for ever having dropped it. He rested the staff gingerly against the pew in front of him, and opened Amell's letter. The script slanted left. Amell hadn't written it, but he'd obviously dictated it.

"Anders,

"I'm sorry I never got you that pony, but I hope you enjoy the staff all the same. I had it commissioned for you from the dragon bones we retrieved in the Blackmarsh. To be honest I'm a little disappointed I never got to see the final product, but it feels as I intended it.

"I thought you could call it Vigilance. I know, more wardeny darkspawn names, but peace is all I ever wanted you to serve in. I also hope it reminds you to never try to make your own spells, whatever the reason. This isn't how I intended things, but I want you to know that I have no regrets.

"Yours always,
"Amell."

It was a long while before Anders stopped crying and was able to read the next letter. The letter was sealed with the emblem of the Circle of Magi, and Anders tore it open.
"Anders,"

"I can't tell you what it means to hear from you. We all say we’ll write when we part ways from old friends, but it's a rare day when someone actually does. Life in Kirkwall has not been easy for me. They call it the City of Chains for a reason.

"I was ecstatic to hear you joined the Wardens. I always prayed your every escape attempt would be your last, despite the fact that it would mean we would likely never speak again. I hope freedom is treating you well. I am doing what I can here, but the templars are nothing if not vigilant.

"Should I take your letter to mean you have joined our ranks? I hope this is the case. I don't think I need to tell you how invaluable skilled healers are, and you were always passionate and driven. I know we would benefit greatly from your aid.

"Please keep in touch,
"Karl."

Anders set the letter down, and picked up the last. It was from Tallo. His palms were sweating too much to tear it open, and he had to dry them off on his trousers before the parchment would give. The letter was alarmingly short, and written in Ander. Anders wished he'd never opened it.

"Your mother is dead. Never write to me again."
Hello everyone! Welcome back! There's some in game dialogue in here, and a whole poem straight out of the game because I am the worst and thought it better suited for the scene than anything I could come up with. Sorry in advance!

There probably won't be another chapter this weekend, as I have some real world things I have to take care of, but Monday is a holiday and I love writing on my days off, so we'll pick things up again pretty quick. Thank you all for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

Translation
Taren souveri: Weary/tired mind.

9:31 Dragon 14 Umbralis Sometime
Somewhere, in the Deep Roads

The lyrium was getting to him. Anders leaned heavily on his staff, and wrung the dragonbone between his hands. The friction made his gloves chafe against his palms, and was slightly soothing. Watching you. Anders blinked hard, and touched the grimoire at his side. Freedom. The voices were different. Which meant he was hearing voices. Which meant mana imbalance.

Twelve wardens was too much, especially when three of them were inexperienced. Eram was competent, but he wasn't Amell. They came out of every encounter with injured, and Anders was having trouble keeping up. His staff, his rings, the runes on his bracers... All of it helped, but it wasn't enough. Anders drank a lyrium potion with every skirmish, and sometimes one afterwards, and all he could think was that Amell had never pushed him this hard.

Anders. Even Kal'Hirol hadn't been this bad. Anders had been exhausted, sure, but he hadn't been drinking lyrium like water. If anything it had been more of a physical overestimation on Amell's part than a magical one. Amell understood magic. Amell knew his limits. Amell protected him. Eram didn't.

Anders. The dwarf fought in the front lines, with the other warriors. He gave orders before fights, and didn't keep track of them as they progressed. He wasn't ready and waiting with a dagger to save Anders from anything that might look his way, because Eram was just his Commander, and not his lover.

Anders. It wasn't until Amell was gone that Anders finally understood the difference he made in a fight. If the darkspawn hated anything, it was light, and most of Anders magic was comprised of bright, white, light. Anders frequently found himself the target of angry shrieks and enraged genlocks when they slipped through the cracks Amell had always kept sealed. Anders didn't know where he'd be if not for Barkspawn. The mabari hovered at his side, and mauled anything that threatened him.

"Anders!" Sigrun shouted. Anders jumped, and felt like his world turned upside down. Everything spun, he lost his balance, and he clung to his staff to keep upright. Dizzy in the Deep Roads was a recipe for disaster. Channels of magma kept the passage they were in illuminated and warm, but they
also meant an errant spill could cost him his life.

Anders blinked Sigrun into focus. The dwarf was staring up at him from underneath her half helm, concern in her crystal blue eyes. "What?"

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Sigrun asked. "I know I'm short and hard to see, but it's usually a lot easier to get your attention."

"Peachy as a pie." Anders lied. Barkspawn whined and nudged him. Anders gave the dog a weary pat.

"Maybe if we're talking about your pupils I can see where you got pies from," Sigrun said. "You're pretty pale, and you're twitching so much it's getting hard to tell you and Justice apart."

"I'm the pretty one." Anders said, dragging a hand over his face. It wet his palm with sweat and he used it to smooth back the few strands of hair that had escaped his hair tie. His hands weren't shaking, at least. That was something.

"So remember how you told me not to hide injuries?" Sigrun asked, taking off her helmet and shaking out her pig tails. "What's going on?"

"It's... In the shadows. Anders sucked in a sharp breath. "It's called mana imbalance. From all the potions. One too many on the rocks, I guess,"

"Do you need to take a break?" Sigrun asked. "How can I help?"

"Cut me off, I guess," Anders said. "But I'm the healer, so..."

"I always knew your drinking would tear us apart," Sigrun joked.

Anders grinned. He felt too sick to laugh. Velanna joined them; the sight of her bare feet on the blighted, fleshy ground made Anders a little queasy. "What is going on?" Velanna asked.

"Anders is sick." Sigrun said.

"Sick?" Velanna grabbed his chin in her hand and turned his head back and forth.

"Hey-" Anders protested feebly.

Velanna pried his eyes open side with two fingers, and frowned. "Taren souveri. You need to sleep."

"Thank you, Commander Obvious." Anders rolled his eyes. "And just how am I supposed to do that?"

"You lie down and close your eyes, fool." Velanna said.

Sigrun giggled.

"I will force a halt." Velanna said, and left towards the front of their procession.

"She's gotten a lot better, have you noticed?" Sigrun asked.

Anders shrugged, "Well, she didn't slap me, so..."

"Not just that." Sigrun said. "Ever since Lyna, she started wearing her warden pendant, and now with her and Nate back together she smiles a lot more. It's nice, you know? It makes me think we're
going to be okay."

"Gnawing flesh. Anders gripped his staff a little tighter. "Is that darkspawn or just me going crazy?"

"Kind of hard to say, sweetie. We're in the Deep Roads. There are darkspawn everywhere." Sigrun took one of his hands and gave him a tug to keep him walking. "Come on. We're falling behind. I'll keep an eye on you."

Anders let her drag him along, Barkspawn following at his heels. The voices weren't so bad. He had Amell's grimoire, and he was getting used to the whispering, but the dizziness was making him sick.

Wait... What had Amell said... Something about using the Taint to realign your connection to the Fade... Anders freed his hand from Sigrun's to unhook the grimoire from his belt. *Kill them.*

"Oh shut up." Anders muttered.

"What?" Sigrun asked.

"Nothing." Anders flipped the tome open to the Joining ritual, and flipped back and forth between the pages numbers in the margins until he found the one he was looking for. Regenerates mana, realigns connection with the Fade, alleviates mana imbalance. "Can I borrow a knife or a dagger?"

"I've only got my axes." Sigrun said. "We really need to get you your own dagger though. Hang on, I'll go ask Nate."

Anders kept his finger on the page, a little surprised the grimoire stopped muttering once he told it to shut up. Maybe he had more control over it than he thought.

Anders did not like the Deep Roads. They were creepy and slippery enough without him dizzy and hearing voices. Magma channels ran along the floor, and the angle of the light cast long and queer shadows across the walls. The floor and the walls were coated with a layer of blight, a slimy mixture of flesh and muscle that pulsed and undulated and occasionally oozed out puss and rot.

The air was thick with green gases, and white sacks full of Children occasionally clogged the corridors. The tunnels made everything echo, and where there weren't darkspawn, there were giant spiders. Anders could hear them hissing and skittering as they followed their procession, attacking whenever someone made the mistake of tripping over their webs.

At least Amell's expeditions had goals. They cleared out mines and quarries, they retrieved lyrium or gold from Kal'Hirol. They didn't wander aimlessly in the Deep for the sport of it.

Sigrun came back with Nate. The archer handed him a dagger so small it might have been a letter opener. "It's a spare," Nate explained. "You can keep it, as a late Satinalia present."

"Thanks," Anders pulled his sleeve out of his glove and bracer, and rolled it up around his elbow so he could make a cut in the same spot he always did. Barkspawn stared at him attentively, tail wagging. Blood magic must have reminded the poor thing of its real master.

"Velanna told me you have some kind of mage sickness? Is everything alright?" Nate asked.

"Anders called it mana imbalance but I don't know what that means." Sigrun said.

"It's from too much lyrium. Makes you crazy. Nothing trivial." Anders said.

"Well as long as it's not trivial." Nate said.
Anders focused on the spell. It reminded him of a regeneration spell, augmented by the darkspawn corruption inside him instead of his heartbeat. Finding the source of the corruption to pull from was another matter. Amell had a few helpful notes, suggesting trying to sense darkspawn and pulling from where that sense of wrongness lay within. It worked, and in minutes Anders felt infinitely better.

The voices stopped. He found his equilibrium, and he just felt sweaty, instead of achy and nauseous. Anders healed the cut on his arm and rubbed away the residual sting it left. "Thanks, Creepy."

"Did that help?" Sigrun asked.

"It helped," Anders said. "So where do I put this?"

"It goes in your sleeve." Nathaniel explained, taking the dagger back and cleaning it off before he sheathed it. He slipped it up his sleeve to demonstrate, and hesitated handing it back. "The bracers might be a problem though."

"Amell kept his in his boot." Sigrun suggested.

"The boots need to be tailored for that." Nathaniel said, handing Anders the dagger. "Your satchel for now, I suppose."

Anders dropped it in his satchel. "And there it goes, never to be seen again. Thanks again Nate."

"Of course." Nate said. "I suppose I never considered how much casting you actually do, healing everyone between fights. I know Amell gave us longer breaks but I never considered why."

"Well, now you know." Anders said, hooking Amell's grimoire back to his belt and fixing his sleeve.

"Velanna said she'd ask for a halt," Nathaniel said. "I wonder what's taking so long,"

"There she is," Sigrun pointed to Velanna, who shouldered past the rest of the Wardens to join them.

"'We'll stop when we stop.' Of all the ignorant pigheaded..." Velanna stopped and squinted at Anders' eyes. "... You look better. Why do you look better?"

"Magic." Anders joked.

"He used one of the spells in Amell's book." Sigrun explained.

"Amell knew a spell to counter an imbalance of mana?" Velanna asked, only to continue before anyone could answer, "Of course he did. And now thanks to his grimoire you know it. I would learn it as well, with how this durgen'len drives us. We should study from his grimoire together."

"You know, last time I asked if you wanted to discuss magic with me, you called it stealing." Anders reminded her, more to evade the question than anything else.

Amell's grimoire belonged to Anders, and Anders didn't want to share. Maybe it was petty, but he didn't care. Reading it was personal. Amell had written every word and drawn every diagram for someone to read someday, and Anders liked pretending he was that person. It was comforting, having some kind of connection to Amell while he was gone.

"Then we should steal from his grimoire together," Velanna said, undeterred.

Fate had it that the darkspawn chose that moment to attack, and save Anders from an uncomfortable conversation. Anders summoned Compassion, and channeled an aura of aptitude for the new recruits.
who so desperately needed it. Eram wasn't half as picky as Amell had been about recruiting. The day after his public address to the nobility, Eram had gone to the Amaranthine dungeons, and offered a chance at redemption to anyone who survived the Joining.

He won seven recruits that way, though only three lived. One was an elven pickpocket named Sidona who had decided to risk her life rather than lose her hands. Another was an old Dalish elf named Jacen who'd been caught poaching. The third was a mountain of a man named Gerod, whose crime Anders didn't know. As far as Anders could tell, only Jacen had any sort of skill in combat, but hunting deer was a far cry from hunting darkspawn, and he was wounded as often as the rest.

The fourth recruit didn't come from the dungeons. He came from the Chantry. Rolan was a templar, and he'd volunteered to join the Wardens the second it became public knowledge that Amell was elsewhere. Anders hated him on principal at first, his personality second, and his nasally voice third. Amell never would have accepted a templar, but Eram wasn't Amell. He allowed Rolan a chance at the Joining despite Anders' protests, and Rolan survived despite Anders prayers. The templar bastard hadn't left Anders alone since.

Anders caught himself neglecting the man in fights, but Rolan didn't need his support. Not only was Rolan competent, as far as Anders could tell he was as fearless as Amell. He was undeniably invaluable, and Anders hated him for it. The man knew how to fight as a unit and how to fight alone. He killed darkspawn emissaries with alarming precision, and held his own against every other type of foe they encountered. It put the odds of him meeting his end at the hands of darkspawn depressingly low.

The fight came to a close, and Anders was left to handle the wounded. Jacen and Sidona limped his way, as did Nathaniel and Eylon. It wasn't an ideal spot to be treating anyone. The stone was soaked with blood; puddles of it splashed up on Anders' trousers with every step. Darkspawn bodies were piled high at both ends of the corridor, and each draft of wind that blew through the Deep Roads wafted death and rot his way. There was nowhere to sit, without sitting on pods of flesh or puddles of blood, which meant both Anders and his patients had to stand.

Jacen reached him first. The Dalish was old: his hair grey, his tattoos like bright red cobwebs on his wizened face, but he was nice, and it was hard to hate him despite how often he was injured.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Anders joked, moving the elf's arm out of the way so he could inspect the damage a shriek had done to his side.

"I am sorry, da'len." Jacen said. "These old bones don't move as fast as they used to."

"They shouldn't have to move," Anders muttered. "Someone should be looking out for you out there."

Anders drank another lyrium potion. The cloying sweet taste was starting to make him sick, but after what he'd done to Amell, Anders doubted anything would be enough to make him throw up again.

Mass recruiting was a terrible idea. Their little group had worked. It had been perfect. Oghren and Amell had had the front line, Sigrun and Velanna cleaned up the middle, and Anders and Nathaniel stayed in the back. The few fights they'd had with Justice, he went nicely with Amell and Oghren at the front. Eram was full of shit. He wasn't a competent tactician, and he didn't know his men well enough to know where they belonged on the battlefield.

Anders drank another lyrium potion. The cloying sweet taste was starting to make him sick, but after what he'd done to Amell, Anders doubted anything would be enough to make him throw up again. Anders finished healing Jacen, and moved onto the others. Nathaniel took his turn last, and came to him with a nasty gash down the side of his head. "Shriek," Nate explained.

"I can tell." Anders said.
"I didn't see it in time," Nathaniel explained. "It's... a lot more chaotic with this many people."

"It's a lot more chaotic without Amell." Anders said. "He was better at this."

"My understanding of the warrior caste from what Oghren told me is that they fight with other warriors," Nathaniel said. "Eram probably isn't used to having people of varying levels of experience at his side. And he said so himself that he doesn't understand magic."

"Maybe Amell should have just made you Constable." Anders said.

"I don't know that I would be doing any better." Nathaniel said. "I might have pushed you just as hard. I didn't even know about mana imbalance until today. Eram could be doing worse."

"He could be doing better." Anders said.

"Things went south with Amell in charge," Nate reminded him. "You were wounded in Kal'Hirol, we were captured in the Silverite Mines, and there was the ambush at the Turnobles..."

"That was different." Anders said.

"Because it was Amell?" Nate guessed.

"Because aside from Kal'Hirol, those were ambushes. No one is ambushing us down here. We know exactly what we're walking into and we're still getting shit on." Anders conjured a bit of water to clean the blood off Nate's face. "Good as new."

"I'll admit we didn't have this much trouble with shrieks and hurlocks before but... It's only our second expedition. I'm sure we'll all learn to work together." Nathaniel said optimistically.

"I wouldn't count on it." Anders muttered, tossing a glare in Rolan's direction. Barkspawn followed his gaze and growled agreeably. What a good dog.

"... I've been trying to keep an eye on him." Nate said. "I don't like his timely arrival either. You and Velanna need to be careful. I'm not sure I believe his story about losing his chantry to the Blight inspiring him to join the Wardens. Why wait almost a year if that was the case?"

"Nate, everyone knows templars can't lie. Lying is a sin." Anders joked.

"I'm serious." Nate said.

"Well what do you want me to do?" Anders demanded. The procession set out, and Anders gave Nathaniel a shove to set them moving. "I can't just stop being mage. Magic's not magic you know."

"The blood magic," Nathaniel said. "I know Velanna is eager to learn more of it, but I don't know if that's the best idea right now."

"Why are you telling me, then?" Anders asked. "Tell her."

"Because I'm concerned." Nate said. "And you're a friend. Or perhaps I'm presuming too much?"

"Look, I'm glad you care, but I'm done letting templars push me around," Anders said. "I'm not afraid of Rolan, and I'm not going to play the guilty apostate or the complacent mage anymore. This is the whole reason I learned blood magic, and if Rolan wants to try something well then... I can't think of anything right now but whatever I do it won't be pretty."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Nate said. "Don't make a game of this, Anders. Please. Amell isn't here
"The Wardens don't forbid blood magic, Nate." Anders reminded him.

"Amell didn't forbid blood magic," Nate said pointedly. "If these past two weeks have shown anything, it's that the two aren't always the same."

Anders didn't answer him. Nate let it drop. They fought another score of darkspawn before they finally came upon an alcove. It was far from what Anders would call cozy. Blight was on the walls, and oozed down into the magma channels, creating a constant aroma of burning flesh, and a massive cobweb occupied one corner of the alcove.

Eram called for them to make camp. Elyon, Velanna, and Anders burned away what they could of the blight and the webs. When they finished, and the walls were blackened char, everyone pitched their tents and passed out rations. It was hardtack, jerky, and water, and Anders was starting to hate it as much as he hated oatmeal.

Anders set up his tent in a cluster with his friends and ate with them, Barkspawn lying next to him and gnawing on a giant piece of jerky. The Orlesians and the prisoners they'd liberated made up their own group. If anything was going to convince Anders that Velanna had changed, it was the fact that she chose to stay with them, rather than join the other Dalish in the group. Anders hadn't asked the story behind why the two hadn't bonded. While he'd never admit it, he liked having Velanna around. It wouldn't have been the same without her bitching.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm exhausted." Sigrun said, pulling out her pig tails and shaking her hair out. Anders followed suit. "The corruption is getting worse, though. I bet we're close to a broodmother."

"Goody." Anders said. "Because the first nest we found wasn't traumatizing enough."

"What are they like?" Velanna took her hair out of the tight bun she kept it in. Locks upon locks of gold fell about her shoulders.

"Big and ugly." Anders said, staring a little.

"And they smell really bad." Sigrun said.

"...Are you asking for Seranni?" Nathaniel asked, unbraiding his own hair. "Amell said she had a version of Blight sickness he'd never seen before. The progression was slow, almost deliberate, and the Architect seemed fond of her. I don't think they intend to turn her into one of those creatures."

"He guessed, as you are guessing now." Velanna said, pulling her knees up into her chest. "I want to know what I should expect."

No one volunteered anything.

Velanna scowled. "You have all faced broodmothers before. Tell me. I have a right to know. Do they... Do they look anything like the women they once were?"

"...yes." Sigrun said. "I was afraid to look at the nest we found... They were all... They still... They were my friends."

"Creators..." Velanna stared at her feet. Nathaniel's hand hovered over her shoulder and ultimately retreated. Anders gave Sigrun's shoulder a supportive squeeze and she smiled for it.
"... Can any of you sense other Wardens yet?" Sigrun asked.

"That's kind of random," Anders said.

"Is it?" Sigrun said meaningfully. It clicked for him a few seconds later.

"I can," Justice said.

"Oh sweetie, I wouldn't ask you." Sigrun gave Justice's gauntlet-clad hand a pat.

"I do not understand what you are all alluding to," Justice said.

"Darkspawn turn women into broodmothers." Sigrun explained. "Amell promised he would find me if the darkspawn ever took me captive down here, and kill me if I... If they made me like them. Now that he's gone... I don't know. Did Amell promise you anything like that, Velanna?"

"We spoke of it." Velanna said into her knees. "I told him such a thing would never happen... I refused to even consider it. Now? I cannot say."

"Maybe we could ask Eram?" Sigrun suggested. "Do you think he would promise something like that?"

"I think him a fool who clearly cares naught for us," Velanna said.

"That's a little harsh," Nathaniel said. "I know he didn't call a halt for Anders, but that could just be attributed to having no safe place to rest until we came across this alcove."

"Then why did he recruit a templar?" Velanna demanded.

The word made Barkspawn growl around the jerky he was gnawing on. Anders scratched his ear in reward, and fished a bowl out from his pack to conjure the dog some water.

"You haven't talked to Rolan." Sigrun said. "He's not that bad, and besides, the Wardens are kind of like the Legion. We leave our old lives behind when we Join."

"Do we?" Velanna demanded.

"He's a templar," Anders said. "He can't leave his old life behind. They're addicted to lyrium, which means Eram is supplying him with some, which he's getting from an agreement with the Chantry or the Circle. Either way, someone wants him here."

"You see?" Velanna said.

"He still might agree to kill us if the darkspawn ever captured us." Sigrun said. "He agreed to help you find Seranni."

"Empty words. I do not trust him." Velanna said. "I trusted Amell."

Justice took off his helmet, revealing the rarely seen corpse beneath. It wasn't pretty. His skin was stretched thin over his skull, and peeling in several places. His veins were bloated, and Anders couldn't help wondering how much longer the corpse was going to hold out, especially with how hard Eram was pushing them.

"This thing you speak of, is it truly irreversible?" Justice asked.

"It would be like becoming a demon, Justice." Anders said.
"... And it would take a senior Grey Warden to find you if you were captured because Grey Wardens can sense each other," Justice said. "Yes, I understand. I will make this oath, then, if you wish it."

"Sweetie no," Sigrun cooed. "You're a nice spirit. Wouldn't that go against your code of justice?"

"The darkspawn are creatures of evil and hate," Justice said. "To live as one of them would be a fate worse than death, deserved of no living creature. I will not allow it to befall either of you for as long as we travel together."

"Thank you, sweetie." Sigrun said.

"... Your skin is peeling." Velanna said rather than thank the spirit.

"Really?" Justice asked, taking off a gauntlet to touch bony fingers to his mangled face. "I hadn't noticed."

"What will happen to you once Kristoff's body is fully decayed?" Velanna asked. "Will you remain here, bound to the tiny motes of dust that were once Kristoff?"

"That is... a disturbing thought." Justice said.

"I agree. Eylon mentioned you were still capable of possessing others. Perhaps you could switch bodies, before this one is little more than bones?" Nathaniel suggested.

"Such a thing would be abominable," Justice said. "I did not even wish to possess this one."

"Amell was a necromancer," Nathaniel said. "He frequently made use of the dead. It's not as if they need their bodies anymore, Justice."

"But I can feel the man who once lived. I know his life, his..." Justice stared at his hands, and flexed his fingers. Rigor mortis made them crack. "It is not just a body."

"Well that's... Good, I suppose," Nathaniel said. "I'm glad you feel that way, but the matter stands that Kristoff may not last much longer."

"I suppose this is true." Justice said.

"If you must kill me to spare me the fate of a broodmother, you will stay away from my body, you hear me?" Velanna said.

"Your objection is noted." Justice said.

"You can have my body if you want, Justice." Sigrun said. "Just make sure I'm dead first."

"I have no wish for you to die, but I appreciate your offer." Justice said.

"Not that this isn't a super fun topic, but does anyone want to change it?" Anders asked. "Maybe we could do a song or something?"

"That sounds fun." Sigrun agreed. "Does anyone have one?"

"While it is no song, there was a sonnet in the book I was gifted which resonated with me," Justice said. "I would be glad to read it to you."

"That would be great, sweetie." Sigrun said.
Justice swung his pack off his shoulder and into his lap and fished out his book. He had it in a leather satchel for safe keeping, and opened it to a page towards the middle.

"When first I summoned her, she was a rose,
Unwithering, unchanging, and unthorned,
A spirit of the purest love one knows,
Who never hated, coveted, or scorned.

"A second time I drew her 'cross the Veil,
And shared a walk, a dance, a stolen kiss;
With such a perfect beauty, pure and pale,
No woman could compare, no man resist.

"Then in my weakness I essayed a third,
Tho' magisters their warnings did impart.

"She broke my binding with a single word,
And said this smiling as she clutched my heart:
"Though love I was, your passion's changing fire,
Has forged this spirit into cruel Desire."

"That was really sweet, Justice." Sigrun said. "Dwarven poems are a lot less... poetic."

"Ridiculous." Velanna said. "It is so very human to insist upon a distinction between spirits and demons."

"Why is it ridiculous?" Anders asked. "They clearly break down into different virtues and vices."

"They break down into concepts, and all concepts have their own virtues and vices about them." Velanna said.

"Why did you pick that poem, sweetie?" Sigrun asked.

"I do not understand demons," Justice said. "Such evil angers and confuses me. I thought the sonnet an interesting insight on the influence of mortals over spirits, and where the perverted desires that morph them into demons might originate from."

"Okay, but you know it was just a poem, right?" Anders asked. "It doesn't actually work like that. Trust me. I've been with Compassion for fifteen years, which means she was with me when I was fifteen. Have you met a fifteen year old before? Sure, mortals can influence spirits a lot, but you can pick and choose what to be influenced by."

"Are you sure?" Sigrun asked. "Maybe she just never lit your 'passion's changing fire'."

"Again, fifteen." Anders said. "My socks lit my 'passion's changing fire'."

"Oh ew," Sigrun said.

Nathaniel laughed. Velanna made a determined effort not to.

"Perhaps you are right. I cannot say." Justice said. "I thought the sonnet intriguing none the less."

Anders stayed up with his friends talking and debating for a while later. Eram didn't trust Justice to keep watch, and so had several of them assigned for different shifts throughout the night. Anders wasn't given a shift, which seemed as much a waste as not giving Justice all of them. He still wasn't
sleeping well, even after two weeks to adjust.

The smell of dog and Barkspawn's itchy fur from the mabari curling up beside him kept him awake as much as his thoughts. Two weeks. Amell would be at Soldier's Peak by now. Anders wondered how long Avernus' ritual would take, whatever it was. He wondered if Amell would be back by First Day, what color his new eyes would be, what kind of speech he would give before assigning Rolan to serve in the Void.

Anders was thinking about his mother, and all the things he'd never had a chance to say to her when someone fought with the flaps to his tent. Anders sat up, and conjured a barrier and ball of mage light, but it was only Justice.

"What's up?" Anders asked.

"I am concerned," Justice said. "I do not mean to distrust our allies, but I can imagine no reason for Gerod to need to be alone with Sigrun, and I am led to believe him an immoral man. Would it be inappropriate to ask you to check on them?"

"What the fuck?" Anders fought his way out of his bedroll, "She's barely said two words to him. Where are they?"

"In her tent." Justice said.

Anders crawled out of his tent and scrambled across the alcove to Sigrun's tent. Maybe if it was anyone else, Anders would have left well enough alone, but Sigrun wasn't interested in trysts. She wanted commitment, and only refrained from relationships because she was committed to dying. The muffled sounds of struggling didn't help either.

Anders shoved open the flaps to Sigrun's tent, and couldn't see anything around Gerod's ass, mercifully still clothed. The smell of sweat and feet nearly choked Anders. Gerod was a giant, comparable to Leonie. His body was a bulky combination of dark hair, rippling muscle, and thick fat that probably made him a beast to wrestle. Following a stroke of genius, Anders grabbed his shoulder. "What the fuck-"

Gerod whipped around, and Anders saw a glint of metal. Anders brought up his hands, and sliver flashed across his palms. A sharp pain followed seconds later, and warm blood poured down his wrists. Anders didn't think about it. He pulled from it, and flung it back at Gerod.


Gerod froze. His eyes twitched spastically in his skull, and blood trickled slowly from his nose. Sigrun scrambled out from behind him, and grabbed her axes from the pile in the corner of her room. Her tunic was torn across her shoulder, her lip was split, and her neck was cut. Gerod bore vicious claw marks, carved into his eyebrow and down his cheek. Good for her.

Anders grabbed Sigrun's hand and walked her backwards out of her tent. Gerod followed.


"I guess now we know his crime." Sigrun spat out a mouthful of blood. "He said I looked like a little girl. Said he couldn't resist."

"I should make you kill yourself." Anders said to his blood thrall.

Gerod's eyes twitched frantically, but his body held still. It would be easy. He was still holding the dagger he'd pressed to Sigrun's throat.

Barkspawn growled. Anders glanced at the dog. It must have woken up at his absence. The mabari
circled Gerod warily, teeth barred, apparently familiar with the spell. Justice followed Barkspawn out of Anders' tent, and walked over to them.

"You have subjugated him as the Commander did demons..." Justice observed. "This is... for a just cause, I hope? Was I right to suspect him of ill intent?"

"Not now, sweetie." Sigrun said.

"I'm going to kill him." Anders decided.

"You will do no such thing." Rolan's nasally voice whined at him. Anders glanced away from Gerod. Half the other wardens had woken up at the commotion, and Rolan wasn't the only one leveling a sword at him. "Stand down, maleficar, or I will cut you down."
Whew! Sorry to leave off where we left off, but the weekend's over and we're back at it again! Thank you all for your lovely comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 14 Umbralis, Sometime

Somewhere, in the Deep Roads

"No!" Sigrun leapt in front of him, which might have actually made a difference if she were taller. Templars' abilities were similar to mages in that they only worked with a proper line of sight. "You're not touching Anders! I swear by my ancestors, if you even try..."

"Stupid... Bitch...." Gerod choked out around Anders' spell.

"Try me with axes in my hands you piece of nug shit." Sigrun said, pointing an axe at Gerod.

"Are you seriously resisting?" Anders forced more will into the spell. "Get down on your knees."

Gerod fell obediently to his knees. The trickle of blood from his nose became a flow. It poured into his beard and weighed it down, dripping off the longest strand beneath his chin.

"Let him go, maleficar." Rolan ordered, not half as threatening as he could have been in his smalls, with only his sword and shield to protect him, "I won't say it again."

"It figures a templar would defend a rapist." Anders laughed. "Should I guess how many Tranquil you've raped? Or do you not count it because they can't say no?"

Leonie lowered her sword at the accusation. The giant woman looked between Gerod and Anders, disgust furrowing her heavy brow. "Rapists and maleficars? Andraste preserve us, are we truly so desperate? I do not know which is worse."

"Are you shitting me?" Anders asked.

"He's a maleficar." Eylon said, the tiny elf looking even tinier in just his trousers. He didn't have his staff, and probably didn't have practice casting without it, "Trust nothing he says. Rolan, smite him quickly."

"Peace, da'len, it is only magic." Jacen said, looking even older with no sleep.

"Shut up, old man." Eylon snapped. None of them were a threat to Anders. A half-naked templar and an ignorant Chantry-apologist were nothing to him.

A scuffle from Anders' left must have been Velanna or Nate waking up. The sound of bare feet followed and a moment later a hand was on his shoulder. Anders smelled dirt and grass. Velanna.

"What is going on?" Velanna asked. "Does this lyrium-addled shem finally think to test us? Why
have you bound this other?"

Sigrun pointed her axe at Gerod again, "He tried to rape me."

"And he still breathes?" Velanna demanded. "Kill him. Anders is holding him for you. You deserve the final blow."

Sidona started crying from the entrance to her tent, the simple pickpocket apparently overwhelmed by everything she'd woken up to. Nathaniel joined them seconds later, and took a spot between Anders and Rolan without asking any questions.

"Let him go, maleficar!" Rolan ordered again, raising his shield.

"Make me." Anders said.

Barkspawn took one look at the silver sword of mercy on Rolan's shield and started barking. His lips curled back from vicious teeth, and saliva sprayed from his jowls. Anders wondered if the dog was going to tackle the templar. He had half a mind to let it.

"For the love of nugs and idiot children, what is going on out here?" Eram bellowed. The dwarf stormed his way out of his tent and took a spot between both groups, in little more than a tunic and his smalls. Somehow, he looked no less commanding than he did in full armor. "Shut that damn mutt up! Leonie, speak."

"... Gerod attempted to rape Sigrun," Leonie explained, over Barkspawn's wild barking. "Anders bound him with blood magic."

"Paragons have mercy," Eram sighed, rubbing at his face and tugging on his beard. "Rolan, stand down."

"Constable, this man is a maleficar." Eylon protested.

"I know he's a maleficar," Eram snapped, waving an accusatory hand in Anders' and Velanna's direction. "They're all maleficars! Why do you think I recruited Rolan? Stand down, man,"


"Did you know?" Anders demanded. "Did you know about him?"

"I knew," Eram confessed far too easily. "The Joining cleanses us of the sins of our past lives. Most Wardens learn from it. Some don't, and they will be made to answer for it. Let him go, and let him speak."

Anders looked at Sigrun instead. She flexed her fingers on the hilts of her axes, and glared at everyone and everything until she looked up at Anders. She gave a tight nod. Anders let go of the spell.

Gerod collapsed. He wheezed and coughed, and spat up blood. He clutched at his head, and Anders almost hoped he'd explode. No such luck. A long thread of blood hung from Gerod's nose. The giant of a man grabbed it and pulled, and wrenched out a three inch long clot which looked more or less a worm. Gerod took one look at it and threw up all over himself.
Sidona covered her own mouth. Sigrun spat on the floor again. Anders flexed his bleeding hands to be sure he still had feeling in them. Velanna folded her arms over her chest and scowled impatiently, and Nate kept his place between Anders and Rolan.

Anders didn't care or notice what anyone else did.

"I told you," Gerod managed eventually. "Told you I can't do kids. You said there wouldn't be any kids. But then she's here, looking just like one with those pigtails and that face... The way she giggles. The fuck was I supposed to do? I couldn't think of nothing but them tiny hands and that little mouth-"

"Maker, stop!" Sidona sobbed, covering her ears, "Make him stop! I can't listen to it! I'm just a cutpurse! I don't belong here with all of you sick freaks! They said the Wardens were noble warriors! I just didn't want to lose my hands! Why is this happening to me!?"

"... This creature is a disgrace to the Order." Leonie said, finally sheathing her sword. "He should never have been put through the Joining. The crying girl is the same."

"Who cares!?" Eylon demanded. "He can be punished. We are standing in front of a maleficar. Did none of you see what he did? He enslaved a man, as he could enslave any one of us. His hands yet bleed! He could be influencing your very thoughts as we speak!"

"You'd have to have thoughts for me to do that." Anders sneered. "You're definitely not Dalish. You spew the same Circle bullshit with the best of them."

"Sniveling coward." Velanna spat. "You call yourself a mage, but know nothing of magic."

"Heal those cuts, maleficar," Rolan ordered.

"What, don't you want to kiss them better?" Anders asked.

"Enough!" Eram bellowed. "All of you! Yes, we have maleficars in our ranks. No, nothing about that is going to change. We have rapists and thieves and murderers, and that's the way it's always been. Rolan is more than capable of handling any magic that gets out of control, but I'll be the one to decide where that line is.

"The Wardens are a second chance for all of us, and against the darkspawn, everything is permitted. Even blood magic. Eylon, Rolan, Leonie, get used to that. Gerod will be reassigned. We will not murder him in cold blood in the middle of the Deep Roads. Anders, Sigrun, Velanna, get used to that."

"Sidona. Sidona! Stop crying. You had to have both physical and mental fortitude to survive the Joining. Find it. We are Wardens! We all drank the same blood, and swore the same oath. That doesn't make us heroes. It makes us the lesser of two evils, and the greater evil will always be the darkspawn. Justice!"

"Constable?" Justice asked.

"You don't need sleep, correct?" Eram asked.

"This is true." Justice said.

"Then you will guard Gerod for the rest of the night," Eram said. "Watch will resume as assigned for tonight. In the future, Justice will always hold watch."
"Constable-!" Eylon protested.

"You would trust this creature!?" Rolan demanded.

"Enough!" Eram barked. "This creature is a corpse. It's not going to rape anyone, and after two weeks I think it's clear Justice is incapable of malice. I don't think I need to guess what happened. Gerod abandoned his watch to harass Sigrun, Justice saw, and got help from Anders. Am I wrong?"

"This is true." Justice said.

"In the future, if you see anything suspicious on watch, you will get me. Not Anders, or anyone else," Eram said. "Do you understand me?"

"I understand you." Justice said.

"Good," Eram rubbed at his face, "Ancestors, what a mess. All of you, go back to sleep. We resume our expedition in the morning. We're nearing on a nest, and we're not turning back over this."

"Are you serious?" Anders laughed. "One guard and a slap on the wrist? You're just inviting him to try again or run away!"

"If he does either you have my permission to kill him," Eram said. "Until then, he is under guard, and he will be reassigned upon returning to the Vigil."

"This is bullshit." Anders said.

"An unnecessary burden, Constable." Leonie agreed. "Gerod has proven himself a man without honor and a traitor to the Order. Only death is suitable."

"We aren't chevaliers, Leonie." Eram said. "We're Wardens. Honor is optional. All of you, go back to sleep."

Jacen was the first to obey, the old Dalish crawling wearily back into his tent. Sidona crawled back into hers, still sniffling.

"I had next watch." Nathaniel said.

Everyone slowly trickled back to their tents, until the only ones left in the alcove were their group, and Gerod. Justice took up a spot a few feet away from him, hand on the hilt of his sword. The child rapist went from kneeling to sitting on his ass and looking up at the spirit with a defiant sneer. Anders healed his hands reluctantly. They were a little stiff, but with a bit of flexing over the next few days and they'd be fine. Velanna grabbed his hand, heedless of the blood still coating it, and pulled him and Sigrun back to her tent. They sat inside with the flaps open, Nathaniel standing by the entrance to listen while still on watch.

Velanna stared at Gerod, who stared defiantly back. "I do not want him listening," Velanna said.

Gerod heard her and laughed, "Guess that's just too fucking bad, huh knife-ear?"

Anders looked at the bastard for a few seconds, and cast an easy creationism spell. "Go the fuck to sleep."

Gerod collapsed. Justice stared at him dispassionately for a few seconds, and then came over to kneel outside the entrance to Velanna's tent. "Is there still a need for me to watch him if he is under a veil of magical sleep?" Justice asked.
"No, sweetie." Sigrun said. "Anders is a great mage. He doesn't need help. Come here."

Justice scooted inside the tent. Sigrun crawled over and hugged the reeking suit of metal. "Thank you for looking out for me, salroka."

"I do not know this word, but you are most welcome." Justice said, stiffly patting Sigrun's back. She must have taught him how to hug at some point, "I would hate for any injustice to befall you."

"It's a special word. It means friend." Sigrun said, sitting back.

"Where's my hug?" Anders asked.

Sigrun elbowed him lightly in the stomach.

"Oh, you're cruel," Anders wheezed, and dragged her into a hug anyway. "I'm stealing one then, because that scared the shit out of me."

"Thank you, sweetie," Sigrun said, giving Anders' cheek a kiss before she shoved him off. "I'm glad you were there, I really am, but Justice is a spirit. I doubt he even knew what was going on,

"I did not." Justice said. "I only sensed that it was wrong."

"'Wrong'," Velanna repeated mockingly. "Disgusting is what it was. I cannot believe we are allowing that piece of filth to live. If he had faced you on the battlefield and not in your sleep, he would be in pieces right now. I have seen that lumberjack wield a sword. His size is the only thing he has, and I doubt any where it counts."

Sigrun let out a tiny giggle. Nathaniel snorted. Anders managed a laugh.

"And now we are to be made to fight alongside him?" Velanna continued. "This is absurd. Mythal's mercy, the things he said of children..."

"It was disturbing, to say the least." Nathaniel agreed. "I know we all have our crimes, some worse than others, but we all have our excuses. I can't think of an excuse for this."

"Whatever his crimes, he must answer for them." Justice said.

Anders jutted a thumb at Justice, "What he said."

"Why not just kill him?" Velanna asked. "The dwarf said if he runs, he dies. Let us just say he ran."

"No," Sigrun squeezed her hand. "You heard what Eram said about Rolan. He recruited him to watch you and Anders. I don't want you two getting in trouble over this."

Velanna made a disgusted noise, and glanced at where Gerod still lay unconscious. "Fools. All of them. Instead of recruiting a templar to watch us, he should have been watching his own men."

"I wish I knew where he got off recruiting that piece of hurlock spew." Anders said.

"Gerod or Rolan?" Sigrun asked.

"Yes," Anders said. "And Sidona? Did you hear her crying? No wonder she's been injured almost every fight. The darkspawn probably scare the poor girl stiff. She's not Warden material."

"She must be, or she wouldn't have survived the Joining," Nathaniel said.
"That doesn't mean anything." Anders said. "It's blood magic. Who knows why she survived."

"We were scared, our first fights." Nathaniel said. "Do you remember the cellars? All the ghouls? Amell and Oghren cleared them out. You and I watched."

"Everybody's scared of darkspawn." Sigrun said. "Death is one thing, but darkspawn? I never told you guys, but after the Joining, with the nightmares? I've never been so scared in my life. It's still hard at night. I can feel them, crawling under my skin like ants, their filth all over me, their claws scratching at the inside of my skull...

"And the whole time I hear this song... It's so beautiful it makes me want to cry, and it almost makes me think the rest of it isn't so bad. Like I want it to corrupt me. It's so..." Sigrun shuddered. "It's terrifying."

"I have the same nightmares." Nathaniel said.

Velanna didn't say anything, but she nodded.

"It's easier if you don't go to bed stressed." Anders said. "For a while I didn't have them at all."

"You mentioned you have a bond with a spirit of Compassion." Justice said. "Perhaps this spirit shields you from the worst of the corruption. Kristoff has memories of these nightmares, and I am led to believe nothing can stem the tide of them."

"That's-no," Anders said. "Compassion... Could she even do that?"

"I would," Justice said.

"Lucky," Sigrun nudged Anders. "Either way, there's no way I'm not going to bed stressed now."

"Certainly not with these people as our companions," Velanna snorted. "Cravens and criminals led by a fool."

Anders laughed. He couldn't help himself.

"What?" Velanna demanded.

"You know that's exactly how you would have described us a few months ago?" Anders asked.

"It was as true then as it is now." Velanna said. "I just happen to be more accustomed to you than these others."

"More accustomed," Anders repeated teasingly. "You can say you like us, you know. Being nice for once in your life won't kill you."

"You have no proof of this." Velanna said.

Anders snorted. Velanna fought back a grin and looked away.

A silence settled, not uncomfortable. The Joining oath had been just words to Anders. Amell had spoken them; Anders hadn't really listened. Anders was all for casual friendships, and a bit of camaraderie and revelry, but he only really thought of himself as a Grey Warden when it was convenient. The thought of the Order as some big happy family of Brothers and Sisters was nothing short of absurd now, but the little circle of friends he had meant something to him.

"We should probably get some sleep if we're going to fight broodmothers tomorrow." Sigrun said.
A murmur of agreement sent Sigrun, Justice, and Anders out of Velanna's tent. Justice went back to resume his watch over Gerod. Nathaniel stayed where he was outside Velanna's tent, watching the entrance to their small alcove.

Anders paused with Sigrun outside her tent. Barkspawn wandered over sat down on Anders' bare feet. For once, the dog was welcome, if only because he was warm.

"Why do you suppose he likes you so much?" Sigrun asked.

"Jealous?" Anders teased.

"A little," Sigrun admitted. "You have him and Ser Pounce-a-Lot. All I ever had was a nug for about an hour before my uncle slaughtered him and ate him. I was just wondering if he likes you because you and Amell were together, or because of the blood magic, or something else."

"Beats me." Anders shrugged. "I'm a cat person. I don't know what I'm doing with a dog, or why he won't leave me alone... But Amell has him pretty well trained. Did you see the way he reacted to Rolan?"

Sigrun knelt down to pet Barkspawn, "...I know I'm supposed to follow orders, like it or not, but I really don't like it. In the Legion it was all okay, because if you got an order you didn't like, you could always remind yourself you'd probably be dead in a day. We even had a song for it."

"Well go on then," Anders said.

"Here we go again,
Same old stuff again
Making sure the Stone's been fed
Few more days and we'll be dead,
And I won't have to look at you,
So I'll be glad and so will you."

"That was about as morbid as I expected it to be," Anders said.

"I miss him." Sigrun said quietly. "I know it's stupid, and I know he's probably dead already, but I miss him. I even miss Oghren. I worry sometimes Oghren will go with him. To his Calling. Do you know why he joined the Wardens?"

"Free drinks?" Anders guessed.

"He dropped his son." Sigrun said. "Twice. All the drinking... He was even drunk when he told me. He joined us because leaving his family was the best thing he thought he could do for them... We're on such loose sand here, salroka. I feel like any second now, it's all going to fall apart."

"I get to be salroka too now, huh?" Anders asked.

"It means one at my side." Sigrun explained. She stopped petting Barkspawn and stood. "And well... That's where you are right now. If something happens with Rolan, I'll stand with you. We'll probably get kicked out of the Wardens or die for it, whatever it is, but I was a Legionnaire first. I can always go back to Kal'Hirol if things go bad."

Sigrun gave him a tight hug around his waist, and Anders knelt to better return it. "That's grand and all, but if you really want to do something for me, stop with all the suicide talk."

"I'll try," Sigrun said. "Goodnight Anders."
Anders wouldn't have been able to sleep alone in Sigrun's place, but the hardy little dwarf went back to her tent as if it were just another night. Anders spared Gerod a glance, but he was still unconscious. The spell would hold for a few hours yet, and Justice was watching him. Anders went back into his tent. Barkspawn crawled in beside him, and Anders resigned himself to smelling like dog. If nothing else, it was better than smelling like darkspawn.

This was what he got for Amell's generosity. Anders was never going to be free. Templars were always going to be a part of his life, no matter what he did to avoid them or prepare himself against them. The only thing that had ever worked for him was Amell. The Hero of Ferelden cast a long shadow, and it was easy to hide in. Anders retrieved Amell's grimoire from his stack of gear in the corner of his tent and flipped it open.

There wasn't anything he wanted to learn, and Anders flipped through the pages aimlessly until he landed on the spell he'd used to realign his connection to the Fade. It wasn't creationism, but it had been closer than anything he'd found. If he could regenerate mana with the Taint, how hard would actual regeneration be?

Anders read the notes Amell had taken from Quentin about reformation until he fell asleep.

Anders wasn't surprised to wake up to a field of reeds. He'd been more or less pissing lyrium thanks to Eram. Compassion sat across from him, wearing Amell's form as she had been ever since Anders had learned his mother was dead. The sight of his mother was too painful for him, and Andraste's form was too impersonal. Amell's helped more than it hurt.

The backwards light of the Fade caught in Compassion's raven hair and shadowed her golden eyes, and was impressively convincing. "Hey love." Anders said.

"You are nigh sick with mana," Compassion said, smoothing back his hair with a concerned hand. Her arms even had the scars right, "Your connection to the Fade is strong, but not this strong. What has happened?"

"You know me," Anders shrugged. "No self restraint. One too many lyrium potions but I'll be fine. I'm actually glad it gave me a chance to talk to you. I was wondering if there was any way you could talk to Amell for me."

"He would have to visit my demesne for me to speak with him." Compassion said. "You are my only visitor. You always have been."

"But you've met him. I dream of him plenty, and you said he was compassionate. Isn't that enough to pull him here?" Anders asked.

"I do not pull anyone here." Compassion said. "This is our place."

"I do not pull anyone here." Compassion said. "This is our place."

"Could you try?" Anders asked.

"I do not know how, just as I do not know how to restore his sight. You are the mage and healer between us. I have only energy and comfort to offer you," Compassion took his hand and squeezed it. "I am sorry."

"Hey, no big deal." Anders shrugged. "It's not your fault."

"Nor is it yours." Compassion said.

"You really pull that look off," Anders said dejectedly, "You look like him, and now you even sound like him."
"Your mother's form upset you, last I wore it." Compassion reminded him. "Would you prefer I returned to it?"

"No." Anders said quickly. "I don't want to see her. Or think about her. Or anything."

Compassion put an arm around him. Anders leaned against his spirit. She had the smell right. Copper and the fade, hints of soap. Anders had had too much lyrium to dream, and spent the rest of the night with Compassion, painfully aware of everything from Amell to his mother to Rolan, and woke up unrested.

The next day was awkward. Aside from Eram's instructions, hardly anyone spoke. All of the Orlesians and ex-prisoners avoided Anders and Velanna, save for the old Dalish Jacen who didn't seem at all perturbed by the blood magic revelation. Eram gave Gerod back his weapons and armor, and let the child rapist keep fighting with them. Anders ignored him the same way he ignored Rolan in fights. He wouldn't have shed a tear if either died.

They followed the corruption to a broodmother. The nest in Kal'Hiroil had broodmothers that had been dwarven women once. The creatures gave birth to genlocks, owing to why such darkspawn so resembled dwarves. The creature they found must have been an elf once, because her layer was crawling with shrieks.

There Anders learned Amell wasn't the only one they so desperately needed in a fight. Against the nest in Kal'Hiroil, Oghren had been invaluable. The broodmothers were immobile, giant creatures of rot and waste congealing into the corruption they spread. To compensate, they had tentacle-like appendages countless meters long. They moved them through the Blight on the floor and along the walls, and used them to strangle and lash out at anything that set foot in their layer.

Oghren had been able to take out the tentacles with a single sweep of his axe. No one in their new group compared. Gerod should have been able, but the bastard swung his bastard sword recklessly, and cleaved into the tentacles instead cutting them in half. Leonie and Eram used sword and shield, and neither had the heft of a battle axe to carve the tentacles apart.

The broodmother's nest was at a crossroads of sorts. One Deep Road's tunnel and two darkspawn-made tunnels intersected where she sat on the edge of a chasm. The walls were lined in thick white sacks that spewed out the occasional new born shriek. The broodmother herself was a horror, but her face was bare. She wasn't Seranni.

Anders felt wretched for taking comfort in it. Seranni or not, the thing had been an elven girl once, and didn't deserve her fate. Her body had swollen, a massive purple and red mound, covered in blight sores. Her torso emerged from it like a growth, and vestigial limbs protruded from her in every direction. She had countless sets of breasts, and they spilled down her distended body all the way into the blighted ground. A few shrieks were suckling on her.

The experienced warriors charged. The new recruits threw up. Nathaniel grabbed Anders hand and pulled him up a hill of flesh and Blight to an outcropping of bare rock. Barkspawn followed and Velanna ran to join them, and their small group stayed crouched where the tentacles found no purchase. The battle raged beneath them, and Anders kept an eye on Sigrun and Justice.

He channeled aptitude for them, kept a barrier over them, and did his best to freeze the shrieks that noticed them. From his narrow perspective, the battle was going well, until more darkspawn poured in from the tunnels and crawled up the chasm to help the broodmother.

Their small corner handled it. Barkspawn and Velanna's earth magic kept the darkspawn back, and left Anders and Nate free to support the rest of the Wardens, who so desperately needed it.
Justice, Sigrun, and Rolan struggled to hold off the incoming darkspawn while Leonie and Eram engaged the broodmother. Jacen and Eylon had their backs to a wall, with only Gerod's feeble defense keeping them from being overwhelmed. Sidona...

Anders didn't know where Sidona was. "Where's Sidona?" Anders asked.

"I lost track of her." Nathaniel said. "She was fighting the broodmother last I... There, at the edge of the chasm."

The simple pickpocket was in the process of being dragged over the edge of the chasm. Her mouth was open, but the many shrieks and their echoing cries drowned out her screams.

"Velanna, can you help her?" Nathaniel asked.

"I can't travel here. The stone is too thick." Velanna said.

A root broke out of the hard stone ceiling above Sidona, and wrapped tight around her arm to keep the girl on this side of the chasm.

"That is all I can do." Velanna said.

"... I think I have a shot." Nathaniel said, notching an arrow.

"What?" Anders asked. "No! Maker, don't kill her. I'll get to her. Hang on."

Anders shoved past them and slid down the flesh covered hill, a hand to the rot to keep him from slipping on his way down. He steadied himself on his staff when he reached the bottom, and Barkspawn charged down after him, his claws tearing up chunks of flesh and blood as he ran. It wasn't far to Sidona, in theory.

There were other mounds of flesh, shriek pods, and rocky outcropping between Anders and the chasm. The darkspawn were still swarming, mostly preoccupied with defending the broodmother, which Anders wasn't threatening. He started towards Sidona at a jog. Barkspawn leapt past him without warning, and tackled a shriek out of the air as it dove for him, seemingly out of nowhere.

Anders stumbled back a pace. Black blood sprayed into the air, and Barkspawn ripped the creature's throat out. The dog came back to Anders with blood and filth dripping from his jowls. The shriek had left lacerations on the mabari's shoulders, and Anders healed them.

Another ten paces, and another shriek noticed them. Anders froze it, the dog ate it, they continued. Anders dodged around one of the white sack, and it exploded on him. A newborn shriek fell out squealing and covered in pus. A tentacle shot up out of the ground to defend it, and struck Anders in the stomach.

He lost his footing, and his vision became a blur of red, white, and black. He went crashing through a darkspawn sack, and rolled several feet further before he came to a halt on the blighted ground, covered in blood, pus, and amniotic fluid. Anders climbed to his feet, dripping filth. It seemed a miracle he was alive. If the broodmother had been Awakened, she might have knocked him forward, and into the chasm.

Instead she'd knocked him backwards, towards the hill he'd just climbed down. It was inconvenient, and his ribs were definitely bruised or broken, but he was alive. How many lives did Anders have left? Six? Probably best not to keep count. Anders tried to run, and the pain in his chest nearly made him puke.
He healed himself before he continued, and the time it took him was long enough for Barkspawn to run back to his side. Anders was glad the dog was alright. He'd already cost Amell enough.

Anders ran to the edge of the chasm, where Velanna’s root was still tethered to Sidona’s arm and keeping her from falling over the edge. Anders cast a quick rejuvenation spell for her, and dropped to one knee to help her up. It was surprisingly easy to pull her back onto solid ground, and Anders belatedly realized it had nothing to do with the fact that he’d started exercising.

He’d wasted his time. And wasted his mana. Sidona was already dead. Anders pulled up a torso that must have been caught on the edge of the chasm. Sidona’s lower half had been torn off. Her spine and her intestines oozed out from below her belt. She’d died with her eyes and mouth open, in the middle of a scream.

There was nothing for it. Anders ran back to the hill, and rejoined his friends.

"This isn't working." Nathaniel said when he showed up. "We're in a terrible position. The darkspawn can come at us from every direction. We need to retreat."

"Tell Eram that." Anders said.

"How? He is dead." Velanna pointed. Anders followed her finger.

The dwarf was a headless corpse; the tentacles that had ripped him in half were still twisted around his mangled body.

"Well now what?" Anders asked.

"We retreat." Nate said again. "I'm out of arrows, and I'll be no use down there with so many tentacles still functional."

"We three could, but the rest?" Velanna asked rhetorically, still casting what she could. "Look. They are surrounded. There is no retreating for them. We cannot leave Sigrun. Use his grimoire."

"How? You want me to throw it at them?" Anders demanded, throwing out a barrier for the wardens who were still alive. "It doesn't work like that. I'd have to pick a spell, and I don't even know where to start."

"Amell gave you that book for a reason. Do something." Velanna said.

Anders drank his last lyrium potion, and channeled a lightning spell. It arched through five darkspawn, and felled them all without making a dent in the horde. A tentacle burst out of the ground beside Eylon, wrapped around his arm, and ripped it off. The elf collapsed, screaming in agony. Jacen grabbed Eylon’s good arm, and dragged him back into the Deep Road’s tunnel they’d came in from. It was where they all should have been going.

"The broodmother!" Velanna said suddenly. "We can enslave her! Use her and those tentacles against the horde. Nathan, give me a knife."

Nathaniel handed her a dagger, and rolled up his sleeve to offer his arm. Anders wasn't surprised to see Barkspawn perk his ears up and sit beside them. Amell had definitely trained the dog for everything. Velanna ignored the mabari, or maybe didn’t understand that it was willing to help, and cut vertically down her and Nathaniel’s forearms.

"Don't blow it," Anders joked. "Use the dog too, if you need more blood. Amell trained him for it. I have to go help Eylon. Good luck,"
Velanna chose to concentrate on the spell rather than answer. Anders told Barkspawn to stay, and slid down the hill and ran along the wall back to the Deep Road's tunnel. He darted out of the nest, and followed the trail of blood to where Jacen had propped Eylon up against a wall, and was trying to help him. The younger elf was all red, from his hair to his freckles to the blood pouring out of his stump of an arm.

The older Dalish had a rag from his pack pressed to Eylon's shoulder, but it wasn't helping. He needed a tourniquet, and Anders didn't have any rope. Amell could have done it, with telekinesis, but Anders didn't know any telekinetic magic. "Da'len, thank the creators," Jacen said, "Please help, he won't hold still,"

"Stay away from me, maleficar!" Eylon snarled, attempting to scoot away. His glove and boots were soaked through, and it was impossible for him to find any purchase on the smooth stone. He flailed madly in one spot, slipping and sliding in his own blood.

Anders cast a sleep spell, and the wild elf slumped over, unconscious. "Jacen, do you have any rope?" Anders asked, carving out a lifeward beneath Eylon in case he went into shock.

"Yes, some," Jacen said.

Anders took Eylon from him, along with the ruined rag, and continued pressing it to Eylon's wound. Jacen searched through his pack and produced a cord of rope thicker than Anders would have liked. It was almost as thick as an elf’s forearm, and obviously for scaling any small cliffs or ledges they might encounter in the Deep Roads. Eylon didn't have much of a stump left, but Anders took the rope and tied it around what was left of his arm anyway. It fit, if only just.

"Jacen, I know this sounds crazy, but I need you to go back in there and try to find his arm." Anders said. "I might be able to reattach it,"

"I have seen you heal, da'len. I would believe you capable of anything," Jacen said, picking his discarded bow back up, "I will try to find it."

The old Dalish ran back into the broodmother's nest. Anders felt better knowing he probably wasn't sending him to his death. With Velanna holding the broodmother, Jacen wouldn't have to worry about the tentacles tearing him apart.

Anders kept cleansing aura over Eylon, and waited.

He waited for a quarter hour. Every few minutes, a darkspawn would appear, either from the nest or from further down the Deep Roads. Anders froze them, and with his new staff, he didn't even have to get up to shatter them. The dragonbone and its many enchantments channeled his magic so efficiently the darkspawn shattered on their own. Eventually, the Wardens started trickling out of the nest to join Anders and Eylon in the corridor.

Gerod was the first one out. Anders hated that he was even still alive. Sigrun followed him, along with Justice, then Rolan. Nathaniel, Velanna, and Barkspawn came next, finally followed by Leonie. Jacen was last.

"Is he dead?" Leonie asked, kneeling wearily next to Eylon.

"He's not dead. He's just unconscious," Anders said.

"Because you are keeping him unconscious," Rolan said. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't smite you and force you to release him," The templar was limping, his left leg dragging behind him, and still had it in him to be an ass. Anders had to give him points for consistency, if nothing else.
"Because he'll go into shock and die in about fifteen minutes if you do." Anders said.

"That a good enough reason for you, bucket-head?" Sigrun asked, shoving past Rolan to flop down next to Anders.

"I couldn't find it," Jacen said.


"No arm left," Gerod said, spitting into a magma channel. "Thing exploded right on my face when that tentacle ripped him in half,"

"He is left-handed," Leonie said levelly. "He will live. Do what you can with what is left."

"... we'd have to make camp," Anders said. "I need to amputate it properly so I can sew the skin back together."

"Then we will make camp." Leonie said. "Can Eylon be moved?"

"Carefully, but yes." Anders said.

"Then we move in five," Leonie said. "Pack up. We will head back to the alcove,"

Packs came down, rags and water came out. Weapons were cleaned and sheathed, bows unstrung, shields shouldered. Five minutes felt like five seconds. Leonie lifted Eylon effortlessly, and carried the unconscious elf as they set out. Anders fell back a pace to walk with Nathaniel and Velanna, and heal the casting cuts on their arms.

"So... it worked?" Anders asked. "We won?"

"It worked," Nathaniel said. "We won."

There was no celebrating.
9:31 Dragon 19 Umbralis Afternoon
Chantry of our Lady Redeemer, Amaranthine

Healing Eylon's arm had been unpleasant, if only because very little of it was healing. The stump the elf had been left with had to be amputated properly. Healing it was a messy business of sawing through flesh and bone until Anders had enough skin to work with to sew the wound shut. Eylon had woken up screaming, sobbing, and blaming Anders for all of it. Anders let him, knowing it could have been worse. Eylon didn't need both arms to cast his spells, and the injury wasn't enough to send him to his Calling.

They returned to the Vigil short-handed, ten Wardens in place of twelve, only to suddenly become eleven.

Anders had broken into a run when the messenger told them a Warden had returned to the Vigil, and slammed open the door to the barracks to be greeted with a very confused Stroud, just back from Montsimmard.

Anders didn't have it in him to be embarrassed. He was just relieved it wasn't Oghren, back alone. Apparently, Stroud and Loghain had picked up horses in Jader, and it made the trip faster than they'd anticipated. Stroud had since agreed to stay with them for a time before heading to the Free Marches, owing to the state of the arling.

With Eram dead, Leonie stepped into his position as Warden-Constable. She hadn't held the position a day before there was another assassination attempt. Varel had been meeting with Leonie at the time, and somehow ended up taking a crossbow bolt for her. The assassin escaped, but Varel lived.

Less than an hour after the attempt, Leonie had the noble hostages brought back to the Vigil. She'd called a formal audience, and from what Anders had heard had more or less threatened to kill everyone and everything until someone came forward. Apparently, someone had, because Leonie had three nobles executed on the spot. The assassin hadn't returned, and a lovely young woman named Ser Tamra had been staying at the Vigil as Leonie's honored guest ever since.

Gerod hadn't been reassigned. Instead, Leonie had him castrated. Anders wished she'd killed him, or reassigned him, or chosen any sort of punishment that didn't mean Anders had to be the one to make sure the man healed properly after losing his testicles. The last thing Anders wanted to see was the man's mutilated crotch. Checking on the scars behind Gerod's dick made Anders so profoundly uncomfortable there wasn't an analogy disturbing enough to describe just how uncomfortable it actually made him.

Eylon was another regular visitor to the infirmary to make sure his shoulder was healing. Both men's visits were filled with frigid silence, which was really the only appropriate thing to fill them with. His
physician could have handled it, but Anders was the only one with a cleansing aura at his command that could treat the infections that inevitably followed.

Leonie gave a completely different address than the one Eram had given. She sat them down and read through the Commandments of the Maker, and stated they should refer to Transfigurations 1 if they wanted advice on how to conduct themselves under her command. Everyone had one warning, in honor of Eram's memory, after which traitors to the Order would be executed. Gerod had already used his.

The only real bright side was that after Leonie read through Transfigurations 1:2, she concluded that there was nothing in the Commandments against using blood magic on darkspawn. Anders and Velanna were free to continue using such magic, provided they never used it on mankind. Anders and Velanna subsequently agreed it a ridiculously rule, considering they were more than likely to encounter bandits, brigands, and all other manner of evil not darkspawn.

Admittedly, they voiced their complaints to each other and not to Leonie, but it felt good to complain all the same. The only complaint Velanna voiced aloud was when Leonie stated there was to be absolutely no fraternization among the ranks, no exceptions. According to Leonie it created too many conflicts of interest. According to Velanna the shemlen bitch had no right to presume to tell them how to live.

The argument had escalated from there, until Leonie threatened to have Nathaniel reassigned, stating a pre-existing conflict of interest with the arling given his lineage. Velanna had stormed out, which was very Velanna of her. Nathaniel had given a quiet 'I understand,' which was very Nathaniel of him, and just like that it was over. Anders swore he'd heard Sigrun sniffling throughout the rest of Leonie's address.

According to Leonie, the arling was as important as the darkspawn, and both Amell and Eram had unjustly neglected it. She took them to Amaranthine to coordinate with the guards on combating smuggler activity, and, Anders learned only once they were standing inside Amaranthine's Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer, help the templars.

The Chantry was as grossly opulent as Anders expected it to be, given the hordes of refugees still trapped outside Amaranthine's high walls. The floors were covered with intricately patterned rugs, the walls with fanciful crimson tapestries. Stained glass windows illuminated mahogany pews with brilliantly colored light, and wrought iron chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling. The entrance was lined in flower beds, and ferns hung from arches cut into the walls.

Between the arches were offering tables and votive candle racks. A few of the arches opened up and led into small nooks containing bookcases filled with holy scripture, or marble statues, allowing for semi-private areas for reading or prayer. The Chantry was filled with refugees, those lucky few who had managed to make it into the city, and smelled overwhelmingly of incense used to mask the smell of too many people packed into one place.

Leonie and Rolan pushed through the crowd to find whatever templar representative they were here to see. Gerod followed them. Stroud and Jacen stayed in a corner, out of the way and talking to one another. Nathaniel and Eylon went to pray. Justice wandered among the refugees, asking anyone and everyone who so much as sniffled if there was anything he could do for them.

Anders went to one of the votive candle stands, and lit a candle for his mother. Sigrun and Velanna followed him. Velanna's steps were jittery and awkward, and had been ever since Leonie had started insisting she and Jacen wear their full Warden uniforms, boots included.

"We used to do something like this in Orzammar," Sigrun said, "There are statutes of Paragons
throughout the city. You can light a candle at them and pray to the ancestors to watch over your loved ones, or pray for the Stone to find them worthy of joining the ancestors if they're dead.

"If they die and the Stone finds them unworthy, they become part of the gangue. The um... the corruption in the Stone. It was part of our job as the Legion of the Dead to keep the Stone pure. Is that for Amell?" Sigrun asked.


"Can I light one?" Sigrun asked. "Or is it only okay if you're an Andrastian?"

"I couldn't give two bits what the Chantry says is okay," Anders snorted. "Light them all if you want,"

Sigrun took his place at the stand and lit one. After a quiet moment she turned to Velanna. "Do you want to light one too, sweetie? For Lyna?"

"Why?" Velanna demanded. "This is a human custom. We have our own prayers. We do not need to borrow theirs."

"I'll light one for her then." Sigrun said, lighting another.

"Who was the first one for?" Anders asked.

"Varlan." Sigrun said. "I'm kind of glad we came here. The statue of Andraste in the courtyard at the Vigil is covered in wax. There's not really room for any more candles, and it's not like there's a statue of a paragon for me anywhere. I always used to pray to Gherlon, the Blood-Risen. He was born casteless, but later became a Paragon and a King. His story always gave me hope, until I joined the Legion. I kind of stopped praying after that. No point if you're already dead, you know?"

"Wax is the least of it," Velanna said. "The bird droppings are practically desecrating that statue at this point."

"I'm surprised you care," Anders said. "Andraste was a human, you know."

"I can look past petty hatred when I have reason to," Velanna said.

"So you admit it's petty." Anders said, "Good to know."

"I respect Andraste," Velanna said, "She freed the elven slaves, and fought for freedom and justice. The fact that she fought a tyrannical empire only for her followers to become one themselves is amusingly ironic, but no reason to hate her personally."

"It's almost as if not all humans are the same," Anders mused.

"Perhaps they are not." Velanna said.

"I must have wax in my ear," Anders rubbed his ear. "What did you say?"

"Nothing." Velanna hummed.

"Wardens, outside." Leonie's order sounded through the Chantry. Stroud pushed open the massive twin doors to the Chantry, and everyone quickly moved out. The Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer was situated on a hill, and looked out over the heart of Amaranthine.

The market sprawled out beneath them to the north, a plethora of colors and movement. It was a
beautiful view, if you kept your eyes fixated there, and didn't look northeast towards the docks and
the slums surrounding them, or west to the gates and guardhouses and remember the refugees
trapped outside. Funny how Leonie didn't seem to care about that. Probably because the Bann didn't
care about that.

Perspective was important after all.

Leonie stood next to the statue of Andraste in the center of the Chantry courtyard. Rolan took a spot
next to her, along with yet another templar. Anders wondered if they were recruiting her too. She
had hazel eyes, auburn hair, and a pretty face, all of it nullified by the Silver Sword of Mercy on her
breast.

"This is Ser Rylien," Leonie introduced the templar. "We will be helping her with her investigation."

"Thank you, Warden Constable." Ser Rylien gave them all a small bow. "I am indeed fortunate the
Wardens have taken an interest in this matter."

"Why is that again?" Anders mouth asked without any permission from his brain. "Are we
combining Orders or something, because the whole vow of chastity thing really isn't going to work
for me."

"Don't interrupt, mage," Rolan sneered at him.

"This is our arling." Leonie said. "It is for us to defend it from all threats. Ser Rylien, continue."

"Thank you, Constable," Ser Rylien said. "You are correct, ser mage. Ordinarily the Order would
handle this matter ourselves, but most of my fellows have been recalled to Denerim, and I have only
recently taken my vows. It was suggested that I bring the matter forward to Ser--- I mean, Warden
Rolan, who brought it forward to the Constable.

"The issue at hand is that Amaranthine is a hotbed of maleficar activity of late. We've received a
number of disturbing reports and accusations, and have narrowed our search to three suspects," Ser
Rylien reached into her satchel and pulled out three sheaves of parchment. She passed them to
Leonie, who passed them around the circle for everyone to see.

"I have worked with a sketch artist to record their likeness," Ser Rylien explained. "I would urge all
of you to commit their appearances to memory. Our goal here is to apprehend these suspects, and
bring them in for questioning. This must done quietly, or details of who they are and what they are
about will undoubtedly get back to them."

The papers reached Anders, and Ser Rylien's voice faded away. Maker's mercy, it was Alim. The
handsome elf smirked up at him from the parchment. Sharp nose, strong jaw, hazel eyes and golden
brown skin. They even had his ponytail right. Anders passed the parchment off quickly and accepted
the next. Anders didn't have a face fit for Wicked Grace. One look at him and Anders was sure
everyone would know he knew.

The next suspect was another elf, who looked a female version of Alim. A sister maybe. Anders
dared a glance up. Everyone was listening to Ser Rylien. No one was looking at him. The last
suspect was a human male. The dumb bastard had a tattoo. It was a wave above his left brow, and
two on his cheek on the same side. Idiot. The templars had it easy enough without mages branding
themselves.

Anders passed the parchment off. His palms had left sweaty stains on the edges. These were
members of the Collective. They weren't maleficarum, and even if they were, they'd have to be
hypocrites to hunt them when their Order already harbored two. They couldn't just go along with this. Someone should say something. Someone should do something. Someone...

Anders was someone. He could do something. But what? How? He couldn't just inconspicuously excuse himself and run straight to the docks to warn Alim. Leonie and Rolan weren't that stupid, and they were already making plans for the hunt. Ser Rylien suggested they pair up in groups of two to scour the city.

Justice would help him, Anders knew, but the spirit wouldn't be much help clunking through the city in full armor. Rolan was already volunteering to search the docks with Eylon, given how many reports had come from that area. Nathaniel and Sigrun were quick and stealthy. They could get there first, but there was no way Alim would trust them. Anders had to be there, and pairing up with Nate or Sigrun wouldn't make Anders any faster or stealthier.

He was a mage. He wasn't a rogue. All he had was magic.

Magic.

Leonie called for the rest of them to separate into groups. Anders grabbed Velanna's hand. The elf shot him a confused frown, but as a testament to how much she'd changed, she didn't wrench away. Everyone else made their groups, Sigrun with Justice, Jacen with Stroud, Leonie with Nate, and Gerod with Rylien.

"You sure she's old enough to go with him?" Anders asked, trying to come up with a plan. The morbid quip won him a few snorts and sniffs from the rest of the Wardens.

"A valid concern," Leonie nodded at him. "Gerod, you will pair with me. Nathaniel, with Ser Rylien."

"Why is my age a concern?" Ser Rylien demanded. "I am a full fledged member of the Order, newly initiated or not."

"Nothing was meant by it, my lady." Nate assured her, gesturing to the winding stone stairs that led down from the Chantry courtyard and to the city. "Shall we?"

Velanna glared miserably at the pair as they left with the others. Anders sympathized, but he didn't have time to express it. Anders tugged on her hand and pulled Velanna down the stairs, the elf tripping over her boots the entire way down. "Amell never forced me to wear these accursed things." Velanna muttered.

Anders dragged Velanna into the Chantry's arbor at the bottom of the stairs, the small alcove of trees and trellises according them a little privacy. "We have to get to the docks." Anders said. "I know the elf. He's a member of the Collective. We have to warn them. You can get us there. Use your root magic."

"The same magic which so terrified you last I used it on you?" Velanna asked.

"Look I get it, I'm a coward. Small dark spaces terrify me, but I don't have a choice here. We have to do something. Fast. Here, we can leave our tabards here," Anders unbundled his belt and hastily took his off tabard. "We don't want people gossiping about a pair of Wardens running around the docks before Rolan and Eylon get there."

Velanna tore hers off, along with her boots. Anders took them and stuffed them behind a rose bush. "I need a line of sight to wherever I take us. Let us go back to the hill, and to the docks from there."
They rebuckled their belts, ran back up the stairs to the hill the Chantry sat upon. The docks were visible, but featureless: grey buildings, white sails, and brown piers walled off from the rest of the city. Anders couldn't make out any people from this distance.

"Can you teleport us that far?" Anders asked.

"It's not teleportation. I move through the earth. I can get us there, but it will be in bursts." Velanna explained.

"Don't be obvious." Anders said. "Keep us away from crowds. We can go on foot when we get to the docks."

"I will be." Velanna said, "Give me your hand,"

Velanna held out her hand. Anders stared at it. Velanna had long slender fingers, callused at the tips, and they were already glowing green with the pull of mana. On the other side of the spell was a tiny prison of roots, like rope and chain made into a cell. Anders took a deep breath, and grabbed her hand.

Darkness swallowed him. He felt upside down and inside out and backwards. The smell of earth and bark was everywhere, dirt and bits of small rock showered across his face, got in his boots, his hair, down his trousers and the back of his tunic. It was over quickly, and they were left standing in a patch of torn up dirt between two trees.

Darkness came again before Anders had a chance to appreciate the light. It took them four trips before they reached the docks, and it was too crowded for them to continue. Anders grabbed Velanna's hand and ran with her to the Fisherman's Rest. Without their tabards, they were nothing special. A human and an elf in black trousers and blue tunics, the former with too much jewelry and the latter with no shoes.

They ran across three piers, bumping into cutpurses and sailors, kicking up puddles of water, and dodging carts of fish and crates of trade goods. An ocean wind carried with it the scent of brine and fish, and mussed their hair as they ran. At one point, a loose barrel narrowly avoided crashing into them, and they both came to a skidding halt.

Velanna caught herself on him, laughing. Anders laughed with her. Anxiety was making a mess of him, but beneath that, this was almost exciting. "Which way now?" Velanna asked breathlessly.

"There," Anders pointed to the water-logged tavern. Fisherman's Rest was crowded in the afternoon, cheap ale mingled with the scent of the sea and one too many people. Alim was sitting in his usual booth, all but inviting someone to apprehend him. He was also meeting with someone.

Anders made his way across the wavy floor and around warped tables to Alim's booth. The elf glared up at him for the interruption. "We have to talk. Now. Emergency or whatever your code for that is. You're in danger."

That must have been the right code. Alim excused himself from his meeting and led Anders and Velanna to one of the tavern's guest rooms. It was far from glamorous. There was an armoire, a cot, a trunk, a tiny table, a small bathing area with a bucket and stool for washing and a chamber pot. Extortionist or not, Alim clearly didn't use any Collective coin for himself. Anders felt like an ass for judging him.

"What is it?" Alim demanded.

"The templars know your face," Anders said. "They're using Grey Wardens to search the city for
you, and some are already on their way to the docks. Do you have a sister?"

"Are they looking for her?" Alim asked. "They are or you wouldn't ask. How many?"

"Ten." Anders said.

"I have to get to the Crown and Lion," Alim said. He opened his trunk and pulled out two ready-
made packs with so little hesitation it made Anders angry. Alim had planned for the day templars
came for him. He was a mage, which meant he wasn't welcome anywhere. Nothing he built would
ever last. Nothing any of them built would ever last. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. It wasn't just. "My
sister is a scullion there. Do you know where your fellows are searching and if I'll run into them?"

"I can get you there," Velanna said.

"Thank you." Alim darted back out into the hall. Anders and Velanna followed him to the bar of all
places. Alim smacked the counter to get the portly bartender's attention. "Whiskey with an apple
chaser."

"I'll have it right out." The bartender promised.

"Is now really the time?" Anders asked.

Alim led them through the crowded tavern and into the kitchen. From there they took a backdoor out
onto the docks.

"Oh it's a code." Anders realized when they were back out on the pier. "Chaser. Being chased.
That's pretty clever."

"How do you intend to get us to the Crown and Lion?" Alim asked.

Velanna dragged both of them through the dockside district, moving further inland until they found a
gatehouse that led back into Amaranthine. It was on slightly elevated ground, with a decent view of
the city. "Give me your hands." Velanna said.

"This is going to suck." Anders warned Alim.

They took her hands. Roots swarmed over them and dragged them underground. They reemerged
almost a quarter mile away from where they'd been, beside a nondescript house and a pile of rubbish.
Alim doubled over and threw up.

"I warned you." Anders said.

"Creators," Velanna muttered.

Alim gagged and wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand, stumbling away from the puddle of
vomit he left at his feet. "I'm sorry. We need to hurry. It's just down this street, we'll go in through the
kitchen."

The back of the Crown and Lion was less grandiose than the front. Rubbish heaps and broken
bottles of glass were strewn along the deserted street, along with the occasional refugee and
afternoon lush. Alim ushered them in through the back.

His sister looked just like him, from the strong jaw to the sharp nose, to the same style ponytail. She
was standing over a bucket, shelling shrimp, and looked anything but a dangerous maleficar.
"Alim?" The girl asked. "What are you doing here-Oh my stars a Dalish."
"We are known, Melissa," Alim explained, forcing one of the pack's into his sister's back. "Get Sorcha to open the passage. We need to get out of the city."

"Guess you won't be finishing those shrimp then, huh?" The chef sighed. "Bloody templars."

"But you said they all went to Denerim!" Melissa protested, whipping her hands off on her trousers. "I found honest work. The Warden Commander promised we'd be safe here!"

"The Warden Commander is gone." Alim said, and turned back to them. "Thank you for your help friends. Maria, the bartender at the Fisherman's Rest, will know who the new liaison is when we get one."

"They were looking for one more," Anders said. "A man with blue eyes, blonde hair, and a tattoo on his face, like two waves on his left cheek and one above his brow. Do you know anyone like that?"

"Evon." Melissa said. "Oh no... He'll be at his stall in the markets. It's in plain sight. We can't just leave him, Alim. Strangers, I know it's a lot to ask, but could you get him out?"

"Well look, I'm Anders, and this is Velanna, so now we're not strangers, and it's not a lot to ask." Anders said. "Right?"

"Of course we will help." Velanna said. "These templars have no right to any of you."

The door to the kitchen open and a woman hurried in, with red hair, red eyes, and a pretty if plain red dress. She closed the door behind her hastily and ran to the back door to open it, "Lissa there are Wardens here asking questions about you! Hurry! Leave before they search the kitchen!"

Alim grabbed his sister's hand and the four of them ran back out into the alley. "What do we do now?" Melissa asked. "There are Wardens after us too?"

"They are working with the templars," Velanna explained. "Our new Constable has made mewling cravens of them all."

"This way," Alim urged them on. "We can use the smugglers' alleys,"

The four of them darted around corners and through shadowed alleys, and the occasional crowded street. The city sloped down towards the markets, and stairs were carved into the hill leading down. The four of them found a spot to the left of the stairs, overlooking the market. Melissa pointed a stall in the distance.

Evon apparently made a living selling candy. Someday Anders wanted to tell Leonie all about the dangerous criminals she and the templars were protecting the arling from. But preferably not right this second, the way he might have to with Leonie and Gerod combing through the markets some short ways from Evon's stall. The two giants weren't hard to spot, with how they towered over the crowds.

"Get him quick," Anders said. "Our Constable is right there."

"I'll never reach him before they do," Melissa protested.

"Just get him up here," Anders suggested, thinking fast. "We'll hide behind this house, and the second he reaches us Velanna can transport the five of us across the street. I see an alley there we can duck in."

"I cannot move five at a time." Velanna said.
"But you can move three." Alim said. "Anders, let's go now. You three can catch up with us."

"Right." Anders said.

Anders and Alim bolted across the street, Velanna back around the house, Melissa down the stairs. Anders didn't see what happened, but he heard Melissa screaming, and the sound of chaos from the markets. He and Alim kept running down the side street, and darted in a space between two building so thin Anders wouldn't have called it an alley. A short while later Velanna, Melissa, and the tattooed fellow name Evon appeared in a shower of roots outside it and leapt inside with them.

"Did they see you?" Anders asked.

"Ha!" Velanna snorted.

"They'll search the area, we have to move," Alim said, hurrying down the alley with the assumption they'd follow. The alley was so thin they could only go two at a time, but soon they were out, and onto a side street.

"Back to the Crown and Lion? Do you think the Wardens there are gone?" Melissa asked.

"It's our only way out of the city," Alim said, "They'll never find us in the refugee camps outside the walls. We can make for Highever when night falls."

"Or you could keep going to West Hill," Anders suggested. "There's a man there named Levyn who would probably help you, and if you go there I can send you a few sovereigns to get started somewhere else."

"And where will you find these few sovereigns now that Leonie has cut our stipends in half?" Velanna demanded.

"Amell left me some in case-" I wanted to bring my dead mother down to visit. "Just in case." Anders said.

"Who are you?" Evon asked, "Why are you helping us?"

"Oh, right," Anders looked over his shoulder and held out his hand. The tattooed fellow shook it warily. "I'm Anders. And... I don't know. Because someone should."

"A good reason, but rarely enough for anyone," Evon said suspiciously.

"Be quiet, Evon." Melissa said. "They're helping. Who cares why?"

"This isn't how it's done," Evon said. "We mark our homes with blood when something like this happens to let everyone know they need to run."

"You weren't home, Evon. There wasn't time. The templars are getting smarter. They're using Grey Wardens now. Do you think any of us want to leave like this?" Melissa looked at Velanna, crestfallen, "I have so many questions for you, but I know there's not time to ask."

"There's the inn," Alim said. "One of us should check to see if the Wardens have gone and then let the rest of us in through the back."

"I'll do it." Anders said. "Stay out of sight."
Anders hurried across the street to the tavern while everyone else circled around the back. Anders let himself into the inn, and cleaned off his boots on the rug before the door while looking around. The common room of the Crown and Lion was comfortably warm, and smelled of fresh reeds and pine. A fire was crackling in the fireplace, and a minstrel was idly strumming her lute on the stone stage.

For the most part, the tavern was empty. It was a well-to-do lodging for well-to-do folk doing well-to-do things in the middle of the day. Anders spotted the redhead from before wiping down one of the tables, and went over to her. She glanced up at him with an easy smile, "Looking to wet your whistle, stranger?"

"Sorcha, right?" Anders asked. "Melissa's friend? Are the Wardens gone?"

"They're gone," Sorcha squinted at him. "Who are you?"

"What you don't remember? We just met ten minutes ago. How could you forget this face?" Anders joked, "Everyone is waiting out back, is it safe for them to come through?"

"It is. Let me get the door." Sorcha stuffed the rag she was holding into her apron and hurried to the kitchen.

A few minutes later and she led the group of mages out of the kitchen and through the common room. Surprisingly, neither the barkeeper nor the innkeeper said so much as a word. "Upstairs," Sorcha said.

The barmaid led them up the stairs and down the hall to a room she unlocked with a set of keys from her belt. All of them crowded inside. The room was for storage, and packed with stacked furniture and rolled up rugs. Sorcha move a rug and a table aside to reveal a trap door underneath she unlocked for them. A ladder led down into darkness.

"This leads outside the city. There's a house a quarter mile to the north of the city gate, against the city walls. It's marked with a broken circle, if either of you ever need it." Alim fished out a coin from his pocket, with a broken Circle of Magi symbol on it. He gave it to Anders. "This will let the Collective know you hold a Most Trusted status with us. You both deserve one, but I only have one. We'll head to West Hill and try to find this Levyn. Thank you for everything."

Alim climbed down the ladder without another word. Evon followed him. Melissa gave Sorcha a fierce hug. "We'll see each other again someday."

"No we won't, but thanks for saying it," Sorcha said, giving Melissa a push towards the ladder. "Go on, get."

"It was an honor to meet you, Velanna." Melissa said. "Thank you, Anders."

She climbed down the ladder. Mage light battled back the darkness as the three apostates descended. Sorcha closed the trap door over them and locked it before moving the furniture back in place. Her eyes misted, and she smudged the kohl decorating them when she wiped away unshed tears. "Get you two a couple of drinks?" Sorcha offered. "On the house."

"We should get back and get our things before someone finds them, but I'll take you up on that someday." Anders pocketed the coin Alim had given him. He left the tavern with Velanna, and her root magic brought them back to the Chantry.

"We did it," Anders laughed. "I can't believe we actually did it. I mean, you did it, with your magic, but-"
"Your ideas saved those people." Velanna said.

"... They did, didn't they?" Anders allotted.

"I told you," Velanna grinned. "Templars are nothing to us. That fool woman should have known better than to ask our aid in this. What did she expect, asking us to turn against our own kind?"

"Probably that we'd be too scared to disobey after what she did to Gerod," Anders guessed. They went back inside the arbor, and found their tabards untouched behind the rose bush. Anders handed Velanna hers, along with her boots.

"Ha!" Velanna laughed while she dressed. "I am not afraid of her."

"I am, a little," Anders said, unbuckling his belt and pulling on his tabard. "But getting those people out right under her nose like that? Honestly, that was the most fun I've had in weeks."

"I had so missed this." Velanna said after she managed to get a foot into her boot.

"Missed what?" Anders asked.

"Feeling proud of myself." Velanna said.

"What?" Anders laughed. "You're the proudest person I know. You're radiating so much pride you're practically a demon."

"I am proud of my people. It is not the same," Velanna said quietly. "Enough of this! We saved those people. Let us go back to the Crown and Lion and make good on our reward."

"Finally, we're speaking the same language," Anders grinned.

Proud didn't begin to cover how Anders felt. He went back to the Crown and Lion with Velanna and they got themselves a table and drinks, and spent the next hour recounting everything that had only just happened. "Velanna? Thanks. For going along with all this. I wasn't sure if you would when I asked."

"Why wouldn't I?" Velanna demanded. "There is no one your Chantry does not oppress, mages or elves. If you wish you to strike out against them, I am with you."

"I have to tell Justice about this," Anders said.

"What does that spirit have to do with anything?" Velanna asked.

"It was his idea," Anders said. "He said I should fight against my oppressors. The Circle, the Chantry. He said I had an obligation to free other mages, which at the time sounded like suicide, but I don't know... maybe he's right."
Alright! Welcome back everyone! Here we go again! Making progress. We hit 4,000 views! Thank you so much for supporting this story! Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 25 Umbralis Early Afternoon
Vigil's Keep: Warden's Barracks

Anders,

I'm sure you already know this, but you were right about the potion. Adding heatherum and foxite made all the difference. I thought for certain I had the wrong ratio of elfroot and spindleweed. I guess this means the student has finally surpassed the master. Haha.

Things have been going better for me recently. First Enchanter Orsino managed to convince the Knight-Commander to allow the senior mages outside the Gallows once a week. Granted, we're only allowed to visit the Chantry, and only for a few hours under supervision, but the fresh air and sunlight make all the difference.

Naturally, it's done wonders for the Collective. I still can't tell you how proud I was to learn of what you did for us. If ever there was a man who deserved our Most Trusted status, it's you. I'll see what I can do about changing the name to 'Most Awesome' status, but I can't make any promises. Haha.

Things at Vigil's Keep sound difficult. Ser Rolan's recruitment is certainly suspicious, but King Alistair proves there is a precedent for cross-recruiting across the Orders. I think it's plausible Ser Rolan has been given a special assignment to watch over you. You were famous, after all.

I can see why the Circle might see the need to keep an eye on you, but I would be hesitant to blame Greagor. I know what you think of Kinloch Hold, but Greagor cared for us. I see that now. If you could see Knight-Commander Meredith, you would see it too. I think the fault may lie in Denerim.

Knight-Commander Tavish has all but driven us out of the capitol. With King Alistair approving your conscription, Tavish will have heard of you. It wouldn't be a stretch to assume the more outspoken members of the Order might have gone to him for help. I don't know what you can do with that information, but it's all I know.

Justice certainly sounds like a fascinating creature to encounter. I'm afraid I don't have any insight there, aside from the fact that creatures like him can die in this world. Whether or not he will die when his body decays is beyond me. You're the spirit healer between us, after all. I trust you'll be able to find some way to save him.

As always, it's wonderful to hear from you. My relationship with the Maker is complicated these days, but rest assured that you, your Commander, and your mother are in my prayers. I know it hurts now, but time heals all wounds when magic fails us. The only advice I have is to try to remember the years you had with her, and not the years you lost.
Anders lay in bed, propped up by his pillows, and hugging the one made by his mother to his side. Ser Pounce-a-Lot lay on his chest, Barkspawn at his feet. "What do you think, Ser Pounce-a-Lot?" Anders asked, waving the letter over the little tabby's head. "Do we go to Denerim and mind-control the Knight-Commander? Will that help?"

Ser Pounce-a-Lot curled up into a ball and wiggled predatorily. Anders lifted the letter when Ser Pounce-a-Lot dove for it, and the cat face-planted on the cot beside him. "Maybe I should train you to become a vicious attack kitten. What do you think?" Anders scooped the cat up and gave it a kiss between the ears. Ser Pounce-a-Lot crawled out from under his arm and paced circles on his chest.

"Mages created mabari hounds, after all," Anders mused, nudging Barkspawn with his foot. "I could probably make you just as smart as those stupid dogs."

Barkspawn looked up and growled. Anders gave him another nudge. "I'm kidding. You're not that stupid."

The door to the barracks open, and Anders tensed, given the odds it was someone he wanted to encounter. Stroud walked in. Anders relaxed a little. The Orlesian-turned-Free Marcher grinned at him. "I see you have a friend or two," Stroud observed.

"Who, these guys?" Anders gave Ser Pounce-a-Lot a playful swat with his letter. "We're more like frenemies."

"I am surprised the mabari obeys you," Stroud walked over to his bunk, and changed out of his tunic. His clothes were soaked with sweat, and Anders guessed he'd been out in the training yard, doing something productive. "It is my understanding that they imprint on one master for life. If Commander Amell has gone to his Calling, traditionally the mabari would go with him."

Barkspawn whined.

"Amell didn't want to risk it... and I don't know that he obeys me, really," Anders said, unable to help petting the dog with his foot at the mention of Amell and his Calling. "I think he just sort of protects me because Amell and I...are friends."

Stroud snorted, "You can say lovers, serah. It is well known."

"Well you know, with the Constable," Anders shrugged.

"I believe the rank of Commander is higher," Stroud grinned, gathering up a change of clothes and heading for the wash. "I cannot say I approve of the decision to forbid fraternization. It makes far more sense to me find love within the Order as opposed to without. We are Brothers and Sisters, after all. Who do we have if not each other?"

Anders didn't have an answer to that. Stroud left him for the washroom. Anders stayed in bed, petting Ser Pounce-a-Lot with his hand and Barkspawn with his foot. The door opened again, and Velanna glanced inside. "Is anyone else about?" Velanna demanded.

"What, I'm not good enough for you anymore?" Anders joked. Velanna glared at him. "Stroud just went to the wash, otherwise it's just me."

Velanna slipped around the door and dragged Nathaniel in after her.
"Anders, do you mind if-" Nate began.

Velanna grabbed Nate by the front of his collar and slammed him back against the door. "There is no one here but us," Velanna pushed herself up to the balls of her feet and kissed Nate shamelessly.

Anders blinked, stunned. It wasn't hard to convince Nate of Anders' nonexistence, by the look of things. The man engulfed the tiny elf in his arms, and the stolen moment reminded Anders almost painfully of the Circle.

"Banal'shem tu mana var lath." Velanna said when their lips broke apart.

"I don't- again, in common?" Nathaniel begged.

"No." Velanna gave him a shove and walked to her bunk. Anders whistled. Velanna rolled her eyes at him.

"I don't suppose we could keep this between us?" Nate asked.

"Well I'm game if Velanna is." Anders joked.

Velanna made a disgusted noise and took off her boots. Nathaniel went to his own bunk, and the door opened again a few seconds later. Cutting it close, that. It was a servant, Anders guessed by the elf's meek demeanor.

"Warden Anders?" The servant looked at him, "Warden-Constable Caron wants to speak with you."

"Oh boy," Anders couldn't keep the sarcasm from dripping out of his voice. He set Ser Pounce-a-Lot aside and climbed out of his bunk. He headed out into the hall and through the Vigil to the third story. Leonie had moved herself into Amell's old quarters, and Anders didn't have words for how much her audacity riled him.

The guards outside unlocked the door for him, and Anders was shown inside.

Leonie had completely redecorated. Gone were the bookshelves filled with tomes and arcane trinkets, gone was the liquor cabinet, and everything that had made Amell's quarters Amell's. The only things Leonie kept were Amell's bed, his writing desk, and his armoire. The rest of the room was decorated in Andrastian paraphernalia.

Leonie had a votive candle rack with a prayer mat set before it, a table decorated with a map of the arling, and the walls were covered in symbols made from bronze and silver, bearing Andraste's flame or silver swords of mercy. A few urns, bearing depictions of lions and other Orlesian symbols took up space in the corners.

Leonie had lit incense, and everything about the room reminded Anders of templars and oppression. She was sitting in an arm chair, the sitting area rearranged so armchair faced the door, and the couch faced away from it. She looked like a regular inquisitor, a fire in the hearth to her left casting ominous shadows across her face that went well with her frown.

"Anders, sit." Leonie said.

Anders sat.

"You are not special." Leonie said.

"Oh ow, you're just-" Anders started.
"You are not being singled out." Leonie said over him. "I will address performance issues with everyone under my command. I have spoken with Ambassador Cera, Physician Torin, and Assistant Physician Edan. Upon reviewing the notes you keep for your infirmary, I have determined that they are unacceptable.

"Whether or not claims of your drunken debauchery have any basis in fact, there are several supplies that cannot be accounted for by the vague figures you have given. You will pay the Circle for these supplies, and keep more accurate records in the future. By my calculations you have eight sovereigns worth of supplies to answer for.

"As this was a pre-existing concern before my appointment to Constable, I will not hold it against you. However, you will maintain better relations with the Circle in the future. To start, you will turn in this 'Blighted Staff' retrieved from an Awakened darkspawn in Kal'Hirol for study."

"What... Who... How..." Anders vision went spotty, and circles of red and orange floated over Leonie's brutish face; her ice blue eyes shined through them. Anders' spine locked up, and his shoulders tensed.

"If you have questions for me, make sure they are coherent." Leonie said. "You will turn in your sovereigns when you turn in your staff."

"Back the fuck up," Anders said. Leonie raised an eyebrow at him. "Where do you get off? I don't owe the Circle anything. I kept those notes for me," Anders grabbed his tunic and shook it meaningfully, "Not for you or Cera. When Amell appointed me to that infirmary, he gave me full autonomy over everything."

"I am not Amell." Leonie said. "You will pay what is owed or the difference will be confiscated from your things and withheld from your stipend. I am led to believe you can afford it," Leonie gestured at him disinterestedly. "I am sure you have at least eight sovereigns worth in jewelry and other ornaments."

"These are mine," Anders shook his hands at her. The gold bangles he was wearing on his wrists jangled at her. "You can’t just take them!"

"You are a Warden," Leonie said flatly. Justice had more emotion than the Orlesian bitch. "Your actions reflect upon the Order. You have indebted us to the Circle and you will be made to answer for it, regardless of your feelings on the matter. And you will get rid of your cat."

Anders burst out laughing. He laughed so hard his chest ached and he ran out of breath. He doubled over, clutching his stomach and spilling a few involuntary, hysterical tears. "Fuck you," Anders managed.

"For your sake, I will pretend not to have heard that." Leonie said. "The mabari-"

"If you think for a second-" Anders hissed.

"May be kept, as it proves an invaluable war asset, but it is not imprinted on you. The animal is wild and dangerous, and if you cannot keep it under control, it will be sent to the kennels in Denerim."

Leonie said.

Anders started laughing again. There was nothing else for him to do.

"The cat is unsanitary, and embarrassing," Leonie went on to explain. "Litter is strewn beneath your bunk, its fur infests the barracks, and some members of the Order are allergic. Not only that, but it’s clear the animal and the, shall we say, special treatment you received from the late Warden-
"Maybe late!" Anders interrupted. "You don't know! When he gets back-"

"Warden-Commander Amell has made you soft." Leonie spoke over him. "You wasted invaluable time in the Deep Roads attempting to save a dead member of our Order, and you made no effort to search for maleficiarum in Amaranthine.

"It has been almost a month since Warden Commander Amell left for Soldier's Peak, in the mountains of Highever. The journey would have taken a week, under the absolute worst of conditions. He has had more than enough time to make the round-way journey. The fact that he has not yet returned is a clear indication that he has gone on to Orzammar to meet his Calling."

"You don't know that!" Anders snapped.

"I do not need proof," Leonie said, "I was not his lover, and his death is not hard for me to accept."

"You can't do this." Anders said.

Leonie stared at him dispassionately.

"You can't make me get rid of my cat," Anders said. "He was a gift! What did that cat ever do to you?"

"I do not enjoy repeating myself, Warden." Leonie said. "Do you have any questions for me that I have not yet addressed?"

"What do you expect me to do with him?" Anders demanded, "He's a cat! He's mine! I can't just get rid of him."

"I will give you three days to make arrangements," Leonie said. "If you have not yet turned in your sovereigns and staff and gotten rid of your cat, I will make whatever decisions I see fit to address whatever issues remain. You are dismissed."

"You can't do this!" Anders protested. He might have been talking to a templar for all the acknowledgement Leonie gave him. "You can't say you're not singling me out and then do all this to me. You think I don't know what's going on here? You're working with the templars to punish me for escaping the Circle. I know Rolan is here to watch me. I know what all this is about."

"Warden Rolan was recruited by the late Warden-Constable Kader for reasons unknown to me. If there was some arrangement between him and the Circle, I was not privy to it, nor do I consider myself beholden to it." Leonie said. She so obviously cared so little Anders couldn't help but believe her. "I will not deny I consider his presence invaluable given your and Velanna's proclivities, but I expect you to answer only for what you have done as a Warden. Your life before your Joining is of no consequence to me."

"My life after my Joining is of no consequence to you!" Anders snarled. "If you gave two figs about me you'd know that cat is one of the only things that still makes me happy. You can't take him away from me."

"I do not need your happiness, only your obedience." Leone said. "You are dismissed. Do not make me say it again."

Anders stood up. He thought seriously of going downstairs to get Amell's grimoire and force Leonie to take back everything she'd said. He could probably do it now, grimoire or not. He knew the spell.
Persuasion was easy for him. Blood magic was easy for him.

Leonie eyebrows knit together into a glare. Anders forced himself to leave. He didn't get far down the hall before he had to stop, and lean against the nearest wall. His legs were shaking, and it was suddenly hard to hold himself up. He couldn't breathe. Anders inhaled, and it felt like his throat was closed, blocking any air from getting into his lungs.

Maker, not here. Don't have a panic attack here. Not in front of her quarters. Not where the guards can see and tell her later. Don't give her the satisfaction.

Anders locked his arms over his head. He tried to breathe again. He couldn't. He was going to start wheezing soon. Anders shoved himself off the wall and hurried to the stairwell. He made it around the corner and down three steps he collapsed. Anders grabbed his chest, hyperventilating. Maker, where was Amell? Why was this happening to him?

Anders buried his face in his hands, and stayed sitting until he felt someone touch his knee. Anders glanced up, expecting a servant or soldier to tell him he was in the way, despite the fact that he was sitting on the far edge of the step, and not the center of it.

Sigrun was kneeling on the stair below him, staring at him. The concern in her bright blue eyes was a stark contrast to the cold disinterest in Leonie's. "Sweetie?" Sigrun asked. "What's the matter?"

Anders opened his mouth to say something glib. An unhappy whine spilled out of his lips.

"Oh sweetie," Sigrun sat on the stair above him and put an arm around his shoulders. She smelled like iron with a hint of lavender. It wasn't soothing. It was just a smell. "Is this about Leonie wanting to see all of us? I'm up next. What happened? What did she say to you?"

Anders made another miserable noise. He sucked in a deep breath, and tried to find his bearings. "I have to get rid of my cat." Anders said.

"What!?" Sigrun sat back. "Why!??"

Anders shrugged. "I guess she's a dog person."

"That doesn't-" Sigrun covered her mouth with her hand, and glared at the stairs. "But... there's no reason... You're not a Legionnaire. You're a Warden. Amell told me we were allowed to have things."

"Yeah," Anders said. "He told me that too."

"But you love Ser Pounce-a-Lot," Sigrun said. "I love Ser Pounce-a-Lot! I sneak him dried mackerel all the time... He's like our mascot. This is just mean. It isn't fair."

"You think we should tell Justice?" Anders joked.

"Oh sweetie..." Sigrun said.

"Maybe Nate's sister needs a mouser," Anders said.

"Maybe," Sigrun agreed unhappily, rubbing his back. Anders found her hand and gave it a grateful squeeze.

"I guess I'll go ask him."

"Okay, sweetie," Sigrun stood, "I'll see you at lunch, okay?"
"Yeah." Anders agreed.

Anders wandered down the stairs. Everything felt heavy, from his head to his arms to his feet. He dragged himself back to the barracks, and found Nathaniel playing cards with Velanna and Justice. A few other wardens were in the barracks. Stroud was reading, and Gerod was in his bunk taking a nap.

Ser Pounce-a-Lot ran over meowing, and wove circles around Anders' feet, tripping him up on his way to Nate's bunk. Anders fought back the urge to pick him up, and swallowed down a lump in his throat.

"Anders," Nate grinned, "Do you want me to deal you in next hand?"

"Yeah, sure, can I talk to you though?" Anders asked, "You don't have to get up. Do you think Delilah and Albert would take Ser Pounce-a-Lot?"

"Take him?" Nate repeated, leaning out of his bunk to look down at the cat circling Anders' feet. "Why?"

"Leonie says I have to get rid of him." Anders explained.

"Asha'alas lath'din!" Velanna spat, throwing her cards on the bed. Stroud jumped. Gerod woke up with a snort, and Velanna lowered her voice to an angry hiss. "You are not serious?"

Anders put on a wan grin. He didn't know what else to do.

"I'm sure Delilah would be happy to have a cat," Nate said, wearing a weak smile of his own. "She used to put out milk for the mousers when she was younger."

"Would you mind going to Amaranthine with me tomorrow to give him to her?" Anders asked. "He could be a gift for or something, since she's expecting."

"Of course," Nate said.

"Thanks," Anders said.

"Fenedhis," Velanna muttered. Justice picked up her cards and neatly folded them before handing them back to her, "Dread wolf take that woman. I swear by the Creators if she pushes us much further."

Anders took a seat on the edge of the cot. It creaked under his weight, already supporting three people, one of them in full armor. Ser Pounce-a-Lot jumped up into his lap. Anders inhaled shakily. The little tabby butt impatiently against his hand for pets, and Anders pressed his fingers into his eyes to fight back tears.

The door to the barracks opened, and a servant poked their head in. "What!?" Velanna barked.

The servant shrank back. "A thousand apologies, Wardens. A visitor is here for Warden Kristoff. She says her name is Aura,"

"Aura?" Justice repeated, setting down his cards.

"Yes, Ser, Kristoff, Ser," The servant babbled, casting nervous glances in Velanna's direction, "She's waiting for you in the Main Hall,"

"Leave us," Velanna snapped.
The servant fled.

Justice stayed sitting, his helmet hiding his expression. "I have memories of this woman," Justice said quietly. "She was Kristoff's wife. She loved him a great deal, and he her..." Justice looked at Anders, "What do I do?"

Anders pushed Ser Pounce-a-Lot off his lap, grateful for the distraction. "You break it to her. Come on, I'll help you."

Anders stood up, and Justice followed him. They left the barracks and went down the hall to the Main Hall, where Aura was waiting for them. She was a beautiful woman, with a maturity to her that had Anders placing her around thirty. Her hair was blonde and braided, her nose petite and pert, and her eyes were brilliant sapphires that lit up in excitement at their approach.

She was wearing an elaborate dress of blue and gold, and it was easy to see that Kristoff had taken care of her, while he was alive. "Kristoff?" Aura guessed by Justice's armor, skipping across the divide between them to jump into Justice's arms. "What are you doing with your helmet on? I told you I didn't care about the scar; I bet it makes you look rugged."

"I fear you are mistaken, Aura," Justice said.

"Kristoff?" Aura took a step back. "Why are you...? What has happened?"

"I'm Anders," Anders held out a hand. Aura shook it cautiously, "I'm ... Kristoff's friend. Can we talk somewhere private? Just the three of us?"

"I-... I suppose," Aura said, glancing nervously between them. Anders waved her forward, and led them to the chapel. It seemed like the only appropriate place for this conversation.

"You were supposed to get here by Solis." Anders remembered, talking to keep the poor girl from glancing at Justice every two seconds. "Am-... The Warden Commander thought you might have run into trouble on the road."

"No, my sister took ill, and I had to stay in Jader to take care of her baby for a few extra months while she recovered. She and the baby are fine now," Aura explained, glancing back at Kristoff again, "I got a letter that said Kristoff had been missing for two months, but he is here. What is going on?"

"We should sit down first," Anders said. They reached the chapel, and Anders helped open the door to let both of them through. He was glad to see the chapel deserted, so close to lunch. Aura deserved the privacy. Anders led the three of them to a pew in the front row, and they sat down.

"What is going on?" Aura asked again.

Anders took her hands and put on the same face he wore whenever he had to tell a patient they had to lose a limb, or there was nothing magic could do for them, "I really don't know how to tell you this, but Kristoff is dead. He died to darkspawn, almost six months ago now."

"Dead?" Aura repeated, looking at Justice. "But he's right there. His voice is ... a little different, but I know his armor. I used to help him put it on, before he was called to Ferelden to help dispatch the last of the darkspawn. Tell me what is going on here!"

"Your husband is gone," Justice said. "I inhabit this body now, but his death will be avenged, I assure you."
"Inhabit? What-?" Aura scooted back from them on the bench.

"He's... a spirit," Anders said, "He's trapped inside Kristoff's body."

"What-" Aura said.

Justice took off his helmet. Anders wished he hadn't. There was nothing reassuring in the corpse's rotten face, his bloated veins and drawn back skin. Bright blue eyes made of magic and energy stared out at Aura. The poor woman covered her mouth, and went so pale she was nearly green. Anders half expected her to be sick all over the pew.

"You-you've desecrated his body!" Aura screamed "How dare you!"

"It was not intentional," Justice said. "There was-"

"Get away from me!" Aura screamed, bolting off the bench. Anders grabbed her hand before she got more than a few feet.


With a visible effort, Aura swallowed back vomit. She looked at Justice, agony in her eyes, and collapsed into a ball to sob into her knees.

Justice looked miserable. He climbed down onto the floor with Aura, and knelt a foot away from her. "Aura, please do not be alarmed," Justice begged, "I have no wish to frighten you."

"What are you?" Aura sobbed.

"I am a spirit of Justice," Justice said.

"I know it sounds crazy, but a demon trapped him in Kristoff's body," Anders explained. "He never would have done this on his own. He doesn't want this any more than you do."

"I know I have done you a great disservice, but it was unintentional. I meant your husband no harm," Justice said, his voice surprisingly soft. Anders felt bad for ever comparing him to Leonie. Justice might have been a person with how wide his range of emotions was. "I would ease your distress or assuage your pain had I the power."

Aura spent the next few minutes crying. Justice looked up at Anders, desperate and depressed. Anders shook his head. Aura needed the time to mourn. It wasn't something they could rush. Justice sat on his knees, hands in his lap, waiting. Eventually, Aura found her voice.

"I knew," Aura gasped, dragging her hands down her face, flush from her tears, "I knew when he left that this could happen. He told me it could. His father died a Grey Warden too... when the letter came, I was so afraid for him. I knew it meant he was dead, but I refused to believe it. When I saw him in the hall..."

"Tell me, is there anything I can do for you?" Justice asked, "Tell me, and I will do it."

"Can you bring him back?" Aura laughed.

Justice took it literally, as he took everything. He shook his head.

"Maker," Aura inhaled shakily, and reached out a trembling hand to trace over Kristoff's peeling face. "My poor Kristoff."
"I am so sorry," Justice said with so much sincerity the words themselves seemed to weep when the corpse's tear ducts no longer could, "The darkspawn who murdered him lies slain, but the one who commanded it yet lives. I have made it my mission to avenge his death."

Aura nodded. "You... you are a spirit. The first of the Maker's children. Do you know if he rests at the Maker's side?"

"I do not," Justice said, "We spirits know no more of death than you do. What lies beyond is obscured, even to us, but I pray for him. Every day."

"... avenge him," Aura decided eventually, "Whatever darkspawn or thing commanded that he should die... kill it. Kill it for him. Kill it for me. I will wait for his ashes a little longer, if it means that whoever or whatever did this to him will pay."

"I swear it," Justice said fervently.

Aura nodded again, and swallowed. "Thank you." She looked to Anders, where he was still sitting on the pew. "What you said before, were you truly Kristoff's friend? Or this spirit's friend?"

"I never met Kristoff," Anders confessed. "He was investigating the darkspawn on his own, and he was already dead when we found him. I'm sorry."

Aura stared at Justice for a long while, and reached up to touch him again. Her fingers dipped beneath his collar, and she pulled out a necklace. Not his Grey Warden pendant, but a locket. She flipped it open. There was a picture of her within.

"Still wearing it," Aura noted despondently. "Does this... does any of this mean anything to you?"

"I have his memories," Justice said. "His things mean more to me that words can say. His essence lingers on them like dust, fingerprints on top of fingerprints that let him linger long after death. It is a beautiful gift to know anything of his life... I know he wished to be relieved of his service here, so he could return home to you."

Aura bit back a sob, and let go of the locket. It fell against Justice's armor.

"I have his belongings, his mementos," Justice continued, "Would any of them help assuage your pain? We are given a stipend here, which I know Kristoff once sent to you. I have no need of coin or earthly possessions. I would gladly give it to you again."

Aura sobbed again.

"Justice," Anders said, "Just let her have a few minutes,"

Justice sat in silence, fidgeting uncomfortably every few seconds. Without his helmet on, it was almost startling how human he looked. He was more expressive than Anders gave him credit for, the spirit just couldn't show it while his identity was kept secret.

"I was going to stay here with him," Aura said when she collected herself. "... I don't know what to do now."

"I can talk to the Seneschal if you need a place to stay," Anders offered. "He's alright. I'm sure he'd find a place for you."

"That's very kind of you," Aura sniffed. "Thank you."
"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Justice asked.

"I do not need his things, spirit." Aura sighed, and dug the heels of her palms into her eyes. "I need him. I always used to tease him about how hopeless he was without me. He couldn't cook, or do laundry to-... to save his life, but I'm the hopeless one now."

"He knew you spoke in jest, but he felt the truth of your words in his heart," Justice said. "He loved you dearly."

"... do you suppose if I stayed here, we could spend time together?" Aura asked. "... I would appreciate talking to him... or... his memories..."

"I would be honored." Justice said.

"Thank you." Aura sucked in a rickety breath and crawled to her feet. "I... I need to be alone. Thank you, both of you, for being honest with me."

Aura's feet seemed to carry her out of the chapel on their own, her steps wandering and almost blind. She found the door to the chapel and staggered out. Justice watched her go, crestfallen.

"Did I do the right thing?" Justice asked.

"I really wish I could tell you," Anders said. "I think so."

"Thank you for helping me..." Justice said. "This world is nothing like I thought it would be. I used to scoff at demons' lust to cross the Veil. I pitied mortals, I did not envy them. When I was forced here against my will, I thought you mortals beyond my reach, beyond help, but I was wrong about this world. There is so much beauty here... and it coexists with such great darkness. It is so confusing."

"It's confusing for us too, Justice," Anders said, holding down a hand to help the spirit off the floor. Justice took it, and rejoined him on the pew. He put his helmet back on, and stared at his hands in his lap.

"Mortals... they are worth saving," Justice said. "What you did for those mages in Amaranthine, I was glad to hear of it. Proud. It gave me hope, to see that you could change, to be given an example of something worthy in the mortal world. It was enlightening... inspiring. I wish this for myself. To be more. To accomplish more. For Aura. For Kristoff. For all mortals."

"Well that's... that's pretty marvelous, Justice. Thanks," Anders managed a smile, "I'm glad it meant something to you."

"It did. It still does," Justice said. "You have shown me an injustice greater than any I have faced in your Circle. I understand that Velanna proved more useful in your quest, but if you will allow it, I would fight this injustice by your side in the future."

"Well... the next time something happens with the Collective, I'll let you know," Anders promised.

"Thank you," Justice said. "The concept of friendship is still new to me, but I would be honored to consider you one."

"Thanks, Justice." Anders said. "Me too."

Chapter End Notes
Elvish Translations
Banal'shem tu mana var lath : No human will stop our love.
Asha'alas lath'din! : Dirty woman loved by no one!
Fenedhis : Fuck

This an optional [Apples and Apostates Chapter](#) from Justice's perspective that takes place after this chapter if you would like to follow both in chronological order.
Here's to Us Blighters

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back! Things are taking a bit of a turn here, so I'm a little nervous about this chapter, but I hope you all enjoy it. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 1 Cassus Late Morning
Vigil's Keep

Anders didn't want to think about it.

He'd never liked the thought of being trapped anywhere, but with Amell gone, there was no other way for him to feel.

Anders had given his old staff and eight of the sovereigns Amell had left him to Cera. The elf had worn a smug smirk the whole time; her fingers had curled around the coins like spider legs and she'd gone so far as to count them out in front of him. The other two sovereigns had already gone to Alim and the others in West Hill. Anders was back where he started: with nothing. Not even his cat.

Delilah had been grateful for Ser Pounce-a-Lot, at least. Ser Pounce-a-Lot had taken to her after a few pieces of dried mackerel, and she'd promised to take care of him. Her husband Albert had promised they'd give Ser Pounce-a-Lot back if Amell ever came back to Vigil's Keep, and Anders was allowed to keep him again.

Anders didn't want to think about it. A month had passed with Amell gone, and Anders didn't know how much longer he could cling to the hope that Amell was ever coming back. Anders' mother was dead. Ser Pounce-a-Lot was gone. Vigil's Keep had long since stopped feeling like a home or haven to him.

Anders spent most of his days in his infirmary, taking meticulous notes on everything he and his assistants did so Leonie wouldn't try to confiscate any of his things. When he wasn't there, he was making copies of the tomes he'd borrowed from the Circle for the Collective, and when he wasn't doing that he was in the chapel.

He didn't pray. He didn't see the point. The chapel was a hideaway for him, and more often than not, Justice came with him. They'd sit in the pews and talk about everything from the Fade to the Chantry to the Circle, and Anders had to wonder if spirits were drawn to spirit healers, or if it was the other way around.

Anders watched Barkspawn like a hawk. The dog wasn't imprinted on him, and the mabari had its own routine. It would wander around the courtyard chasing birds and peeing on everything, follow around other wardens between meals, beg in the kitchens, and at one point it broke into the larder. The chefs complained. Leonie threatened him.

Anders sat the dog down and begged it to behave. He felt like a fool for it, but he didn't know what else to do. Amell had loved that dumb dog, and if Leonie sent it back to the kennels Anders didn't know that he'd ever forgive himself. The mabari had cocked its head at him, and Anders hoped that
whatever blood magic had originally invented the breed was strong enough that the dog actually understood him.

Anders was walking the grounds with Barkspawn and Justice when the commotion started. Soldiers and servants ran through the courtyard, and sergeants and captains took to the walls to start bellowing orders. A crowd of men rolling a ballista hurried past him.

"Wardens to the Main Hall!" A servant ran through the courtyard yelling.

"Now what?" Anders sighed.

"The army appears to be mobilizing," Justice said.

"Yeah, I know it's nevermind. Come on," Anders dragged himself towards the inner courtyard. Barkspawn ran circles around them, excited by the commotion and barking happily. Anders wished he could steal some of that enthusiasm. He pushed open the doors to the main hall and was nearly barreled over by a servant.

Anders ducked out of the flow of traffic. The rest of the Wardens were crowded off to the right of the Main Hall, milling around a pillar. Anders went to join them, and took a spot near Sigrun.

"What's going on?" Anders asked.

"Darkspawn!" Sigrun said eagerly. "The horde was spotted in the field and they're mobilizing on Amaranthine! We're going on a forced march ahead of the army to try to save the city, just us Wardens! Isn't that exciting? The scouts say there were hundreds. Hundreds! This is certain death for sure."

"Oh. Well, I can see why you've got your chin up," Anders joked, feeling a very sudden stomach ache.

"I can't wait." Sigrun bounced on the balls of her feet. "I'm not running this time, and I don't have to worry about being turned into a broodmother," Sigrun's voice dropped to an excited whisper, "Do you remember the lyrium Amell had the miners smuggling out the mines in the Wending Woods? He and Dworkin and I were working on turning it into bombs. Lyrium bombs!

"I have a few, in case the darkspawn overwhelm us. You just throw them at your feet, and boom! They're super illegal, though, so don't tell anyone. Dworkin says the explosion will kill everything in a ten meter in diameter, at least. Do you want one in case we get separated, salroka? I know you don't have to worry about being turned into a broodmother, but you know, in case you get overwhelmed."

"Wardens!" Leonie's shout interrupted Sigrun. Leonie raised both hands for silence and the scattered conversations died down. "The enemy is out of hiding! The men are assembling, but our task force will be the first to reach Amaranthine. We are going to war. Gear up, and gather by the stables! We will go two to a horse. Eylon, you will stay behind."

"Commander-!" The one-armed mage started.

Anders forgot his anxiety at the title. Leonie wasn't their Commander. She was their Constable. Her clenched a fist and shot the elf a glare.

"You will stay behind." Leonie said again, in a tone that brokered no argument. "We march in ten minutes. Dismissed."
Everyone ran for the barracks. Anders stayed where he was; a few of the Wardens jostled his shoulders as they bolted past. Justice stayed with him. Sigrun looked up at Anders and grinned. "So do you."

A hand grabbed Anders' shoulder and wrenched him around. The hall spun in a blur of brown and silver, and Eylon's crimson hair and freckled face came into view.

"This is your fault!" Eylon snarled. "Leonie never doubted me until you cost me my arm! I hope you die out there, maleficar!"

"Oh go fuck yourself," Anders shot back. "You only need one hand for that."

As it turned out, Eylon also only needed one hand to punch him. The tiny elf was a force mage, and the blow knocked Anders off his feet. Anders crashed back into the pillar behind him and landed on his ass.

"Hey!" Sigrun shouted, jumping in front of him. "Back off! If you've got a problem with Anders you've got a problem with me, and I'm a dwarf, buddy. Just try that magic crap on me."

"Fucking dog-lords," Eylon spat on the ground next to them and stormed away.

Anders jaw felt like it had been torn off. He raised a hand to it and gingerly felt at the joints, not surprised it had been partially dislocated. Maker, this was going to hurt. Anders set his hands to both sides of his jaw, and forced it back into place with a burst from Compassion. A snarl of pain escaped him, and just opening his mouth to make the sound hurt.

"Ouch," Sigrun said, kneeling in front of him. "That looked like it hurt."

"Me and my big mouth, right?" Anders joked, rubbing at his aching jaw.

"Eylon's loss of his arm was no fault of yours," Justice said, holding down a hand to help Anders up, "His reaction was unwarranted."

"Yeah, well," Anders took Justice's hand and climbed to his feet. He swore he heard a joint pop. Concern welled in him. Anders had no idea how much longer Kristoff's body was going to last, but he doubted it would be much longer. "That's what being a healer is, Justice. You do what you can and you get the blame when you can't do enough."

"It is most selfless of you." Justice said.

"I love seeing you two getting along," Sigrun said. "Do you want one of my bombs, sweetie?"

"I think I'm good without running into a warzone strapped down with explosives, but thanks," Anders said.

"I have three if you change your mind," Sigrun said, "I'm going to go see if Velanna wants one."

They all made for the barracks. Anders went to his bunk and changed out of his clothes and into his armor. He put on his leather trousers and leather chest piece, his brigandine spaulders and leather boots and gloves. He wore his silver bracers and chainmail tabard over them, and buckled his belt. He'd gotten a proper sheath for the dagger Nate had given him that attached to his belt, along with Amell's grimoire. He picked up his satchel and looped it over his shoulder, and fished out a jar of Amell's kaddis.

He whistled for Barkspawn, and the mabari trotted over to sit down in front of him. Anders didn't
know what Amell had infused the kaddis with, but he could feel the magic on it. He painted a lifeward on the dog's forehead and a glyph of warding on its back, "You have to stay safe, alright?" Anders said. "Amell might come back some day, and we can't let Leonie send you back to the kennels."

Barkspawn licked him. It was disgusting. The dog's breath smelled like death and shit, it clung to his saliva. Anders gagged and wiped his face off on his sleeve. "Maker's breath that's foul. Yes, I'll stay safe too. No more licking."

Barkspawn barked. Anders put the lid back on the jar and stuffed it back into his satchel. He picked up his dragonbone staff and the electricity coiling within made the hairs on his arm stand on end. Velanna came to stand with him by his bunk, and Anders raised an eyebrow at the bomb strapped to her belt. "You sure about that?" Anders asked.

"I am not afraid of death," Velanna said, lifting her chin. "I will be the one to decide how I meet it."

"If you can throw a bomb, you're not dead yet," Anders said. "Are you sure you're not being premature about all this?"

"You know our deaths are a very real probability," Velanna said, "Why is the truth so hard for you to swallow?"

"I normally spit," Anders joked.

Velanna's face contorted. Anders laughed, and Velanna let slip a giggle. "You-... You are exasperating."

"I try," Anders said.

Justice rejoined them, along with Sigrun. Nathaniel came last, with how many daggers, arrows, traps, poisons, and other sharp odds and ends the archer carried. He looked a little frazzled, Anders noticed. His sister was in Amaranthine, after all. Anders wondered if he should say something supportive.

"Are you guys ready?" Sigrun asked.

"Are you?" Nathaniel asked.

"I'm already dead," Sigrun grinned, "I've got nothing to lose."

"That is certainly one way to look at it," Nathaniel said.

"We will cut down all darkspawn before us," Velanna said, "Your sister will not face the same fate as mine."

"We might still find Seranni, Velanna," Nathaniel said.

"Do you really believe that?" Velanna demanded angrily, "Sometimes I think you have more hope than I. Enough. I have no need of false hopes. The five of us are enough."

"You guys know I love you, right?" Sigrun asked.

"Can we not do this?" Anders asked. "The goodbyes and the final speeches? Why tempt fate? You don't know how this is going to go."

"Sure, sweetie." Sigrun grinned, "Wicked Grace later tonight?"
"I'm in," Nathaniel said.

"Yeah, sure," Anders said.

"I would love to join you," Justice said.

Velanna snorted and rolled her eyes. "... One hand, maybe."

"Then we're good." Sigrun said. "Let's go, you guys."

The five of them left the barracks, other wardens ahead of and behind them. They all gathered by the stables, and divided up into pairs. Leonie rode with Rolan, Gerod with Stroud, Sigrun with Velanna, Nathaniel with Jacen, and Anders with Justice. Garavel was rallying a small task force to follow them to Amaranthine, with the barest of ballistas and other siege weapons.

The main army was forming slowly, but it would take hours if not all day to recall everyone from the fields and the roads. The ten of them road out alone, Barkspawn running alongside Anders' horse.

They pushed their horses to Amaranthine, but the city was a day's journey from the Vigil. Hours passed in silence. They saw the smoke long before they saw the city. Amaranthine slowly took shape, the high grey walls of brick and stone, the streaming flags and banners and the red and orange awnings and shingles that decorated them. The small wooden houses and fields outside the city, and...

Maker, the refugees. The camps were in ruins. Packs of darkspawn crawled among the ruined tents, through the fields, in and out of broken down homes. Children and genlocks and other darkspawn ran amuck, eating livestock and the dead, and setting fires. "There!" Leonie yelled, gesturing with her sword to a house surrounded by a ring of soldiers.

"We join the holdout!" Leonie yelled. They couldn't ride the full distance. The darkspawn riled the horses, and Sigrun and Velanna were thrown off theirs. Everyone dismounted. Some of the horses bolted back towards the Vigil. Leonie ordered the rest sent back, and they slapped the beasts haunches to send them off. The fighting started before they reached the holdout.

A dozen shrieks crossed the fields with alarming speed, the beasts taking too all fours to cut them off while they were separated. Barkspawn ran out to meet them, and tackled one out of the air. The warriors charged after the mabari. Anders channeled lightning, and sent it arching through the pack. Velanna called on fire. Jacen and Nathaniel did nothing. They had to unpack and string their bows before they could be of any use in the fighting.

The fight with the shrieks took long enough that the Children could catch up. The skittering babyfaced spider-like monsters were the most frequent in Anders' nightmares. He carved glyph after glyph of paralysis for Nate, Jacen, and himself, fairly confident Velanna could take care of herself. She was strongest out in the open, where the ground was soft and she could call on her nature magic with ease.

When the last of the Children were dispatched, they finally managed to join up with the holdout. City guardsmen, a few of the Vigil's soldiers, and Ser Rylien were defending the surviving refugees. Men and women were crowded into the farmhouse, spilling out the front door and crammed down into the cellar. One well placed fireball from an emissary would be the end of all of them.

"Rolan, Stroud, Jacen, reinforce the perimeter!" Leonie ordered. If there was anything to be said of the Orlesian bitch, she was a far better strategist than Eram had been, "Who is in charge here!?"

A man with cool brown skin and bright blonde hair stepped forward. His eyes were ringed with dark
shadows, and he was limping. "My name is Constable Aidan, Warden," The man bowed, "I am grateful for your arrival, but I fear there is little that can be done now."

"You look hurt, do you need healing?" Anders asked, taking a step forward.

Leonie slammed a muscular arm into his chest. "You will waste no mana outside of our company."

"But..." Anders said.

"I thank you, Warden, but I will survive," Aidan said, giving him a grateful nod.

"Report, Constable," Leonie ordered. "What happened here?"

"Incoming!" One of the soldiers on the perimeter yelled.

"They have emissaries!" Someone else yelled.

Aidan abandoned them, half staggering half running for the perimeter, where the young templar they'd met last month was standing. "Rylien, hurry! Don't let them get to the refugees!"

"Rolan! Aid her!" Leonie yelled.

The fight was long. Anders and Velanna took up spots on opposite sides of the farmhouse, and raised spellshields. It took all of Anders' focus to block the spells the emissaries loosed at the house. All he could do was watch as wave after wave of darkspawn crashed against the small circle of soldiers, and hope Rylien and Rolan could get to the emissaries.

A few men defending the perimeter were felled, and darkspawn swarmed in through the cracks. The injured fought them, men and women not fit to stand the perimeter but who could still hold a weapon, or couldn't fit in the farmhouse. Most of them died. Barkspawn stayed next to Anders and tore into any darkspawn that reached him. It all happened in the span of a few seconds, but it was enough to cost them at least a dozen lives.

When the few seconds were up, Stroud and Justice fell back from the perimeter to clean up the inner circle. The soldiers on the perimeter drew together, and the circle around the farmhouse shrunk. The smell of battle was in the air: shit, piss, blood, the Fade, burning wood. The sounds were there too, metal on metal, metal on bone and muscle and flesh. The cries of shrieks and wails of Children, the guttural noises of genlocks and hurlocks.

Anders hated it. They were already overwhelmed, and they hadn't even set foot in the city yet. Maybe they never would. Maybe Sigrun was right to bring the bombs.

It felt like an eternity, but the fighting finally stopped. The horde was still there, packs of darkspawn crawling like roaches among the houses and refugee camps in the distance. Anders couldn't begin to imagine what the inside of the city looked like. Garavel and his small task forced arrived just as the fight ended, and joined up with them. The soldiers were carrying bows and crossbows, rolling ballistas and dragging other packed up siege weapons. Anders hoped that would help.

Anders drank a lyrium potion, and regrouped with his friends. Sigrun had a sprained wrist, but everyone else he cared about was fine. He healed Sigrun, and then saw to the rest of the Wardens. Stroud and Rolan both needed healing. Stroud had taken an arrow in his thigh, and Rolan had a few contusions from fighting to reach the emissaries. Rolan kept his helmet on while Anders healed him, but Anders imagined he was glaring, so Anders glared back.

One of the refugees saw his healing magic, and bolted out of the house. She was a younger woman,
in a torn up dress with blood on her hands. She ran straight for him, but Anders couldn't sense any injuries on her. "Healer! They have a healer! Ser please, my brother."

Leonie caught the girl by her collar before she could get near him, and spun her around. She gave the woman a hard shove to send her back towards the house. "Get back," Leonie ordered.

"But my brother!" The woman wailed.

Another bold refugee crept out of the house, and took heart at the sight of reinforcements. "Wardens!" The older man cried out. "The wardens are here! Please! My family is still in the city! Please save my family!"

"Back inside, all of you!" Constable Aidan yelled. Not everyone obeyed.

Leonie ordered them away from the house, and they regrouped with the Constable and Garavel on the road to the city. Anders stared at the house, thinking of the woman's brother and all the blood on her hands.

"Where is the Warden Commander?" Aidan asked.

"I am the Warden Commander," Leonie said. Anders hated her. "Report. What happened here? You are in charge of the city's defenses, are you not?"

"I am," Aidan bowed his head, "I failed in my duty. Last night, a swarm of... of gruesome creatures emerged from beneath the city. They spread pestilence and destroyed everything they touched. Their corruption is so virulent at least a quarter of the city succumbed within the first few hours. Then at dawn, the other darkspawn attacked. I fear Amaranthine is lost."

Anders looked at Nathaniel. Nathaniel was looking at the city, his expression unreadable. Sigrun took Nate's hand and squeezed.

"Darkspawn!" A soldier yelled.

"Just one!" Yelled another.

Anders turned around. A lone darkspawn, a hurlock with no nose and whose skin peeled back from its skull, was walking down the road with both its clawed hands raised. Anders wondered if it was Awakened. An arrow took the creature in the shoulder, and the force of the shot spun the creature in a circle before sending it to its knees.

"Please! Do not be killing!" The darkspawn screamed. "I am bringing a message! Please do not be killing!"

"Maker's breath, is it talking?" Aidan asked.

"Hold!" Leonie yelled, raising a closed fist with the command. She stepped in front of all of them to receive the creature. "Speak, monster, before I gut you."

The darkspawn crawled to its feet, black blood oozing from the wound in its shoulder. It limped forward until it was about a yard away from them.

"That's far enough!" Garavel warned the creature.

The darkspawn stopped. Closer up, Anders could see its skinless lips, pointed teeth, and jet black eyes. It was wearing chainmail armor, and Anders couldn't help noticing the armor was decorated. It
had a purple scarf wrapped around its neck, a few bits of bone and pieces of metal tied to its waist with string, a necklace wrapped around its wrist like a bracelet. The creature surveyed all of them and it almost looked afraid.

"Where is being the Commander?" The darkspawn asked, "The one with the special blood and eyes of red? We are to be speaking to him."

"You are speaking to me, creature," Leonie said, "Speak quickly."

"The Architect... he was wanting the trust of the other... We have been watching. We have been thinking he will understand," The darkspawn whined, wringing its clawed hands, "... We will be speaking with you instead. I am calling myself the Messenger. The Mother's army, it marches to Vigil's Keep. She attacks now! The Architect, he is sending me to warn you. You must save the Keep, then be finishing the Mother in her lair."

"You were right to want the late Commander Amell," Leonie said, "I do not trust you, creature. Garavel-"

"This is truth!" The darkspawn wailed. "If you do not go now, all is being lost! The Mother, she will win!" The darkspawn stormed forward, and Leonie leveled her sword at it. The creature kept walking and pressed his neck against the tip of the blade. A trickle of black blood ran down into his scarf, "If I lie, then kill me!"

Leonie glared at the darkspawn. Garavel coughed, and shifted uncomfortably.

"Constable, if I may?" Garavel asked.

"Speak," Leonie said.

"I can see no reason for this creature to lie to us," Garavel said, "We're mobilizing, but our forces are scattered between the roads and the fields. It will take time to get them all back to the Keep, and mount a defensive, especially with the standing order to head to Amaranthine. If we leave now, perhaps we can reach the Vigil before the darkspawn."

"Leave?" Constable Aidan asked, "But what about the darkspawn here?"

"Soon, they will be going to Vigil's Keep as well," The darkspawn said. "This city, it is nothing! You must be leaving it! The Mother, she is using it to distract. It is the Keep the mother is wanting utterly destroyed!"

"The darkspawn has a point," Garavel said. "We cannot leave with this other army hot on our heels. The Constable says the city is lost. I say we destroy it. Burn it, and all the darkspawn within."

"What?" Anders asked.

"I agree." Leonie said.

"You can't be serious," Anders said.

Leonie didn't bother turning around to acknowledge him. She sheathed her sword and the darkspawn breathed a sigh of relief. The rest of the Wardens started packing up to march. Garael signaled his men over.

"You can't be considering this!" Anders yelled, unable to restrain himself. Unable to want to restrain himself. "Burning a city that has stood for generation? The arling will collapse without
"Amaranthine!"

"It's a miracle you were never made Tranquil," Rolan sneered, "Know your place, for once in your life, and be silent."

Anders ignored him, and ran to force himself between Leonie and Garavel before they could make preparations. The giant glared down at him. "This is wrong! If there's even one innocent person in there we can't just-

"I did not ask your opinion," Leonie said.

"Please listen to him!" Sigrun begged, running over to grab Anders hand. "Please! If you will not go to the aid of these people, send me! I will enter the city alone!"

"Destroying the city would mean murdering any survivors," Justice chimed in, "It is not justice. I cannot condone it. Reconsider, I beg you."

"All of you, don't," Nathaniel said, "I don't like it either, but someone has to make the hard decisions for the greater good."

"How can you say that!?" Velanna yelled at him. "Your sister is in there!"

"If we destroy this city we're no better than the darkspawn!" Anders said, "We have to try!"

"My family built that city!" Nathaniel yelled back at them. Anders had never heard him raise his voice before. It was a little frightening. "I don't want to see fire ravage these streets! Delilah.... it would take a miracle. If Leonie thinks this is best-

"This shemlen bitch knows nothing!" Velanna snarled. That got everyone's attention. Leonie even turned around. "Amell built that Keep! You know it can stand on its own! Listen to yourselves! Look at what you're about to do!"

"That's enough!" Leonie barked. "I am your Commanding Officer, and you will do as I say! I have never seen such a disrespectful, disobedient, disgraceful assortment of Wardens in my entire life! I don't know what kind of twisted fantasy Amell created for the five of you, but he is gone! I do not care what you think! You do not get a say! You will fall in line, or suffer the consequences!"

"I didn't sign up for this!" Anders shouted.

"What do you know of consequences!?" Velanna demanded, unthreatened. Anders felt the pull of mana on her. Rolan must have felt it too. He took a defensive position next to Leonie. "You know nothing! I do not care about your orders, or your threats! I did not join the Wardens for you! I joined for Amell!"

Velanna turned to Nathaniel, grabbed a fistful of his tabard, and wrenched him down to her height. She kissed him hard in front of everyone, and shoved him back not a second later. "I stayed for you, and I will see no more innocent blood on my hands."

A root ripped out of the ground and wrapped around Velanna's foot. Another around her hand. A multitude swallowed her, and she vanished underground. She reappeared just outside the gates to the city. A tree ripped up out of the ground beside her, and the sylvan tore into the darkspawn around her. Velanna ran into the city alone.

"Velanna!" Nathaniel yelled after her.
"Sweetie no," Sigrun sobbed, knees buckling underneath her.

Leonie turned away from the sight. "Garavel, burn it down."

"Aye, Commander," Garavel nodded. He gave the signal, and the Vigil's soldiers started setting up the siege weapons.

"Maker forgive us for what we are about to do," Aidan said.

"No!" Nathaniel finally yelled. "No, damn you!" He tripped over himself in his haste, and took off down the street after Velanna.

Nate wasn't a mage. He was an archer. A tracker. He was one man, and Velanna was so far ahead of him she might not even know he was following her. He'd die on his own.

"If any more of you so much as think of deserting-!" Leonie began.

Anders didn't stay to hear the rest. He ran after Nathaniel without thinking. The damn dog ran with him, barking in blissful ignorance. Anders should have said his goodbyes after all. Damn all of them. Damn everything. "Nathaniel, wait for me!"

"Jacen!" Leonie screamed from behind him.

An arrow flew wide to Anders' right. Anders wondered if the old Dalish had missed on purpose.

"Anders!" Justice yelled after him. Anders heard the thud of metal on pavement, and held out a hand for when the spirit caught up. A surge from the Fade hastened both of them to catch up with Nathaniel.

"You can burn with the rest of the city!" Leonie screamed, her voice fading.

Anders caught up to Nathaniel, and ran past Velanna's rampaging sylvan and into the city with him. If the fields were bad, the city was worse. Darkspawn swarmed over the rooftops and through the streets like a tidal wave.

Velanna hadn't gotten far. She stood on the steps down to the markets, beside a burning building, surrounded by darkspawn. She fought from a nest of lashing vines and corrosive blood magic, while every sickly tree in the city tore out of the ground to fight with her.

Justice ran to join her, and shoved the half dozen darkspawn trying to overwhelm her back with a blast of raw magic torn straight from the Fade. Anders summoning lightning, and the resulting chain arched through six of the beasts. They exploded, and a space cleared around Velanna. Nathaniel ran through it and grabbed her.

"You think I'm the fool between us!?!" Nate yelled at her, grabbing her face in his hands, "What are you thinking? We have to get out of here!"

Velanna glared at him. "I could not save my sister. I can save yours. I am not leaving."

"This city is going to burn!" Nate shouted.

"I am a mage," As if to prove it, Velanna put out the fire eating up the building beside her with a blast of ice magic. "I will not let it."

"We still can't stay here," Anders said, "One house, sure, but we can't save the whole city. We have to get to high ground. To the Chantry. There'll be survivors there, if they're anywhere. We can
"I agree with this plan." Justice said.

"I want to find Delilah first," Velanna said, finally taking in the four of them, "... Sigrun?"

Anders looked over his shoulder, expecting the little dwarf to come running through the city gates behind them. They waited one second. Two. Three. More.

Sigrun didn't follow them.

She was a soldier, Amell had said.

She followed orders.
Welcome back everyone! I hope all of you enjoy this chapter. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 1 Cassus Afternoon
Amaranthine

Realization set in slowly for all of them. They looked at each other, and looked at the gates, and a wretched silence settled between them.

Nathaniel broke it, "We need to move,"

"Mythal halani Sigrun dareth." Velanna whispered.

Anders didn't need to know Evlish to know it was a prayer. He was glad someone had said one. Maker knew they needed them.

"Justice can take point," Nathaniel said, "Velanna can summon a sylvan whenever we come across a tree, and that should be enough to clear out the area. Anders, do you think you could use any of the spells Amell used to?"

"I can do corruption," Anders said. "I can't do it in as wide a net, but I can do it."

"Then we'll do a sweep of the city on the way to the Chantry," Nathaniel said, "The arrows should start any minute but the siege equipment will take time to set up. As long as the wind keeps blowing west I don't think the fires will spread past the markets and the front district, but we need to hurry."

Justice took point, and they ran down the stairs into the market. The streets were in ruins. Broken carts and torn down awnings filled up gutters, overflowing with refuse, feces, and blood. There were no bodies. Chewed up chunks of flesh and blood and bone littered the grout between the cobblestone. It didn't make Anders queasy anymore, just angry.

A swarm of Children burst out of one of the shops to their left. A burst of energy exploded from Justice, and the Children shrieked in outrage at the light. Justice really was fantastic at holding the focus of everything from darkspawn to demons. The Children dove for the corpse, and Barkspawn dove on the Children.

Anders rolled up his sleeve, drew his dagger, and cut his arm above the bend in his elbow. He cast a spell to boil the darkspawns' blood, and let it loose. It was infinitely more effective than lightning or any other element could have been. The Children exploded, leaving only claws and teeth and carapace behind.

Anders left his sleeve rolled up, and the cut flowing free. He wiped his dagger off before he sheathed it. He unhooked Amell's grimoire and held it in one hand with his staff in the other. The diffused magic of five demons radiated from the tome; Velanna felt it and glanced at him. "Keep that open."
"What do you think I'm doing?" Anders shot back.

They turned the corner and found another cluster of darkspawn, trying to force their way into an alley. Planted in the ground across the street was a pine tree, and Anders felt the Fade swell as Velanna forced a wisp across the Veil. Branches sprouted from the pine, and took the shape of gnarled arms. The sylvan ripped itself out of the ground, its roots tearing up cobblestone and flower pots.

A hurlock turned around, and let out a guttural cry of warning. The sylvan swung an arm and sent the creature flying down the street. It hit the cobblestone and rolled several feet before it finally came to rest a short yard away from them. Barkspawn dove on top of it and ripped its head off, shaking the skull between his teeth like a chew toy.

"Good dog," Anders said.

The rest of the darkspawn turned away from the alley, and started attacking the tree. Without them in the way, Anders could see the score of darkspawn had been held off by all of two guards. Anders and his group ran to join up with them, and pick off the darkspawn with the help of the sylvan.

The fighting went easier, with just the four of them. Justice excelled at keeping the darkspawn's focus, Nathaniel was sharp enough to spot any darkspawn who slipped past the spirit, and skilled enough with a bow to take them down before they reached Anders or Velanna. Amell should have left him in charge from the start.

When the last darkspawn died, Velanna sent the sylvan back the way they'd come to fight any darkspawn that wandered into the markets. The tree lumbered off, creaking and grumbling and making sounds that almost sounded like words. It was a poor substitute for the squad of guardsmen or wardens that should have been guarding the city, but it was all they had for now.

"Maker bless you, Wardens," One of the guards said, collapsing against the wall. He was bleeding profusely, from over a dozen different injuries. Anders jogged over, and summoned Compassion. He healed the man's contusions, sprains, cuts, and broken bones, Leonie be damned. It was what magic was for.

"What's your status here?" Nathaniel asked.

"On death's bloody door," The other guard said, gesturing to the alley behind him, "We've got a dozen citizens crammed back here. I haven't seen the Commander for a while; it's just the two of us against this damn horde. I thought we were done for back there."

Velanna darted around the guard and into the alley. It veered sharply right; the survivors must have been crammed into a nook Anders couldn't see. "Delilah?" Velanna yelled.

"Velanna!" A male voice answered. A man emerged from the alley, heavy set, with a red nose and curly brown hair. It was Albert. He pulled Velanna into a fierce hug. She didn't hug back, but she also didn't flinch. "Thank the Maker you've come," Albert said, letting go of her.

"Albert, where's Delilah?" Nathaniel asked.

"The Chantry, Maker willing," Albert said, taking in the four of them. "A small group of guards has been making trips between here and the Chantry, trying to get all the survivors together, but they can only take so many at a time. They're getting women and children first."

"Ridiculous. We will take all of you," Velanna said.
"We might bring the horde down on us, moving with this many at a time, but I don't think we have a choice," Nathaniel said. "They're going to burn down the city."

"What!?" The guard Anders was healing demanded. "They can't! We've still got survivors in here! I know the darkspawn hit us hard, but there have to be other pockets of survivors out there!"

"That's why we're here," Anders said, hauling the man to his feet when he finished healing him. "We need to get everyone moving, are there any injured back there?"

"A few," The guard said.

Anders hurried around the corner, and was greeted with a dozen wide-eyed and pallid faces. "Who's injured?" Anders asked.

A few hands came up. Anders started forward when one of the guards screamed. "Arrows!"

"Anders!" Nathaniel yelled.

Anders carved out a glyph of warding. A rain of arrows fell through the market place, but the glyph kept any from falling in the alley. Most clattered through the streets, some of them already extinguished by their flight. Others impaled themselves in the surrounding rooftops, and the oil and risen-soaked towels attached to them set fire to thatch and wood.

"I will put out what I can," Velanna said, running out of the alley and back through the market.

"Everyone who can move, move," Nathaniel said.

All but two of the survivors got up, and clustered at the front of the alley. Anders bent to heal the two who couldn't. The first was simple, a twisted ankle on an older fellow who thanked him profusely for his help. The second less so. The woman had a vicious gash from her hip to her ankle that had nearly torn her leg in two.

"I need a half hour for this," Anders said.

"We don't have a half hour," Nathaniel said.

"Please don't leave me here," The woman sobbed.

"We're not going to leave you," Anders promised.

He could quicken the spell somehow. Maybe in a burst. Hopefully without killing himself in the process. Anders gathered the mana for the spell, and held it to overflowing. Anders summoned Compassion, and forced the regenerative energies into the woman. The flesh knit together at a miraculous rate, but it was beyond draining.

It took him five minutes, in place of thirty. Anders was dizzy by the time he finished, and the world slipped out from underneath him when he tried to stand. He opened up his satchel for a lyrium potion. He only had five, and Velanna might need some for her sylvans. Anders drank one, and tried not to think about it.

Anders climbed to his feet, and left the alley. Velanna was back by the time he finished the healing the woman. "I did what I could," Velanna said.

"We need to hurry, the next volley will be any second," Nathaniel said.

Any second turned out to be this second. Anders cast a warding glyph, and everyone huddled
around him while the second rain of arrows fell. Anders and Velanna put out the ones that landed within range.

"Don't waste the mana," Nathaniel said.

"But the city!" One of the guards protested.

"We can cast a blizzard later, together, over the market." Velanna suggested.

"I'm for that," Anders said.

The rain of arrows stopped.

"Everyone stay together. Anders, take the rear, Velanna, take point." Nathaniel said.

Their group of survivors made it out of the market, and picked up another group of guards in the process. That put them at five guards, four wardens, and a dozen citizens when the darkspawn attacked. The groups of hurlocks and genlocks were easy for them. The more humanoid darkspawn had to come at them from the ground, and that made choke points easy with a few glyphs and a half-circle of soldiers.

The shrieks and Children were the problem. The more bestial monsters crawled over the roof tops like a plague of locus, skittering and crawling and leaping off the surrounding buildings towards the vulnerable center of their group. Even when Nathaniel's arrows or Anders and Velanna's magic picked them off, their corpses were still a threat.

The shrieks were made of claws, and the Children had heavy carapaces. Most splattered on the cobblestone, resulting in little more than a mess or a few bruises from the resulting explosion. One landed on top one of the survivors, and knocked the woman unconscious. They didn't have time to stop and heal her. Velanna picked the woman up and slung her over her shoulder, and Anders wished he'd asked Amell to teach him physical magic.

They were heading for the center of the city, where most of the taverns and possibly more survivors would be when the tremors started.

"Ogre," Nathaniel said needlessly.

"The beast will take time to fight," Justice said. "Can we spare it?"

"No," Nathaniel said.

"Then we don't fight it," Velanna said.

"You wanna flip for it?" Anders joked.

"I think it should be you, Anders, if you can," Nathaniel said, "Velanna has the sylvans,"

"I need at least two people," Anders said.

Barkspawn barked at him.

"... I need at least one person." Anders revised.

"We need someone willing to bleed for a spell!" Nathaniel yelled.

Anders expected a riot. He couldn't think of a worse idea than telling a group of panicked men and
women that they had a maleficar in their midst. Instead half the group came forward, and the rest only shifted nervously. Anders picked Albert, and another man with a build like Gerod who looked like he could spare the blood. Barkspawn barked at him again, but he'd rather the dog not bleed, if only because it was more useful in a fight than an unarmed citizen.

Anders stuffed Amell's grimoire under his arm and drew his knife. He cut down Albert's forearm, and wiped it off before he did the same to the other man. "Both of you have to stay near me, and tell me if you get tired." Anders warned them, tying their heartbeats together as the tremors grew worse.

"We will," Albert said.


Anders certainly wasn't expecting thanks for bleeding someone. He grinned, and pulled on the blood he'd need for the spell. "Where's it coming from?" Anders asked.

"There," Nathaniel pointed down the street.

Not a moment later, and the ogre came charging around the corner from behind the Pilgrim's Rest. It crashed through the corner of the tavern, and sent broken bricks and shattered wood flying. It had a child impaled on its horns, and crashing through the building knocked the poor boy loose and sent his body rolling through the street. The ogre roared, saliva spewing from its mouth along with an arm from whatever poor bastard it had just eaten. Anders flung the spell.

The ogre came to an abrupt halt. It stared at him, unblinking, black blood pouring out of its nose and ears. Anders wondered how long he could hold it. He glanced back at Albert and the other fellow bound to his spell, but they had a healthy color to their faces and no exhaustion in their features.

A few of the survivors cheered. Anders couldn't help a laugh. They kept on through the streets of Amaranthine, and found another holdout of survivors at the Crown and Lion, being swarmed by every manner of darkspawn imaginable. There were scores of them. They blackened the street as far as the eye could see.

They wreathed and roiled, crawling over one another, pulsing and undulating like a single mass. The cries of so many shrieks were deafening, and Anders couldn't hear whatever command Nathaniel or any of the city guardsmen might have given. Anders set the ogre on the darkspawn.

The ogre might have been charging through liquid. The path it cleared lasted only long enough for Anders to see the cobbledstone was painted black with blood before it sealed up again with more darkspawn. There were three pine trees on this street, and Velanna made sylvans of all of them before she begged a potion from him. Anders gave it to her. He had three left.

Darkspawn swarmed over his ogre like ants, and tore it apart. They turned Velanna's sylvans to splinters, and they were still a multitude. The horde charged them, and Anders used the blood already flowing from his cut, from Albert and the other volunteer to cast a net of corruption as wide as he could. It measured ten meters, and barely made a dent.

Velanna brought up a wall of fire in front of them to cut the darkspawn off. Children came crashing to through it, their baby-faces charred an angry black. A burst of energy exploded off of Justice, and the darkspawn swarmed him. Anders lost sight of him, and panicked. He ran forward, lightning on his finger tips, when Nathaniel grabbed his arm, and yelled something in his face. Anders couldn't hear him. Nathaniel pointed up.

Anders carved a glyph of warding. He was almost too late. A hail of arrows rained down around
them, and cleaved through the horde. Scores fell. Several survived, but they were a number more imaginable than before. Velanna cast a lightning storm over the surviving darkspawn, and the street was flooded with blood and bodies. It flowed towards the city gates, where the city slanted, and they had to wade through ankle high waters of red and black to reach the Crown and Lion.

It was burning. Velanna summoned a blizzard to put it out, and Anders did the same for the handful of buildings that surrounded the tavern. They both needed lyrium potions afterwards. Anders had one left.

"Commander!" One of the guards called to a soldier manning the front of the Crown and Lion. "Thank the Maker you survived!"

The title still hurt to hear.

The soldier in question was in dark green armor, with brown hair and a brown beard and more circles under his eyes than his cheeks had room for. They sagged as a result, and he dragged his way over to them. One of the guards clasped arms with him, and the Commander looked at them, "Wardens?" He asked rhetorically after a glance at their tabards, "When the arrows started falling I thought... Has the Constable not given up on the city after all?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Nathaniel said.

"I see," The Commander's face fell even further, if such a thing were possible. "The militia has set up a base of operations at the Chantry, and they were holding, last I knew. We're sending all the survivors there. My men and I have been searching the city for more, but you saw the horde. We've been pinned down for hours. I have twenty civilians in the tavern behind me, and only five men to guard them. We've searched the forward districts, but we haven't been to the docks yet, and there's been no word from the Bann's estate."

"We're heading for the Chantry," Nathaniel said.

"We can go to the docks after we get everyone to safety," Anders said.

"Then we'll join you," The Commander said. He threw open the door to the Crown and Lion and started shouting out orders. Anders leaned over to take a look inside the tavern. Twenty people took up a lot more space than he thought.

"Nate," Anders said.

"What is it?" Nathaniel asked.

"My glyph won't cover that many if another volley hits us." Anders said.

"... then we'll make a run for it." Nathaniel said.

The Commander finished giving orders and came back to them. "I have everyone packing. Are you ready to head out?"

"We need to hurry. The next volley will be any minute," Nathaniel said, "Tell your men to run,"

"Most of my men can't run," The Commander frowned. "I saw your group survive it."

"I'll stay with the injured," Anders said, "They'll fit in the glyph. You can take everyone who can run to the Chantry and come back for us."
"Alright," Nathaniel said. There wasn't really time to argue.

"Dareth, Anders," Velanna said.

"Still don't speak Elvish," Anders said.

"It means you're an idiot," Velanna said brightly.

"I figured," Anders grinned.

The group split. Everyone save for ten injured, three guardsmen, and Barkspawn went with Nathaniel to make a run for the Chantry.

Albert counted himself among the injured. "You might need me again," Albert explained, holding a hand to the cut on his arm. Anders had to fight his instinct to heal it.

"I just might," Anders said.

"Don't die," Nathaniel said, "Delilah will kill me if you do."

"Well, then at least we'd be even," Albert grinned. Anders rather liked him.

Anders watched the group of survivors and guardsmen sprint down the street to the Chantry. The Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer sat at the crest of a hill, and towered over Amaranthine. It was almost as high as the walls, and as far as Anders could tell none of the arrows could reach it. He didn't know what would happen when the ballistas and trebuchets were set up, but at least they'd found survivors. At least they were alive for now.

Perspective was good, after all.

"We'll watch the sky for the next volley or any darkspawn, Warden," One of the guardsmen said.

"Thanks," Anders said.

The injured sat in a huddle inside the entrance to the Crown and Lion. Anders bent to see to them. There were two with broken legs, one with a handful of broken ribs. Another had a concussion. Someone else had open wound on their side, another had one on their chest. Yet another had a fractured hip. Anders healed them, while Albert sat in a chair beside the door in case they need to run outside and bind another ogre.

"So I know this is really selfish of me, but do you know what happened to my cat?" Anders asked him. He drank his last lyrium potion halfway through healing the injured.

"Delilah took him with her when the guards brought her to the Chantry." Albert said. A smile touched his lips, and quickly faded. "She's twenty-six weeks... Do you know if it's safe? For her to be running, with all the smoke and the stress?"

Anders wished he could say he wasn't that kind of healer. He would have been happy to spend the rest of his life delivering children, but the only children he'd delivered had been ones born in the Circle. Nothing was worse than trying to console a grieving mage girl while under templar supervision, urging her to push when they both knew she'd never see or even hold the child she worked so hard to bring into this world.

"She'll be fine," Anders said.

"Warden! Survivors approaching!" One of the guardsmen called. "They've got darkspawn on their
Anders cut off the spell he was channeling and ran outside. Three women were running towards the inn. Anders recognized two of them. One was Natia, the portly old bartender from the Fisherman's Rest. The other was Solona, their new contact for the Collective. She pushed the other two women in front of her while flinging fireball after ineffectual fireball into the horde behind her.

"Albert, I'm going to need you," Anders said.

Albert held out his arm. One little cut on Anders' arm wasn't going to cut it. There were at least a score of darkspawn chasing Solona. Anders guessed that meant the docks were lost. He drew his dagger and cut vertically down his forearm. The pain of it brought tears to his eyes, but he pushed through it. He wiped his dagger off on his trousers, sheathed it, and wove his heartbeat together with Albert's.

Anders grabbed Amell's grimoire and flipped it to the page bound with Desire, and used the demon's magic to amplify the spell while he channeled it through his dragonbone staff.

"What are you waiting for?" One of the guards demanded. "Do something!"

"I need a clean line of sight," Anders said; the patter of his blood hitting the ground was barely audible over the guttural moan of the encroaching horde, "I'll cast when they get past us."

"Though all before me is shadow, Yet shall the Maker be my guide," One of the guards started praying. Anders didn't mind so much. If there was ever a time for it, it was now. "I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light, and nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

Solona and the others ran past them. Anders cast the spell. The darkspawn came to a seizing halt. The first row took the full brunt of the spell and exploded, bursting like overfull pustules, white and black and green fluids splattering across all of them. The second row hung suspended mid-air, caught in a miasma of blood while their eyes and veins swelled until they burst and blood pooled out of their ears and noses. Solona cast another fireball, and they dispatched the horde.

Anders healed his and Albert's arms, and wondered if Amell would have been proud of him.

"Anders," Solona gasped, breathless. She set her hands on her knees, and her hair spilled in front of her face. It was soaked through with sweat, and dyed a dark brown where it was normally blonde.

"Put your hands over your head," Anders said, "It helps air into the lungs."

Solona did as he said. "Darrian gave himself to demons so we could escape. The docks are overrun."

"Volley!" One of the guards yelled.

"Get over here!" Anders yelled, drawing a quick glyph of warding beneath his feet. The guards and the three women clustered around him, and the arrows fell. They clattered against the cobblestone, imbedded themselves in nearby fenceposts, rained down on the rooftop of the Crown and Lion. A few hit a small patch of grass and devoured it.

"Solona, can you put out the fire over the Crown and Lion?" Anders asked.

"I won't have any mana left if I do," Solona said.

"There are people in there." Anders said.
Solona cast a blizzard. The fires went out.

"Maker's breath, are they trying to burn down the city?" Natia wheezed. "Don't they know we're still in here?"

"They know," Anders said, concern for the older woman welling in him. Natia was old, and portly, and in no fit state to run. He cast a simple rejuvenation spell for her to help her heart recover, and knew he was pushing his connection to the Fade.

"Bastards," One of the guards said.

"How could the Constable abandon us like this?" Asked another.

"Our Constable ordered him to," Anders said.

"Bloody Orlesians," One of the guards muttered.

"We should get back inside," Anders said.

They went back inside the Crown and Lion, and Anders went back to healing the survivors until Velanna and Justice came back for him. The lack of Nathaniel made Anders' heart feel like it was falling into his stomach. For a moment he couldn't breathe.

"He is with the survivors at the Chantry," Velanna said before Anders could ask.

Anders wheezed, and kneaded at his chest to shove the ugly feeling away.

"We need to go now," Velanna continued. "Nathan says they'll have finished setting up the siege equipment by now. We have but minutes. I can take the worst of the injured underground."

"These two still can't walk," Anders gestured to an older man's whose foot had been crushed, and a young woman with a gaping wound in her thigh.

Velanna picked the girl up without a word. "Support yourself on my shoulder," She said to the man. Startled, probably by her strength, the older fellow obeyed and limped out of the Crown and Lion with her.

"I am glad to see you survived, my friend," Justice said.

"Thanks, Justice, me too," Anders joked. "Everyone, we're moving! Stay near me,"

No one needed any convincing. The previously-injured were so desperate to stay near their healer they were tripping over each other. They ran for the Chantry, and Anders wasn't surprised to see two sylvans milling about aimlessly at the base of the stairs. They urged the rest of the survivors up the stairs. The courtyard was filled with archers, picking off any darkspawn who appeared below the Chantry.

Nathaniel was with them. Anders went over to him. Velanna and Justice joined him.

"Do you think the siege weapons can reach us here?" Anders asked.

Nathaniel looked to the soldiers and survivors crowded within hearing range. His nod was little more than a raise of his eyebrows.

"What do we do?" Anders asked.
"Pray the Chantry holds," Nathaniel said quietly.

"Fenedhis," Velanna muttered. "More like we should go back out there now that we've saved all we can and end that foul woman."

"I'm up for it," Anders said.

Barkspawn barked. Anders scratched the dog's ears.

"Perhaps she will reconsider," Justice said hopefully.

"She's been firing on the city for almost half an hour, Justice, why would she reconsider?" Anders asked.

"It is never too late to right a wrong," Justice said.

"The market is burning." Velanna said.

Anders looked down at the city. Velanna was right. They'd put out the fires they could, but they were two mages against two armies. "Is the wind still blowing west?" Anders asked.

"For the moment," Nathaniel said.

Anders looked at the walls, waiting for the next volley that would come from ballistas and trebuchets, and burn down the rest of the city.

"... Does anyone have a song?" Anders asked.

"Not without Sigrun." Velanna said.

They waited in silence.

An age seemed to pass.

Then it happened.

An inferno appeared outside the city. The flames leapt up past the city walls, countless meters wide and even more meters high. It looked like the sort of storm only a mage could conjure, and Anders first thought was that an emissary had gotten to the refugee holdout.

Velanna thought something else. She touched the bomb on her belt, and looked out at the walls.

"No... no... please..."

"She wouldn't." Anders said quickly. "She's a soldier. She follows orders. Amell said so."

"... wouldn't she?" Nathaniel asked. "If all she had to hit were the siege weapons... if she knows we're in here... Why else haven't they fired yet?"

Velanna collapsed. She fell back against the statue of Andraste, and buried her face into her knees to sob.

"Stop it!" Anders yelled. "You don't know what happened! Anything could have happened! If she did it, maybe she just threw it at the siege weapons. Maybe she threw it at darkspawn! She has two bombs on her, she could."

Another inferno appeared. Velanna's sobs turned into anguished screams.
Anders fought back a sob. He started crying. He couldn't help it. He stumbled back and sank to the ground with Velanna, and she grabbed him to scream into his shoulder. Nathaniel turned away from the walls and kicked the offering bowl in front of the statue of Andraste so hard it shattered against the walls of the Chantry.

A half hour later, a scout came to report the Vigil's army was falling back. Their siege weapons had been turned to ash, apparently by one of the darkspawn emissaries.

The survivors cheered.

No one else knew what really happened.

A half hour after that, and another scout came to report a second wave of the darkspawn army had started towards the city as soon as they saw the Vigil's army falling back. Another came to say that there were darkspawn pouring out of the Crown and Lion. They would have come from the tunnel the Collective used to get mages in and out of the city. Apparently they were endless.

Nathaniel recovered first. He went with the Commander of the city guard to set up traps around the Chantry. Anders untangled himself from Velanna and forced himself to his feet. He stumbled to the edge of the courtyard, and leaned over the half-wall to look down at the city.

The market had burned down, but the flames hadn't spread much further. There were darkspawn everywhere. Pouring in through the gates, bursting at the seams of the Crown and Lion. He counted three ogres, far below, but not nearly far enough away.

Velanna and Justice joined him.

"Do you think we'll die making the world a better place?" Anders joked. His voice was rough and scratchy and it hurt to talk.

"I think this world is damned, and all of us with it," Velanna said.

"I think you're right." Anders said.

Nathaniel came to join them. "We're not going to hold."

"No, really?" Anders asked sarcastically.

"It's been an honor." Nathaniel said.

"... I have an idea." Justice said.

Everyone looked at him.

"... I have been thinking," Justice continued. "Kristoff's body will soon expire. I can feel disturbing wear and tear that leads me to believe I will not survive this fight, no matter the outcome. Several of you have made mention that it may be necessary for me to... switch bodies. A few days ago, Nathaniel mentioned I might find a living body to possess.

"... I thought this a thing for demons, but... Before he left, the Warden Commander and I spoke of the other spirits he had encountered in this world. He mentioned a woman named Wynne, a mage of unfathomable strength and unlimited potential who shared her body with a spirit of Faith. If we are to die here, I hope it will be with honor, but these innocents we are defending do not deserve to suffer at the hands of darkspawn."
"... Perhaps together we could do what we cannot do alone." Justice said.

"... Are you-offering to possess one of us?" Anders asked.

"I am offering to help." Justice said.

"Incoming!" One of the soldiers yelled, and spared them from having to consider the offer.

The darkspawn were a swarm. They surged through the streets like a tidal wave, and Velanna's sylvans charged out to meet them when they reached the base of the Chantry. An ogre was at the forefront of the darkspawn army, and grabbed the pine tree at its base. It used it like a club to swat the other sylvan aside.

The darkspawn ran over trip wires, over pressure plates. Scattered explosions felled small clusters of them, and the few archers they had rained fire down on them. It was barely making a dent.

Nathaniel grabbed Velanna's chin in his hand and turned her away from Justice to kiss her. "If you say yes, I will still love you, whatever you become." He said, and ran to join the archers on the walls.

"I refuse," Velanna said, and ran to the edge of the courtyard. She pulled her bomb from her belt, and flung it into the darkspawn below.

The cataclysmic explosion bought them minutes, at most.

Anders looked at Justice. At his friend. At one of the only friends he had left.

Amell was dead. Sigrun was dead. Anders was done lying to himself.

In a few short hours, they'd all be dead too.

Anders looked out at the darkspawn. Amell's song came to mind.

"He was a mage and Warden both, and surely shook with fright, for though he'd been in battle he had never seen a Blight..." Anders mumbled to himself. Barkspawn nudged his hand for the song. Anders stared at him, and cast a spell to put him to sleep. He made sure it would only last a few minutes.

"Anders?" Justice asked.

"Do you think we'll go mad?" Anders asked.

"I cannot say." Justice said.

"... Not by everyone," Anders said. "By the darkspawn."

Justice ran for the stairs. Anders ran after him. They ran into the street together, into the circle of char and ash and death left by Velanna's bomb. The darkspawn were already swarming towards them, down every street, every alley. "Thank you, for being my friend." Justice said.

"Thanks for being mine." Anders said.

Justice held out his hand.

Anders took it.
An optional Apples and Apostate' Chapter told from Sigrun's perspective, detailing her account of the events of this chapter.

An optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter told from Justice's perspective, immediately following this chapter, if you would like to follow both in chronological order.

Both link back to this chapter.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! I know some of you are curious about how we're going to be treating Justice in this story, and I just want to say that just because someone calls Justice a demon or a spirit does not necessarily mean that he is one. I hope you enjoy the chapter, and thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 3 Cassus Morning
In the Fields Outside the City of Amaranthine

A creature that might have been a man woke up in the fields outside the City of Amaranthine with no understanding of how it got there, no knowledge of what it is was, and no memory at all. Not even its name. It sat up and felt the grass beneath its finger tips, and noted that the feeling was wrong. It thought of the gentle brush of reeds, and the sway of their stalks.

It looked up at the sky, and noted that that too felt wrong. Above the creature, a sea of endless blue existed where the creature remembered green. Shapes of white and grey were painted across the blue sky, and the creature knew them for clouds. They were wrong as well. The creature thought instead of islands, of floating cities, of home.

Worst of all was the light. The creature had to squint against it. It was bright, and golden, and harsh, and from above. It remembered light as something soft, a whisper in the reeds and a breath in the air to battle back the Void. The Void in the Fade. Where the creature had spent so much of its life. The creature remembered it was a mage. A mage and a man. Or... no. Not a man. Not anything. Just a pursuit of an ideal.

"What am I?" The man asked himself. "I'm... Justice? No. No... I'm Anders."

Anders pressed his fingers into his forehead, trying to think. His thoughts were sluggish. His memories a jumble. His head was throbbing, a pain the likes of which he'd never felt before. Or had he? He suddenly wasn't sure. He breathed in a breath of mana, and exhaled, and the pain was gone. Had magic always been that easy for him?

Anders pulled himself up onto his knees, and looked around. He was in the field of a small farmhouse, outside Amaranthine. All around him was ruin. There were collapsed buildings, trampled fences, burnt fields, mangled tents, and bodies. So many bodies.

Most of them were darkspawn. Anders looked around, but there was no movement. Aside from himself and the bodies, the fields were deserted. What was he doing here? How had he gotten here?

"Thank you for being my friend." Justice had said.

"Thanks for being mine." Anders had said.

The memory was there. Both memories were there. They were both his. Anders couldn't decide what had happened, where he had been standing. He wasn't even sure who had said what anymore.
They'd clasped hands, and then...

Light. Such a bright burst of light they'd been blinded by it. A powerful feeling like... love, or maybe righteous fury, and pain. So much pain. A searing pain like being burned from the inside out, like his blood was boiling, and the holy smites of a thousand different templars had crashed down on him. And then nothing.

No, that was wrong. The memories were there, under the pain of what had happened to him, but Anders wasn't sure he wanted to search for them. He tried anyway.

"I will cleanse this city in fire!" He'd screamed.

Why?

Darkspawn. They'd done this to fight darkspawn. Anders looked down at his hands, bound in leather gloves, and stained black with blood.

Was he still human?

Anders unlatched one of the silver bracers he wore over his gloves. Anders remembered it was important to him, but he couldn't remember why. It hurt to try, and he set the bracer in the grass beside him for the moment. He took off his glove with shaking hands, and looked down at the palm that greeted him.

It was a human hand. Five long fingers, pale, with a soft pink beneath his nails, and a smattering of blonde hair on his knuckles. Anders took off his boot, and the blood-soaked sock beneath it. His foot was a human foot. Five long toes, pale, with a smattering of brownish red hair, and a scar that twisted up over the side. He remembered it from a time he'd stepped on a rake as a boy.

He'd spent a lot of time in farms and fields in his youth. His parents had been farmers. He was from Tallo. The memories put themselves back together piece by tiny piece. Anders touched his face. He felt down his jaw, over the prominent bump in his neck, over his nose and his brow. Human. Still human.

He still looked human.

He wasn't human. He was an abomination.

He was Justice. He was Anders. He was neither and he was both.

Anders felt a pang in his heart. He put his clothes back on and crawled to his feet. He found his staff, Vigilance, a noble name, a short distance away in the grass. He picked it up. He checked his side for his grimoire. Vengeance. Justice. Vengeance. Anders snatched his hand away. Demons. The tome sickened him.

No it didn't. He needed it. It was all he had left of Amell.

Anders' head hurt. He wanted to talk to Justice. He wanted to talk to Anders. But he was Justice and he was Anders and he wasn't even sure what he wanted anymore, he just didn't want to be alone.

Anders looked at the city in front of him. There was no movement in the fields. He looked to the refugee holdout, but there was no ring of soldiers around the farmhouse, and there were no refugees inside that he could see. Anders took a step. His legs still worked. He let them carry him towards the farmhouse, and looked at the trampled ground from where the Vigil's army had come and then gone.
Sigrun.

Anders looked around. The siege weapons had been set up a few yards away, to judge by the two craters of black that stood on either side of the road to Amaranthine. There were no siege weapons now, just black circles. Anders walked over to one, and his boots crunched over the blackened remnants of what he assumed was a burnt trebuchet.

"Why did you give her those bombs?" Anders asked aloud, to a dead man. "You knew what she'd do with them. You knew."

Anders inhaled shakily and felt tears stream down his face. His vision blurred, and he raised an arm to wipe his face off on his sleeve when he realized he was covered in blood. He settled on blinking several times. He walked through the char and ash, easily ten meters in diameter, nudging over broken bits of wood with the butt of his staff. He didn't find anything, except charcoal, but there was still another circle.

Anders walked over to it, his chest tight and his stomach a tangled knot of hurt. He picked his way through the black, and finally found what he was looking for. A piece of metal, melted, but still in the vague shape of a griffon. Like the kind of emblem Anders wore on his shoulder. The kind that meant he was a Warden, a member of an order of warriors that lived and died fighting darkspawn.

Anders sank down to his knees and picked the piece of metal up. He cleared a spot, in the ash and char, and set it on the blackened ground. He combed through the rest of the area on his hands and knees, and found other pieces. A piece of metal with misshapen dwarven runes that might have been from her axe. A chunk of something that looked like it had been a shoulder piece. Her buckle. A tiny gauntlet.

Anders stopped, and started sobbing. His shoulders shook and his chest constricted, and he had to breathe in gasps between his sobs.

The tears stopped when he didn't have any left. Anders chest and throat hurt, and he massaged at his aching heart beneath his tabard.

At least it had been a noble death.

Anders didn't know why that comforted him.

Anders picked up all the pieces of Sigrun's armor that he could find, and stowed them in his satchel. There was none of her left. The explosion had been too powerful. He hoped it had been quick.

Anders choked on another sob.

Dwarves didn't burn their dead. They buried them in the Stone. Sigrun had told him that once. Twice? Anders sucked in a deep breath. She deserved a proper funeral. He could give her that. It was the right thing to do. Anders stumbled to his feet, and looked at the gates to the city.

Had it worked? Was anyone else alive?

Did he even want to know?

Yes. He was a healer. If there were survivors, they needed him. He had an obligation.

Anders started forward. His feet got heavier with every step he took towards the city, and no one came to man the gates. No scouts ran out to meet him. He didn't see anyone on the walls.
Later. Think about it later. That was what he always did.

There was a tree, uprooted and broken in half, just inside the city gates. Anders stepped over it, and looked down at it. Velanna. Velanna was his friend. She was alive, or had been. Anders didn't know if she still was. She summoned wisps from across the Veil, and bound them to the trees in the city so they could fight the darkspawn.

But trees didn't help when the Vigil's soldiers were trying to burn down the city. Anders stopped on the steps that led down to the market. There was no market left. It had been burned to the ground. Every shop, every cart, every beautiful awning and pretty patchwork tent. Countless people's livelihood, destroyed, because of one woman's refusal to help.

Anders felt livid. Fury burned inside of him, white and hot and blazing and righteous. How dare she. How many innocents had burned, or been felled by her rain of arrows while he protected only a handful? How many more might they have saved if she hadn't given into sloth, and stood idly by while darkspawn ravaged the city?

Anders blinked. He couldn't see straight. He blinked again, and pressed his fingers into his forehead to fight off what felt like a headache. Was he angry? Was Justice?

They both were.

Anders started down the steps to the market. He'd go to the Chantry last. The city was quiet, and it unnerved him. The sound had been uproarious... before. Anders wasn't sure how long it had been since the battle. Hours? A day? More? He decided not to think about it.

"Hello?" Anders called out. "Is anyone still alive?"

Silence. Anders walked through the still city, no sound save for the quiet thud of his boots on the pavement, or crunching over char and ash. He stepped over the ashen corpses of darkspawn, the chewed up remnants of citizens, over rubble and refuse and ruin. "Is anyone alive?" Anders called every so often.

No one answered him. Anders left the market, and went towards the docks. The piers were destroyed. Several of them had collapsed into the ocean. Driftwood and bloated corpses floated in the water, and knocked up against the shore with every wave. Anders amplified his voice with a simple charm, and called out while he walked through the docks. "Is anyone alive?"

The soft lapping of waves and the quiet thud of bodies bumping up against what was left of the piers answered him. Anders nudged open the door of the Fisherman's Rest with his staff. "Darrian?" Anders called, "Darrian, are you still alive?"

The Collective mage didn't answer him. Anders went inside. The floor had been torn up, a path carved through the wavy planks that led back outside into the docks. Anders guessed that meant Darrian, or whatever he'd become, had left the inn. "Is anyone in here?" Anders called.

Silence. Anders left the inn, and looked at the path of ruin Darrian had left. He followed it through the dockside district, and eventually it led to the harbormaster's office. Anders nudged open the door with his staff. "Hello?" Anders called out.

There was no answer. Anders followed the path of torn up planks and char towards the back of the building. A pile of darkspawn bodies blocked the entrance to one of the backrooms. "Darrian?" Anders called again.

Anders finally heard something. A low murmur, like someone laughing. He looked at the bodies. He
needed to move them somehow, but he didn't know any telekinetic magic.

Anders lifted his hand and blasted the pile of bodies across the room with a burst of raw energy torn straight from the Fade. He looked down at his palm in shock, but the laughter was audible now. Anders shook himself. He could worry about his magic later. "Darrian?" Anders edged around the entrance to the backroom. "Are you in here?"

Maker's breath.

Darrian was an abomination in the purest sense of the word. His body was mangled and mutilated; bulbous veins pushed up the left side of his neck, and twisted into a knot of muscle and flesh that ate up the left side of his face. The right side of his face was still Darrian: tawny skin with long black hair, and one good hazel eye that looked up at Anders.

His body was a contorted mess of muscle and bone; his skin was stretched and he barely seemed to fit within himself. His bones seemed to jut out of every joint in his body, turning into spikes and spines at his elbows, at his knees, all down his back.

"Darrian?" Anders ventured.


"Darrian, it's me, Anders, remember?" Anders crept around the pile of darkspawn in front of Darrian and knelt off to the side from him. "Do you remember me?"

Darrian laughed.

"I know you're in there somewhere," Anders said, summoning a soft breath of mana and letting the healing energy wash over the wound Darrian had inflicted on himself. "Talk to me. You're a mage. You work for the Collective. Remember?"

"A mage," Darrian tested the word, rolled it around in his mouth, and spat it back out. His eyes glowed, and bright red fire burned in his eye sockets, "No. Not a mage. More than that."

A Rage demon. Anders felt a surge of righteous fury at the sight, and battled it down. It was Darrian. It was just Darrian, abomination or not. Anders wasn't any different.

Darrian was a little uglier.

"Anders?" Darrian ventured.


Darrian blinked slowly and the fire in his eyes died down. Anders took heart in it. Darrian took a deep breath; muscle and sinew sealed the left half of his mouth shut and it stretched with a sickening sucking sound when he inhaled.

"I just wanted to help." Darrian said.

"You did," Anders took one of Darrian's meaty hands and squeezed. "You did help. Solona and a few others got out thanks to you."

"No," Darrian pulled away from him. He scooted back against the wall and his bulbous form shook
and wobbled with the motion. "I let it in. I thought... I thought it would fight the darkspawn. And it
did but... So many people, Anders. So many innocent people. I killed so many. I can't control it."

Tears spilled down Darrian's mutilated face, "Kill me. Kill me while I'm me. While I can hold it
back. Please."

"What?" Anders asked. A part of him agreed, and it scared him. "No. I'm not going to kill you.
Look, I know you look... Okay you look awful, but the Collective can find a place for you. You just
need to get a hold on this thing."

"I can't," Darrian said.

"Yes you can," Anders said. "You've got a hold on it right now. You're talking to me, aren't you?"

Darrian laughed. It was a throaty chuckle that shook his entire mass, and it got deeper and deeper
until it reached an unnatural depth. Darrian looked at him and his eyes glowed red and lit on fire.
"No, he is not. Darrian is gone. I am something more."

Darrian, or the thing he'd become, lifted himself off the ground with a breath of magic. He radiated
energy, and Anders scrambled backwards. He picked himself up on his staff and held out a hand in
front of him.

"Darrian, come on." Anders said. "You're in there somewhere."

"He is not." Darrian said. "You know it. You are just like me. I can smell it on you. What are you,
brother? Pride? Fear? Come out. Let me see."

Fire crackled between Darrian's claws. Anders summoned a spell shield, and the fireball Darrian
threw at him diffused into the air around them. Darrian laughed, and rushed him. He moved at a
blinding speed through the air and crashed into Anders, burying his claws in Anders shoulders.
Anders screamed, and Darrian picked him up and flung him out the door of the small backroom.

Anders crashed through the doorframe. He felt his shoulder crack, and he went rolling through the
harbormaster's office and landed in a pile of darkspawn corpses. Anders lost his grip on his staff and
didn't see where it landed. Anders forced himself to his knees and healed his shoulder.

He did it with little more than a breath of mana. It should have taken a full channel of Compassion,
and several long minutes of concentrated focus. Anders rolled his shoulder; it had only taken him a
few seconds.

"Desire? Hunger?" Darrian continued, floating out of the backroom. He threw another fireball, and
Anders summoned another spell shield. Fire washed over him, little more than a pleasant warmth on
his face.

"Darrian, come on," Anders begged. He felt something stir inside of him, but he didn't have time to
name the feeling, "You're stronger than this. I don't want to kill you."

"Don't you?" Darrian laughed, and rushed him again. Darrian tackled him to the ground, and
slammed a fist into Anders' side. Darrian's clawed hand ripped through Anders' leather armor, and he
charged it with a burst of lightning.

Anders screamed in agony. His whole body convulsed, and he seized, his muscles locking up.

"What are you? Rage?" Darrian guessed, "Come out!" He slashed a clawed hand across Anders'
face and ripped open his cheek.
Anders screamed again, and something came over him. It was anger, but it was more than that. It was protective. Possessive. No one was allowed to hurt him.

Energy exploded off him: raw magic pulled straight from the Fade. The blast knocked Darrian off of him, and Anders leapt into a crouch.

"There you are," Darrian grinned.

Darrian rushed him again. Anders rolled to one side with a speed he'd never had before, and dodged him. He lashed out and grabbed Darrian out of the air, not with magic, but with something else. Something that was just him, an extension of himself. He caught Darrian by his leg and flung him down into the ground.

Darrian lay where Anders had thrown him, laughing his guttural laugh. Anders walked over to him, and the words seemed to speak themselves, "You are a foul creature of Rage and Hatred. Release your hold on this mage."

"It takes one to know one," Darrian said. He raised a bloated hand and a blast of fire and energy caught Anders in the stomach. The force of it should have sent him flying, but he only stumbled. His armor was on fire, but it didn't hurt him. It couldn't hurt him.

"I am no demon," Anders said.

"No. You're more than that," Darrian agreed.

"Release him." Anders said again.

"You first," Darrian laughed.

Darrian leapt off the ground and rushed him again. Anders knew he fought him, but it felt like he was only watching the fight. His body seemed to move on his own, his magic cast on its own. He saw his arms, when Darrian tore through his armor, and the blue fire cracking through his skin. It ran up and down his body like veins, it hummed and sang with all the power of the Fade, and eventually it brought Darrian to his knees.

Anders raised a hand to kill him. He felt the need for it, in every fiber of his being. Darrian was a monster, Darrian was evil, Darrian was gone. Darrian was sobbing.

Anders stopped himself. He let go of the magic gathered in his hands, and watched the fire cracking through his skin go out. A splitting headache doubled him over, but Anders felt like himself again.

"Darrian?" Anders dared, kneeling next to the man.

Darrian looked up at him. His eyes weren't on fire anymore. They were hazel again. "Anders, please,"

"I'm not going to kill you," Anders said.

"Please, please, please," Darrian sobbed, and clutched at his head.

Anders wasn't a killer. He wasn't. He could defend himself. He could kill bandits, brigands, rapists, fathers who stole their sons' eyes, and still live with himself, but he couldn't kill a man sobbing on his knees. He couldn't.
Amell could.

Amell had killed someone out of mercy on almost every expedition Anders had ever gone on with him. He'd found some way to live with himself afterwards.

Anders could too.

Anders was already bleeding. He used the blood flowing from his wounds to form a spell to stop Darrian's heart. Anders set a hand on Darrian's swollen chest. The other abomination looked up at him, and his eyes turned to fire.

"I'm sorry," Anders said, and cast.

Blood rushed out Darrian's nose, his ears, spilled from his eyes like tears. He slumped over, dead. Anders stood up, and went to find his staff.

He hadn't even needed it in the fight. Anders picked it up, and stared at the torn sleeve of his Warden armor. He remembered of the blue fire cracking through his skin, and the words that had poured out of him, unguided and unbidden. He looked at the cuts lacerating his body and inhaled mana. His flesh knit back together effortlessly.

Best not to think about it.

Anders looked back at the thing that had been Darrian. He doubted anyone who searched the city after him would bother with a funeral for him. They'd see an abomination, and throw it on the pyre with the rest of the darkspawn. Anders leaned his staff up against the door to the harbormaster's office, and picked Darrian up by his armpits to drag him out into the street.

It wasn't difficult. Anders never remembered being this strong. A few pushups and a jog around the Keep in the morning wouldn't have made him this strong. He brought Darrian into the center of the street, went back for his staff, and channeled a fire spell that turned Darrian to ashes.

He should have said a prayer, but nothing came to him. They'd never been very good at praying. Anders watched the ashes blow away, and continued his walk through the docks and back towards the city. He called out for survivors every few minutes, but no one answered him. Occasionally, he found a lone darkspawn. A Childer or a genlock eating the corpses that littered the gutters, and killed it with fire or ice, but for the most part the streets were deserted.

Anders forced himself to head for the Chantry. The streets were barricaded: trees and corpses and every bit of makeshift rubble imaginable blocked him from getting past the Crown and Lion. Anders took some heart in it. The barricade hadn't been there before. Whatever happened, the survivors had obviously gained some ground. "Hello?" Anders called. "Is anyone alive?"

A head popped up over the barricade. Anders breathed a sigh of relief and waved. "Warden?" The guardsman manning the barricade squeaked at the sight of his uniform.

"That's the rumor," Anders said. "How do I get to the Chantry? Are there any survivors there that need healing?"

"Dozens, Ser." The guardsman said. "You'll have to go round, through the back door of the Crown and Lion and come through the front. I'll let everyone know you're coming and not a threat."

Anders hoped that was true. The guard ducked back down behind the barricade, and Anders walked around the Crown and Lion to the back entrance. The inn was still standing, but the rush of so many darkspawn pouring out of it had done serious damage to the building. The back door was gone, and
widened to twice its normal size. Every window had suffered a similar fate, and rubble was piled up against the walls.

The inn was worse on the inside. Stampeding darkspawn had destroyed all of the furniture and toppled the stairs. Anders walked out the front of the inn, and was ridiculously grateful the guard had said something for him. A dozen crossbowmen were guarding the entrance to the Crown and Lion. A few of them mumbled as Anders walked past, and Anders wondered if they'd seen him merge with Justice.

He wondered if he'd killed anyone.

The fighting must have died down. Survivors spilled out of the Chantry, and littered its courtyard. Guards roamed the streets, just beneath the Chantry. A few of them looked at him with glares, others with awe. Most didn't look at him at all. Anders didn't know what to make of any of it. He was heading for the stairs to the Chantry when he saw Nathaniel and Velanna running down them.

Anders felt a surge of relief so profound he had to choke down a sob. Anders jogged over, but when they reached the bottom of the stairs Velanna grabbed Nathaniel's arm to keep him from running out to meet him. She took a spot in front of Nathaniel, and glared at him suspiciously. Anders felt the Fade swell around her.

Maker, what had he done?

"Stop," Velanna said when he was a yard away.

"Nice to see you too," Anders said.

"Anders?" Nathaniel asked, untangling himself from Velanna's retraining arm. He took a few cautious steps forward.

"That's the name," Anders said.

"It could be lying," Velanna said.

"Oh for-seriously?" Anders asked. "It's me. Or... us... I guess. And it's 'he', not 'it.'"

"The thing we saw was no man," Velanna said.

"That's a fine 'thank you,'" Anders frowned. "It looks like it bloody well worked! What's going on? What did I do?"

"Do you not remember?" Nathaniel asked.

"... did I kill anyone?" Anders asked, trying to ignore the rock that settled in his stomach.

"No," Nathaniel said. Anders felt a little better. "Velanna, I think he's fine. We should find somewhere private to talk about what happened."

Velanna squinted at him. Anders frowned at her. "... I suppose if Justice could enter this world without going mad... the two of you might be able to stay sane together... But we shouldn't be alone with him until we're certain. You saw what he did."

"I'm standing right here, you know," Anders said.

"We can talk in the Crown and Lion," Nathaniel said, "The guards could use a break anyway, and they won't be far away if something happens."
"Fine." Velanna said. She kept a wide berth around him, and it made Anders feel sick and unhappy. They went back to the Crown and Lion, and gave the guards a break so they could talk in the common room. There wasn't a lot of furniture left standing, so Anders took a seat on the bar. Nathaniel sat next to him, and Anders felt a little better for it. Velanna continued to stand a safe distance away.

"What happened?" Anders asked. "What did we do?"

"After the two of you went into the street together, there was an explosion of white light." Nathaniel said. "It was too bright to see past, for a while, but when the light dimmed you were in the street, fighting darkspawn, only... Your eyes were glowing, and your skin cracked open, like you were on fire from the inside.

"I'm not going to lie, Anders, it looked bad. We thought for certain you'd gone insane. Some of the guards on the stairs were near enough to hear you screaming, and you were raving about how the darkspawn were a cancer at the heart of the world and you were going to bathe the streets in blood and purify the city with fire.

"We told them you were just a powerful mage when they brought it up later, but I don't know how many of them believed us. But before that, you killed... at least a hundred darkspawn on your own. We ran out of arrows before you ran out of mana. We had to start bleeding a lot of the survivors so Velanna could help keep the darkspawn from overwhelming you.

"We lost a lot of people, all the same. A few of the survivors bled out without a healer. A lot of the guards died. When there was finally a break in the fighting, you took off. That was... the day before yesterday. We didn't have time to see where you went. We took everyone who could walk, and made trips to the guard house for all the pitch and oil we could carry. We came back to the Chantry, and when the darkspawn came back yesterday, we burned them.

"Right now, we're just holding out in case there's another wave. Constable Aidan came back into the city yesterday, and brought his refugees and the guards he had left to reinforce us. ... I know we already knew, but he confirmed it. About Sigrun. Apparently when the Vigil's soldiers finally finished setting up the siege equipment, she threw one of the bombs at one trebuchet, and stood under the other and threw it at her feet. I..." Nathaniel stopped, and his eyes watered. He took a deep breath and couldn't continue.

"... I know." Anders said. He opened his satchel, and fished out Sigrun's Grey Warden emblem. Velanna finally abandoned her caution to come over to him. She took the metal griffon from him and stared at it, tears running down her face.

"I don't know why, but I was outside the city when I came to... I found what I could of her things. I thought... maybe we could have a funeral for her." Anders said. "You know, so she can be one with the Stone or whatever."

Velanna nodded.

"I don't know that you should," Nathaniel said.

"What do you mean you don't know if I should?" Anders glared at him, "She was my friend!"

"No-I know," Nathaniel said quickly, "It's just... Leonie left Rolan, with Constable Aidan, in case we managed to save the city. He's still in the Chantry, but he'll probably hear you're back soon, and I don't know... Is there any way he'll be able to tell? What you and Justice did?"
'... I don't know.' Anders said.

'I don't either,' Velanna said.

'... Anders, maybe you should leave.' Nathaniel said. 'Go to West Hill, or somewhere away from here. I don't... I don't know what they'll do to you if they find out what happened.'

'What about you?' Anders asked. 'We all deserted.'

'I don't know,' Nathaniel said. 'Rolan hasn't said.'

'The guards said there were injured.' Anders said.

'There are,' Nathaniel agreed, 'There are a lot, but...'

'Then I need to help.' Anders said.

'What if Rolan finds out?' Nathaniel asked. 'What if he tries to kill you?'

'A hundred darkspawn.' Nathaniel had said.

'I don't even know if she can die,' Amell had said of Wynne.

'Not a mage. More than that.' Darrian had said.

'He can try.' Anders said.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! Not much of a comment for this chapter. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 3 Cassus Afternoon
City of Amaranthine: Crown and Lion Common Room

"Good." Velanna said, her voice scratchy. She handed Sigrun's emblem back to Anders, and he stowed it in his satchel. "I cannot wait for this templar to test us."

"I don't know that I'm as eager." Nathaniel said.

"You saw what Anders became in the fight." Velanna said. "If he can control it there is nothing that can stand against us."

"Still right here, you know." Anders said.

"Well, then?" Velanna demanded.

"Well what?" Anders asked.

"Can you control it?" Velanna asked.

"It's not an it, you know, it's Justice," Anders said defensively. "I know you never liked him, but that doesn't make him an it. Or a monster. He's a spirit. And my friend. And ... me, I guess."

"That is no answer." Velanna said.

"What's there to control?" Anders asked. "When he's ever done anything wrong?"

"Have you forgotten how we met the spirit?" Velanna frowned. "He made every effort to kill us in the Fade, for the crime of trying to escape it."

"We were helping a demon," Anders said; the admission left a foul taste in his mouth for some reason.

"Exactly my point." Velanna said. "Justice has proven he does not understand the complexities of the world outside the Beyond. Who is to say he will not lash out at one of us if we do something that does not adhere to his warped sense of justice?"

"I am." Anders said. "Look, you never got to know him. He was learning."

"And now he is a part of you, and incapable of learning anything more." Velanna said. "Are you sure he learned enough that you would trust him with all the power you have gained?"

"Yes, okay?" Anders said. "Yes. I may not remember what happened with the darkspawn, but Nate said we didn't kill anyone. I'm not running around growing arms and lopping off any heads, am I?"
"Yet." Velanna said.

"Oh come off it." Anders said. "The only time I haven't really felt like myself since this happened is when I ran into an abomination that tried to kill me. And all I or Justice or we or whatever did when that happened was protect me."

"There was an abomination in the city?" Nathaniel asked.

"One sits before you now." Velanna said.

"Darrian." Anders said. "He was a Collective mage. He let in a Rage demon and it... overpowered him."

"As Justice might you." Velanna said. Anders scowled at her. "I am not being cruel; I am being cautious. Amell was the one who had experience with peaceful possession. The three... Or four of us do not know what we are dealing with here. This Wynne, is there anything about her in his grimoire?"

"I don't know." Anders said. "... Justice doesn't like touching it. Demons upset him. Which, you know, pretty big clue he's not one."

"Oh will you stop insisting on this ridiculous distinction between spirits and demons?" Velanna raised a frustrated hand to her brow, "There is no distinction. All spirits embody something, and all things to excess are dangerous, especially Justice."

"He's not dangerous," Anders said. "Okay? We're not dangerous. He's not even... It's not like he's just sitting in some corner of my mind waiting to take over. I mean sure I don't really feel... Whatever part of me is him very often, but that's still who he is. Who we are now.

"He was quiet, remember? He wasn't like me. He knew when to shut up and listen and he only said something when he had something to say. I still feel things, just walking around. Weird little thoughts about obligation and honor and that's it unless there's a threat because that's just who he is.

"I'm okay. I'm fine. Okay? Unless there's some swarm of darkspawn coming for us or something I don't think anything is going to happen."

"I agree with Anders." Nathaniel said. "But I also agree with Velanna. We should know more about this,

"I'll ask around." Anders said.

"And the templar?" Velanna asked. "You know he intends to bring us back to the Wardens."

"I could always poison him," Nathaniel offered.

Anders laughed. Velanna snorted.

"See you're joking but I'm on board with this," Anders said.

Nathaniel sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Maker, maybe I should. If we go back to the Wardens I don't know what will happen."

"We saved the city." Anders said.

"We saved a handful of civilians and guards," Nathaniel said realistically. "The city? I think it will take at least a year to undo all the damage, and that's assuming we have the resources to rebuild,
which we don't. Maybe if Amell were still in charge we could beg on other nations and the crown, but Leonie doesn't have that kind of influence.

"Castrating Gerod was what Leonie considered a mercy. We're deserters. By all rights we should hang. I don't know if what we achieved here will be enough to convince her otherwise. She wanted to burn the city down. She might have us imprisoned, or have the two of you sent to the Circle..."

"She might try," Velanna said.

Anders pointed at her in agreement. Velanna snorted, and grabbed his hand out of the air to squeeze it. Anders tugged her over to him and hugged her with one arm.

"... I never sang a song for her." Velanna said.

"Me neither," Anders said.

"... That's what funerals are for." Nathaniel said. "They're for us. Sigrun had hers when she joined the Legion."

They sat in a silence that didn't feel reverent. It just felt miserable. First Amell, now Sigrun, and when they went back to the Vigil probably all of them. Nathaniel found Anders' hand and squeezed it. Anders squeezed back.

"I need to go see to the wounded," Anders said eventually. He got down off the bar, and a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Barkspawn! Andraste's knickers, I forgot all about him. Is he alive?"

"He's fine." Nathaniel reassured him. "When you changed, he wouldn't go down the stairs and join the fighting. He stayed in the courtyard, and helped protect the archers from any darkspawn that climbed the hill to reach us. I think he's still there."

"Okay," Anders said. "Okay, good. What about Delilah? Did she make it to the Chantry?"

"She did," Nathaniel said. "And your cat, before you ask."

"Thanks," Anders laughed sheepishly, "Sorry. I really like that little shit."

"We feel the same way about you." Velanna teased.

"I'm glad you're alright, Anders," Nathaniel agreed. "You and Justice. I wasn't sure we'd ever see you again when you took off after the fight."

"Well... you know," Anders shrugged. "I'm glad we didn't go insane and kill everyone,"

"Yet." Velanna said.

"You know Oghren used to call you Bitch Tits, right?" Anders asked.

"His note for Satinalia just said Tits," Velanna said.

"It was hard to tell under all the grease," Nathaniel mused.

"Clearly my mood has lightened some." Velanna said.

"So this is Nice Velanna. Good to know." Anders said.

Velanna huffed and gave him a shove. Anders let the shove lead him into a step that led him into
another and the three of them left the inn. The guards resumed their post watching the Crown and Lion, and the three of them headed up the stairs to the Chantry.

Barkspawn was in the courtyard, lying next to the statue of Andraste. His ears perked up at their approach and he cocked his head at Anders.

"Hey mangy," Anders said, relieved to see the dog wasn't injured.

He hadn't taken two steps towards the mabari to scratch its ears when Barkspawn started growling at him.

"Um..." Anders said.

Barkspawn kept growling. The mabari jumped to its feet and snarled, hackles up. Anders took a step towards the Chantry, and the dog barked savagely, slathering all over itself. It tensed as if to lunge and Anders cast a frantic spell to put it to sleep. Barkspawn collapsed, unconscious.

"... I will watch the mutt," Velanna offered in the awkward aftermath. "Nathan, you should stay with Anders in case the templar tries something."

"... Yeah... thanks," Anders said.

Nathaniel gave Velanna's cheek a kiss and her arm a caress, "Come and find me if Aidan needs anything or another wave appears,"

"I will," Velanna said, shoving him off her.

Maybe Anders was a selfish bastard, but the sweet exchange hurt his heart to watch. He missed Amell, and all the little touches Anders had never appreciated until it was too late.

And now Amell's dog hated him, or whatever he'd become. How was Anders supposed to watch Barkspawn if the dog instinctively wanted to kill Anders for being an abomination? Barkspawn wasn't half as interested in any of the other Wardens. At best, Velanna could force him to sleep when he became too much trouble. At worst, Leonie would send him back to the kennels.

Anders tried not to think about it.

Anders went into the Chantry with Nathaniel. The sight he saw was more than justification for what they'd done. The Chantry was packed with men, women, and children. There were so many people crammed into the building they were sitting on the pews, and between them on the floor. There were at least a hundred that he could see, and they hadn't even gotten into the back of the Chantry where Anders imagined the injured were being kept.

Granted, many of them were the refugees Aidan had brought in from the fields, but Anders didn't doubt at least half were from the city. The sight of them was heartbreaking. Most of them were clutching one or two possessions saved from the horde or the fires. A painting. A favorite book. A dress. A few people had lutes, drawers of silverware or jewelry, knitting needles, and other miscellaneous trinkets or pieces of their livelihood.

There was even a chicken or two running through the Chantry, and at one point Anders saw a goat. All of the children had some kind of doll or toy, and Maker, there were so many. They ran to the end of the pews to stare up at the Wardens in awe as they walked by, gawking shamelessly like only children could.

"Where's Delilah?" Anders asked.
"In the back, with the injured." Nathaniel said.

"What?" Anders asked, "Why didn't you say something?"

"It's not serious." Nathaniel explained, "She broke her ankle in the run to the Chantry. One of the guards carried her the rest of the way, but he died in the fighting."


They reached the backrooms of the Chantry, normally reserved storage and homing sisters and chanter. They'd been converted into a makeshift infirmary. All of the doors were open, and men and women and even some children were laid out in the six rooms in the back. Rugs had been thrown down, cots pushed together, blankets and other linens collected to form some feeble kind of comfort.

Two Chantry sisters, the Revered Mother, and Ser Rylien and Rolan were seeing to the wounded as best they could. Their best seemed to be little more than offering water, prayers, and a tourniquet or two. The Revered Mother approached them when they stepped into the hall, "Warden, do you need something? I understand your concern for your sister, but we are crowded enough at it is. I promise to send for you if her condition worsens."

"My fellow Warden is a healer," Nathaniel explained.

"I see," The Revered Mother turned to look at Anders and her face pinched up into an ugly sneer when she noticed his staff. The condemnation in her eyes made Anders' shoulders tense and his eye twitched.

"Great!" Anders said brightly, "Good for you. Not everyone can do that, you know. You mind?" He shoved past her and into the first room without waiting for an answer.

It was full of children. Most of them were lying on the floor with their heads in their parent's laps. One or two were with what looked like older siblings. A few didn't have anyone at all.

"I'll wait in the hall and keep Rolan from bothering you," Nathaniel said.

"Alright, thanks," Anders said.

Anders decided to start with the children who didn't have anyone. He sat down next to a little boy with messy black hair and auburn eyes who might have been Amell a dozen years ago. The boy was missing his leg, beneath his knee, and a tourniquet had been tied for him.

One of the Chantry sisters was sitting with him. She looked up from the boy and took in Anders' staff and his Warden uniform, and had a completely different reaction than the Revered Mother had. "Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadows. In their blood the Maker's will is written." The woman said with a smile.

The irony of saying something like that to a maleficar made Anders grin. That was certainly one way to interpret that verse, "Thanks. I think-you're not a Chanter are you?"

"Speak only the Word; sing only the Chant. Then the Golden City is thine," The woman said.

Great.

"Alright, sure," Anders said, "Look, I need um... a lot of things. Bandages, bowls of clean water, poultices, salves... do you have anything like that left?"
The woman gave him a sad smile. Anders supposed that was better than another verse. Anders sighed and got up to lean outside the door to the room. "Nate,"

"Yes?" Nathaniel asked.

"I need a bone-saw, and a rasp," Anders said. "Can you try to find both for me?"

"Alright. I'll see what I can do," Nathaniel said.

Anders went back inside to see to a girl with a broken arm and a boy with a concussion in the mean time, considering he couldn't amputate the boy's leg properly without a bone-saw. Both of the children would have required he summon Compassion in the past, but Justice had given him so much more potential. Anders inhaled mana and exhaled magic.

Even when it took a concentrated amount of focus, the energy Anders used for his spells came from within, like the Fade was a part of himself that he could draw on as easily as his own blood. It wasn't until Anders was halfway through the room he realized it wasn't his energy. He was pulling on Justice. Anders stopped in the middle of healing a girl with a torn ligament behind her knee and stared down at his hands.

Justice was a stronger spirit than Compassion. Of course healing was easier for Anders now. But he didn't want to pull on Justice. He wanted Compassion, whether or not that meant slow going with his spells. Anders tried to reach for her, across the Veil, but he couldn't feel her past the spirit inside him. Justice was blinding. Justice was overwhelming, so intertwined with Anders and his magic he couldn't feel anything else.

"Warden?" The mother of the girl he was healing prompted him. "Is my daughter going to be alright?"

"Sorry," Anders shook himself. Later. He'd deal with it later. That was what he always did. "She'll be fine," Anders went back to healing the girl, wondering when he'd need a lyrium potion. Maybe he never would. How strong of a connection to the Fade had Justice given him?

Nathaniel came back when Anders had finished with every child except the Amell-boy in the room. The children with guardians had left with them, but there were three without who hovered around the Chanter. Somehow, Nathaniel had found a saw and a rasp for him. Anders guessed the tools had come from the refugees, and went back to sit beside the little boy who looked like a young version of Amell. The Chanter was still sitting with him.

The boy looked at the saw with wide, terrified eyes and whined, fearful tears streaming down his face. The Chanter brushed them away, and whispered, "Though darkness comes upon me, I shall embrace the light. I shall weather the storm. I shall endure. What You have created, no one can tear asunder."

"Hey, I'm Anders," Anders set the tools off to the side to talk to the boy. "What's your name?"

"Austen," The boy said nervously.

Fuck.

The Maker sure had a sense of humor. Anders swallowed past a lump in his throat and smiled, "Look, I know this looks scary, but it's not. You've already been through the worst of it. I'm going to help you fall asleep, and when you wake up your leg will be all better, alright?"

"Really?" Austen asked, "I get my foot back?"
"... No, but it will be alright," Anders said.

Austen was a lot better at dealing with his injury than Fausten had been. The boy nodded bravely and Anders cast a spell that put him to sleep. Anders looked at the Chanter afterwards, "Can you take the kids out? They're probably not going to want to watch this."

The Chantry sister nodded. She was wearing your typical sunburst chantry robes, nothing special. She had a plain face, with plain black hair, and plain brown eyes, but she gave him a sweet smile when she stood, "Let Him take notice and shine upon thee, for thou has done His work on this day. And the stars stood still, the winds did quiet, and all animals of earth and air held their breath. And all was silent in prayer and thanks."

Anders couldn't help a chuckle. He reached to rub away a flush creeping up his neck, "Thanks. I um... that's nice to hear. Don't normally get that from the Chantry. You sure it's okay for you to be nice to a mage?"

"Though the lands suffer a thousand wrongs, the Maker yet notices the smallest of deeds," The sister said.

Guessing none of the kids spoke the Chant of Light, Anders looked at the little group of three and said, "You guys need to go with her now, alright?"

One of them was a boy of about five, with bright red hair and a face full of freckles. He'd had a broken rib and a contusion that had him crying relentlessly until Anders had healed him. The boy ran over and hugged him. Anders gave the boy's shoulder a squeeze, and bit back a wistful sigh.

No one was ever born hating magic.

The Chanter ushered the children out, babbling verses from the Chant. Anders re-tied the unconscious boy's tourniquet to a knot that would hold through the surgery, and sawed away the jagged ends of the bone that jutted out from lower half of the boy's leg.

The sound was always the worst. The steady grate of metal teeth sawing through bone made a scissoring noise, as it might with wood, only sharper. It wasn't something children would want to hear. Bone dust littered the ground beneath the boy when Anders finished, and he cut away the excess muscles with his knife to better shape the end of the limb.

Justice's energy made it possible for Anders to seal the wound shut, without having stitch it closed and let it heal it naturally. It was also the first thing that finally felt like a drain on his strength, and Anders was a little relieved to realize the potential Justice had given him wasn't limitless after all.

The rug the boy was lying on was a mess when Anders was finished. Bone dust, blood, and chunks of muscle and skin lay at his feet, and his hands were completely red. Bits from the surgery were caught under his nails, and he wiped them off on his trousers as best he was able. The boy's leg would be an aching mess of pain for a few weeks, but it was better than what it was. Anders untied the tourniquet and picked up his tools, and left the boy sleeping for now.

It was the only room in the back with children, mercifully, and Anders got through another dozen patients including Delilah before he finally tired. He was sitting with Nate in the hall, not really talking, when Rolan and Rylie left one of the backrooms, carrying bowls filled with bloody water. Rolan looked at him, and Anders was almost surprised to note he didn't sneer. Instead Rolan gave him a nod and said, "Mage,"

"Templar." Anders said.
Rolan and Rylien left the hall. Anders guessed that was probably the most civil conversation they were ever going to have.

"That's something, I guess," Nathaniel said. "If Leonie had something planned for us I think he might be a little more..."

"Of a smug asshole?" Anders guessed.

"Yes." Nathaniel said. "Do you need any lyrium? As much as I hate to say it, I think they might be our best options if we're going to find any."

"I'm not begging anything from a templar." Anders said.

"I'll ask for you," Nathaniel said.

Rolan and Rylien came back a short while later, carrying new bowls with new water.

"Rolan," Nathaniel said, shoving himself up off the floor to cut the two templars off, "Do you have any lyrium potions you could spare?"

"Not that I know of, Warden," Rylien answered instead. "The warehouse was raided, several months back. We've only the lyrium for ourselves, and it's not prepared for drinking."

"Thank you anyway," Nathaniel said.

"Thank you, for helping the city." Rylien said, and looked down at Anders. The Silver Sword of Mercy on her and Rolan's breasts made Anders irrationally angry, no matter how civil the conversation. Then again, what was irrational about being angry over a symbol of oppression that had haunted you your entire life? "And thank you, Ser Mage, for helping with the wounded."

"If you've expended the last of your mana, I need a word," Rolan whined in that nasally voice of his.

"Knickerweasels?" Anders supplied.

"Very funny," Rolan scowled, and looked like himself again. "This is serious,"

"Fine." Anders climbed to his feet.

"Anders..." Nathaniel started.

"Well come with me, then," Anders said.

Nathaniel accepted the compromise, and Rolan seemed to accept it as well. They went into the room with the sleeping child to talk. "I'm told you held back the horde alone." Rolan said. "How?"

"Magic, obviously," Anders said.

"One mage doesn't have that kind of power, maleficar or not." Rolan said.

"I'm special." Anders said.

Rolan glared at him. There was just something ugly about him. He wasn't a terrible unattractive man. He kept his hair slicked back, and he never had helmet hair as a result. His nose was rather ordinary, and his complexion was clear for the most part, if a little shiny. His eyes were a deep green, and while he never smiled his jowls hadn't been destroyed the way Loghain's had, but there was just something ugly about him.
"That all?" Anders asked.

"What did you do?" Rolan asked. "I've spoken to the soldiers. To the survivors. I know you bled many of them, but even with a limitless supply of blood two maleficars would have been overwhelmed by the horde. No demons were summoned, that anyone has mentioned, and I sincerely doubt you managed to convince hundreds of people to lie for you."

Anders spread his hands and shrugged.

"What happened to Justice?" Rolan asked.

"I told you, he died." Nathaniel said.

"I want to hear him say it." Rolan said.

"He's gone." Anders said. He didn't feel anything, saying it. It wasn't a lie. Justice was gone. Anders was gone. They were something more, now. "... we'll need to find his body for Aura."

"I did," Nathaniel said. "The darkspawn... tore off a few pieces. His arm and his head. We found the head, but not the arm."

"... At least Aura will be finally be able to have Kristoff's ashes." Anders said, not surprised by how much it meant to him. Aura had meant a lot to Justice. Her relationship with Kristoff left Justice craving the chance to experience love for himself, as himself. Anders stared down at his hands and felt wretched. He'd never have that chance now.

"What did you do, mage?" Rolan demanded.

"What the fuck do you want from me, Rolan?" Anders snapped.

"I want to know how a mage of no remarkable strength nor talent whose primary focus is and always has been creationism manage to stem the tide of a horde of darkspawn with nothing but a few pathetic militiamen and one maleficar to aid him!" Rolan said. "I can only imagine it was something unholy; there were rumors about the late Commander Amell.""

"Don't you bring him into this!" Anders shouted, "Don't you even say his name! You hear me?"

"Or what?" Rolan asked. "How else would one mage stand against an Archdemon and live were he not a maleficar? What did he teach you? What did you do?"

"Fuck you Rolan," Anders said. This was a mistake. There was nothing any templar had to say that was worth listening to. Anders started for the door when Rolan grabbed his arm. Anders whirled with the motion and slammed his fist into Rolan's face. The force of it knocked the templar back against the wall. Thanks for that, Justice.

Nathaniel grabbed Anders' arm and pressed a hand into his chest to hold him back. "Anders calm down."

Rolan must have bit his cheek. He spat out a mouthful of blood. Good. "How many people did you sacrifice for whatever unholy ritual you used, maleficar? What's in the tome?"

"Fuck you is in the tome." Anders said, wrenching his arm out of Nate's grasp to storm out of the room. Anders left the hall, and the Chantry altogether, and heard Nathaniel jogging after him. He shoved open the doors to the Chantry and stepped into the courtyard, and was greeted with a slathering, snarling Barkspawn.
"Go back to sleep!" Anders snapped, and cast a spell to force the dog to obey.

"What happened?" Velanna asked.

"Fuck all happened," Anders muttered, storming to the edge of the courtyard to lean over the banister and bury his hands in his hair. He pulled out his hair tie and gave the strands a therapeutic yank.

Velanna came to lean next to Anders on the banister. Nathaniel took a spot behind her and wrapped an arm around her waist. Anders looked at them and wondered how long that was going to last. Leonie had forbid relationships. Were they going to try to press their luck disobeying her after deserting? They already were, carrying on like this in front of Rolan.

"What are you two going to do?" Anders asked.

"What do you mean?" Nathaniel asked.

"I mean what are you going to do?" Anders asked. "About Leonie's rules?"

"Fuck her rules," Velanna said.

"That's what we're going to do," Nathaniel agreed.

Anders chuckled, and stared out at the city. The view from the Chantry was of the burnt down market, the ruined Crown and Lion, the blackened streets below and the bloodied ones far away. "What do I do about the dog?" Anders asked, "Someone's going to find out if he keeps acting like that around me. Rolan's not that stupid."

"... Maybe we could leave him with Delilah," Nathaniel suggested.

"A mabari that's not imprinted, when she's expecting?" Anders asked.

"I ... really don't know, Anders," Nathaniel said.

"... imprint on him." Velanna said.

"Mabari don't work like that," Nathaniel said. "Once they're imprinted, they're imprinted for life. He'll never answer to anyone but Amell."

"Won't he?" Velanna asked, rather ominously, Anders thought. "We are maleficarum. Can we not persuade him to accept Anders as he is now?"

"You want me to mind control the dog?" Anders asked.

"I am certainly suggesting it," Velanna said.

"I'm not taking Amell's dog," Anders said.

"You need not imprint on it, just persuade it that you are no threat," Velanna said. "You are the better at blood magic between us. I doubt the mind of a mongrel would be difficult for you to bend."

"He's not a mongrel," Anders said. Anders looked back at the unconscious dog, but he had to admit there was no taking Barkspawn with him now with the way the dog reacted to him. They had to do something, or leave him behind. "I shouldn't do it in front of everyone, but how are we going to move him?"

"Have I mentioned you are a fool?" Velanna asked. She walked over to the dog, who easily weighed
as much as a person, and with a bit of maneuvering slung the mabari over her shoulder. She turned on her heel and started for the stairs, showing as much strain as she would carrying a pillow.

"Does that turn you on at all?" Anders asked.

Nathaniel looked at him and frowned, and followed her.

"No answer means yes," Anders called after him before he followed him.

They took Barkspawn down the stairs and to the larder of the Crown and Lion. Velanna set the dog down on the floor, and roots ripped from beneath the floor boards to hold him to the ground. Nathaniel took up a watchful spot at the door and Anders reached for Amell's grimoire.

_Vengeance. Vengeance._ He snatched his hand snatched from the tome. His head ached. Anders pressed his fingers into his temple, "Stop it. Come on. We have to do this for Amell," Anders muttered, and wondered what he was even doing. He was the one who didn't want to touch the tome. Damn spirits and demons, there wasn't any distinction between him and Justice.

"If you cannot even convince him to do a simple task, how are you ever to control him when we are in the field?" Velanna demanded.

"It's not-ugh," Anders scrubbed his hand off on his trousers. There was still blood from the surgery under his finger nails. He thought anxiously of Compassion, and pushed the thought away. "It's not like that. I don't want to touch it. It freaks me out."

"It did not used to," Velanna said. "Clearly it is not you who is bothered by it, it is Justice."

"I am Justice," Anders snapped at her.

Velanna looked taken aback, and Anders tried to get a hold on himself. He took a deep breath and grabbed the tome again. _Vengeance. Vengeance._ "Shut up!" Anders yelled at the tome. He forced himself to keep a hold on it, and ripped it off his hip. The tome kept quiet, but Anders could still feel the demons that lay within.

They were fractured. Fragmented. In eternal agony, devoid of purpose, devoid of reason. He felt them writhing beneath his fingers as he turned the pages, silent but still pulling for him. They wanted out. They wanted out. They wanted out.

Anders inhaled sharply and tried to focus. He stopped at the page Amell had kept for persuasion, and looked at the spell Amell had known to permanently alter a person's perception. It was for a person, and not a mabari, but the dogs were smart. Anders didn't think it would be too different. He drew his dagger and cut above the bend in his elbow, an easy task considering Darrian had shredded much of his armor.

He drew from his heartbeat, and followed through Amell's instructions as he formed the spell between his fingers. It tugged at the core of a person, altering their sense of self to one that accepted whatever ideal the blood mage who cast the spell focused on. Anders didn't want the dog imprinted on him. He just wanted the dog to stay calm around him.

_Abominations are safe. Don't fight me._

It was a dog.

_My smell is safe. Don't fight whatever I smell like._
Anders dispelled the sleep hanging over Barkspawn. The dog woke with a yawn and a whine, and blinked up at him. Almost immediately, the mabari thrashed against the roots Velanna had restrained it with. It snarled viciously, teeth snapping against the floor, claws scrabbling trying to reach him.

Anders cast the spell.

Barkspawn whined. The haze of blood flowed from Anders to the mabari, and sank into its ears, into its eyes, its nose. The dog shrank back and flailed, thrashing his head madly from side to side. It whined, and whined, and dropped its head to the floor, smashing its paws over its muzzle and ears, and eventually lay on the ground, still and panting.

Anders took an uncertain step forward. Barkspawn's eyes flicked up at him, and the dog's nostrils flared. Anders knelt a cautious distance away, but Barkspawn didn't lunge at him. Anders held out a hand, a few inches from the dog's nose, and tensed to pull away in case the dog dove at him.

Barkspawn sniffed him. He whined again.

"... I think it worked," Anders said. He reached out to scratch the dog's ears, and the dog didn't fight him. "... Do you like me again?"

Barkspawn whined, but he didn't try to eat him. It was something.

"I think you can let go of him," Anders said.

The roots shrank back into the ground, one after the other. The mabari stayed where it was. Anders kept scratching Barkspawn's ears. The lifeward on its head had long since faded, as had the glyph of warding on its back. It had come out of the fight alive, and Anders hoped whatever he'd done hadn't left the dog irreparably damaged.

"Are we good?" Anders asked. "You want to get up now?" Anders leaned back on his heels. The dog didn't move. "... can you get up?"

Barkspawn got up on wobbly legs. The dog circled around him, head down; its eyes darted meekly between Anders and the floor.

That... was really not what Anders had been going for.

"Hey," Anders caught the dog's face in his hands. "Look. It's me. Remember? Amell said you had to be nice to me."

Barkspawn whined, and licked his face. Anders scratched between his ears.

"Clearly it is fine," Velanna said.

"Does this really look normal to you?" Anders demanded.

"It looks like he is not attacking you, and that was our goal." Velanna said.

"You're okay right?" Anders asked the dog, petting down its side. "The spell was just to help you learn, okay? You're not broken, are you?"

It wasn't as if Barkspawn could answer.
Surprise! It's a fast update! We blow the lid off this thing soon. Thank you all so much for your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 10 Cassus Afternoon
Vigil's Keep

It took them three days of patrols and excursions into the city to safely say that they had cleared out the last remnants of the darkspawn, but the people were unconvinced. Anders overheard unhappy murmurings that Leonie's decision to abandon the city was part of an Orlasian plot to retake Ferelden. He heard grumblings of malcontent that the Wardens were after more influence at court, and had tried to burn down the city to eliminate the trade competition against the Vigil.

He overheard people talking about him. Some of them the very same people Anders remembered healing. Some people called him a mage with enough strength to rival the Hero of Ferelden. Other people called him a monster. Some guessed him for a maleficar. Some even rightly assumed that he was an abomination. Anders tried not to let it get to him.

Constable Aidan distributed everything he could find to the refugees. He raided the templar warehouse, again, he raided all the taverns in the city, he raided known smuggler hide outs, he raided his own guardsmen's provisions. He was a good man, that Anders could tell, and he never questioned how Anders had managed to fight off so many darkspawn on his own.

They regained contact with the Bann, and learned that much of the city's nobility had survived by cowering in her estate. Anders was glad there hadn't been any more death, but it was hard to feel sympathetic to a handful of frumpy fops who had high walls and a whole host of guards to defend them, while the rest of the city had to make a mad dash for what little protection the Chantry afforded them.

For two days, Anders slept at night but didn't dream. He closed his eyes, and he opened them hours later with no memory of the in-between, and every time he thought anxiously of Compassion. On the third day Anders had nightmares of darkspawn, and woke feeling inexplicably unhappy until he remembered what Justice had told him or what he had told Anders once, in the Deep Roads.

Justice had claimed he would keep nightmares of darkspawn at bay given the opportunity. Anders supposed the spirit was upset it had failed to do so, and wished there was some way to talk to Justice. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't either of their faults. The nightmares were as much a part of them as they were of each other and there was no escaping them. Anders guessed he'd been right when he assumed not going to bed stressed was what held the nightmares back.

Barkspawn no longer made any effort to attack him, or even growl at him. Anders was relieved to see the mabari seemed to get better, after a few days. The dog no longer slunk everywhere, and for the most part it acted the way it always did: pissing on, and chewing and digging up everything. Anders might have been relieved, save for the fact that the dog acted different around him now. It was meek, and timid, and flinched if Anders moved too fast.
He tried not to.

Come the fourth day, the Chantry and everything around it was rank. It smelled like sweat and body odor, like piss and shit, like blood and rot, and every manner of filth imaginable. Anders himself smelled much the same. Between rooting out pockets of darkspawn, healing the injured, and searching the city for food, there wasn't any time to worry about bathing.

Taking out his hair tie had been a horrible idea. After being spoiled with regular baths, a buildup of oil had turned Anders' hair into a greasy, itchy mess. He spent most of his time with one hand to head, scratching at his scalp or his ever growing stubble. There still wasn't time to worry about his hygiene, when the first three days were up.

The darkspawn might have been gone, but the dead remained. The long and ugly process of cleaning up the city took them three more days. They set up mass pyres, outside the city, and dragged corpse after corpse out to meet them. They burned the darkspawn en masse with no ceremony, but the people were a little more complicated.

It wasn't just that they needed to stack the bodies on onto a pyre. They had to learn their names and tell their families. It wasn't easy. The arling of Amaranthine was home to at least twenty thousand people, and the City of Amaranthine home to over two thousand. They'd only managed to save a few hundred. It was worth doing, and Anders didn't regret it, but he regretted not saving more.

On the seventh day, a small entourage from Vigil's Keep arrived. There was a riot. The scouts saw the troops approach from the walls, and the news spread like wildfire. The survivors made a mad dash for the walls and the gates, and threw everything from sticks to rocks to what little food they had at the soldiers. Anders heard petite women and old men and even children scream and wail and wish death on the Vigil's soldiers for what they'd done.

They were right to be angry.

The Vigil's Soldiers had to stop outside the city gates for their own safety. Rolan went out to meet them, and came back to tell them that the Constable had killed the Mother, returned to the Vigil, and wanted to talk to all of them. Anders supposed 'talk' meant 'kill' in this case, but the three of them agreed that they didn't have anywhere else to go.

Anders never liked the thought of feeling trapped somewhere.

They went back to the Vigil with Rolan and the small group of soldiers, and Anders wondered the entire trip if they were walking to their deaths. All it took was a walk through the courtyard to realize the Vigil had faired exceptionally well, compared to the city. Amell had the army wearing silverite, he had the walls rebuilt from granite, he had lyrium bombs. Amell had turned the crumbling ruin into a fortress, and Leonie had still managed to get the Seneschal killed.

Anders thought of how in step Leonie was with Garavel, and wondered if she had even tried to save the poor old man who'd been so faithful to the Wardens. He wondered what would happen to the Vigil with the two ruthless warriors in charge. He wondered what would happen to them.

Leonie met with them in Amell's quarters. Anders looked at the Andrastian paraphernalia and the Orlesian decorations, and the woman who condemned thousands to die, and felt so furious he couldn't see straight. He walked into her quarters, Amell's quarters, and walked immediately back out. He pressed an arm against the cold stone wall in the hall and pressed his head against his arm, trying to calm down. Velanna rubbed his back, and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"You must calm yourself," Velanna hissed, "You are breaking. Your eyes glow."
"What do you think I'm trying to do?" Anders hissed back.

"You can do this," Velanna said. "You are stronger than Justice."

Anders turned his head to the side to glare at her, "I am Justice."

Velanna slapped him. "You are Anders. Get a hold of yourself."

For some reason, the slap didn't bother him. Anders took a deep breath, and dug his knuckles into his eyes. He inhaled, counted to three, and exhaled before he looked back at her, "Better?" Anders asked. He honestly couldn't tell.

"Barely." Velanna allotted, and gave his arm a tug. "Come. You need not listen to her. We will tell you what she had to say later."

Anders let her lead him back into Amell's quarters. Leonie was sitting in her armchair, facing the couch where Nathaniel sat waiting for them, and a fire was going. She had her arm in a sling, and Anders didn't feel any particular urge to heal her. He sat in the corner of the couch closest to the door, and gripped the armrest so hard his knuckles turned white. Velanna sat in the middle, between him and Nate. She looked Leonie dead in the eye and set her hand on Nathaniel's thigh.

"The three of you should know the darkspawn calling itself the Messenger led us to Drake's Fall, in the Dragonbone Wastes. We killed it, and the creature which calls itself 'The Mother,' but found no evidence of the one calling itself 'The Architect.'" Leonie said.

"With all due respect, Constable, why bother telling us?" Nathaniel asked. "Are the three of us not going to hang for treason?"

"No." Leonie said stiffly. "As I said, everyone is allotted one instance of forgiveness in Eram's memory. You deliberately disobeyed a command from your superior officer, and in my opinion such a thing is worthy of death, but I can respect your intent. More than that, I can respect the sacrifice made by your former comrades, Sigrun and Justice."

"I was a chevalier. I understand honor. Whatever my feelings, what you did was nothing if not that. You will not hang. I will take no action against the three of you, but the next time you think to disobey my orders, I won't have Jacen shoot you down. I will run you through myself. Are we clear?"

Velanna folded one leg over her knee and kept her hand firmly on Nathaniel's thigh. Anders kept his hand locked tight to the arm of the couch.

"... Again, with all due respect, Constable, no." Nathaniel said. "There are orders of yours I don't agree with and I have no intent to follow, regardless of the consequences."

"... I suspected this might be your answer," Leonie said. "Very well. I have spoken with Ser Tamara over the state of the arling and she and several others are of a mind that your presence will be invaluable in the coming months to placate the nobility who were loyal to your father. You will remain at the Vigil. Velanna will be transferred to Ansburg, in the Free Marches."

"Will she?" Velanna asked.

"She will." Leonie said. "Under force and under guard, if need be."

"You do not have the means to force me to do anything," Velanna said.
"This is meant as practicality, not punishment," Leonie said as if she hadn't heard her. "Nathaniel's actions at the Gates of Amaranthine are a perfect example of why romantic entanglements have no place in the Order. If not for his feelings for you, I have no doubt he would have deferred to my command. His desertion led to Anders’ desertion which led to Justice's desertion which ultimately culminated in Sigrun's death and the loss of siege equipment worth several hundred sovereigns."

"Amell was not half so blind and he had no eyes." Velanna said, "Open yours, you fool of a woman. What happened at Amaranthine was no one’s fault but yours."

"These are my orders." Leonie said.

"Dread Wolf take your orders," Velanna said.

"You can go willingly, or you can go with a host of templars escorting you." Leonie said.

Anders broke the arm of the chair. It snapped off under his hand, and splintered into his palm, and took his entire side of the couch with it. The couch lurched, and Velanna thudded into his side with a surprised grunt.

"I will not stand idly by and watch you commit these grievous injustices on my friends," Anders growled; his voice dropped several octaves without any intent on his part. Velanna smashed an arm into his chest, and Nathaniel jumped off the couch to stand in front of him.

"Anders, calm down," Nathaniel said. "We'll discuss it. We'll reason with her."

"She would give your lover to templars!" Anders raged, "She would condemn you for a feeling of such pure beauty it brings the soul to tears! She is not worthy of reason! She is not worthy of anything! She sentenced a city of innocents to death and it weighs not on her conscience! We should not have come back to this accursed place! We will only be ordered to commit more atrocities under her command!"

Velanna dragged him off the couch and manhandled him out the door. Nathaniel stayed behind, and Anders was dimly aware of Nathaniel talking to Leonie as Velanna forced him into the hall.

"Is Warden Anders alright...?" One of the guards outside Leonie's door asked nervously.

"Fine," Velanna snapped, an iron grip on his arm leading him down the hall and into an empty guest room, where Velanna slapped him. "Get a hold of yourself! You are angry, I am angry, we are all angry! That is no excuse for this!"

"It is every excuse!" Anders shouted. "I will not see you or any mage suffer at the hands of templars ever again! I will have her, I will have Rolan, I will have all of them before I allow it!"

Velanna curled her hands into fists, but instead of punching him she fell forward and dragged him into a hug. "You are the most idiotic, simple-minded spirit I have ever had the misfortune of meeting. You never should have left the Beyond. What do you care for the fate of a murderer?"

"Whatever your crimes, you atoned for them." Anders said, staring down at her. His anger faded, and he felt confused. It was a hug. He knew how to hug. Sigrun had taught him how to hug. A sudden migraine made Anders stumble, and he clutched his head while Velanna supported him. He inhaled mana, breathed out magic, and the headache was gone.

Velanna grabbed his shoulders and shoved him back. She looked up at him and frowned, and Anders winced preemptively and closed his eyes. He eased one eye open a few seconds later when the slap never came, and Velanna slapped him then. "Bloody really!?" Anders demanded.
"Do you truly still think you and Justice one and the same?" Velanna snapped at him. "Do you even remember what just happened?"

"Of course I remember, I was there!" Anders said, "I know what I said, and I'd say it again, and if it took Justice to give me the courage to say it then maybe he's one of the best damn things that ever happened to me!"

"He is going to get you killed!" Velanna said. "You cannot be angry! Not anymore! You are no longer human. When you are angry, it shows. It cracks through your skin and glows in your eyes and all will know you for an abomination and then we will lose you the way we lost Amell, and Sigrun, and Seranni, and Illshae, and I will not allow that!"

Velanna covered her mouth with her hand and bit back a sob. Tears started in the corners of her eyes and overflowed to spill down her cheeks and off her tattooed chin. Anders felt sick and queasy, and pulled her back into a hug. Velanna swatted angrily at him, and for the most part Anders ignored it.

"... we should leave," Anders said. "We should just leave, just go. The Collective could help us."

"Where would we go?" Velanna asked.

"I don't know." Anders said. "Anywhere but here."

"Nathan would never leave his sister," Velanna said. "I will not leave him."

"What if Leonie sends you to Ansburg?" Anders asked.

"I will not go." Velanna said. Anders pulled back from her and scrubbed at his face. Velanna did the same, and snarled under her breath, "This would never have happened if Amell were here."

"Yeah and if the sun never set it would never be night." Anders said.

"What on earth does that mean?" Velanna demanded.

"It means no shit." Anders said.

Velanna looked at him and frowned. "You cannot control it, can you?"

"... You've seen me play Wicked Grace," Anders said. "I've got so many emotions on my sleeve I can't keep any cards up there. But I mean... I don't think... I still don't think I'm going to hurt anyone. Back there... I just wanted us to leave. I didn't want to hurt her."

"You said you would kill anyone who tried to give me over to templars," Velanna said.

"Well yeah but templars aren't people. They don't count." Anders joked. Velanna scowled at him. "Well what do you want me to say!? Yes, I'd probably kill a templar if they tried anything, but so what? I can't kill someone in self-defense now?"

A knock on the door interrupted them. Nathaniel let himself in a few seconds later. "The guards said you two went in here. Is Anders-... not... um..."

"No more glowy," Anders said.

"Right," Nathaniel said. "Leonie said she would consider reconsidering."

"Bullshit." Anders said.
"Since when do you know blood magic?" Velanna asked.

"I don't know that it means anything. I got the impression she was only agreeing to give us time to grieve, before having you relocated." Nathaniel cracked his knuckles and leaned back against the door with a sigh. "She also... definitely noticed Anders' skin cracking and lighting on fire."

"So...?" Anders asked.

"She didn't say anything, really," Nathaniel said. "I don't think she cared, or even understood what it meant."

"Rolan will." Velanna said.

"Fuck Rolan," Anders said.

"Kill Leonie, Marry Justice?" Nathaniel guessed.

Anders snorted. Velanna giggled.

"... Do you want to hold the funeral now?" Nathaniel asked. "Before things get any worse?"

"Why not?" Anders shrugged, "I haven't cried enough today."

"How are we to bury her?" Velanna asked.

"A stone cairn would work," Nathaniel said, "Or... we could use the crypts, beneath the Vigil. They're Avvar, but a few of the sarcophagi are empty, and Sigrun told me that only nobles and Paragons are buried in crypts."

"Crypts," Anders said in time with Velanna. They smiled, but sadly.

"... I think we should tell some of the others," Nathaniel said. "Not Leonie or Rolan, obviously, but she got along with Stroud and Jacen."

They agreed, and the three of them went down to the barracks to find Stroud and Jacen. The Free-Marcher and the old Dalish both accepted their invitations. While they were there, they cleaned up Sigrun's bunk. They gathered all her trinkets and all her baubles and every little oddity she'd collected once she set foot on the surface.

The five of them went down to the crypts beneath the Vigil. They searched the walls for an empty sarcophagus, and Anders set the few pieces of metal from Sigrun's weapons and armor inside. He added her snow globe, the spyglass from Amell she'd loved so much, the few potted plants Velanna had helped her grow, the tiny toy chariot Nathaniel had painted for her and the little toy horse Oghren gave her to go with it.

He put in her favorite book, a painted skyball of polished black with a handful of constellations on it, the empty bottle of Aqua Magus she'd wanted because she thought the blue blown glass looked pretty. She had no jewelry, no pretty dress, no fancy headband: none of things Anders had seen her wear in the Fade but never thought to get her until just now.

"Anyone want to go first?" Anders asked.

"I don't know what to say," Nathaniel admitted. "They say the Maker didn't create dwarves, but I don't know any dwarven prayers."

"... If I may, Brothers and Sisters?" Stroud spoke up. "I have known a few dwarven Brothers and
"Sisters in my time, and I know the proper words for funeral rites."

"Please," Nathaniel said.

"Thank you." Velanna said.

Stroud cleared his throat, and took a spot next to the sarcophagus, "Atrast tunsha. Totarnia amgetol tavash aeduc."

"That's a mouthful," Anders said, "What's it mean?"

"I cannot say," Stroud admitted. "I only know the words."

"May I say something?" Jacen asked after a few moments of silence.

"No one else is," Anders said.

"I did not know the child long, but for one so young she was extraordinarily brave," Jacen said, "What happened at the shemlen city was a great tragedy. That she had the courage to give her life to stop it was one of the most noble things I have ever seen in my entire life, and I am very old."

Anders snorted, and gave the grey-haired Dalish a long look, remembering the orders Leonie had given him. "Back there. In Amaranthine. Did you miss on purpose, with me?"

"You deserved the chance to try, da'len." Jacen admitted. "... It would have been a terrible waste of life."

"... I want to sing a song for her." Velanna said.

Nathaniel squeezed her shoulders.

"Go ahead," Anders said.

Velanna took a spot by the sarcophagus and ran a hand over the stone lid. The song she sang was soft, and in Elvish, and it was anything but beautiful. Velanna's voice cracked, and she sang off key, and Anders didn't understand a word of it.

Sigrun would have loved it.

"What did that mean?" Nathaniel asked when she finished.

"It means she is gone, and we are not." Velanna said unhelpfully.

Nathaniel started talking, something about how Sigrun had always been fascinated with their religions and how he didn't think she would mind if they said a few prayers to their own gods for her. Anders didn't hear him. He heard the footsteps echoing through the crypt, and he saw Gerod in the doorway, and he saw red.

"You would dare!?" Anders raged, Velanna didn't bother holding him back. Anders stormed across the crypt and grabbed Gerod by his collar when the giant set foot in the crypt. He slammed Gerod back against the doorframe to the room, "You would dare walk on this hallowed ground and defame this holy ceremony and the reverence we bore for our Sister!? You are not welcome here! You will leave!"

"I will let him kill you," Velanna threatened Gerod from her spot by Sigrun's sarcophagus.
Gerod looked at him with tears streaming down his face. They meant nothing to Anders. "I just wanna leave her flowers. That's all. I just wanna leave her flowers, and I'll go."

"You will leave!" Anders ordered again, "Sigrun has no need of you!"

"Da'len, at least let him speak," Jacen urged.

Anders didn't know why he listened.

"I know what I did to her wasn't right," Gerod said. "I know I'm not right. I know. Kids fuck me up, but ever since the Constable cut my nuts off it ain't so bad. I don't want it so bad. Someone shoulda done it a long time ago. I just wanna leave her flowers. She weren't no kid. No kid's ever gonna do something like that."

Nathaniel appeared at Anders' side. Anders didn't feel the need to be surprised. Nathaniel took the sweaty mess of handpicked wildflowers with all their broken stems and missing petals out of Gerod's meaty hand. "Get out." Nathaniel said.

Anders let go. Gerod slunk out of the crypt. Nathaniel looked down at the flowers in his hand and flung them angrily against the wall after Gerod was gone. They scattered and ripped into pieces. "Fuck," Nathaniel muttered. "Where were we?"

"I believe you were suggesting we each say a prayer," Stroud said.

Nathaniel squeezed Anders' shoulder. "Come on, Anders."

Anders let Nathaniel urge him back towards the sarcophagus. Anders folded his arms over his chest and glared at the floor.

"Are you going to say that ridiculous prayer of yours?" Velanna asked.

"I had a different verse in mind, actually," Nathaniel said, "From the Canticle of Andraste. Let the blade pass through the flesh, let my blood touch the ground, let my cries touch their hearts. Let mine be the last sacrifice."

Stroud said his own verse. Jacen and Velanna said their own Dalish prayers. Anders didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. They spoke a bit of Sigrun, and eventually Stroud and Jacen left the three of them to mourn. Velanna and Nathaniel shed a few tears, but eventually they too left. Anders stood in the crypt alone, staring down at the sarcophagus that was far too big for the body that didn't fill it.

"If we weren't us I bet we'd be talking about the Maker right now, and whether or not dwarves go to his side," Anders said to himself. "... Sigrun went into the Fade. It's not like it's not possible."

There was no one to answer him.

Anders sighed and looked around the crypt. There were the Avvar sarcophagi, the ruined flowers Gerod had brought, the passageway that led deeper into the crypt and to the binding circle Amell had used ages ago to summon a demon. Amell had stepped into it in case he became an abomination. Anders remembered being so angry with him; at the time, he couldn't think of anything worse that could happen to a mage besides Tranquility.

Anders sat down on the stone floor and leaned back against Sigrun's sarcophagus with a sigh. "I don't even know any songs," Anders said to himself. "It's not like we ever had a reason to sing in the Circle. What was there to sing about? You get a handful of mages together and you start up a chant
and you're definitely going to bring the templars down on you."

Anders thudded his head against the tomb, trying to think. The only song that came to him wasn't even his.

"Somewhere there's a mother,  
Crying for her daughter.  
She's a legionaire,  
They sent her out to slaughter.  
But don't you cry for her,  
She don't need your sympathy.  
She's a legionaire,  
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a father,  
Crying for his son.  
His son's a legionaire,  
In a war that can't be won.  
But don't you cry for him,  
He don't need your sympathy.  
He's a legionaire,  
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a husband,  
Crying for his wife.  
His wife's a legionaire,  
And she's fighting for her life.  
But don't you cry for her,  
She don't need your sympathy.  
She's a legionaire,  
And that's the best that dust can be.

Somewhere there's a woman,  
Crying all alone.  
Her lover was a legionaire,  
And now he's lost to Stone.  
But don't you cry for him,  
He wouldn't want your sympathy.  
He died a legionaire,  
And that's the best that dust can be."

Anders sighed again and pulled his knees up to his chest and draped his arms around them. "... do you suppose that works?"

There was still no one to answer him.

"We really couldn't have picked a worse time to do this, huh?" Anders said to himself. "... everything upsets me lately. Gerod. Rolan. Leonie. Darrian... that poor kid and his foot... I guess it upsets you too, huh? Maker, I don't even know which one of us is talking anymore."

Anders got up eventually and left the crypt. He went to find Aura, and after a bit of asking got someone to point him towards the scullery. Aura was laundering clothes, and she stopped seeing him in the doorway. "Anders!" Aura said brightly, abandoning her workload to run over to him. "I'm so glad to see you safe! They-.... They are saying Kristoff died?"
"They are saying that." Anders agreed. "Could we talk? Maybe in the chapel?"

"It is crowded of late," Aura said. "Perhaps somewhere else? The servants' quarters are not terribly busy this time of day."

"Sure." Anders agreed, and let her lead him through the Vigil to the servants' quarters. They weren't much different from the Wardens' barracks. Rows of bunks were pushed up against the walls, with trunks at their feet and writing desks against the walls. The center of the room had the same few tables, and a door on either side of the room left to the servants' washrooms.

Aura led him to a bunk that must have been hers and sat perched on the edge of it. Anders sat down next to her.

"What happened?" Aura asked.

"A lot of darkspawn," Anders grinned weakly. "Justice made huge sacrifice for all of us and we won the fight, but he's... he's gone now."

"I am so sorry," Aura said, taking his hand and squeezing it. Her hand was soft, and the simple touch meant a startling amount to Anders. "I know he was a dear friend to you."

"Yeah, he really was." Anders said. "We managed to retrieve Kristoff's body when the fighting was over. We carted it back to the Vigil. It should still be in the courtyard waiting for you. I know you don't want to see him on a pyre, en masse with the rest of the soldiers. I can burn him for you, so you can have his ashes."

Aura sniffed once, and inhaled shakily. "That certainly is most kind of you. Thank you. Do you... know what happened to Justice? If he returned to the Fade, or to the Maker's side?"

"...I know he wouldn't want you to be sad for him," Anders said.

"I have never spoken to a spirit before." Aura admitted, "It was... distressing, but he was very kind about everything."

"Yeah, he really was." Anders said.

"It's silly, you know." Aura said, "That a spirit of Justice possessed him, of all things. He used to be a bounty hunter before the Wardens recruited him. He was always so ashamed of his past, and so proud of his life as a Warden. He thought it was a chance to redeem himself. He really believed in your Order."

"Justice told me," Anders said.

"Do you have anything I could use? For his ashes?" Aura asked. "An urn, or maybe a box?"

"Yeah," Anders said quickly, "I can find you something. Do you want to meet me in the courtyard?"

"Alright," Aura agreed. "And-Anders... thank you. For everything. You have been so very kind and forthright with me. I can see why a spirit of Justice would befriend you."

Anders cleared his throat and gave her a smile. He left the servants' quarters and went to his infirmary, where he found a metal jar he normally used to hold incense of awareness. He dumped out what was left of the incense in the grass outside the infirmary, and then froze, staring at the pile of dust and what he'd done.
How much had that cost?

Anders shoved the thought away. Justice for Kristoff and Aura was what it cost. Anders stuffed the jar under his arm, and went out to the outer courtyard. The cart was where it had been, pushed off to the side of the front gates with Kristoff’s body atop it. His head, still in its helmet, lulled down by his feet. It made Anders uncomfortable to look at. He felt like he was looking at his own corpse.

Aura joined him eventually, and Anders gave her an easy smile. "Did you want to have any kind of ceremony or anything?" Anders asked.

"Perhaps if you could say a prayer?" Aura asked.

"I uh-..." Anders rubbed at the back of his neck, "I don't have a lot of the Chant memorized."

"I can always have a service for him later." Aura said.

"Alright." Anders handed her the jar, and went picked up Kristoff under his arms. He dragged the headless corpse outside the Vigil's walls, and off to the side of the road before he went back for his head. The whole thing was unspeakably unsettling.

It wasn't him. It wasn't Anders, and it wasn't Justice. It was just a body. Anders set the corpse down, and inhaled mana to rip a chunk of earth from the ground and toss it aside. It was misshapen, and shallow, but it would fit a body. Anders set Kristoff in the small pit, and stepped back to stand off to the side with Aura.

Anders tried to think of what the Chanter had said to him. The prayers Nathaniel was always giving for the dead they stumbled across. Nothing came to him.

"You do not have to say anything," Aura assured him.

"Has anyone ever told you you're pretty perceptive?" Anders asked.

"Often, in fact," Aura smiled sadly.

"I just I think he deserves something." Anders said.

"He deserves to rest." Aura said.

Anders conjured fire between his fingers, and held it until he started to sweat. He cast the spell into the pit, and the flames devoured Kristoff.

Anders and Aura stood and watched.

"... Are you going to go back to Jader? With your sister?" Anders asked.

"I think so," Aura said. "There are too many unhappy memories here."

"Yeah," Anders said, "I know what you mean."
Champions of the Just

Chapter Notes

It is 3:30 AM and I have decided I am not going to space these chapters out you guys just get them all in one big burst. Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:31 Dragon 15 Cassus Evening
Vigil's Keep

Five days after they returned to the Vigil and Anders decided he couldn't stand it anymore. Every evening he went to sleep, and every night he failed to dream, and every morning he woke, and every day he lived without Compassion. She was his spirit. She was the reason anyone had ever called him a spirit healer, and the closest thing he had left to a mother. Her very essence came from the life they built together, and Anders couldn't stand not knowing what had become of her.

He knew how to reach her. Amell had a Harrowing ritual in his grimoire, and it could be tailored to a demon, or tailored to time. With a little bit of preparation, Anders could set up a ritual to send him into the Fade for half an hour to talk to Compassion. All it would take was a small silver bowl, and lyrium. The lyrium was the only thing Anders had a problem with.

It took a special ritual to prepare, and lyrium already prepared for drinking was no substitute. Anders needed the lyrium Amell had smuggled from Kal'Hirol, or the lyrium he had mined from the Wending Woods. Anders could get it from wherever Amell kept it, or he could beg it from Dworkin and hope the dwarf didn't tell anyone. Anders was never fond of begging.

Anders went to Nathaniel, and asked him for his help breaking into the Vigil's storage rooms so he could go through Amell's things. Unsurprisingly, Nathaniel agreed with little more than a shrug. Even more unsurprisingly, Velanna overheard them, considering she was sitting against Nathaniel's side when Anders' asked, and wanted to participate in anything that was even the slightest bit of defiance against Leonie.

They agreed to wait until nightfall, and went sneaking through the Vigil together. Anders rather loved it. He loved it even more when Barkspawn woke and followed him, and didn't seem quite as terrified as he had been for the past few days. Anders guessed it took time to adjust when a maleficar wrenched at the core of your being and completely redefined it.

The storerooms were beneath the Vigil, and Amell's things were kept under lock, key, and ward. Anders handled the wards, Nathaniel the lock and key, and Velanna kept watch. It took them around five minutes of fiddling, but they managed to break in, and Anders darted around Nathaniel to go through the crates and trunks stacked in the small room. He found a handful of things, and all of them upset him.

Books, tomes, an assortment of crests, stamps, and even a shield with Amell's house's heraldry that made Anders think Amell was a damn liar when he said keeping his family name was 'just a joke.' He found the box of letters, again, and Amell's journal. He grabbed the journal, intending to go through it to find out what Amell had done with the lyrium, when he heard the singing.
It was a beautiful sound. Anders followed it to another trunk, and the source proved to be a small chest of silver with liquid lyrium inside. Anders sat on his knees, enraptured. It wasn't like the Call from his nightmares, but it was still beautiful. Anders didn't think any sound he'd heard yet could compare to it. He wished very suddenly that Kristoff's body hadn't lost its arm, and he'd been able to keep the ring the Circle had given him. That he had given Justice.

"Anders?" Nathaniel prompted him. "We shouldn't linger."

"No-I... you're right." Anders closed the chest and stuffed it under his arm. He found the silver bowl Amell had used when they'd fought the Fear demon together, and took it with him. "I have everything." Anders said.

They left the storage room. Nathaniel locked the door behind them, and Anders warded it, and it was like they'd never been there. They fled the lower levels of the Keep and went to the cellars, where they'd agreed to have the ritual. They picked a spot in the crypt near Sigrun's sarcophagus, and Anders set up the ritual on the cold stone floor.

"Remind me again of your intent?" Velanna asked.

"I'm going to go into the Fade and talk to Compassion." Anders said.

"But what is the need?" Velanna demanded, "Justice is more than capable of providing you with the energy needed for your spells, and you tell me he handles your connection to the Fade now."

"Look, sure, Justice is great, but I've been a spirit healer since I was twelve, and that whole time the only spirit I used was Compassion." Anders explained, "I need to be sure that whatever I did, she's alright. Spirits are just a reflection the mortal world, and for fifteen years Compassion reflected me. I don't know if she can pull on anything else. I don't know what will happen to her now that I can't reach her."

"Your old spirit will find something else to reflect, I am sure." Velanna said.

"... I think maybe Anders is right to be concerned," Nathaniel said from where he was leaning against Sigrun's sarcophagus, Barkspawn resting under one arm. "There hasn't been a lot of Compassion at the Vigil lately."

Velanna made a disgusted noise, "It does not work like that. Place and time are nothing in the Beyond. Concepts and symbols are important, and spirits can find them anywhere so long as they exist somewhere in the mortal world. A spirit of Pride might draw from someone in Ferelden and someone in Nevarra, and never know the distance between them."

"You didn't know her," Anders said. "She was shy. She didn't go searching for anything to fulfill her purpose. I did it for her."

"She sounds weak." Velanna said.

"So what?" Anders asked.

Velanna didn't have a retort.

Anders went back to setting up the ritual. He cast a charm on the silver bowl to ensure it could hold the magic, and used the instructions in Amell's grimoire to cast the ritual he needed to tie the lyrium to his soul and his spirit. He took a seat next to the bowl of silver, and flexed his hands, thinking of the pain that always came with the ritual, "I'll wake up in a half hour."
"We will be here," Velanna said.

"Good luck, Anders," Nathaniel said.

Anders took a deep breath, and wished he was holding someone's hand. Amell, Justice, Compassion, anyone, but he was alone. He dunked his hand into the bowl, and the lyrium swept up his arm. It was as cold and dark as the Void, and it sank into his heart with all the pain of a blade. It felt like dying, as always, but Anders thought of what merging with Justice had felt like, and knew some pains were worse than death.

The stars stood still, his heart and lungs seemed to freeze.

All was black and silent.

Anders didn't know how much time passed; time was meaningless. Anders sat up through no will of his own, and ran his fingers through the reeds springing up from the ground around him. "... It is good to feel the breath of the Fade again," Anders said to himself.

He hadn't thought the words. He hadn't meant to say them. His body stood up of its own accord and looked up to the emerald sky, and he felt a little homesick, but with no real desire to return home. "Anders?" He said to himself, and looked around the Fade.

No answer. Anders looked down at his hands involuntarily and noted the blue flames cracking through his skin. "Ah yes... Of course... I had hoped it might be different here." Anders said quietly.

He flexed his fingers experimentally and finally realized what had happened. They were reversed in the Fade. Justice was dominant here. Anders felt like he was watching everything the spirit did and said from behind his own eyes. It was disorienting, but...

He didn't mind that much.

"... I miss talking to you." Justice said quietly. Anders still felt tangled in him; he'd thought the same thing. He felt things Justice felt in the real world. Said things Justice wanted to say. It would probably work the same way here.

It wasn't as if Anders wanted to do much more than make sure Compassion was alright. Justice looked around the Fade and the memories that littered it. He pulled the memory of a thick woolen scarf from air and pressed the soft fabric against his face.

"I like this scarf." They said.

"What are you seeking here?" Compassion appeared beside him to ask. "Can I help you? I do not often see visitors,"

Justice looked up at her. She still wore Amell's form, and spoke with his voice. Messy black hair was strewn about her head and fell into her eyes, gold as always, but flecked with red for Anders' sake. Anders felt relieved. She was whole and well and fine. "Compassion." Justice said, and smiled.

Compassion stared at him, saw through him, and let loose such a shriek it sent a sharp pain up Anders' spine, "What have you done!? What have you done to him, you wretched demon!?"

"I am no demon," Justice said. "I am-"

Compassion dove on him, screaming fury. Her hands lit on fire and she tore into Justice's chest, digging and clawing as if to rip out his heart. "Get out! Get out of him! You will not have him!"
Justice shoved her off and darted backwards, but they were in her demesne. A wall formed behind
him and he slammed into it trying to retreat. "I did nothing! He agreed!" Justice said.

"You lie!" Compassion shrieked.

No, no, no. Calm her down. Calm her down.

"Calm yourself!" Justice begged obediently. Thank the Maker. It worked. Their influence worked
both ways. Compassion flickered and vanished. She reappeared beside Justice to take a vicious
swipe at his face. Justice ducked and scrambled backwards. "Desist! Anders does not want this!"

"Get out! Get out of him!" Compassion screamed again. She flickered in and out of existence, and
pursued Justice relentlessly. She dove for his throat, his chest, her hands radiating fire and fury. Her
demesne reformed and reshaped itself around them, manifesting walls and spikes to cut off Justice's
retreat.

Justice was infinitely stronger. Anders didn't doubt he could have killed her if he made the effort, but
all he did was run and plead. "Compassion, calm yourself! Anders is fine! He is well! He was
willing!"

"You lie!" Compassion shrieked. Her eyes burned brighter, hotter. Amell's form started to burn
away, and her fingers bled slowly into claws.

"Cease this, I beg you!" Justice pleaded, dodging a chain of white lightning that seemed an extension
of Compassion's arm. "Look at what you are becoming! Anders does not want this for you!"

"If you will not release him I will kill you both and it will be a Mercy!" Compassion threatened, her
form falling apart with every hostile act she took. "I will not let him live as your prisoner, demon!"

This wasn't happening. Compassion didn't get angry. She didn't have outbursts. She was just
compassionate. He had to stop her. Anders had never even heard of demons of Mercy, but he could
see it happening in the claws shaping on the ends of her finger tips, in the fire burning in her eyes.
Justice was right. Demons were just corrupted spirits, and now it was happening to Anders' spirit.

They had to do something. Anders couldn't lose another person he loved.

"Stop!" Justice roared. He caught Compassion when next she dove for him, and pinned her to the
ground. "Look at yourself!" Justice ordered, grabbing Compassion's wrist and holding her clawed
hand in front of her face. "Do not give into this perversion! Anders loves you! No injustice has
befallen him! He made a willing sacrifice-" Justice fumbled.

Compassion. Appeal to Compassion, not Justice.

"A sacrifice to save hundreds!" Justice said at Anders' urging, "His aim was to help, as he would
help you now were he able. He is no prisoner. He is still here. He just cannot touch the Fade, as I
cannot touch the realm of mortals!"

"I do not believe you!" Compassion snarled, thrashing under him.

"You must!" Justice forced her back down. "I am Justice. I would not deceive you!"

"You possessed him!" Compassion screamed. "You possessed him! You possessed him!"

Anders let go of her shoulders to grab her face in his hands and kiss her. It was like kissing feathers,
or cotton, or clouds. He could barely feel it, and couldn't hang onto it for more than a moment, but
Compassion sobbed into his mouth. Justice let go of her. Compassion collapsed, weeping, and covered her face with her hands.

The claws seemed to recede, and the fire burning through her seemed to die down. Justice rolled off of her, and knelt unhappily beside her.

"Why?" Compassion struggled out.

"To save a city." Justice said.

"I cannot reach him," Compassion wept, "I cannot even feel him through you."

"Nor he you." Justice said. "Or I know he would call on you for his magic."

"Why would he do this?" Compassion asked, "We swore we would not be imprisoned ever again, and now you have made him a prisoner in his own skin."

"It is not so," Justice said. "He is himself, in the realm of mortals, as I am myself here. We are tangled tightly together, and it is... confusing, but we are no prisoners. I know that you have doubts, but when I speak it is as much with his voice as mine."

"It has been so quiet," Compassion said. She still hadn't moved from the ground, and lay with one arm over her chest. Justice reached out and took hold of it. "Is this you, or him?" Compassion asked.

"It is both of us," Justice said. "I feel his thoughts as my own, and I know you had a strong bond with him. I have done you a great disservice breaking it."

"... can you not let go of him?" Compassion asked.

"I cannot," Justice said. "I tried. When we first joined... I had never felt such completion. Anders is mana and magic, and the Fade seemed roar within him. I was at home, and yet I could still taste the mortal air, feel the caress of the cold winter wind on warm living skin, and it was nothing at all like the life I had lived in a dead man. I... I confess I lost myself to it for a time.

"Then I felt what I had done to him. Joining was effortless for me, but agony for him. The pain of it fractured his mind, and trying to reach him was like picking through pieces of broken glass. I fled the battle, and found a secluded place where I tried to let go of him. To return to the Fade, or to the air around me, or anything to free him. But a living host is far different from a dead one.

"Anders had been willing, and we were too tangled. I could not pull myself apart from him. It took me a day to find his memory of magic and learn to heal with it, so I could put his memories back together as best as I was able. Please believe me when I say I mean him no harm."

"Do you swear it?" Compassion asked.

"I aspire to Justice as much as you to do to Compassion," Justice said. "I would not lie to you."

"... I will never talk to him again, will I?" Compassion asked.

"I cannot say." Justice said. "I am sorry. I would let him if I understood how we speak through each other, but he feels quiet right now. Melancholic."

Compassion pulled a memory from the air around them, and Justice inhaled blood and magic and sweat. The scent meant very little to him and very much to Anders. Compassion might not even be able to continue existing without him, and she was still looking for ways to comfort him.
"He loves you very much," Justice said. "He wants you to find another to draw on."

"There is no one else," Compassion said.

"I can feel the magic that holds us here fading." Justice said. "... Anything you tell me you tell him."

Compassion sat up and crawled over to him. She climbed into Justice's lap and kissed him, and it tasted of light and warmth and feathers and finger tips. "Please take care of him for me."

The Fade fell away, and Anders woke up crying.

Anders rolled over and onto his ass, and sobbed into his hands. He could just imagine Velanna scoffing at him, and almost wished she'd slap him. Maker knew he needed it. He didn't want to think about what had just happened. He didn't want to think about anything. He grabbed hold of his collar and pulled it up around his face and wiped his face off on his tunic.

Anders wondered why Velanna and Nathaniel weren't saying anything. He cleared his throat and shoved his tunic back down and looked up.

Where was he?

Where were they?

Anders was still in the crypt, but he wasn't where he'd been. The room he was in was filled with statues of ancient Avvar warriors, glaring judgmentally down at where he sat in the very center of the room. Beside him was a golden celestial globe, and it rotated leisurely. The room was lit with the soft green glow of veilfire, and in front of him...

Anders looked up into the white griffon emblem of the Wardens on a plated chest piece. He looked up further still, into Rolan smiling face. The templar stood with one hand on his hip, leaning casually to one side. Beside him, the silver sword of mercy decorated Ser Rylien's armor. Eylon was there, leaning on his staff with his one good arm, and Cera as well. Four other templars Anders didn't recognize were with them.

Velanna, Nathaniel, and Barkspawn were nowhere that he could see.

"Well, well, look who's finally awake," Rolan said.

"Did I oversleep?" Anders joked, climbing slowly to his feet. He looked for his staff, but it was gone. He reached for his tome, but there was nothing at his hip.

"Missing a few things, are we?" Rolan mused.

"I'm sure they'll turn up," Anders said brightly. "If nothing else, I know Cera has a staff I can borrow."

"What are you waiting for, Rolan?" Eylon demanded. "Kill him."

"Not without proof." Ser Rylien said. "I will not consent."

"Step out of the circle, maleficar," Rolan ordered.

"What do you think I've been trying to do my whole life?" Anders joked.

"You still think this is a game," Rolan noted bemusedly. "You stand accused of consorting with demons. If you cannot leave the binding circle, you will be executed, and your fellow maleficar will
be made Tranquil for harboring an abomination. If you can step out from the binding circle beneath you, you will be released. We will return your things, and never speak of this again,"

"Return them?" Eylon demanded. "Just moving that tome into this room drove Ser Borris mad."

"... The tome we can burn." Rolan agreed.

One of the four templars held Amell's grimorie aloft. He had his sword stabbed through Ander's belt, which Anders apparently was not wearing, and the grimorie dangled off it. The templar gave his sword a shake and Amell's grimorie toppled onto the floor and landed on its spine, opening up to a random page.

"Eylon." Rolan invited the one-armed mage to destroy one of the only things Amell had treasured.

"No!" Anders screamed, and rushed forward. The binding circle flared beneath him, a shimmer of white light rippled out from where he'd connected with the invisible confines of his prison.

"I knew it," Rolan said, his nasally voice vibrating with smug satisfaction.

Ser Rylien made a quick gesture with her hand over her heart, "Maker have mercy. It looks so human."

"It's not," Rolan said, "Eylon, burn the tome. The rest of you, kill this creature."

Anders felt the magic gathered around Eylon, and slammed his shoulder into his barrier. The barrier flared a second time, and held a second time. Rolan raised his sword, and fire crashed down on Anders. Agony buckled his knees, and he fell. A second smite followed the first, followed by a third, and a fourth.

Anders screamed until all the breath left his lungs. Fire took its place, and the searing pain reminded Anders of merging with Justice and having his mind torn to pieces. He was burning from the inside out. From the outside in. It was scorching, caustic; he felt like his skin was being torn off in strips, his blood not boiled but turned to steam that rose into his every muscle. The pain of it gave him a seizure, and he blacked out.

That seemed a mercy, but it was a brief one. No sooner had his eyes closed, than they opened again. Anders lashed out the binding circle, again and again, and the runes fractured under his onslaught. Amell's tome was slowly burning, despite all its protective enchantments. The page it was open to blackened and crinkled, and the reservoir rune which held a demon broke.

Anders felt a sharp pain in his heart as the binding to him broke, and a miasma of shadow rose from the tome. The tome screamed. Agony and Anguish, Terror and Despair. Not the one, brief scream Anders had heard when he had first touched it, but a long and drawn out cry. One of the templars fell on his own sword to stop the sound. A wave of energy exploded from the tome, and the binding circle holding Anders broke.

Anders rushed Rolan. He lashed out, and the silverite of Rolan's armor exploded in a shower of molten metal. Anders grabbed Rolan's face in his hand, and pumped fire down his throat and into his lungs. The templar's flesh melted off onto Anders' hand, a warm sticky mess that gave way to bone. Anders charred the templar's skull until it turned to ash in his hand and there was nothing left for him to hold onto.

What was left of Rolan collapsed. Anders ran a bloody hand through his hair and cast wild eyes around the room. There was a sword in Anders' stomach. He hadn't noticed it. The blade stuck out the front of him, and he could feel the hilt pressed into his back as an afterthought. There was no pain
to it, and Anders reached behind his back to pull the sword out and drop it on the floor.

Anders could feel blood running down his legs, a distant warmth that didn't concern him. Eylon was floating. Shadow and fire poured out of his mouth, and Anders watched him swallow down a demon of Despair. The joining caused another explosion, and knocked Anders back into one of the Avvar statues. It fell over, and shattered the golden celestial orb rotating madly in the center of the room, trying to restore a circle Anders had already ruined.

Eylon screamed, a twisted scream of agony and ecstasy, and a new arm burst out from the stump at his shoulder in a shower of blood. The limb was thin and skinless and so long it hung down to his feet. Eylon lashed out with it, and plunged newly formed claws into Ser Rylien's throat. A blaze of white, righteous wrath crashed down from the ceiling as one of the surviving templars tried to smite Eylon. The abomination wailed, and a shock of lightning from Cera sent it fleeing from the crypt.

Anders chased it. Eylon ran out of the chamber and into the crypts, up into the dungeons. Other templars were there. Other soldiers from the Vigil. Other prisoners in their cells. A mabari was there as well, and it stared at the abomination curiously for a handful of seconds before a lash from Eylon's elongated hand killed it in an instant.

Anders dove on Eylon, and ripped into his back. His skin was like parchment beneath Anders' fingers, and he dug through flesh and muscle until his fingers hit bone and Eylon exploded with energy, throwing Anders backwards.

A soldier in silverite armor charged him. Anders lashed out, and the metal of his armor melted. It felt like warm wax against Anders' skin. The blood like a summer rain. Every bit of bone and flesh and muscle that gave before him was little more than a pinprick of feeling in a haze of fury. Anders sought out every Silver Sword of Mercy and burned it from every breast and tore through any formless shape or shadow that got in his way.

Anders sat on his knees in the courtyard when it was over, under a starless sky on a moonless night. He was clutching Amell's tome beneath his fingers, but he didn't remember picking it up. It was burnt and tattered like the sacrilegious scripture Amell had given him months ago, and just as precious. His hands were more than bloody, and they stained it.

Anders stared down at the tome in his hands, and looked around him. There were no bodies in the courtyard. Only pieces. A leg. A gauntlet. Half a head. Ash and char and gore and Maker it wasn't possible that all of them were templars. Anders stumbled to his feet and ran back into the cellars, down into the dungeons. "Velanna!" Anders yelled.

He tripped, on blood slick piece of bone, running down the stairs, and crashed down the last five steps. He lost his grip on Amell's tome and it went sliding through ankle high waters of blood and the voided bowels of dead men. Anders ran after it and snatched it back up, and ran to the dungeons. "Nate!" Anders yelled.

He made it to the dungeons. His staff was sitting on a table, beside the cells. Anders grabbed it. The cells were destroyed. The bars were bent inward and melted through. Anders couldn't tell if any of the pieces in the dungeon were Velanna or Nathaniel. The only corpse with any form left to it was Barkspawn.

Anders ran to the mabari and pulled for Justice, but nothing answered him. He was exhausted, and the dog was dead. Dead because it hadn't seen Eylon as a threat after what Anders had done to it. Anders stumbled backwards, and slipped in blood, and combed mindlessly through the mess of muscle, melted metal, and burnt leather for any piece that looked even remotely like Velanna or
Nathaniel.

There was nothing. It was too corrosive. Anders couldn't tell who or what any of the pieces had been. He ran back out of the dungeons, up into the cellars, and into the courtyard. "Velanna!? Nathaniel!?" Anders yelled. He summoned a ball of mage light and shot it off into the dark corners of the courtyard.

Nothing.

No one.

Anders ran into the inner courtyard and into the Keep. He went to the barracks, and for one ridiculous moment he thought he'd find his friends sitting at the table, playing cards or dice or draughts. Or lying in their bunks, fast asleep.

No one sat the table.

Their bunks were empty.

Anders stood in the center of the barracks, dripping blood. It was the only sound aside from Stroud's peaceful snoring.

Anders' heart fell into his stomach. He stumbled back out of the barracks and into the hallway. A passing night servant was carrying a handful of towels down the hall, and saw him. Her eyes widened and her pupils devoured whatever color her eyes had been. She dropped her load of towels and bolted back in the direction she'd come from.

Anders picked up a towel off the floor. His palm stained it red and black, when he pressed it to his face it came away soaking with blood. Anders ran a hand through his hair and his fingers brushed over chunks of flesh, ash, and metal shards. Anders exhaled shakily, and sank down to sit in the doorway to the Wardens' barracks. He ran his hands through his hair, and tried to pick through the memories of what had just happened.


Flashes of Sunbursts and Silver Swords of Mercy. White Griffins and Brown Bears and all manner of emblems and heraldry.

... How many people had been trying to kill him?

... How many people had he killed?

He tried to think of green eyes, of blonde hair, of pointed ears and tattoos like halla horns. He tried to think of grey eyes, of black hair, of a hooked nose and dark armor. Anders couldn't remember either of them. He thought of the cells and didn't remember melting the bars, but Velanna didn't have any sort of magic that powerful. It had to have been him.

Had he let them out?

Had he killed them?

Anders couldn't remember. He felt his heart beating against his ribcage like panicked hands on a cell door in a black room in Kinloch Hold, and burried his face in his knees. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think. His breath came in frantic, staccato gasps. Anders hugged himself, and his hands slipped over his shredded leather armor and blood-soaked brigandine shoulders. He tried to summon
Justice again and managed a faint pulse of healing magic.

It didn't feel like Compassion. It wasn't warm. It wasn't soothing. It was crisp, and clear, and firm, and it reminded him he couldn't just sit here, covered in filth and crying until more templars came. Anders stumbled to his feet and went back into the barracks. He stripped off his ruined leathers and changed into a uniform he hadn't torn to shreds, but left the tabard behind.

Anders put on more clothes over his armor, extra tunics, a second set of spaulders, feathered, and part of a Tevinter-style robe Amell had given him to replace the one he'd lost in Kal'Hirol. He wrapped two scarves around his neck; he put on a second set of gloves and a second set of socks, and grabbed his satchel and dumped out the supplies he usually kept in it.

He filled it with his books, his mother's pillow, his jewelry, and then without thinking about it ran to Justice's old bunk, and grabbed his books as well, and the playing cards Sigrun had given him. Anders grabbed the thirteen silvers he had to his name, and stuffed them into his left boot before running out of the barracks.

His first thought was to steal a horse from the stables, but the five that they had at the Vigil reared and whinnied and raged when he came near, beating against their stalls with their hooves at the scent of an abomination. Anders backed up from the stables, and the shouting started.

Anders drew his dagger, cut his palm, and picked a random horse.

Obey.

The horse quieted. Anders grabbed its reins and dragged it out of the stall, and saw the torches spilling out of the Keep and filling up the inner courtyard. He scrambled up onto the horse without bothering to saddle it.

Anders put his heels to the horse, and his back to the Keep.

Chapter End Notes

An optional **Apples and Apostates Chapter** that provides more insight into Rolan's character and why he joined the wardens.

A **fanwork** which is a song about the relationship between Anders and Compassion.
Hello everyone! I just want to take a minute to say that you guys are really what makes this story for me. I've had some of you wonderful, talented people create some amazing works of fan-art that have meant the world to me, and a great many more leave insightful, inspiring comments, and even more than that add this story as a quiet subscription, bookmark, or kudo, and every last one of you has gotten us to over 5,000 views, and that's just incredible to me. Thank you so much for reading, and hopefully enjoying, this story!

Welcome to Kirkwall, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:31 Dragon 15 Cassus; Well into the Night
The Pilgrim's Path

It started raining. Anders felt the first drop on his nose; the second landed in his eye. The third missed him and landed on the back of his blood-bound horse. Anders had reined it sloppily, and the ropes were sliding off the horse's head. He didn't need them, and when they unraveled Anders watched the horse trample over them as it galloped down the road.

The beast was bound. Anders didn't need reins, or any sort of riding experience. All he needed to do was hold on to the horse's neck and will it forward. The horse's spine knocked into him with every bounce, but Anders was only dimly aware of himself and any pain he felt.

He was more aware of the scratch of the horse's fur against his cheek. The sound of its hooves kicking up mud as the rain grew heavier, and turned to sleet and hail. The few chunks of ice that landed on his head, or caught in his scarves to melt against his neck. It was winter in Ferelden, and that meant rain and sleet more than it did snow. It was freezing, but Anders didn't feel terribly cold.

He didn't feel terribly anything.

Where was he going?

Away.

Away where?

Anders didn't know. The horse led him down the Pilgrim's Path towards Amaranthine, but Anders didn't know if that was where he wanted to go. The city lay in ruins. There were a handful of survivors scattered throughout the sprawling metropolis. There were no crowds for him to disappear in, and it was the first place anyone would look for him.

He couldn't go to Amaranthine, but where else was there for him?

Alim and Melissa had gone to West Hill, and were setting up a base of operation for the Collective there. Anders might have been able to join them, except Levyn was in West Hill. Anders had already killed Amell's dog. He wasn't going anywhere near Amell's best friend.
He shouldn't go anywhere near anyone. Anders thought of Velanna and Nathaniel and his stomach

did a turn. He didn't belong near people. He didn't belong anywhere.

Anders turned his face into the horse's neck. It was a living, breathing creature with a beating heart
pumping hot blood beneath its skin, but Anders might have been rubbing his face against a rug. He
couldn't feel any warmth. He couldn't feel anything but alone.

Anders didn't know how it was possible to feel alone. He was tangled up in another person's soul,
but it wasn't like Justice was sitting next to him. They weren't two people anymore. They couldn't
hold a conversation. They couldn't talk about what they'd done. What they were.

Hail pelted Anders. Ice filled up the hollow of his scarf and caught in the grooves of his clothes and
armor. His hair was soaked through, and it was numbingly cold, but at least it helped wash away the
last of the blood.

Anders felt like he should be crying, but what was the point? He didn't have enough tears. It was
better the sky wept for him. Or for Nathaniel and Velanna. Not for Anders. Anders didn't deserve it.

Maker, why did Eylon have to burn Amell's tome? Didn't they know the screams weren't just a
protective enchantment, and there were demons inside? Couldn't they feel them? Why couldn't Rolan
and the others have just killed him? That was their damned job, wasn't it? They were supposed to
keep people safe from monsters like Anders.

But they didn't. They didn't protect the weak. They didn't defeat the strong. They oppressed both and
helped neither and now they were dead. More than dead. Anders had torn them apart in a bloody
abattoir of rent limbs, melted skin, and bones not broken but crushed to dust. Justice had never been
that strong before. Anders had never been that strong before.

He wasn't a mage anymore. He was more than that. And he couldn't control it. Not enough to tell
friend from enemy and keep himself from killing the only two friends he had left.

Anders didn't know how many templars had been set against him, but there had been at least five,
and it hadn't mattered at all. Someone had plunged a sword straight through him, and Anders had
pulled it out like a splinter.

Anders had to stop Darrian's heart with blood magic to kill him. A templar had to cut Eylon's head
off after Anders had practically burrowed into his ribcage like some kind of wild animal or parasite.
If a host of templars couldn't kill Anders what could?

... Anders could kill Anders.

It wasn't a new thought.

Anders thought it every time the templars ever caught up to him. He thought it in solitary. He thought
it when Amell left, when his mother died, when Sigrun did. He thought it when he looked out at the
horde and took Justice's hand, with no idea of what would happen to him.

He should have thought of the consequences, but Anders never thought of the consequences. Not
when he came back to the Vigil after Amell let him go, not when he trusted Namaya, not when he
used blood magic on Amell's dog, not when he took Justice's hand and changed their lives forever.

The horse reached Amaranthine as the sun was cresting the horizon. Anders willed it to stop, and
pushed his sopping hair out of his eyes. He looked to the dilapidated farmhouses, and the high walls,
and wondered where he could go. The Wardens wouldn't protect him now. The Wardens wanted
him dead, like the templars wanted him dead. Anders had never destroyed his phylactery. There was
nowhere he could hide.

He couldn't stay in Ferelden. Maybe Solona would be able to help him, but he shouldn't just ride in through the front gates. Someone would come searching for him, after what he'd done. There was no reason to make it easy for them. Anders urged the horse off the road, and through the farmhouses outside the city walls.

The houses were all dark. The muddy side roads were deserted. The only sound was the steady patter of hail hitting thatch roofs and cobblestone and clay shingles. Anders slid off his horse when he found the house with the broken Circle carved into the door frame. His boots hit mud, and he sank several inches.

For one powerful moment, Anders wanted to collapse. To let his knees hit the ground, and dig the heels of his palms into his eyes, and scream his throat raw, and let the hail pelt him into nonexistence. Let him stay where he was. Let the templars or the Wardens or anyone come find him and let them put an end to his miserable monstrous existence of running and running and running.

He didn't.

Anders didn't know what to do with the horse. It stood next to him, mindless and bound and probably just as irrevocably broken as Barkspawn. He let go of the spell, and the horse gave its head a violent shake. Its nostrils flared, and it looked at Anders, and its pupils grew alarmingly large. The beast whinnied and reared in a panic, and its hooves slipped in the mud.

The horse fell over. It thrashed madly on its side, spraying Anders with freezing mud before it righted itself and bolted off into the night. Anders watched it go. It was a good thing Leonie had made him get rid of Ser Pounce-a-Lot. Anders didn't want to picture the little tabby with its hackles up, hissing in fear any time Anders came near it.

Anders went to the shed of the abandoned house and opened it. The trapdoor was there, under a bag of feed that had been ripped open and spilled across the floor of the shed. Rain slipped in through the crafts in the shed and made sludge of it. Anders stepped through the mess and opened the trap door. It opened up into darkness. He needed a torch.

Anders first thought was to summon a wisp to hold onto a simple incantation for light. Before he'd finished the thought, his hand lit with fire born from the Veil. The soft green glow looked like the sky in the Fade and reminded Anders of home. Anders hadn't had a home since he was twelve. He shouldn't have known the feeling, but it was there, in the magic: comforting, soothing.

"... Thanks, Justice." Anders said to himself.

Anders climbed down into the tunnel. The soft glow of veillfire illuminated the passageway, and all the darkspawn bodies no one had cleared out. Anders picked his way over hurlocks and genlock, over shrieks and children. The tunnel led to a small underground cavern, where the Waking Sea had an inlet beneath the city. A small dock had been built, and the Collective had shared it with the smugglers in Amaranthine to get mages in and out of the city.

There was a small paddle boat docked. Anders stopped for a piss and stared at it. He doubted he could sail to Llomerryn in it. Anders shook himself off and followed the passageway the rest of the way to the Crown and Lion. He crawled out into the ruined tavern, half expecting to be greeted with a dozen templars or guardsmen. It was deserted, and Anders went through to check out the back door. The streets were empty, and Anders jogged to the docks.

There were a few people at the docks who'd risen with the sun. Sailors and a guard patrol, and one
or two survivors. A few boats were docked at the few surviving piers. Relief in from Denerim or elsewhere if Anders had to guess. Or maybe just merchants who hadn't heard the news, or ship captains who had and guessed there was coin to be made helping refugees leave the city. Anders hoped it was the latter. Maybe he could book passage somewhere.

... With thirteen silvers.

Maybe the Collective would spot him.

Anders went to the Pilgrim's Rest and let himself inside. The torn up floor boards had been pulled out, but not replaced. The Pilgrim's Rest sat on an uneven foundation, and the missing floor boards revealed the blackened crawl space beneath the tavern. Anders watched his steps over the wavy floor boards on his way to the back of the empty inn. He checked the kitchens, and found Natia struggling to light a fire in the hearth.

"I can get that," Anders offered.

Natia stood up, and brushed her wrinkled hands off on her apron. "I imagine you can."

Anders lit the hearth with an easy fire spell.

"Shame the Maker didn't think I was worthy of that little gift," Natia mused, "You want me to wake Solona for you?"

"That'd be great, Natia, thanks," Anders said.

"Watch the fire, will you?" The portly old woman toddled out of the kitchen.

Anders sat down at the prepping table. Natia had a few eggs, milk, butter, and flour set out. There was a bowl of blueberries as well. Anders stared at the fire and ate a few blueberries without tasting them while he waited, humming tunelessly to keep himself from thinking.

Natia came back with Solona a short while later, and swatted him away from the blueberries. She set about to making breakfast, while his fellow mage-

Anders wasn't a mage anymore. Solona sat next to him at the table. She was still dressed in her night-frock, and rubbed sleep from her eyes while stifling a yawn. She looked to him, and took in the assortment of clothes he was buried under.

"Cold out?" Solona asked cautiously.

"Freezing," Anders said.

Solona surveyed his four layers of clothes, his wet hair, his bloated satchel. Her face twisted in sympathy, and she said, "... I know a runner when I see one. How soon do you need to leave?"

"Now," Anders said.

"I can't," Solona tapped her fingers on the table, and shifted anxiously, "I've only got one boat leaving the city, and even if I could get you on it, it's not going anywhere you want to be,"

"Where I want to be is anywhere but here," Anders said.

"It's going to Kirkwall," Solona said. "You don't know how bad it is there, Anders. There was an influx of mages after the Starkhaven Circle burned down, and Kirkwall's Circle is overcrowded. The templars are cracking down more than ever: locking up mages just so they don't have to deal with
them. I haven't heard from Thekla in almost a month."

"All the more reason to go, then," Anders said. "Someone should make sure Karl's alright, and as it turns out I'm someone,"

"Anders..." Solona sighed, and ran her hands through her hair. "I want to help you. I really do. I've got another mage who wants out of Amaranthine, but the captain wants five sovereigns for any mage he takes, and I just don't have that kind of coin. I can set you up here for a few days, and we can wait for another boat. One going to Rivain, or Antiva."

"I don't have a few days," Anders said. "People are going to come looking for me,"

Solona spread her hands and gave him an unhappy look.

Anders chewed on the inside of his cheek, thinking. He swung his satchel into his lap and dug through it for a few rings and bracelets, "Do you think he'll take five sovereigns in jewelry?"

"...I think we can ask," Solona allotted. "Give me a few minutes to change and I'll take you to him. They're due to ship out sometime this morning."

"Thanks," Anders said.

"No thanks," Solona said quickly, and squeezed his forearm. Anders couldn't feel it through how many layers he was wearing. "We shouldn't have to give thanks. It shouldn't be a favor to be free."

Solona left him at the kitchen table, and hurried off to change. Anders stared at the knots in the table, and traced over a few with his fingers. A plate slammed down in front of him, and Anders blinked up at Natia.

"You don't have a canteen," Natia said.

"...I don't have a what?" Anders asked.

"You kids," Natia shook her head, "You never think when you have to run. You grab the jewelry, the keepsakes, every little thing you're afraid to lose, but don't need. You need clean water, food, and a way to cook it."

Natia left him at the table and rummaged through one of the cupboards. She pulled out a leather satchel, and threw it on the table next to the plate she'd set out in front of him. Natia grabbed one of the straps to the satchel, "Leather, good and sturdy, waxed so it doesn't soak through. You got that right at least," Natia flipped open the satchel and pulled out a metal pot with a stand and a canteen. The metal pot was filled with hardtack and jerky. "I make these kits for the kids. There's enough food to last you a week, if you do a meal a day."

"You know I can conjure water, right?" Anders asked.

"And drink it out of your hands?" Natia smacked the back of his head. The slap reminded Anders of Velanna, and at first he grinned, until he remembered he'd probably killed her. "Stay for breakfast. I'll make you some pancakes before you go."

"You don't have to do that," Anders said.

"I swear, every mage," Natia rolled her eyes, and went back to squat beside the hearth. "'You don't have to do that' 'I don't need anything' 'You don't owe me anything.' You spend your lives being told you're nothing, so you think that's what you're worth. Well let me tell you something: the Maker
wouldn't have made you a mage if that wasn't what He wanted you to be. Who are we to question His will?"

"Why do you care?" Anders asked. "You're not a mage. Why are you sticking your neck out like this?"

"My boy was one," Natia said. "I kept him from the Circle for eighteen years, and then one day... well, you know how it goes. I didn't see him again for three years, and when I did... They made him Tranquil, and forced him to work as a proprietor for one of their shops in Gwaren. What the Chantry does to them... it's worse than slave labor. My boy died the day that brand touched his forehead. I made sure the Chantry couldn't keep desecrating his corpse. That's why I care."

"I'm sorry," Anders said.

Natia stood up, and dumped a pancake off her skillet and onto his plate. "You don't need to be sorry. You just need to live. Eat your pancake."

Anders ate his pancake.

Solona came back dressed, and Anders slung his second satchel over his other shoulder. He thanked Natia again, and left the inn with Solona. One of the few surviving piers had a ship docked, with the name Pride of Amaranthine painted in faded lettering across the side. A few sailors were rolling barrels up the plank and onto the deck. Solona jogged up to talk to the captain, while Anders took the steps at a crawl.

Solona was already at the stern when Anders got on deck, talking to a heavy set man with no shirt, windswept hair and mutton chops. She was gesturing emphatically, but whatever she was saying it apparently wasn't enough to erase the frown on the captain's face. He looked to Anders and his frown deepened. Anders headed over, and the man started down the steps to the deck. "Nice to-"

"My cabin," The captain interrupted him. "Let's see what you got."

"Well at least buy me dinner first," Anders joked.

No one laughed. Anders followed the captain and Solona to the captain's cabin. It was something less than lavish; a bolted down bed and a writing desk took up one side of the room, an armoire, a low table, and couch took up the other. The captain cleared a space on his writing desk. "Ante up." He said.

Anders dug into his satchel, and tried to decide what he could stand to lose. He pulled out the things he'd bought for himself: a set of golden bangles. His old brass earring. A silver bracelet. A few toe rings. An enameled brooch. Ferrenly's necklace. He doubted he could convince the captain the small pile added up to five sovereigns, but he tried anyway, "The necklace is dwarven made, and it's enchanted. It's worth three sovereigns on its own."

The captain squinted at him, and glanced between him and the pile. "Not gonna cut it."

"You think I can pay tolls and docking fees with jewelry?" The captain demanded, "I'll have to pawn all this shit, and there's no way I'm getting three sovereigns from any of my vendors for a beat up old fox pendant. Throw in that earring and those bracers you're wearing and we'll call it good."

The earring was from Sigrun. Anders was probably going to die wearing it. The bracers had been for
his name-day, and Anders had only accepted them after he’d forgiven Amell for using blood magic on him. A vivid memory of Amell having sex with him while Anders wore the bracers and only the bracers came to mind. Anders clamped a hand over one, "No."

"Then get off my boat," The captain said.

"Wait, okay-" Anders fished through his satchel, and found a handful of gifts that weren't quite as important to him. The gold earring with emerald studs. The ring to his enchanted set, considering he’d lost the other one. "The ring is enchanted too. It's worth two sovereigns, easy. All of this is worth way more than five sovereigns."

The captain picked up the brooch and scratched at the enamel on it with his thumb nail.

"Okay, well not if you ruin it," Anders frowned.

"Fine." The captain said. "Below deck, with the rest of the refugees. We cast off in half an hour."

Anders left the captain's cabin with Solona. She gave him a wan smile, "I'm sorry you had to do that... I know how much my first necklace meant to me."

"Whatever," Anders said. "Thanks for getting me on the boat."

Solona grabbed his hands and gave them a squeeze, "Write when you get to Kirkwall."

"You got it," Anders said.

Solona let go of his hands and nodded. "Take care of yourself, Anders,"

Anders managed a pained grin. Solona walked down the plank, and Anders headed to the stairs that led below deck. The hold was packed with refugees. Men, women, and children who wanted out and away from the devastation the darkspawn had wrought on Amaranthine. Anders rolled his fingers over his staff, and walked a few feet through the hold. There wasn't any place for him to sit.

The hold was cramped; everyone sat shoulder to shoulder. It smelled damp, and sweaty, and it was uncomfortably humid compared to the sleet and hail Anders had sloughed through to get here. Anders looked for a corner to curl up in, but there was nothing. Anyone who could have made room for him saw his staff, and looked away hastily. They were all refugees. Survivors from the siege. Some of them had to know who he was.

So much for being a hero.

Someone whistled. Anders glanced over his shoulder. A man with curly brown hair and a smattering of unkempt stubble waved at him. His mouth looked far too big for his face, but he was grinning. Anders made his way over, stepping gingerly between a few folk to sit in the spot the stranger cleared for him. Anders swung both satchels into his lap and hugged his belongings to himself.

"Thanks," Anders said.

"Nice shoes," The frog-mouthed man said.

"What?" Anders asked.

"Nice shoes." The man said again, pointing down at Anders' feet. "What are they? Bear hide?"

"Tusket, actually," Anders said, shuffling a nervous inch to the side. "You're not going to try to steal my shoes, are you?"
"What? No, no, no. I'm a cobbler! It's the trade," The man wiped his hand off on his trousers and held it out to shake. "Name's Franke."

Anders shook it, "Anders."

... he probably should have lied.

"Are those silverite tips?" Franke the cobbler asked rhetorically and pressed on without waiting for an answer, "What are you doing for the lining? Lambswool?"

"Loden," Anders said.

"Nice shoes." Franke said again with an appreciative whistle. "Are you a noble or something?"

Anders frowned and jostled his staff on his shoulder, "You know this isn't just for walking, right?"

"Well, flames, I don't know," Franke laughed, "The old Warden-Commander was a mage. Times are changing, as they say. Anyway, I like your shoes."

"Thanks."

"Not sure you'll need that loden lining up in the Free Marches," Franke said. "It's a lot less wet over there I hear. Hardly ever rains."

"That'll be nice."

"No more sleet or slush. No more hail. Maker, the hail. Just clear skies and a warm sun," Franke said wistfully. "And no darkspawn."

"No darkspawn." Anders agreed.

"So I figure you won't be staying in Kirkwall?" Franke asked. "Not very mage friendly, I hear."

"I have a friend there."

"Well that makes one of us," Franke laughed. "Me? Shop burned down. Bloody Orlesians, right? Lost everything I had, but I figure it's a sign from the Maker, telling me to start over somewhere new. You look like you got lucky. Carrying everything you own, but at least you're carrying something."

Anders didn't say anything.

"I'm talking too much." Franke decided.

"Sorry," Anders said. "It's been a long day."

"I hear that." Franke said. "With the darkspawn? Been a long month. A long couple a years, honestly."


"Here's hoping," Franke joked.

Anders exhaled hard through his nose. He didn't have the energy for anything else.

Franke kept talking. The man's big mouth was as figurative as it was literal. He rambled on about how he'd been spared from the worst of the Blight living in northern Ferelden, about how he'd made
a respectable if not necessarily impressive living in Amaranthine, about how he had a bit of a fetish for feet. The boat cast off, and Anders had to swallow his pancake back down when he felt the ship lurch.

"It's worse on deck, trust me," Franke said. "I've actually been sailing a few times. The family lives down in Gwaren, you see. Blight did a number on them down there, with Teryn Loghain pulling all his troops out of the south during the Blight."

Franke kept talking. He went on about his family, and how he apparently hated them, but family was family. He babbled about Gwaren, and how he'd helped his family rebuild for a time before coming back to Amaranthine.

Anders fell asleep listening to him. He didn't remember doing it, but he must have, because the next thing he knew the darkspawn were there. He felt them crawling under his skin, pulsing and undulating deep beneath the earth, hissing and gnawing and biting and Anders was right there with them, digging into Eylon's back with his bare hands. The man's skin was under his nails, and his muscle felt like uncooked meat, and all Anders could hear was a song more beautiful than lyrium and all he wanted was to stay like this forever: clawing and digging and writhing in the welter of the gore he'd birthed.

"Hey! Hey! Wake up!" Someone shouted. Hands were on his shoulders, shaking violently, and Anders started awake.

"I'm up, I'm up. What is it? Who's hurt?" Anders asked, half way to standing before he realized where he was. Franke still had his hands on his shoulders, and half the hold was glaring at him. A child was crying somewhere.

"You, by the sound of it," Franke joked, "That must have been some nightmare."

"Sorry," Anders sat back down, and ran a weary hand through his hair.

"Darkspawn, right?" Franke guessed.

Anders snorted. "You have no idea."

"I get it," Franke said. "I had a few nightmares of my own after they attacked the city."

Franke went on to tell him every gory detail of said nightmares. Anders bit the inside of his cheek every so often to stay awake. No one should have to listen to him raving and wailing about darkspawn in his sleep. Long hours passed, with Franke talking, and talking, and talking. Anders listened to less than half of it, and still felt like he knew everything there was to know about the man, but somehow Franke kept talking.

He even talked in his sleep when he fell asleep. Anders shifted, and stretched as best he was able, considering he couldn't move without jostling the refugees next to him. Franke was mumbling about bread and lampposts. Anders stared at the fellow, and made a mental note to thank him when the ship finally docked at Kirkwall. It was impossible for Anders to think over the man's endless babbling. The last thing Anders wanted was to be alone with his thoughts.

Anders pulled himself into a ball, and listened to Franke mumble about toast-stealing darkspawn until he fell asleep. Mercifully, Anders didn't have any nightmares the second time around, or the third. The voyage across the Waking Sea took three days, during which none of them had any food or water. Anders had his canteen, and his hardtack and jerky, but he ran out of that on the first day when he offered Franke a bite, and ended up passing out what he had to everyone in the near
vicinity.

By the third day, Anders was starving. His back and ass were the tightest knots on the ship, and his
arms and legs were always asleep. He had horrible motion sickness every time he had to go above
deck for a piss or a shit, and the vertigo usually made him throw up. The acrid taste of vomit was still
in his mouth went word went out that they were approaching the city, and Franke dragged him
above deck for a better look.

Maker's breath.

The first thing Anders saw was a wall of black rock. The cliff reached at least a hundred meters high,
and the city of Kirkwall sat atop it, barely visible. What was visible were the dragons carved into the
black rock, and the two massive bronze statues. They were almost as tall as the cliff. Naked,
genderless humanoid figures, they stood with their faces buried in their hands, with massive chains
about their necks that connected them to a fortress, which sat atop an island.

"Do you know what that fortress is?" Anders asked.

"The Gallows, if I had to guess," Franke said, eyeing his staff and giving him a worried look, "The
Circle in Kirkwall. Is that where your friend is?"

Poor Karl.

No wonder Solona hadn't heard from him. It was a miracle Karl had ever managed to get any letters
out to begin with. Why did every Circle have to be an impenetrable fortress in the middle of a lake or
an ocean? Kirkwall wasn't even being subtle about it. The fortress was chained to two giant statues
of sobbing slaves, for Maker's sake. Anders pushed down a surge of anger that bubbled inside of
him.

"That's where my friend is," Anders said.

The cliff face split between the two sobbing statues. Their ship sailed slowly towards the chasm.
Above it, massive bridges spanned the length of the divide, connecting one side of the city to the
other. Anders craned his head, but he couldn't see much of the city from here. The docks were off in
the distance, fast approaching, but Anders stared at the Gallows as the fortress faded into the
distance.

"... Kind of reminds you of a prison, doesn't it?" Franke asked.

"Yeah, it really does," Anders said.

"Doesn't really seem right." Franke said.

"No, it really doesn't." Anders agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter!
Rip Up Your Roots

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back! I hope you're all still enjoying this story. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 19 Cassus; Late Afternoon
Kirkwall Docks

The *Pride of Amaranthine* sailed through the split in the cliff face to make harbor at Kirkwall's docks. The city was carved into and out of the black-rock. Scattered throughout were buildings carved from sandstone, paler than Anders' flesh. From a distance, it made the city seem as though it was covered in freckles, and was almost beautiful.

The boat lurched to a halt sometime later, and up close the city was something else. The dock they chose was comprised of mostly white sandstone, weathered an ugly beige by the sea air. Instead of a balustrade or railing, the docks were lined in spikes. Gathered at the pier was a score of folk, held back by a handful of soldiers in orange uniforms.

Anders had seen a mob before. The crowd was jeering, but they were unorganized and unintelligible and the only real takeaway was that they were angry. "Feels like home already," Anders mused.

"Were you for the riots at the Vigil?" Franke guessed.

"Something like that," Anders said. The staff meant being outed as a mage was unavoidable, but there was no reason to go around broadcasting he was a Warden, too.

The plank fell, and the first brave sailor who disembarked took a handful of fish guts in the face.

"Fereldans go home!" Someone yelled.

"We don't want you dog lords here!" Screamed another. Some sort of rotten vegetable hit the side of the hull, and Anders watched it leave a streak of puke-green on its way down into the water.

"Too bad they didn't throw it a little higher, right?" Anders joked.

"I hear that," Franke laughed, making a playful grab for the next piece of rotten food that came flying their way. It fell into the ocean without ever reaching the boat, "I'm starving. Thanks for the meal the other day, by the way. You didn't have to share. I figure it's going to be harder for you than the rest of us."

Anders shrugged. It was going to be hard for all of them, at this rate. More folk were running to join the crowd gathered on the dock, and Anders doubted the five guards were going to be able to make any difference against the mob. A well dressed looking man Anders guessed for the harbormaster started towards the pier with two assistants at his side, saw the crowd, and hung back. It wasn't terrible reassuring.

A few more sailors disembarked, and someone in the mob threw a full chamber pot on one of them.
The crowd cheered. "Guess they had enough of us Fereldans after the Blight," Franke said.

"Guess so," Anders said.

The rest of the refugees started spilling out of the hold. A brave few started down the plank, when one of the rioters broke through the line of guardsmen and charged forward. A guardswoman charged after him; she was alarmingly tall, and everything from her hair to her freckles to her uniform was bright orange. She looked like some sort of cross between Leonie and Oghren, and she knocked the offending rioter over before he reached the startled refugees.

She gave the fellow a hard kick that rolled him off the pier and into the ocean. Anders snorted. Franke laughed. "And that goes double for all of you!" The guardswoman threatened, "Disperse immediately!"

"Fuck you, Fereldan bitch!" One of the rioters yelled, and flung what looked like a rotten cabbage in the guardswoman's direction. She ducked it, but the second was a tomato and took her in the chest, painting her even redder than before. "Get out of our city!"


Another group appeared further down the sandstone streets, and made for the pier. They looked to be soldiers, albeit poorly outfitted. They were wearing an assortment of mismatched leather, and the only uniform thing about them were their masks: turbans, with strips of leather to cover their faces. "This day just keeps getting better," Anders said.

"I think so," Franke said, "Reminds me of a play or something, you know? It's exciting."

"I've had enough excitement for nine lifetimes," Anders said.

There were at least twenty of the masked group, and whoever they were, they made the mob uneasy. One of the men stepped forward and took his helmet off, and a mess of red hair fell out. His face was dirty and flushed red, and when he grinned it was with a mouthful of yellow.

"Cor Blimey," The tough guardswoman called out, "You are under arrest for racketeering, larceny, destruction of property, and being an all around ass. You and your men throw down your weapons," The new group laughed. "You hear that boys?" The leader who must have been Cor called out. "I'm under arrest! Guess we can't escort our fellow Fereldans past this rabble. I'm sure that's alright. Looks like the guards have it."

The group laughed again. Cor walked over to the guardswoman and held out both his wrists in a polite surrender, smiling sweetly.

Anders' couldn't see the guardswoman's expression from where he was stood, leaning over the railing on the ship deck. All he could see was the back of her head, and how it twisted to look between the mob and Cor.

"You rip up your roots, Vallen, and you ain't gonna have a tree," Cor said.

"Don't get used to this, Blimey," The guardswoman said. "As soon as I have the men."

"I'll leave the welcome mat out for you," Cor said.

"Let's go, men," The guardswoman called to her very small retinue of guardsmen, "Looks like our
The guards left. The mob took one look at the gang Cor was leading, and dispersed in the way that only mobs could. They scattered like rats, dropping their assortment of rotten foods and chamber pots and running in every direction. A few of them slipped on the pier's wet planks, and went crashing into the harbor. Cor's gang laughed.

The sailors went about unloading with the mob gone, and the harbormaster finally approached to speak to the captain. The refugees all scuttled down the plank to gather on the pier, and Anders and Franke joined them. The docks smelled like brine and body odor and an acrid stench that must have been unique to Kirkwall.

"Welcome to Kirkwall!" Cor said brightly, spreading his hands wide, "Where the Marchers march, the guards guard, and the rest of us get crushed under foot! My name is Cor Blimey, and the only thing you lot need to know about me is I'm a right bastard, and the right bastard for all of you! We-" Cor gestured to his group of mismatched vagrants, "-are the Dog Lords, and anyone who smells like dog shit is welcome among us. I can tell you right now, you won't get a warmer welcome anywhere else.

"We're not the power in Kirkwall, but we are a power in Kirkwall, and that's more than most can say. You can try your luck in the city all you want, but unless you want to work in the mines, no one's hiring Fereldans, and you don't want to work in the mines. With me you get a place to sleep and foot to eat. With Kirkwall, you get to find out why they call it 'The City of Chains.'"

Cor clapped his hands, and rubbed them together with a grin, "So. Where are my takers?"

A handful of people came forward. Anders guessed it helped that most of them were starving.

Cor counted heads, and pushed them into the center of the group where they were passed around to clasp hands and backs, "Not bad for a start," Cor said, surveying the crowd of refugees that hadn't volunteered to join the Dog Lords. His eyes settled on Anders, and his staff, "Oi, Packmule, what's it take to get you to hop borders?"

"I'm a sucker for eyes," Anders quipped, and chuckled for his own sake.

"Oh yeah?" Cor maneuvered through the crowd to take a spot in front of Anders. His eyes reminded Anders rather appropriately of dog shit. "What do you think?"

"Really not doing it for me," Anders confessed.

"That's a damn shame, cause there ain't no one else in this city that's going to do it for you if you walk in here with that," Cor said, with a nod to Anders' staff.

"What, they don't like walking sticks in Kirkwall?" Anders joked.

"Ableist bastards, am I right?" Cor grinned his yellow grin. Dog shit in his eyes, dog piss in his mouth. Cor really wasn't fighting the stereotype.

"You need new shoes," Franke mumbled, staring at Cor's feet.

"Mages don't get far in this city," Cor continued. "Not alone. Be better for you with us than in the Gallows."

"And that's so sweet of you to offer, but I think I'll take my chances," Anders said, and decided to end the conversation. He adjusted his satchels on his shoulder, and made to side step around the dog
lord. Cor stepped with him and cut him off.

"Let's try that again, yeah? I'm Cor," Cor held out a hand to shake.

"Anders," Anders said without taking his hand.

... He should have lied. The refugees who didn't want to join started to creep past the Dog Lords and slink off the pier with the gang's leader occupied. Anders watched them go, envious.

"Look, I'm not trying to piss in the wind here," Cor said, "You don't want to join, don't join, but you got a staff and I figure that means you got magic. I got a boy holed up with his guts spilling out, barely held together by my girl's piss-poor cross stitching, and there ain't shit we can do for him. Can you do anything with that 'walking stick' of yours?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a bastard?" Anders asked, "Shouldn't you be threatening to make me smell my own feet if I say no, or something?"

"Guts for garters, goes without saying," Cor joked. "Look, we're all Ferelden, yeah? You can't help him, fuck off and we're good, but if you can, I can make it worth your while. Five silvers, straight up."

Anders sighed. He didn't need the bribe; he couldn't have said no if he wanted to, "I can help him,"

"Good," Cor said, "Hold that staff down when you walk, by the way. You stick out like a Chasind at an Orlesian ball walking around with it up like that." Cor turned around and went back to address his men and all his new recruits.

Franke looked at Anders, "So I guess you'll be going with them, then?"

"I guess so," Anders said.

"Gangs aren't for me, but I'm guessing no one in this city wants a pair of shoes made by a Ferelden." Franke said. "You think you and me could stick together for a bit until we get our bearings? I understand if you'd rather go your own way, though. I know I've got a mouth on me. 'Franke, if you don't shut your mouth one day a spider is going to crawl in there and lay eggs,' my mother always used to say."

"I don't mind," Anders said. "Talk away,"

Anders couldn't have been more grateful. He'd only had a handful of thoughts since he'd set foot on the *Pride of Amaranthine*. Franke's chatter was endless, and it was more than enough to drown out both of the voices in Anders' head. Anders didn't want anything to do with himself, but Franke had to pause for breath eventually, and when he did things slipped in through the cracks.

Flashes of Biff, telling him he was no better than a yo-yo, and all he did with his life was run and get caught. Flashes of Rylock, telling him he was a murderer. Cera, and how she'd rightly predicted Anders was never the one to suffer the consequences of his actions. Oghren, telling him they were going to be friends and Anders being stupid enough to think he didn't need any.

Varel and how Anders hadn't given enough of a damn about anyone to even remember his name. Woolsey and all her well-meaning warnings Anders had never listened to because Anders never listened to anyone. Nathaniel, and how hard he'd tried to be the hero in Amell's stead, and how Anders never wanted to be a hero because it took too much work. Velanna, asking Anders if he could control himself and Anders thinking he could.
Anders wrung his fingers on his staff, and went back to using it to help him walk. He was afraid he would collapse without it.

Cor Blimey led the Dog Lords out of the docks, and into the city. Anders was distantly aware both Cor and Franke were talking, but it was getting harder and harder to listen. The Veil was thin in Kirkwall. Anders could hear the whispers of spirits, demons, and wisps in the Fade, almost clear enough to make out words. He didn't know if that was the city, or if that was Justice, but it was distracting.

It also didn't help his concentration that Kirkwall was a maze. The buildings were a medley of stone: blackrock, brick, sandstone, limestone, and other stones, bound together by cast-iron and copper. They went up and up through alley after twisted alley. Most were covered with tattered orange and red awnings, blocking out what little light the lower half of the city managed to get.

If Amaranthine had been a cesspool, Kirkwall was a cesspit. The only thing the city seemed to have going for it was a decent sewer system. Every mismatched street had a storm drain, but the roads were painted white with bird shit, and rubbish wasn't so much piled in the corners as it was scattered everywhere. Some of the buildings were crumbling, and rocks and dust mixed together with torn parchment, tattered cloth, broken pottery, half-eaten foods, and so many feathers.

The sky and ground were littered with them, and the culprits were apparently children. Anders watched a small group of five chase pigeons, crows, wild chickens, and other fowl come to feed on the refuse in the streets. Eventually two of the boys managed to corner a fatter pigeon, and pelt it to death with rocks.

"I get the wings!" One of the girls called.

"No way! You ate yesterday, it's my turn!" One of the boys said back.

Anders bumped into Franke watching them. The cobbler glanced at him, and then at the children that had distracted him, "Wonder if we can get them to share," Franke joked.

Anders didn't have it in him to laugh. The kids were dangerously thin and obviously starving, and it was freezing. To judge by the carve and cuts in the rock, the part of the city they were in might have been a quarry once, and the winter winds swept down old mineshafts and back up from the sewers, and created tiny dust devils of sleet in the streets. Anders was cold under four layers of clothes, but the kids were in rags.

"You got any kids?" Franke asked.

"No," Anders said, turning away and trying to put it out of his mind. "You?"

"Three," Franke said. "... Told the wife and kids to board up in the shop when the darkspawn came. I went out on my own to get help... made it to the Chantry when the arrows started falling."

"Andraste's knickerweasels, Franke, I'm sorry," Anders said.

"Orlesians, right?" Franke shrugged, and Anders couldn't help seeing him differently. Franke must have liked talking for the same reason Anders liked listening: it kept them both from thinking.

"Orlesians." Anders agreed, but what he thought was 'people.'

"Alright you mangy mongrels!" Cor yelled out, stopping in front of a nondescript building made mostly of blackrock, and patched up with brick. "Here we are," Cor shoved open a rusty iron door, and went inside the building.
Anders wasn't surprised to find it was a shanty. The front room had a stone floor, and the dirt and mud they tracked in made up the grout. The furniture was an assortment of boxes and planks of wood draped over stone. A stolen awning looked like it was being used as a rug for a small sitting area where a group of Dog Lords were placing dice. A metal barrel in the center of the room was filled with burning rubbish, and one of the Dog Lords was roasting a rat over it.

"Home shit home!" Cor laughed at the few dismayed faces in the crowd. "It's not quite Lowtown, but it's not quite Darktown either. Conall, you old fuck, where are you!"

A man emerged from one of the side rooms. He looked a lot like the streets of Kirkwall: crooked and mismatched, old and falling apart. He took in the new recruits with a smile, "Well look at that. We got a few new pups."


"Horny!" One of the Dog Lords yelled.

"Conall!" Cor agreed with a laugh. "Someone fucks with you? Conall. He'll take care of it. Go on. Fuck off. Go see Conall and get some food in you. We'll get you all outfitted later."

The new recruits shuffled over towards the old man. The Dog Lords that had accompanied Cor to the docks took off their helmets, and turned back into people. Pockmarked and pale Fereldans, all of them. Most of them thin, several with dark lines under their eyes, a handful with a sickly pallor that worried Anders, but they smiled and jostled one another with a playful sort of camaraderie that made Anders feel sick and queasy with regret.

Cor came over to him, scratching at his bright red side burns. Franke was in the middle of babbling about something when Cor interrupted him, "So look. I might have undersold it with my boy. He's good and proper fucked, so you better not be a fainter with blood."

Anders snorted, and choked on a wild laugh, "Shit, that's a good one. Where is he?"

"We're keeping him in the back," Cor explained, and looked at Franke, "What about you, Curly? You with him?"

"Love at first sight," Anders said.

"With your shoes, for sure," Franke grinned, "Don't worry, I talk a lot but I won't get in the way."

"Alright then, come on," Cor said. He led them down a hall to the right of the common room, and to a room with a piece of cloth nailed to the wall for a door. Anders could smell the man he was there to heal from the hall. It was an iconic smell: shit mixed with body odor and the acrid tinge of vomit. Cor pulled the cloth aside, and the smell hit them in full force.

Franke recoiled with a gag. "On second thought, I'll wait for you in the main room."

Anders went inside. The room was small, barely more than three square meters. It fit a small end table and a cot, and the man who lay on looked like he wasn't so much as knocking on death's door as he was crawling in through the window. Whatever his original colors had been, sick had left his skin ashen. His hair was black with sweat, and his body was drenched with it. The droplets glistened on his skin, slid off him like rain, and soaked into his cot. The cot itself was dripping, sweat, blood, pus, and piss soaking through the thin fabric strung up between two four rickety posts. The wound was one Anders had seen before, but never this bad. The man's stomach had been torn open, and stitched crudely back together.
Rotten muscle shown through where his skin split. The wound had bloated into a potbelly with infection, and was oozing blood, pus, and all other manner of fluids. The man was completely naked, probably to handle the sweat, and a bed pan was beneath him, ineffectually attempting to catch everything escaping him. Anders stepped back out of the room.

"Too far gone, right?" Cor guessed.

Before Anders had merged with Justice, his only suggestion would have been to put the man out of misery. Anders looked down at his hand and let a well of mana form in his palm. It glowed a soft cerulean, and reminded Anders of the sky. It wasn't limitless, but it was close.

"I need two bowls of clean water, soap, a few towels, a needle and a scalpel, and maybe some bandages and thread," Anders said.

"Maybe?" Cor asked.

"I don't know if I'll have the mana to seal his wound after I cleanse the infection. I might just have to sew it shut properly." Anders explained.

"Right then, I'll get your shit." Cor said and left down the hall.

Anders looked back to the room. The smell was overpowering. Anders took off one of his scarves and tied it around his mouth and nose. He went back inside the wretched room and set his satchels on the end table. He took off his bracers and his gloves, and several layers of clothes so he could roll his sleeves up to his elbows. He was so laden down Cor came back with his supplies before he finished, a handful of Dog Lords there to help him carry everything.

Anders laid out what he needed and knelt next to the cot. The Dog Lords wished him luck and left. Anders still wasn't sure if he could pull the man off death's door, but he had to believe he could. What use was Justice without Mercy? The power they'd been given had to be good for something besides murder. Anders washed his hands, and just that took him an age. It had been four days, and the blood was still there beneath his fingernails.

Anders watched it paint the water pink. He remembered clawing and digging and clawing. The way his fingers had slipped through blood and muscle, the way the white hot fire splitting through his skin had melted fat and left the smell of burning gristle in the air. Anders broke out of the memory with a miserable gasp, and clenched his fists.

Don't think about it.

Anders channeled his mana through his staff and inscribed it into a lifeward beneath the man's cot. From there he cast an incantation to ensure the man stayed sleeping, and channeled a cleansing aura through Justice to fight back the infection. Then it was the bloody process of unraveling the stitching that held the man's inflamed skin together.

The thread came loose with a sickly hiss that persisted as Anders unraveled it. The infected flesh and muscle falling apart as the stitches came out, the pus, the blood, the faint pulse of the man's insides: none of it bothered him. Infection, cholera, gaping wounds, dismemberment, Anders could handle. He hadn't done it. It wasn't his fault. He could fix it. He could make it right.

Anders cleaned the wound as best he was able, cutting away as much dead tissue as he dared. It looked like a wet gangrene, the only cure for which should have been amputation. The whole area was unnaturally soft, as if it was just waiting to slough off. It was putrid, and rotten, and the fetid smell was suffocating even through Anders' scarf. When Anders had cleaned and drained what he
could, he channeled Justice.

It shouldn't have been possible. The man was dead, he just didn't know it yet. The infection had spread to his blood and the site of the injury was a mess, but ever so slowly the swelling went down. The benevolent healing energies might have been turning back time for the effect they had on the man. Anders kept the channel going until his arms were heavy and his legs were numb.

Anders didn't know how long it took him. An hour, perhaps two, but eventually infection cleared, as if it had never been. The wound turned to a soft pink in place of a dark red, and Anders let go of the spell. Anders sat back, exhausted. He felt it in his bones, in the way he didn't feel anything. An ache settled in behind his eyes, and he wanted to curl up on the squalid floor and sleep for an age. He couldn't; the wound was still open.

Anders threaded the needle and took a better spot over the patient. It didn't matter how exhausted he was; Anders had been a spirit healer for fifteen years, and the wound was easy to sew shut and bandage up.

He could have done it in his sleep.

He cut the thread with a scalpel when he finished, and ran his fingers over the pink scar. At least he could still heal, and he could do it better than before. That had to count for something. That had to make up for being an abomination. Anders rubbed his thumb over the pink indent left in the tip of his fingers by the needle's press. How many more lives did he have to save to make up for what he'd done?

Too many. Anders tried to stand, but his legs didn't respond to him. Apparently he could slaughter a score of templars with ease, but saving one life was draining.

Maybe killing was more natural for him.

Anders pushed the thought away and washed his hands off a second time. He didn't have a name for the color the water turned. Anders grabbed his staff, and used it to help him crawl to his feet. The world spun when he stood, and he waited for the wave of vertigo to pass. It probably wasn't helping any that he'd only had one meal in the past three days, and his sleep had been fitful.

Anders dressed himself back up in all the layers he'd taken off to free up his hands enough to heal. He shouldered both satchels, and stumbled out of the room and into the hall. From the common room, he could hear people talking, laughing, making a life for themselves out of the squalor circumstance had forced them into as if nothing was wrong.

It was surreal. Anders couldn't close his eyes without seeing the burned down market in Amaranthine, Eylon's open back, Rolan's smug smirk, the flames from Sigrun's lyrium bombs, Barkspawn's corpse, Compassion's corrupted form, Amell's blind-folded face. But none of those things were here. They were in Ferelden. Anders was in Kirkwall. He just had to stop thinking about it.

There was a Dog Lord waiting for him in the hall. The fellow was bald, and terribly top heavy. His head was hidden away in his massive shoulders and reminded Anders of a turtle. Anders was so fatigued he didn't have it in him to restrain a giggle. "Manus?" The man asked.

"Is that his name?" Anders wondered. "He's fine. He needs to sleep for a day, but he's fine."

"Bullshit," Turtle said.

Anders managed a slow blink; it made his eyes burn, "You mean dog shit, right?"
Turtle ran into the room to check on Manus. Anders leaned back against the wall, and closed his eyes. They'd barely shut when a sweaty mass of muscle locked arms around him, four layers of clothes, satchels, staff and all, and lifted him off the ground in an exuberant embrace. "Holy fucking shit!" Turtle exclaimed, dropping him abruptly. "You're a fucking miracle worker, man!"

Turtle grabbed Anders' shoulders and half shoved, half carried him down the hall to fling him into the common room. The dog lords were still scattered throughout, cooking rats or pigeons, playing dice or eking out some kind of entertainment for themselves, "Cor! Bastard! Dogs! Guess who's a-fucking-live? Manus, that's fucking who!"

It earned a cheer, and a few excited folk ran down the hall to check.

"He needs to sleep!" Anders called after them.

"No shit?" Cor looked up from a game of dice he was playing with Franke and a few other dog lords. "This shit is why us Dog Lords will always beat these Marchers. Queen Anora's got it right, fighting to free you mage folk. Fuck Stannard! Where the fuck are our healers, huh!? Bitch sends her templars down to harass us refugees, and won't let any mages out of the Gallows to clean up the mess she makes?"

By the sound of it, most of the Dog Lords agreed. If not with mage rights, the chorus of 'fuck Stannard' was one that seemed to resonate with them. Cor gestured to the space between him and Franke, "Get your ass over here, Packmule."

Anders stumbled over and sat between Franke and Cor, if only because he was too exhausted to do anything else.

"Someone get this fuck some food, yeah?" Cor ordered.

A woman with a swath of dirty blonde hair and a face full of pockmarks got up from the burning barrel in the center of the room. She handed Anders the rotisserie rat she'd been cooking. There was no subtlety to it at all. It was a rat. Burnt and brown and complete with its tail and tiny head. Anders pinched the skewer between two fingers and wrinkled his nose. It smelled like piss.

He hadn't eaten in three days. His stomach rumbled for just thought of food. Anders took a nervous bite. It tasted pungent and gamey and reminded him of rabbit. It could have been worse, he supposed.

"So hey." Cor said, "Like I was telling your boy Franke, if you're not with us, then you want Lirene, higher up in Lowtown. Don't normally mention it, kills recruitment, but you did us a solid. Lirene runs an import shop, which is about as profitable as it sounds. Imports refugees and dog shit, but the bitch has teeth. If there's work in the city, she'll find it for you, and in the meantime she's got a warehouse where she houses the refugees."

"Sounds like a plan, right?" Franke asked.

"Sounds like a plan," Anders agreed.
A Good Man

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. I had a comment I wanted to make about this chapter but I can't remember it anymore to save my life. Oh well. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:31 Dragon 21 Cassus Morning
Kirkwall Lowtown

Anders had been too exhausted to make the trip to Lirene's Ferelden Imports the same day he'd arrived in Kirkwall. Instead he had fallen asleep in one of the Dog Lords' backrooms, and was surprised to find he woke up with all of his things intact and not stolen. Saving Manus apparently counted for something among the Dog Lords, because no one seemed to protest his extended stay, even with his nightmares. Anders and Franke were given bread made from sawdust for breakfast.

It was food. It was more than he'd had before. Anders accepted it gratefully, and conjured water to fill a barrel for the Dog Lords in thanks. The clean water meant a surprising amount to them, and a few people even volunteered to escort Anders and Franke to Lirene's shop whenever they were ready to go. Anders would have gone that day, had a gang war not broken out in the streets.

A dozen men and women came limping back to the Dog Lords' hideout, and Anders spent the rest of the day healing them while Franke decided to explore the city. Lunch that day was nettle soup, and dinner was kelp the Dog Lords collected when it was thrown out from the hauls at the docks. It wasn't a three course meal served with the Warden Commander's finest brandy, but it was food. Anders ate.

Cor offered him the five silvers he'd promised for healing his men, and considering Anders only had thirteen silvers to his name he was tempted to take it, but he thought of one better. He showed Cor his coin from the Collective, and asked him if he'd ever seen a symbol like it anywhere in the city. Cor hadn't, but he promised to 'send the dogs sniffing for it' if Anders kept healing them. It seemed like a decent bargain, so Anders agreed.

Anders made the trip to Lirene's with Franke the day after the gang war, and listened to the Franke recount everything he'd done the day they'd spent apart. Apparently all he'd managed to do was get lost. Kirkwall was a maze, and if not for the two Dog Lords escorting them, Anders didn't doubt they would have gotten lost again. The Dog Lords did their best to explain Kirkwall's structure to them.

Lowtown had been a quarry, at some point. The district was a collection of 'hexes' connected by corridors and caves carved into the blackrock. Most of Lowtown was stacked on-top of itself, multistory shantytowns and market blocks built around the occasional foundry. Mineshafts were everywhere, and the Dog Lords pointed out each in turn with a warning to steer clear of them.

Apparently, they lead to Darktown. Darktown was a massive mine, or a collection of mines, beneath the city dating back to the days of the Tevinter Imperium. The mines served as the city's sewers now, and housed all the Ferelden refugees who didn't join the Dog Lords, and who Lirene couldn't help. They were also thick with chokedamp, and the poisonous gas would occasionally spout up from the
mineshafts into the city, hence the warning to steer clear.

"On second thought, maybe gang life is for me," Franke mumbled.

"You'll find something," Anders said, "Everyone needs shoes. Well, unless you're Dalish, I guess."

"Oh yeah?" Franke asked eagerly, "You ever met one?"

Anders shrugged helplessly, and wished he hadn't said anything. Mercifully, Franke let it drop, and filled the silence with chatter about the elves he'd met in his life until they reached the courtyard, or 'hex' where Lirene's shop was located. It was a step up from the corridor where the Dog Lord's holdout was located. For one, it was a hex, and not an alley street, which meant Anders could see the sky.

... in theory. Anders looked up at a black cloud of smog and sighed. There was a foundry in the hex, and ash and soot fell from the sky in flakes like snow. A few settled in Anders' hair, but most gathered in the awnings scattered throughout the crowded market district. The shops were little more than planks of wood with threadbare strips of cloth thrown over them to protect goods from the falling soot. Most were selling famine foods: beets, turnips, even bags of sawdust.

A few of the shanties were selling meat or fish, and the flies there were like a cloud. Anders watched a butcher pull down a pig's flank, covered in an undulating mass of black, and carve it for an unaffected patron. Then Anders remembered he'd eaten a rat and decided he couldn't judge. It wasn't as if the vermin weren't plentiful in Kirkwall; they ran along the edge of the buildings, and occasionally scurried underfoot in waves.

"Home shit home," Anders mumbled.

Every other person they passed shot the four of them glares, but Anders didn't know if that had more to do with his staff or with the Dog Lords. With the foundry, the crowds, the rats, Lowtown as a bustle of noise and pungent odors. More than a few people jostled Anders, and each time he couldn't help giving a mental thanks to Amell for telling him to keep his coin in his boots.

Anders watched the crowds despite knowing his coin was safe. He wasn't a fan of being jostled, or having people's hands stuffed down his clothes without invitation. Whether it was the soot, the lack of a restful sleep, or something else, something was going wrong with Anders' vision. A few people they passed had queer halos about them, and Anders had to blink a handful of times before he stopped seeing them.

Lirene's shop was stuffed into a corner. Unsurprisingly, the stone wall it was built into was painted over with graffiti. 'Fereldans go home' and 'Fuck Ferelden' were a few of the creative insults the locals had managed to come up with. There was even a rather crude painting of a mabari fucking a woman Anders guessed was meant to be Lirene with the words 'Fereldan bitch' scrawled above it. Quaint.

They pushed open the door, after which there was little more they could do. The front room was packed with Fereldan refugees, all of them clamoring for the attention of the two women manning the shop.

"This is why you join the Dog Lords," One of their escorts said. "There ain't shit for work in this city."

"Cor will do you solid, Anders," Said the other, a young woman named Bree. She'd been the one to offer him her rat his first day in Kirkwall, and later Anders had healed her arm after she'd broken it in
the gang war, "You should just come back with us, yeah? Where's Lirene gonna find work for a... a man like you?"

"I don't know, maybe I fancy myself a cobbler," Anders joked.

"Sure, I could use an apprentice when I get my new shop started," Franke agreed, "I'm thinking I'll call it: Franke's Footwear. Of course I'll probably just have to have the sign with the shoe for the name again... Someday, I'll have a shop over in Hightown and all of my customers will be nobles who know how to read."

"Good luck with that," Their escort snorted.

"We're gonna head back to the Kennel," Bree said, "You two know how to get back if you need, yeah?"

"Yeah," Anders said. He might have been lying. The two Dog Lords left, and Anders and Franke took a spot at the back of the queue.

"I haven't eaten all day!" Someone in the crowd was complaining.

"Where do I find work?" Asked another. "I asked at thirty farms for work! No one is hiring Fereldans."

"I should have taken my chances with the Blight," One man muttered.

"Is there any flour?" Begged one woman, "We've been out for a week. The children are eating sawdust."

"Them and us both, right?" Franke joked.

A man holding a bowl with a few bits in it stopped in front of them. His clothes were covered in soot, his hair was a ratty coal, and his eyes were two haunted beads of black, "Pardon. I know none of us got much, but my wife died yesterday... in the mines. Either of you spare a bit? I'm taking up a collection to afford the burning."

"Franke's got what Franke's got," Franke shrugged, turning out empty pockets.

"It costs something for a burning here?" Anders asked.

"Of course it does," The miner said. "Everything costs something in Kirkwall. None of those Chantry Sisters is gonna come down to Lowtown to give some Ferelden refugee a service when we're dying in droves in the mines... three others died with her."

"This is ridiculous," Anders said, "We were eating sticks yesterday and we're the lucky ones?"

"Looks like," Franke agreed.

"How much is a burning?" Anders asked.

"A silver," The widower said. And he had to beg for it.

Anders crouched down and took off his boot to fish out a sweaty silver for the man. He flicked it into the bowl and put his boot back on, and when he got back up the widower was staring at him with tears in his eyes. His shaking hands made the few bits and silver rattle in the bowl. Well... at least he wasn't lying.
"Maker bless you," The man sniffed. He palmed the coins and stuffed them into the rags he was wearing, and then he held out a blackened hand for Anders to shake.

Well, it wasn't like Anders wasn't wearing a glove. Anders shook his hand, and the widower pulled him into a sudden hug with a loud sob that drew the attention of the entire room. "Maker bless you," The widower said again, weeping, "There ain't no one done me a kindness since she died. That damn Orlesian wouldn't even give me her last stipend."

"Hey, no problem," Anders said, patting the man's back, "Really, it's nothing,"

"You got a staff," A woman in the crowd said, staring at him. Her clothes looked little more than grey rags, and she was so thin the sharp edges of her shoulders shone through the thin fabric.

"What, this?" Anders tossed Vigilance from one hand to the other behind the crying man's back, "Walking stick."

"Are you a mage?" The woman persisted, unconvinced. No one had a walking stick made out of dragonbone, set with a crystal, and glowing with runes. "I can't get my brother out of bed. The grippe's got him bad, and now he's got the shakes. You can help him, right?"

"Maker, Eireen, leave him alone and stop asking everyone with a walking stick if they're a mage," Someone else in the crowd said, "Mage don't mean healer anyway. Get back in line. Lirene'll get your brother a philter."

The woman turned around with a noticeable sag in her shoulders, and the crowd went back to clamoring for Lirene's attention. The widower untangled himself from Anders, thanked him again, and left the shop. Anders hoped he wasn't just an impressive conman, but the odds that he was telling the truth seemed worth the silver.

Anders stared at the back of the woman who'd claimed to have a sick brother.

Franke nudged him, "We should play Wicked Grace sometime, you and me. I bet you whatever else is in your shoe I'd win."

"I bet you're right," Anders said, "I'm going to go talk to her. Where do you want to catch up later?"

"I guess here, if Lirene can get me a room, or back at the Kennels," Franke said, "If that doesn't work... Same time tomorrow outside this shop?"

"Alright," Anders said, "I'll see you, Franke."

"See you, Anders," Franke said.

Anders maneuvered through the crowd until he reached Eireen. He gave her boney shoulder a squeeze, and she glanced back at him. Anders gestured towards the door with his head and the woman followed him. It wasn't exactly subtle, either way, considering the whole room had seen her accuse him for a mage. Anders was going to end up Tranquil by the end of the week at this rate.

"So can you help him?" Eireen asked excitedly when they were outside. "You're a mage and you can help him, right?"

"Yeah, I can help him," Anders said, "Lead the way."

"We have a small place in Darktown," Eireen said, grabbing Anders' gloved hand and leading him out of the hex and down an alley. "Maker bless you,"
Anders tried to keep track of where they were going, but it was a struggle with the awnings that stretched across the corridors and side streets. Eireen led him to a building with a caved in wall, and stepped over the rubble. Anders stepped in after her, and was greeted with a lift. The massive plank of wood took up most of the floor, chains from the ceiling leading down into the floor. A massive crank sat in the center, and Eireen climbed on.

Six? Was Anders at six lives now? Maybe it was five. He'd stopped keeping count. He stepped onto the lift, and the hollow sound made by his boots and the butt of his staff unnerved him. Eileen turned the crank, and the lift lurched down in sharp, jittery motions. "Thank you so much, Ser Mage," Eireen said while cranking. "It's so hard to stay warm in the winter in Darktown. It's been two days and my brother hasn't gotten up."

"I'll do what I can," Anders said. The lift lurched again, and the further it dropped the darker it became. Anders swallowed down a lump in his throat, and the lift lurched again. The shadows stretched. "So how far down are we going? I mean I know it's called Darktown, but that's just a metaphor, right?"

"No, it's dark," Eireen said. Another lurch. Fading light.

Anders' hand lit involuntarily with Veilfire. Cerulean flames cracked through his skin in his palm and the back of his hand, and crawled down his forearm to stop at his elbow. The soft emerald glow of the Fade illuminated the lift, and Anders stared at it, thinking of the comfort it was so obviously meant to give. The surge of mana was the only contact he had with Justice, and his only way of knowing how the spirit felt.

The fact that Justice wanted to comfort him didn't say much, but it said enough. For a few merciful moments Anders didn't feel quite so alone. He wondered how Justice felt about what they'd done. With the way they'd lost control. The flames in his arm receded and the Veilfire went out. Anders didn't know what it meant. He wished they could talk.

Eireen apparently cared too much about her brother to question the crazy mage lighting himself on fire in the dark. The lift came to a lurching halt and opened up into darkness. A single metal post held an oil lantern, and it was making a very feeble effort to battle back the black. Anders tried to summon the Veilfire on his own, and his hand lit with orange flames instead. Anders frowned.

"It's not so bad further on," Eireen said. "You shouldn't use your magic in the open down here. Stannard likes to send her templars to search the sewers for maleficar and escaped mages, but mostly all they do on their patrols is harass us refugees."

"Templars abusing their power? Color me shocked." Anders said.

"It wasn't like this in Ferelden." Eireen said.

"It was, you just didn't see it." Anders said.

"It's this way." Eireen said. "Thank you again for helping us. I know... I know what happens to mages in this city. I'm sorry I opened my mouth like that but-"

"Hey, it's whatever," Anders said. "Let's just go help your brother."

Eireen led him down a darkened corridor and into maze. Anders stopped at the threshold to the area, and wondered how anyone was ever supposed to find their way around Darktown. A flat of stone took up the space before them, and split off into a dozen different stairs and tunnels. It had been a mine once, and for the most part the area was open. Enough that if Anders looked down or up he
could see more layers to Darktown, stacked one on top of the other.

Fires were scattered throughout the underground cavern like fireflies against a backdrop of black. Some were burning rubbish heaps, others were lit in barrels, yet more in oil lanterns. A handful came from bronze chandeliers hanging down from the stone ceiling. The scattered lighting cast a thousand different shadows, and they stretched liked claws across the floor, illuminating graffiti of various gang markings, of slaves, of templars stepping on or stabbing refugees.

Eireen led him along an old minecart path, the tracks rotted and rusted. Anders followed her past clusters of Darktown inhabitants gathered around the occasional fire. Their faces were shadowed, the cheeks sunken, and all of them were in rags. Many had sallow complexions that screamed of malnutrition. "Keep walking, Fereldans!" One of the groups threatened. "Can still smell the dog on you."

Anders couldn't smell anything but shit. Grooves were carved where the floors met the walls, where sewage flowed when it was abundant or sat when it wasn't. There were cockroaches everywhere. Anders stepped on a few following Eireen. It was obscene that anyone should be forced to live in such a place.

They were still Grey Wardens. They had an obligation to these poor folk. They had an oath. The Blight had brought these refugees to the shores of this wretched city and it was for them to battle it back in any form. The darkspawn were a cancer at the heart of the world and they had to be not only eradicated but undone. The sick and the wounded and the impoverished were but remnants of a greater pressing evil.

"No no no!" Eireen hissed, grabbing his hand and pulling him into a small nook in the blackrock. It pressed the two of them together and Anders stared down at her, perplexed by the closeness. "Put the light out. Stop glowing. I know it's dark but I know the way. I don't want someone to see you and get you in trouble for helping me."

Anders stared down at his hands, and the blue flame cracking through them. "I had not realized," Justice said quietly. He tried to let go. To come back. Anders. He was Anders.

He wasn't. Justice stared at Anders' gloves hands, and flexed them curiously. How fantastical the feeling. The cold wind on his face, the warmth and weight of Anders' clothes, the bite of the straps to his satchels on his shoulders, the bits of silver stacked beneath his foot, the sweat on his palms gathering in the lining of his gloves. No. No, he would not indulge this.

Anders was still there, behind his eyes, but the second Justice had pulled forth Anders had surrendered everything to him. Justice could feel the fragmented thoughts they shared and the ones that they didn't. The sudden, desperate desire to cease to be and leave his life in the hands of another wasn't Justice's thought at all.

"We need a moment alone." Justice said.

"I mean... Sure I guess if you need a minute," Eireen said. "I'll wait a bit down here, just please stop glowing."

Justice leaned Vigilance up against the wall and knelt down in the small nook. How to call him back? He had to pick through Anders' memories to find his capacity to heal and piece his mind back together the first time he had overwhelmed him, but Anders' mind was whole now. There was nothing to heal. Anders just didn't care enough to fight for any hold on himself.

"Anders..." Justice said. What could he say? What would move him?
Compassion might, but Justice didn't aspire to Compassion.

"You promised this woman your aid," Justice said.

Nothing.

"Staying this way might break your mind as it did before." Justice said.

Still nothing.

"... Please do not leave me alone in this world." Justice said.

Anders had a headache. He sat in a small crack in the blackrock, with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. Veilfire was on his fingers. He wasn't alone. He had Justice. He could keep going. Anders ran his hands through his hair and gave the dirty strands a cathartic yank. Don't think about Wardens. Don't think about Wardens.

Anders grabbed his staff and hoped Justice listened to him. He stumbled out of the crack in the rock and found Eireen pacing by an upturned minecart. "You alright?" Eireen asked.

"Just tired." Anders said. "Sorry. Is it much further?"

"Not much," Eireen said. "I'm sorry. I know it's dark, and damp, and all that. I bet being able to glow like that is pretty useful, yeah?"

"Yeah." Anders said.

Eireen led him to a small shack, built up against the blackrock out of discarded bits of timber and stolen awnings. Eireen had said she had a place in Darktown, but Anders wouldn't have called the heap of rubble a place. "There's not room for three people," Eireen said, kneeling next to the entrance and pulling aside the flap of cloth that made up the door.

A dozen templars didn't burst out, so Anders supposed he had that going for him, at least. "Aran, I found someone to help you," Eireen called.

Her brother answered her with a watery cough. Anders wrapped his scarf around his mouth and nose, and hoped it served against the grippe. He summoned a light for himself and crawled into the shack to kneel beside the man lying down inside. True to Eireen's words, Aran was shaking to the point where he struggled to keep his raggedy blanket over his shoulders. His face was a draining mess, and the eyes he blinked up at Anders were a bright red.

"I'm going to heal you, alright?" Anders said, gathering a well of mana in his hand with the hopes the man didn't panic at the sight of a mage.

Aran only nodded. There were broken capillaries all along his hands, and down his neck. Anders pulled the blanket down, and ran gloved fingers over Aran's inflamed joints. Aran was a mess. He must have been suffering for days. Anders released the mana he'd gathered in a wash of benevolent energy to manage the pain, and channeled an aura to cleanse the infection.

Justice felt different than Compassion. Anders let some of the magic wash over himself to fight back the ache in his muscles and the dull pain emanating from behind his eyes. It felt like a breath of fresh air, or a drink of cold water. Anders kept the channel open after Aran was long healed, and stared at his glowing hands. There had to be some other way they could communicate.

Justice was right there. He was a part of him. Anders felt a few of his thoughts, and recognized them
for what they were, but it still felt so fractured and disjointed. He felt like one person, unable to really feel much of Justice until he retreated inside his own head and let Justice take control of him.

Anders had done it so readily. The second he recognized the thought for Justice Anders surrendered himself to it. He hadn't given any thought to what they'd done the last time they'd lost control. He couldn't think of Justice as some kind of abomination, but there'd been so much blood and Maker why couldn't he remember? Why couldn't he talk to Justice so Justice could tell him?

Did Justice even remember?

Maybe he didn't. Maybe Anders had broken him like he'd broken Barkspawn. Anders forced the thoughts out of his head. Eireen had managed to force her way into the small shack, and was sitting tangled in her brother and talking animatedly with him now that he'd recovered.

"Glad I could help," Anders said. He crawled out of the shack and back out into Darktown with the intent to find his way back to Lirene's shop when Eireen ran after him.

"Ser Mage, wait a minute," Eireen begged, darting in front of him, "Is there any way we can repay you? We don't have any coin but if you need a favor..."

"I'm good," Anders said, "Really, just glad I could help."

"I know you've already done so much and you probably have better things to do, but I have a friend who lives down by the docks," Eireen said, "She's twenty-two weeks, but she can't afford a midwife, and the other day there was blood on her smalls. I don't know if you know anything about birthing or pregnancies but I have to ask."

"Spotting is more common during the first trimester, not the second," Anders said, hating the Circle memories that leapt out at him when he thought of delivering children, "You want to take me to her?"

Eireen led him out of Darktown and to the docks. Kirkwall was split into east and west on either side of the chasm, but the distinction was less important than how high up a district was. The whole city was like an allegory for suffering. The Circle was in chains and the wealthy lived above the poor. The thought was a bitter one, but underneath that bitterness was something sweet, like delight. It was the sort of feeling Anders used to have when he talked to Amell, and knew someone understood him.

"... I guess we're of the same mind right now, is that it?" Anders joked to himself.

"What?" Eireen asked.

"Nothing," Anders said.

Eireen brought him to meet her friend in the docks, and passed a compound of qunari that was apparently staying in the city on the way there. Anders couldn't help noticing the compound wasn't covered in the same graffiti that covered everything even remotely Fereldan in Kirkwall. Trust bullies to only pick the fights they could win.

Eireen's friend wasn't suffering from anything serious. Her pregnancy was going well, aside from the usual complaints of backache and frequent urination. The spotting was from a cervical polyp, which Anders removed in an easy surgery. She laughed about it with her husband later when Anders warned both of them off sex until it healed.

They gave him lunch for it, and while the fried fishcakes weren't a feast they were probably the most
substantial food Anders had eaten in days. He hadn’t finished before the woman mentioned she had a
distant relative with back problems that had confined them to their bed, and the husband mentioned
he had a friend with a broken leg who was going to lose his house if he couldn't get back to work.

The man with a broken leg was just down the street, and Anders healed him before he made the trip
to Lowtown with Eireen’s friend to check on the relative with back problems. The man had a
herniated disc, and a friend who’d started vomiting a lot recently. The friend had ulcers, and had a
friend who had the grippe, who had a friend who had the yellow plague, who had another friend
who had chest pains.

None of the people Anders had seen had any coin to spare, not that Anders asked, but most of them
offered him something. Water, whatever food they had, a promised favor in the future. The man with
ulcers had a daughter who’d even tried to give Anders her doll for healing her father. When he’d
declined, she’d gone on to insist that the doll had the grippe and Anders had to heal it.

It was worth a smile, and worth his time. It was the dead of night by the time the chain of ‘friends
who had a friend’ finally stopped. The last patient Anders seen was a man named Thom, who had a
heart disease, and was all too happy to lead Anders back to Lirene’s Import Shop when Anders
healed him, considering it was apparently in the same hex in which Thom lived.

Anders hadn’t even noticed. He didn’t doubt he was going to end up lost more than a few times in the
sprawling mess that was Kirkwall. Unless he was always with a refugee or a Dog Lord, dragging
him from one patient to the next, Anders supposed. He could think of a worse existence. If nothing
else, it was a relief to be busy and not have to think about anything but whoever needed his help
next.

A few Dog Lords passed Anders and Thom in the starlit streets on their way to Lirene’s shop, and
approached with their hands on the hilt of their weapons only to stop when they recognized Anders.
Their whole demeanor changed from desperate thugs to old friends, and they asked Anders when he
was coming back to the Kennels (whenever they needed him), while also mentioning they were
keeping an eye out for his ‘weird symbol’ but hadn't found anything yet (thanks for trying).

Anders gave them a wave when they left. Thom stared at him with his mouth agape.

"What?" Anders asked.

"You. That. The Dog Lords," Thom said, "I-shit. I'm tone deaf. I had no idea you were Fereldan...
you know I'm a Marcher right?"

"You're pretty bad at it," Anders joked, "I thought we were just walking."

"You don't care?" Thom asked.

"Don't give two bits," Anders said. "Why would I?"

"Because the Dog Lords do," Thom said.

"I'm more of a cat person, myself," Anders joked.

"I don't know if that's a good thing," Thom said. "A mage in Stannard's city? You need a group.
People looking out for you. I think the Dog Lords are dog shit, but you probably saved me a heart
attack back there. Gang or not, you might want to stick with them."

"I'll think about it," Anders said when they reached Lirene's shop. "Thanks, Thom."
"No problem," Thom said. "Take care of yourself, Anders."

Anders really wished people would stop telling him that. He let himself into Lirene's shop, and was almost surprised to find it deserted. A middle-aged looking woman in a worn blue dress and a grey apron was tidying up the shelves, her hair bunned sloppily at the back of her head after a day of hard work. Another woman was with her, much younger, and much less affected. She was blonde and slender and humming to herself while she ran a rag over the scattered furniture.

The older woman glanced at him and scowled, "Lissa, didn't I tell you to lock the door? How many times do I have to remind you? Do you want the Coterie or the Redwaters walking in here in the middle of the night?"

"Sorry, Lirene," Lissa said sheepishly, stuffing her rag into her apron and hurrying to where Anders stood by the door, "I'm sorry, friend, but we're full up for the night. Do you have anywhere else to stay?"

"Not even a corner?" Anders asked wearily. The Dog Lords were fine as individuals, but as a gang they were still a gang, and not something Anders wanted to be a part of or come to rely on.

"Wait, you're the fellow with the staff," Lirene made her way around the counter, which was little more than a plank of wood thrown over two stones. "The one who gave a silver to Devin. You left with Eireen."

"Sure," Anders said.

Lirene glared up at him while her eyes searched his face. Anders remembered Cor had called her a bitch, but one of Anders' closest friends had been a bitch. He didn't mind so much, "Did you do anything for Aran?" Lirene asked.

"I guess that depends on who's asking," Anders said.

"What, you think I give a damn about those blighted templars?" Lirene demanded, "They've done nothing but harass us since the Blight drove us to this accursed city. I'm asking because I know folk. Good, innocent folk, who could use a healer. Are you one?"

"That's the rumor," Anders said. Gallows, here I come, Anders thought to himself. At least if he got himself caught he'd be able to see Karl again.

"I'll get you that corner," Lirene said.
Hello everyone. I am very tired and will edit this later as a result. I hope there aren't too many glaring errors. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 1 Verimensis Late Morning
Kirkwall Lowtown: Lirene's Ferelden Imports

Anders wasn't sure he would call the planks of wood and strewn straw a bed, but it was there, and it was his. The bunks in Lirene's warehouse were stacked three high, and Anders had one on the middle row, between Franke and another displaced refugee. One of the refugees had brought in mites, a week back, and Anders had spent days combing through head after head with a fine toothed comb and washing ragged linens with Lissa.

That had been a nightmare on its own. Anders was forever in four layers of clothes, all of them infected. He'd had to wash mites from everything from his smalls to the feathers on his spaulders. If nothing else, it had also given him a chance to wash himself. Anders hated wash buckets with a passion. They reminded him of a fifteen year old boy, still fresh off the betrayal of his first friend.

That boy had sat on a bench under a templar's stare and cried while he ran a rag over his naked body. He'd ceased to be a person. He was just a risk, and risks weren't allowed privacy. Not even to take a shit least they find some way to crawl into the latrine and escape through the sewers, and Maker if it had been possible Anders would have done it.

In retrospect, he knew he didn't warrant the scrutiny. They could have given him five minutes to wash his cock in peace, they just wanted to humiliate him so he wouldn't be so rebellious, and it had worked. For a few months. After those months were up, Anders learned how to bottle it up, put on a grin, and piss on the boot of the templar assigned to him.

The black-eye had been worth it, and the First Enchanter had convinced the Knight-Commander to take the guard off him after that, but the memory stuck with Anders. He hated wash buckets ever since. They reminded him of degradation and humiliation and such a grievous injustice it boiled the blood to think that he had suffered it.

"It was a long time ago," Anders said to himself at the sudden flash of rage he was vaguely certain had been from Justice. Lirene had a few backrooms where the refugees could wash or shit in peace, and that alone made it better than the Circle had ever been. Anders sat on a bench with a bucket for washing and a bucket for shitting, doing his best to get the grime off his skin. It wasn't easy.

He'd had two baths, since he'd gotten to Kirkwall. One his first night at the warehouse, and that had been little more than a splash of water on his face, but Anders was counting it. The second was after the mites, and Anders had scrubbed every inch of his skin pink and raw with a piece of pumice. Anything made from rock was relatively inexpensive in Kirkwall, but it was far from luxury.

Anders missed when he'd been able to lose a bar of soap in the tub and grab another one from the Wardens' limitless supply. There was no soap for him now. It was a luxury Anders wasn't sure he
could afford when he only had seven silvers left to his name. He’s started with thirteen, and seemed to burn through one every other day. Someone needed the coin for a burning, someone else needed food, yet another needed swaddling clothes.

It was good work. Anders didn't know whether it was him or Justice that thought as much, but it was a good feeling. Anders wrung out a strand of his hair and watched the soiled water spill down his forearm and over his knee. It was a light brown with grime, dirt, and blood by the time it reached the floor and swirled down the drain into Darktown.

Anders fished out the cup floating in the bucket and dumped another round of water over his head. If nothing else, his magic meant it was warm, but it never stayed that way for long in winter. A chill cut through the warehouse, and it reached Anders' bones even under four layers of fabric. Sitting on a bench naked, he was freezing in-between each splash of water. Anders ran his nails along his scalp, and a few strands of hair caught on the uneven edges. He needed to file them, but Anders was too busy to do much of anything lately.

Anders loved it. He didn't have time to think, to worry, to reflect. There was always something to do. Someone to help. The fact that Anders could summon clean water at will seemed Maker-sent to the refugees. If Anders wasn't healing a break, or a contusion, or a cough, he was summoning water. He filled canteens, barrels, and buckets. He conjured fire that burned without tinder to help heat the warehouse during the day, and that meant Lirene could save the fuel for night.

He helped clean. He helped cook, albeit poorly. The refugees ate everything from sawdust to bark to rats to pigeons to whatever scraps they could dig up out of the trash. Today they were eating scrapple. Lissa had dragged Anders to the local butchers to beg for scraps and trimmings, and they'd mixed it into a mush with buckwheat and baked it. Of the score of refugees packed into Lirene's warehouse, everyone was to get a loaf the size of Anders' palm.

It was for a First Day feast, and Anders wanted no part in it. Lirene had even splurged for a cask of watered down ale, but Anders wasn't in a celebratory mood. He just wanted to keep busy, keep from thinking, keep from being. Anders felt something at the thought. A feeling like a crease in his brow and a tension in his shoulders, and Anders sighed. "I didn't mean it like that,"

Anders had been there, in the Fade. He'd felt himself behind his own eyes, able to watch every action Justice made with his body and little more. He'd been devoid of any sensation until he'd managed to push past the spirit to kiss Compassion, and that was it. Anders couldn't help wondering if it was the same for the spirit in the real world, sitting, watching, silent save for when he pushed for his thoughts to be heard.

Anders had to hope it was. He'd taken to talking to himself, with the hope that he was also talking to Justice, and they weren't quite so alone. "I don't know if you can tell, but lately I've been thinking maybe we could practice switching," Anders said, scrubbing his shoulders when there was nothing more he could do for his hair. "You know, like we did in Darktown.

"I heard what you said to-..." Anders swallowed down a lump in his throat and shut out the thought of Compassion's fading light, wracked with sobs and twisting into Mercy, "What you said in the Fade. About how you liked breathing, feeling. I don't know how it works for you, but when you're up front everything feels muted for me, and I could really use that right now. What do you think?"

Anders wrung out his rag and dunked it in the water bucket. He washed under his arms, trying to focus on himself, on his thoughts, but he'd never been very introspective. It was hard for him to understand what Justice felt. What he wanted. To even understand how much of a distinction there was between them.
Justice had. In the Fade, Justice had said everything Anders had wanted him to say and done everything Anders had wanted him to do. Anders sat washing himself, his thoughts turning over themselves, his every emotion in a tangled knot he didn't dare unravel for fear of what he'd find, and had no idea what the spirit felt. Anders sighed, and gave up. He finished washing and dried himself off with a fire spell before he dressed.

Anders was a mess of cotton, wool, and leather by the time he finished dressing. He had his smalls, and a base layer of cotton he wore under his black leather trousers. His elaborate belt with all its pouches, sheath for his dagger, bookstrap for his grimoire, strap for the canteen Natia had given him, and a buckle made from silverite he could probably pawn if he got desperate.

Another base layer of cotton on his chest, black leather chest armor on top of that, two tunics on top of it, his brigandine spaulders, and the feathered spaulders on top of those. Two scarves he'd taken to tying around his chest and neck, two layers of socks beneath the boots Franke loved, his gloves and the silver bracers he wore over them.

Add in two satchels over either shoulder, and Cor's nickname was painfully accurate. Anders felt like a packmule. The clothes were heavy enough, but one of his satchels was filled with books, and the other with cookware. Anders knew he looked ridiculous, but he didn't see any other alternative. It wasn't as if there was anywhere he could leave his things, and he wasn't about to risk any of them being stolen.

Especially his staff. Vigilance was the most unsubtle thing Anders could have walked into Kirkwall with, and he knew it, but he couldn't bring himself to get rid of it. He'd already had a few close calls because of it. Patrols through Lowtown were mercifully rare, but they still happened. Whether it was orange guardsmen or silver templars, Anders had been forced to flee down the occasional side alley.

Once he'd gotten himself lost as a result, and hadn't made it back to Lirene's warehouse until well after dark. The reception when he came back was more than a little unexpected. Lirene was practically overwrought, and Anders had only known the woman around a week. More than a few of the refugees were awake, and pacing the common room waiting for him. Apparently, someone had seen the templar patrol, and lost sight of Anders, and assumed the worst.

It was a little jarring to realize how much he meant to them, but it wasn't as if they had anyone else. They had Lirene, and they had Cor, and now they Anders, and as far as Anders knew, there was no one else in the city looking out for Fereldan refugees. There were a few names that came up in conversation, Faj, Vallen, Hawke, and a handful of others, but they were just Fereldans doing well, and not actively helping.

He knew he should have done something with them for First Day, but the last thing Anders wanted to do was spend a day reflecting on the past year. The past was the past, and the dead should stay dead. That was what Anders had said.

'He said to the necromancer,' Amell had joked in response; drink had left his face flush, and when he'd smiled Anders could see the mirth sparkling in his eyes, when they were usually so enigmatic, so captivating, so red.

No. No, no, no. Anders had gone months without thinking about him. He wasn't going to start now. Anders ran an anxious hand through his hair, and his glove came away with a few blonde strands tangled around it. Not again. Anders hoped he never passed a looking glass. He didn't want to know how thin his hair was getting or how far back his hairline was now. Twenty-seven, and at this rate Anders wouldn't have been surprised if a few strands were grey.

He needed a hair tie. He needed a shave. Anders left the washroom and made his way through the
warehouse. Refugees were clustered into small circles, and more than a few whistled and called for
him to join them. Anders waved in answer, and slipped out of the warehouse and into the common
room. Lirene was manning the shop, despite the lack of customers on the annum.

"I'm going out," Anders said.

"Anders, do you want to leave the staff?" Lirene asked, gesturing with her thumb to the cage in the
back of the shop where she and Lissa slept and kept all their personal affects. "We'll keep a watch for
you. Your satchels too, if you need,"

Anders thought about it, and ultimately shook his head. Everything he had meant everything to him.
He didn't want to risk it, "I'll be alright,"

Anders left the shop, and stepped out into Lowtown. It was snowing. Ash and soot mixed with the
snow and painted the sky a dismal grey. Anders untied one of his scarves and tied it around his head,
and over his ears. He brushed his fingers over the silver stud in his right ear, and thought briefly of
Sigrun before he pushed the thought away.

Anders left the shop to jog down Lowtown's steps and twisted alleys towards the docks. It was one
of the few places in Kirkwall Anders could find on his own, mostly because all he had to do to find it
was make sure he was heading down roads that slanted down. He passed a group of children kicking
a leather ball back and forth, and kicked it back to them when it came his way.

Today wasn't so bad, Anders supposed, so long as today stayed today and didn't wander into
yesterday. The kids followed him, either for his staff or for boredom, kicking their ball back and forth
and generally getting in his way. "Spare a bit, messere?" One of the boys begged.

"Spare a bit!" One of the others chorused.

Anders lost twelve coppers to the little robbers. He had a smile by the time he reached the docks, and
made his way through the crowds of sailors and dockworkers, and around piles of cargo and barrel
after barrel of fish. He made it the eastern warehouse district, and climbed a set of stairs to an
overlook of blackrock that stared out at the Waking Sea. Anders took a seat, and dangled his legs
between the spikes that rimmed around the overlook.

The Gallows were there, in the distance, sitting atop a small island of blackrock. The fortress doubled
as a lighthouse, and in the evenings a great beacon fire raged from the top of its ramparts. Anders
didn't doubt it was a magical fire; the templars were always eager to make use of the mages they
oppressed. Treating them like tools, or turning them into them with the Rite of Tranquility if they
fought back.

The chains were there, hanging between the gallows and the massive bronze statues. Apparently
they could be lowered to blockade the docks, but Anders didn't care for their practicality, only their
symbolism. He came to this spot often to look out at the Gallows and think of Karl, and wonder how
he was ever going to reach him.

He couldn't take a boat to the Gallows. Anders might not have been the brightest tack in the box, but
he wasn't that stupid. The Collective could get them in touch, Anders was certain, but Cor's men had
turned up no sign of the symbol in the city. Anders didn't know whether that was the truth, or just
what Cor told him so Anders would keep healing his men. For all Anders knew the Dog Lords
might not even be looking.

"What are we going to do?" Anders asked aloud, "Karl hasn't been in contact with the Collective for
a month. He might be in trouble."
Just wasn't sitting next to him. He didn't give an answer, but Anders did feel an overwhelming sense of certainty and urgency that something needed to be done. "Well that doesn't help us any," Anders muttered, "I know we have to do something. I'm asking what."

Nothing.

Anders sighed, and dropped back onto the blackrock to stare up at the sky. There was no foundry by the docks. Only snow was falling. Anders stirred a few with a breath of mana, and behind him someone chuckled.

Anders flung himself off the ground and flipped over with an unnatural alacrity. He held his staff out behind him for balance and energy and brought up a hand to channel whatever spell he needed. A man in plain garb wearing a hood stood in front of him, a wave tattoo above his left brow and on his cheek on the same side.

"Long time no see," The man said, "You want to put the light out before you get us both killed?"

Evon. The name came to Justice. He was familiar to Anders. Justice let go, and Anders stumbled to his feet. "Evon!" Anders exclaimed. "What are you doing here!?"

"Living, thanks to you," Evon said. He held out a hand and Anders hurried forward to take it. One of them turned it into a hug. Anders had met Evon for all of a few hours when Anders and Velanna had gotten him, Alim, and Melissa out of Amaranthine, but Evon might have been an old friend for how much it meant to Anders to see a familiar face.

"I thought you went to West Hill!" Anders said.

"Alim and Melissa went to West Hill," Evon said, pulling back from him and tugging his hood lower on his tattooed face. "I went here. Kirkwall needs help like you wouldn't believe. A little dog told me you've been looking for us. Come on, it's not safe to talk out in the open. Especially not with you holding a staff. You need to get rid of that."

Anders followed Evon down the stairs and to a back alley. Evon lifted open a storm drain, and waved Anders down into the blackened pit. Anders summoned a ball of magelight before he climbed down into the sewers. Anders hopped off the last three rungs of the latter and hit the ground with a splash. The sewage was little more than a thin film on the ground. It could have been worse. Evon followed him down the ladder, and led him through the vermin invested sewers for what felt like an age.

"Where are we going?" Anders asked.

"We've got a place in the same dock with the Qunari compound," Evon explained. "The templars and guardsmen don't patrol there as often. They're trying to keep the tensions down. I've only been here a month, but even I can see this city is coming apart at the seams. Selby is in charge of operations here."

"What happened to Karl?" Anders asked.

"Who?" Evon asked. Anders' stomach ached.

"Karl," Anders said. "Karl Thekla. He used to be the Collective's contact in the Gallows."

"The Collective doesn't have contacts in the Gallows anymore, Anders," Evon said. "Stannard is out of control. You don't understand. They're locking mages in their cells, refusing them appearances at court. The slightest crime will get you made Tranquil."
"I need to know what happened to Karl," Anders said. "He's a friend."

"I'll take you to Selby," Evon said, "Maybe she can help you."

Evon let him to a corner in the sewers, where light broke through the ceiling from another storm drain. They climbed up it, and out into a back alley, and Anders let his light go out. The street was painted with a thin layer of fallen snow, and the press of their boots melted it. Evon led him to a door cut into a wall of sandstone, and knocked three times. "Package delivery," Evon called.

A brute of a man opened the door. He looked like a dwarf the size of a human: thick at the waist, a barrel in the chest, and battering rams for arms. He looked down at them from under a mess of ratty brown hair, waved the two of them inside.

"Thanks, Donal," Evon said when they were inside. The building looked, surprisingly, like a packaging house. All around them were bulk shipments in from the docks, crates and barrels clustered and stacked into rows. A small desk sat off to the side of the entrance, where an older woman with a pallor as grey as Kirkwall’s skies was sitting.

"Why always with the codes?" Anders asked. "You couldn't have come up with anything better? Why not a knock knock joke? I've got a good one, knock knock-"

"No." The woman behind the desk frowned.

"But it's a good one," Anders pouted. "I thought you were all for cloak and dagger phrases."

"You want a cloak and dagger phrase?" The woman asked, "How about the smart-mouthed Fereldan gets slapped across the face?"

"I wouldn't," Anders warned her, "I'm into that. I'll get the wrong idea."

"Selby, this is Anders," Evon introduced him in the humorless lull that followed, "He's the one that got me out of Amaranthine. He holds our Most Trusted status,"

"Well aren't you something," Selby decided, eyeing him over. "Alright, love, let's go over a few rules. The next time you come here: no staff. Three knocks, and you ask for a package delivery. We keep our special rates on a board in the back. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I need to get a letter to someone in the Gallows," Anders said.

"You got a friend there?" Selby asked.

"Karl Thekla," Anders said.

Selby nodded, "You and a handful of others. Stannard doesn't let the mages send letters out anymore. We had to get a girl in with the maidservants. You can find her at the Rusty Anchor, for two hours every day after dark. She wears a pink shawl and a rose bush brooch, and she's got cherry blonde hair with a face full of freckles. You can't miss her. You bring her your letter, and she'll handle it. No charge."

"Just like that?" Anders asked.

"Just like that," Selby said. "You know how it is, love. Personal letters are no charge. I'll be damned if I let Stannard change that."

"That's pretty marvelous of you," Anders said.
Selby smiled, "Anything else, love?"

Anders hesitated. He felt like there was something else he wanted to ask, but he couldn't find the words. There was nothing else. All he wanted was to get back in touch with Karl. Which must have meant Justice wanted something, but Anders couldn't imagine what.

"You looking for work?" Selby prodded.

"Yes," Anders' mouth betrayed him. He had plenty of work. They had plenty of work. "Stop it." Anders muttered.

"What?" Selby asked.

"Nothing, sorry," Anders said. Well... it wasn't as if Anders didn't want to stay busy, and if Justice wanted to help the Collective it wasn't like they couldn't use the coin. "Work would be great."

"Donal can show you," Selby said.

"Books are this way," The giant said with a nod towards the back of the packaging house.

Anders left Evon behind to follow the giant to a back room that looked like an office. It had a few bookshelves, a desk, and a chest. The giant pulled a set of keys out from inside his shirt and unlocked the top drawer of the desk to pull out a giant tome and drop it on the desk in front of Anders. The giant set a massive thumb in the middle of the book, and flipped it open towards the middle, where the most recent requests were written listed.

"Thanks," Anders said and flipped through them. There was a man missing a grimoire, a request for a satirical tome on the Chantry, a few missing persons, someone paying five silver for ten bundles of deep mushrooms. Anders could do that. It wasn't as if there hadn't been plenty of deep mushrooms in Darktown. "So... how do I accept, or whatever?" Anders asked.

"I stamp it, let everyone know someone else's doing it. You come back with the stuff, I stamp it again."

"Well, stamp away," Anders said.

A bit of riffling through stationary and drawers later, and the request was stamped. Anders went back into the main room, and found Evon sitting and talking with Selby. "Do either of you know where I can get parchment in the city?"

"I can get you some, but it's not free," Selby said, with a twist to her lips that made Anders think she wished it could have been. "One silver for a bundle of twenty leaflets, five bits for the pounce to prep them and ten bits for a quill. Three silver for a jar of ink."

Anders took off his boot, dumped the coin into his palm, and started counting. He had two silver and seventy-three bits left. Anders exhaled heavily. He had to stop giving out his coin if he wanted to be able to keep in touch with Karl, and Maker did Anders want to talk to Karl. He would have paid anything if it gave him a friend.

Anders handed over the coin, Selby handed over the supplies. Anders fit them into the satchel that held his books, and had to do some rearranging and stuff his mother's pillow and one of his books into the satchel with his cookware. When he had everything settled, he exchanged thanks and goodbyes and left the packaging house.

It was still snowing, but a few tugs to adjust his scarf, and it didn't bother Anders. There was
something beautiful in the crunch of the snow under his boots, the cloud of white fog that made up his breath, the cold wind on his skin. Anders leaned on his staff and looked out at the Gallows. Karl must hate it there. He'd craved the same freedom Anders craved, but he believed in it for all mages, when Anders had just believed in it for Anders.

Anders would write a letter today and bring it to the Rusty Anchor this evening. Satisfied with that plan, Anders took to the streets, and took to the stairs, and made his way back to Lowtown. He caught himself whistling half-way there. The world wasn't over. Anders' world wasn't over. He could get through this. He could start over.

Anders was on the street that led to the hex where Lirene's import shop was when someone grabbed his arm and wrenched him backwards into an alley darkened by one too many awnings. Justice whirled with the motion and pinned their assailant to the wall of blackrock with his staff. The dragonbone lay horizontal across a chest clad in leather, and their assailant panicked, "It's me! It's me! It's me! It's Bree! Anders it's me!"

"Bree?" Anders lowered his staff, and stared at the masked Dog Lord. "What are you doing? You scared the shit of me,"

"Templars," Bree hissed through her mask. "They're ransacking the Kennels and Lirene's shop looking for you! Lowtown is crawling with them. Too many people talked. Come on, we have to get you out of here. Conall knows a place."

Bree grabbed the hand not holding his staff, and ran him away from Lirene's hex. Anders let her drag him, satchels banging on his hips, "What do you mean ransacking? Is everyone okay? Did anyone get hurt?"

"We cleared out the Kennels when we saw them coming, but I don't know how Lirene's shop is doing," Bree said.

"Where are we going?" Anders asked.

"Darktown," Bree said, dragging him into a nondescript building at the end of the alley they were in. There was a lift inside. Anders stepped onto it, palms sweating into his gloves. Bree started the crank, "We've got a second base there. You can stay with us-"

"No," Anders said.

"The templars-" Bree started.

"Are fucking with you because of me!" Anders said, "I'm not staying with you. I shouldn't have stayed with Lirene. Why am I always so stupid? I should have known this would happen. I don't belong near people. If not the templars, then it will be the Wardens, and if it's not the Wardens, then it'll be me, and I can't-keep-hurting people like this,"

Anders pressed his thumbs into his eyes and wished he had a wall to bang his fist against, but the walls were sliding down around him with every lurch of the lift. He settled on banging his staff against his head instead. Why did he even still have this damn staff? What was he thinking traipsing around the most mage-hostile city in Thedas waving his staff about like a giant 'I'm a mage!' sign around his neck?

Yours always, Amell.

"Fuck," Anders sucked in a rickety breath. The lift stopped with a heavy thud that made him stumble, and opened up into a dimly lit courtyard of blackrock, strewn with refuse and refugees.
They stepped out onto the slab, and Bree looked up at him, "Anders, please come with us. The templars, it's whatever. You have no idea what kind of an edge you've given us against the Sharps, the Redwaters. A few more years of this and us Fereldans will finally have a place in this city, and it won't be down here."

"No," Anders said, "No, okay? Just no. I'm not doing it. I'm sick of people getting hurt because of me."

"More people are gonna get hurt without you," Bree said. "We need you."

"I... fuck, I don't know," Anders shoved his scarf off his head to run a hand through his hair. "I'll go somewhere. I'll get my own place."

"Where?" Bree asked, "You're a Fereldan and a mage. The best a Fereldan can do in Kirkwall without a gang is Darktown."

"Then I'll stay in Darktown," Anders said.

"At least come talk to Conall," Bree said. "Maybe we can help you find better than a upside down mine cart, yeah?"

"Yeah, fine, alright," Anders sighed. Bree let him down a flight of stairs cared into the rock, and Anders wrung his staff between his hands. "Are you sure you should even bring me down here? Isn't everyone going to resent me for bringing the templars down on all of you?"

"Stannard brought the templars down on all of us," Bree said. "Fuck Stannard,"

"Fuck Stannard," Anders supposed.

Bree led him down a tunnel that opened up into an underground cavern. The Dog Lords were scattered throughout, looking no more worse for wear than they had in the Kennels. If not for the backdrop of blackrock, the two holdouts almost looked identical. They had the same makeshift furniture, the same familiar faces.

No one scowled at his entrance. A few people even got up to say they were glad he was alright. Bree brought him to Conall, who understood Anders' aversion to staying with them. The crooked old man led Anders to a mineshaft, a short walk away. Someone had given it a door; the shaft cut into the blackrock for perhaps ten meters before it dead-ended into nothing. There were already a few pieces of makeshift furniture scattered throughout. Upturned mine carts. Crates. A lantern hanging from the ceiling.

"Used to be our place, before the litter got too big and we had to move," Conall explained, "Home shit home?"

"It's not very clean," Anders said.

"I don't think you're going to find clean in Kirkwall," Conall laughed. "But I think this works as a place to squat and see a few folk. I know the dogs can find it when they need you."

"Maker, Conall, I don't know," Anders leaned back against the wall and banged his head against the stone. "The templars are just going to hear about this eventually, come down here, and clear me out again."

"Not if all you did was heal the dogs. We could keep it quiet," Conall said.
"I'm not doing that." Anders said.

"Then, shit. I don't know," Conall shrugged, "I guess you move again."

"How is anyone supposed to find me if I'm running around in the sewers?" Anders demanded. "This city is a maze. What am I supposed to do, put up a giant sign that says 'Apostate Healer Here'?"

"What about that symbol you had us sniff out?" Conall suggested.

"No, that's not-" Anders sighed and banged his head on the wall again. He wrung his hands on his staff, and both of them lit with Veilfire. Anders stared at it, and cast it into the lantern.

"That'd work, I guess," Conall said. "Never seen green fire before."

"... I guess it would." Anders said.

"So that's what we're telling the boys?" Conall asked, "Look for the lantern?"

"I guess so," Anders said.

"Well I guess that's squared then," Conall said, dusting imagery dust off his hands. "You wanna come back for a bit? Get you something to eat?"

"No," Anders said. "You should stay away from me unless you need healing."

"Hey. Look. Piss on Stannard," Conall spat, "She's been doing this long before you got here, yeah? You change your mind, you know where to find us, and I guess now we know where to find you."

Conall left him alone in his new hovel, and Anders sank to the ground to stare around the small mineshaft. It was a far cry from Lirene's warehouse. There'd been a bed for him there. A washroom. Company. People who were probably being harassed and threatened right now because of him. Anders first thought was that he wanted to go back and check on everyone, but he knew that wasn't a safe option for him. He got up off the floor instead, and sat down at his new mine-cart table. He set his satchels on it, and pulled out the writing supplies he'd bought from Selby.

"Karl,"

Anders stared at the name, at his quill dripping ink. To the Void with it. Karl was his friend, and he was worried. He was doing pretending he didn't need any.

"I think it's been a month or more since our last letter. I would have written sooner but I didn't know how to get a letter to you. I've heard rumors about what's going at the Gallows, but I'd rather hear it from you. I'd rather hear you're okay. I'm staying in Kirkwall for now, and while I know I can't come to the Gallows, I thought you might want to know that I'm here.

"I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm here. A lot has happened for me recently. I left the Wardens. I've been trying to help some of the refugees in the city, but I think I'm doing more harm than good. I took a job from the Collective, mostly for coin, but I know you wanted me to be more involved with them. I don't know if you know any of the members in the city, but if you do you should send me back gossip.

"From what I've seen the templars here are abusive. I know, surprise, but I mean more abusive than usual. I hope you're doing alright. If the Knight-Commander has them harassing refugees for fun I can't imagine what things in the Gallows are like. Please write back soon. And be safe."
"Your friend,
"Anders"

Anders folded the letter and set it in his satchel, and spent the rest of the day wandering through Darktown, picking deep mushrooms and filling his satchel with them. He stopped, come nightfall, and made his way to the Rusty Anchor. The Collective contact was easy to find. Anders left his letter with her and left as quickly as possible, considering he still had his staff and he didn't feel comfortable leaving it in a shanty in Darktown, no matter the state of the city.

He brought the mushrooms to the Collective compound afterwards, and got an earful from a tired Selby about rules and ditching his staff, but he also got his coin. It put him up at seven silvers and seventy three coppers, and from there, despite his better judgment, his worse judgment, and his worst judgment, Anders went back to Lowtown.

He was sure a templar was going to skewer him, but it was night. The templars had up and gone, and left the streets to the thugs. It was like they were playing footbag with the refugees, and it made Anders frustrated, but not furious. He didn't have room for fury when he crept back to Lirene's shop, and knocked on the door when he found it locked.

"We're closed at night!" Lissa called from within.

"It's me," Anders called back.

The door opened. No templars rushed out. Anders supposed he'd earned some good luck. Lissa grabbed his hand and dragged him into the front room, and shut the door hastily behind him. Anders heart twisted with guilty. The front room had been trashed. The shelves were knocked over, the tables toppled, a few of the meager goods Lirene actually sold lay in pieces on floor and Lirene was sweeping them up when he walked in.

"Anders," Lirene said in surprise. "I thought... they didn't get to you,"

"I guess they got you instead," Anders said, "Lirene, I'm so sorry about this. I don't know what they broke, but I'll pay you for it."

"Piss on it," Lirene said, resting her broom up on the wall, "We both know there's nothing in here worth anything but the people."

"Did anyone get hurt?" Anders asked.

"Franke," Lirene said. Anders took a deep breath to keep calm, and Lirene fished out a key ring from her apron, "Come on, I have him laying up in my room,"

Lirene unlocked the door to the backroom she shared with Lissa, and let Anders inside. Franke was lying on one of the cots. He had a rag in his hand which he'd obviously been pressing to his face at some point, but his hand had slid off his face in his sleep. A nasty gash that Anders guessed had come from a gauntlet had torn up the left side of his face and blackened his cheek.

Anders knelt next to Franke and gave his shoulder a squeeze to wake him. Franke woke with a noise that sounded like a frog's croak, and blinked up at Anders. "Hey!" Franke grinned a wide grin with his wide mouth, "You're alright."

"You're not," Anders inhaled mana, and breathed out magic, and the gash on Franke's head knit back together under his hand.

"What, this?" Franke snorted. "Nothing. I uh... I might have told a templar or two to shove
Andraste's flaming sword up their flaming ass. Me and my big mouth, right?"

Anders exhaled hard through his nose.

"You two can just head to bed," Lirene said. "Lissa and I can finish cleaning up."

"I'm not staying," Anders said.

"... I suppose I can't fault you for leaving, but what do I tell Elissa?" Lirene asked, "She's expecting next month, and you said it wasn't going to be an easy birth."

"Tell her to go to Darktown and look for a green lantern," Anders said. "I'm not leaving the city. I'm just going where I can't hurt anyone."

"You didn't hurt anyone," Lirene said.

"People got hurt because of me," Anders said, "It's the same thing, and I'm tired of it. I'll be here if you need healing, but I'm not going to be the reason you need it."

Anders finished healing Franke, and helped Lirene finish sweeping and righting the furniture. He gave her a silver for the damage, and went back to Darktown alone. He made it to the lift, and no further. Justice found the way back to the small mineshaft they were to take up residence in. It was far from secure. The door had no lock, and Justice didn't feel comfortable with Anders sleeping alone in such a place.

He barricaded the door from the inside with the upturned minecart, rested Anders' things against the wall, and sat down on a pile of rotten straw that might have been a bed once. Justice had no need of sleep. It was Anders' mind that needed to rest, but Justice never knew what words would be a comfort to him.

Inadvertently or not, they had been responsible for the wrongs inflicted on those who had sheltered them. It was good of Anders to recognize it, but the wrong had been righted. They had healed and compensated all involved, and had sworn to act with more caution in the future.

Anders was still upset. Justice wished he could ask him why.

"You need to sleep," Justice said.

Anders didn't appear moved. Justice tried to pull on his memories, but they weren't fractured and disjointed as they had been before when his mind had broken. Before, they had been like something from the Fade, and Justice had understood them. What he pulled on now was a tangled knot of all the things that had moved Anders towards sleep in the past: exhaustion, intimacy, boredom, and the reasons he avoided it now: solitude, nightmares, darkness.

Justice could only fix one. He lit the lantern with veilfire, and Anders went to sleep.
As The Crow Flies

Chapter Notes

I wonder if anyone remembers the (admittedly very brief) reference I made to one of the things that happens in this chapter. I considered writing this entire chapter in italics, but I thought that would be a hassle to read, so we just have it in normal script. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon The Month of Verimensis
A Collection of Letters Hidden Under a Mattress
A Second Collection Stuffed into a Satchel

A,

It means everything to hear from you. To be honest, and I'm not sure I have it in me to be anything else anymore, it means everything to hear from anyone. The Knight-Commander has confined me and the rest of the Libertarians to our quarters for 'dangerous proselytizing and inciting to riot.' We were talking in the library. I suppose we should have known better.

The templars gossip that there are qunari in the city, and that they sew their mages' lips shut. I can't help but wonder if they've been giving the Knight-Commander ideas. Did you know there was a vote in Cumberland, some months back? The Libertarians were aiming to pull away from the Chantry, and the Knight-Commander forbid the First Enchanter from attending! He had to mail in his vote.

I know if he had been there he would have been able to pull more of the First Enchanters to our side. Instead the Knight-Commander silenced his voice, and Senior Enchanter Wynne gave such a speech I'm told three First Enchanters changed their votes at the last second. It boggles the mind. A mage who turns against her own kind to ally with the templars? One whose Circle was nearly Annulled? I think I've spent the past few weeks beating my hands on the wall about it.

I'm sorry to be telling you all of this instead of just rejoicing at hearing from you, but there's been no one else to tell and the thoughts have been driving me mad. I don't dare write them in my journal, and my hands are shaking at just the thought of turning this letter over to the person who brought me yours. You have to know there's a chance the templars will intercept these.

Don't sign your name on your letters in the future. And don't write anything that could give away where you're staying. I'd say don't write at all, but I'm not nearly that strong. I have to talk to someone.

This room is starting to drive me mad. It's not solitary, and I would never think to compare the comfort of my quarters to the horrors you suffered, but there are days it feels close. When I found a letter under my tray with breakfast I almost started crying. This is embarrassing, but the first thing I did was run to my window to look out at the docks and imagine one of the far off shadows was you.

There are times it feels like a blessing and a curse I even have a window. On the one hand, it's fresh
air and a view of the outside world, but on the other it's maddening to know it's all so out of reach. We had another jumper, a few months ago. I wasn't in my room at the time, so I didn't see it, but sometimes I look at that window and I know exactly why the Knight-Commander doesn't give us bars. I wonder if she keeps count.

I'm not surprised to hear you left the Wardens your old group. While I don't know the circumstances, I know you were never one for being tied down anywhere. I'm also not surprised to hear you're helping the refugees. You know the templars used to talk about you back in Kinloch? The other apostates made for the hills, the forests, and you always ran to the cities.

You never could resist helping anyone who needed it. I hope the refugees are looking out for you. This isn't a safe place for a mage to be, even in the Circle, but out there? I can't imagine it. The templars bring in more corpses than they do apostates. If you ask me, I think you should keep running. Go somewhere else. Rivain, the Anderfels, anywhere but Kirkwall.

At the same time I hope you stay here. There's obviously nothing I can do for the Collective our friends locked in this damn room, but knowing you're out there and you're helping with our plight means a lot to me. I know I'm not the only mage who could be doing better. They call our Circle the Gallows for a reason. I think the Knight-Commander would see us all hang if she could get away with it.

I know you said you wouldn't, but don't come to the Gallows, whatever you do. I would give anything to see you again, but the last thing I want is to see you in here. The Knight-Commander might let us out of our quarters someday, and when that happens I might be free to walk the grounds or even visit the Chantry again, but promise me you'll stay away and stay safe.

I know it's not my place to ask that of you, and this whole letter is a mess. I'm writing all of this and thinking to myself "What are you doing? You're going to scare him away," but I haven't spoken to anyone in over a month now. How did you survive solitary? What did you do? How did you pass the time? Those aren't rhetorical questions, please write back and tell me. I've spent the past few days sitting on my windowsill and I'm starting to scare myself.

Your friend,
K

---

K,

You're not going to scare me away. This past year My whole life I made the mistake of playing the aloof apostate and it's something I'll always regret. We're friends. If you want to tell me anything, tell me. I'm here and I'll listen. I'm not going anywhere. I don't think Ju a friend would let me leave even if I wanted to. The refugees here are suffering and we're the only ones who can help them.

Maker, I'm a refugee, and I'm suffering. I know everyone has it bad, but being a Warden what I am gives you an appetite. I didn't really notice it at the Vigil before. There was always something to eat, and the meals were three courses long. It's sticks and stones in Kirkwall. Literally. Have you ever eaten nettle soup? I had it one of my first nights here and it tastes like eating grass. With winter out in full I haven't had it since, but bark bread and rats aren't really an improvement.

I should probably strike that last paragraph. You don't need to hear me complain. Things could be a lot worse for me. I've got a place now. It's not pretty, but it keeps the draft out and it's nice to have somewhere to be. The refugees are looking out for me, for some reason. They helped me find this place, and they've been bringing me things. Food, blankets, buckets, you know, necessities.
I really hate the charity. No one here can afford to give anything away, but when I don't take it I end up tripping on it when they leave it outside my door. It's sad. They shouldn't be this grateful. I'm not even doing anything special. I'm just doing what someone should have been doing already.

I know I should have led with this, but I've been trying to work myself up to writing about it. Solitary... Maker, I don't know what to write. I didn't deal with it. I lost my mind and banged on the door for twelve months straight. The only thing that helped me was that cat. Whenever it wandered in through the food latch I'd have a bit of company. He wasn't a person but I could pretend he cared and understood.

Talk to me. Don't just wait to answer my letters. Write whatever you're thinking. Whatever you need to say. It's not going into the Void. I'm here. I'll listen.

Close your window,
A

A,

The window doesn't close, but I'll try to stay away from it. I suppose I shouldn't give the templars the satisfaction. We're not very good at being subtle, are we? Our letters are already full of so many scratched out words and phrases. I hate having to talk like this. Dancing around who we are because who we are is so shameful to the rest of the world.

I know you're already risking a lot getting these letters to me, but I wonder if I could ask you for a favor? Do you think you could send me something? Some piece of the outside world? A seashell, or flower, or anything? I'm sure you can understand why it would mean a lot to me to have something that doesn't reek of musky tomes and lyrium.

I don't know what you can do for food that isn't rats. I'd say take more jobs with our friends, but I understand if you're not interested in taking on that kind of risk. All the same, there are a lot of requests for ingredients, and the Planasene Forest and Vimmark Mountains are right next door. That you can go there at all gives you a huge advantage over the rest of us, and I think it would be worth more than a few silvers to some of us.

If you do go, please let me know what it's like out there. I've never set foot in a forest before, or climbed a mountain, or seen a river. There was the lake at Kinloch, the roads to Amaranthine, and then the Waking Sea, and there the list ends. You know I used to admire you? Your bravery, to escape as many times as you did. I imagine the outside world is far less a wonder to you now, but there are days I look out that window and I can scarcely imagine the rest of the world exists. It feels like such a fairy tale.

Is this something I should get used to? A letter every other day? It feels like too much to hope for. You said I should write anything, so I suppose I'll just fill the rest of this page. The food here is terrible. It's not rats and bark, but the templars certainly aren't of a mind to spoil me while I'm confined to my quarters. It's oats for every breakfast and stew for every dinner. The smell is starting to make me feel sick.

I noticed it's been snowing recently. This is an embarrassing question for a primal mage to ask, but what is that like? Any sort of frost incantation I would be familiar with, or something different? I remember a few winters where Lake Calenhad froze over. I always wanted the chance to walk on it, but it just never seemed to happen. I hope you're staying warm, wherever you are.

Your friend,
K,

I'm sorry I missed a day. I went down to the Wounded Coast and found you a seashell. Now I'm not a shell expert, but this thing is perfect. A ten out of ten, as far as shells go. It's smooth as glass, it's covered in these amber stripes, and it smells like brine and it's got that ocean whistle when you set it to your ear. And those curves? I have feelings about this shell.

Our friend wouldn't take it. They said only letters, and things that can fit in them, so I enclosed something else. I still have the shell. I'm tempted to head down to the Gallows and throw it up to your window. It's that pretty. I won't, don't panic, but it's still a tempting thought. I'll try to find you a flower or something for my next letter. Any preference? I don't know what kind of flora is in the Planasene Forest, but I'm guessing you've had enough of elfroot.

The coast is nice. It was good to get out of the city, so I'm glad you suggested it. Kirkwall starts to stink after a bit, and I think I needed the fresh air. There's a lot I really think you have to experience, and I can't just describe. The way sand gives beneath your feet, and the way the sea spray feels when it hits you and starts to itch later when it gets under your clothes because you're an idiot and didn't think about that.

There's elfroot everywhere, but it's winter so there aren't many other herbs growing. I don't know if our friends need it, but I know I do. I think I've started sort of a clinic in Kirkwall. I'm not sure I meant to, but there it is. People show up every day with some sort of ache or rash. Even more show up for water. I've even had a few who just want to come inside and sit by the fire I can keep going when they run out of things to burn.

Winter is hard on a lot of the refugees. The mineshafts mean the cold gets everywhere, and some of Darktown opens up over the cliffs. When the wind starts going in the chasm, you can hear it roaring through all of Darktown. I've healed more cases of the gripes than I can count, one fellow with pneumonia, and there are more people with joint pains in this city than there are cockroaches. (There are a lot of cockroaches).

You could conjure snow if you tried. You were fantastic at primal magic. It's not quite ice; you want it as granular as you can get, and with a sort of open structure without any of the pressure you usually put into a frost spell. When it's falling, you don't even notice it until it gets heavy, and it's more or less just wind. Walking through it though... that's definitely something I'd say you have to experience and I can't just describe.

It has a sort of crunch to it when you hit a clear patch, and there's just something about walking on it. Like you're a kid again and all you want to do is throw yourself in it. Don't get me wrong, but I hate that you have to ask me these questions. You don't have to stop, I just hate it. It's not fair. It's not right.

**IT IS NOT JUST**

Sorry,

A

---

A

*Thank you for the feather. Most of our quills are made from pheasant feathers. A crow's feather is a*
nice bit of change, and I have to say it reminds me of you. I know you weren't terribly subtle about how much you loved Tevinter fashion. I might be off balance, but I'm guessing for you it's something that speaks of a place where you can be free.

It's an easy bit of symbolism, isn't it? Feathers have always made me think of freedom, but for a different reason. With the occasional seagull that lands on my windowsill, I always find myself thinking I'd give anything to be one. I've heard stories about Chasind hedge mages that could shapeshift into birds, or wolves, or any manner of beast. You can guess why the Circle doesn't teach us that kind of magic.

I don't suppose you could find any Andraste's Grace for me? It's a small white wildflower that grows in winter, with a touch of red in the center like a sunburst. I've read about it, and seen pictures, but I've never actually seen one, and it would be nice to have something that doesn't come straight out of the Botanical Compendium. Most flora just makes me think of a mortar and pestle and grinding for an age to make more potions for the Tranquil to sell in the templars' shops.

Something that just speaks of beauty for beauty's sake would be a nice change. The Wounded Coast sounds like a wonderful place. Strange that they call it that. I'm sure you could come up with a joke about it. I miss your jokes. It always felt a little more somber with you gone, and here you're likely be branded a maleficar just for smiling. I wish I'd never been transferred here.

I tried conjuring a bit of snow per your recommendations outside my window, and you're right, it was rather simple. I managed maybe a handful before it solidified into a block of ice the first time, but I've got it down now. I've considered filling my quarters with it, after reading what you said about what a joy it is to walk through, but I'm sure if I did the Knight-Commander would accuse me of creating a distraction as part of some elaborate conspiracy to overthrow the Order.

Maker knows I would if I could. You don't need to be sorry about being angry. I know it's hard to convey a lot of things through writing, but capitalization and underlying do wonders for conveying anger when an exclamation point just isn't enough, and there's plenty to be angry about.

Did you know the Knight-Commander made over a dozen mages Tranquil last year? A failed Harrowing was a rarity in Ferelden, but mages aren't even being given the chance to fail their Harrowings here. You should see the way the apprentices slink through the halls with their heads down, too terrified to linger under a templar's stare least they be accused of being 'at risk for blood magic.'

We shouldn't be imprisoned over an accident of birth. I shouldn't be locked in this damn room for talking to a few friends in the library. I swear it's like the Knight-Commander is trying to turn the Circle into a prison. I'm glad I have a friend out there who cares. I can't tell you what your letters mean to me. I'm not ashamed to say they're the only good thing going on in my life right now.

Your friend,
K

K,

Why should you be ashamed? I remember solitary. I'll never forget it. If there was anything I could do to get you out of there I would. I don't care if you've got all the luxuries of your quarters, social deprivation is sick. I know you were shy back in the Circle, but if there's anything I've learned in the past few weeks it's that there's a difference between being alone and being lonely.

You deserve to smile at passersby, to talk to your friends, to shake hands with people you meet.
That's a thing that happens in the real world, you know. You don't see the same faces every day. You meet new people, and shake their hands, and learn their names, and you make a connection and it's new and exciting and it means something. The Circle is so fucked. Even if you're not in solitary, you're still trapped.

**IT IS CRUEL AND ABUSIVE**

I'm glad you liked the feather. I'll try to find Andraste's Grace somewhere. I haven't seen a flower like that in Kirkwall or on the Wounded Coast, but I'll make a trip out to the forest and try to find some. Interesting pick, by the way. Am I prying if I ask if it means anything? I know you said your relationship with the Maker was complicated the last time it came up.

Completely unrelated, but how do you press a flower? Asking for a friend.

I'm not sure I have anything for the Wounded Coast. It just seemed like a perfectly normal coast line next to the Injured Cliffs and the Limping Hills. That was bad. I feel bad for having written that. Here, I'll make up for it. Why couldn't the Fraternities agree on a vote in Cumberland?

This is a dramatic pause.

Because they kept arguing in Circles!

I'm not sorry for that one. It took me forever to come up with that. You better be laughing. I'm sure you are, you always used to laugh at my awful jokes. I don't know why you put up with my crap at the Circle. I don't think I took anything seriously back then. You would talk about the fraternities and the future, and I'd just sit there picking at my nails and nodding along.

It wasn't because I didn't believe in what you were saying. I really did. I admired you for having the wherewithal to put up a fight, and not just run from it all. You put up with the bullshit fraternity politics, with tiptoeing around the templars, with arguing with the First Enchanter. I never had the patience for that. It was all too much work. I just wanted out, and I couldn't see past that.

I'm sorry for that. It's not a fight anyone can fight alone. I should have been more supportive. Maker's breath, twelve? Really? A mage a month? And it's always blood magic they jump on when they need an excuse, isn't it? At risk, what does that even mean? Everyone is at risk to learn blood magic. It's blood; it's right there. Does the Knight-Commander pull out the brand every time an apprentice gets a paper cut or something?

Your letters mean a lot to me too. I've made a friend or two here, but it's just not the same. They don't really know me, and I can't tell them anything about my past or I'd just be inviting it to catch up with me. And they're not mages. I can't tell you how many people keep calling me out on every little quirk the Circle ever taught me. I know they mean well, but they just don't understand.

Your friend,

A

A,

Is it sad that I never realized that? When I was transferred to Kirkwall, I had to meet everyone here, and it was absolutely overwhelming for me. I shook a hundred hands and saw a hundred new faces and locked myself in my quarters for a week to unwind. I can't imagine meeting someone new every day. I know it would be overwhelming, but past that, you're right. It does sound exciting.

You're not prying. The Chantry was the only place the Knight-Commander was letting mages visit
for a while, remember? I think you can only sit in the pews and listen to the proselytizing for so long before it starts to eat you at you. I can't help thinking about it, especially considering the Chant is the only thing the Knight-Commander lets us read when we're in solitary.

I've been reading a lot of the Canticles of Transfigurations and Andraste, trying to find the verse that says we deserve to be treated this way, but there's nothing. There's just that one verse, "Magic is meant to serve man and never to rule over him," and there are so many ways to twist it. That the Chantry decided to interpret it as "man is meant to rule over mages" boggles the mind.

And the rest of Transfigurations? Andraste spoke out against doing harm to a man's peace of mind. Where does removing a man's mind play into that? How can the Chantry possibly justify the rite of Tranquility? And the things the templars do to the Tranquil. You would not believe how bad they have it here. I went to speak to one, and the poor girl... Do you know what she told me?

She said she was grateful she was Tranquil, because she would never be able to handle the things that had been done to her otherwise. I'd rather be dead. I don't thank the Maker often, but I thank him for helping me pass my Harrowing. That's not a fate I'd wish on my worst enemy. They'd be better off dead, but the Chantry would never let go of the Tranquil. Not when they're such a convenient source of slave labor.

Why am I writing about this? I'm upsetting myself. Flower pressing. For your friend. You need the flower dry, two flat surfaces, and some parchment. Place the parchment on your flat surface, flower on top of it, another layer of parchment, and the second flat surface on top of that. Weigh it down with something and leave it for a week, change out the parchment every other day if you can.

Or you could just send me a crumpled flower with your next letter and I can do it. I definitely understand what you mean about it being difficult to relate to your friends when they're not mages. I feel like if I was talking to anyone else I'd be embarrassed asking for things like this, but I know you understand. It's so cloistered here, any little piece of the real world feels like a blessing.

Yes, I absolutely laughed at both of those jokes. I wasn't putting up with you back at the Circle, and you never gave me any 'crap.' You were a good friend, and you were more than supportive. I wasn't looking for you to take up arms and tear the Circle down around us, I was just looking for someone who understood, and you did. At the risk of making you uncomfortable, how I felt about you ran a bit deeper than admiration, and still does.

I don't suppose you ever considered anything like that with me? I know that's a ridiculous thing to ask, considering we'll never see each other again. At this rate I'll never see anyone again, but in my defense you are quite possibly the most compassionate man I've ever met, and you've been my only comfort in here since your letters started. I hope you don't fault me for asking.

Hopefully,
K

__________________________

Karl

K,

I don't know what to say.

You should have said something back at the Circle. Maker, maybe you did. You wouldn't have been the first amazing man I was blind to in the past. No, I never considered anything like before, but I'm definitely considering it now. I meant it when I said I admired you. You stand up for your convictions
and that's something that's always impressed me.

I wish it were just that simple. I met someone. Someone who meant a lot to me. And then I lost them, and I don't think I've really come to terms with that yet. I can't even bring myself to think about him. Just telling you this is I'm sorry. That's probably not what you wanted to hear. You're a good friend, and I could see you being more than that someday, but I need time.

You know if you could see me right now, you'd probably change your mind. I'm genuinely afraid to check a looking glass. I've been wearing the same clothes for weeks, I haven't shaved, I rarely get a chance to bathe and when I do it barely makes a difference. I keep my hair tied back just so I don't have to deal with it. And let's not even mention how little I've been eating. I know I've been losing weight. I'm probably going to have to change the notch on my belt soon. So, yes. Ridiculously handsome, as usual.

You probably don't care about any of that.

I haven't found your flower yet, but I'll keep looking for it. One of the florists in Hightown might have something, but there's no way I'd get past the guards with how I look right now. They'd kill me on principle for tracking in mud if they didn't mistake me for a darkspawn. Have I mentioned I'm a mess?

I found a feather I think is from a blue jay in the forest and enclosed it, so I hope that counts for something in the meantime. I thought it was beautiful but I have this... I guess condition lately where I think everything is beautiful, so I don't know if that means anything. Maybe if I find enough for you, you could make a set of spaulders out of them and we could match.

I've been thinking about visiting the Chantry, and just taking some time, but it's over in Hightown. I'd have to take a serious bath, frowns and all. More than that, I'd have to leave my stuff and a lot of my things behind if I was going to be up there without attracting attention, and I don't know that my clinic is secure enough for me to feel comfortable doing that.

I don't mean to scare you, but the templars already caught wind of me once. I'd rather keep my things on me in case I have to move again. It's getting kind of exhausting. If I don't get at least a few muscles out of this I'm going to be seriously disappointed.

For now I've just been reading this book a friend gave me on Andraste. I might see if I can't find a copy of the Chant in the markets. I know there's nothing in there that justifies the Rite of Tranquility. I can't tell you how angry I was to read about that Tranquil girl. It's not right that they do this to us. If you hadn't passed your Harrowing, from the sound of it they might have made you Tranquil just for talking in the library.

I can't stand the thought of you being in there. I looked back at one of your old letters, and what you said about Chasind hedge mages, and it reminded me of something. I came across this grimoire a while ago, and there was a sort of depiction in it of a woman transforming into a crow. I didn't really think much about it at first, but lately I can't stop thinking about it.

I don't know how the magic works yet, but I got lucky and it didn't get burned with the rest of the pages. I think if I studied it and had some time to practice, I might be able to learn how it works. It helps a lot that I also have the journal of the mage it belonged to, and I can cross reference if anything confuses me. I don't want to promise anything yet, but if I managed to figure it out, you said you had a window.

I know we both agreed I shouldn't come to the Gallows, but I keep thinking about that damn window. If I'd had a window in solitary, I know I would have jumped. I tried. I tried more than once
in that fucking room. If I could figure out a way to come see you, would you want me to?

A

A,

Yes

K
We got to 6000 views and 300 kudos! Isn't that fantastic? You guys are amazing! Thank you so much! There's a lot of Amell-related content in this chapter so I hope it doesn't bother anyone. I'm trying my hand at line-breaks for letters in place of italics, but if you prefer one or the other let me know. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:32 Dragon 1 Pluitanis Afternoon
Kirkwall Docks

"What do you call sex in a cobbler's shop?" Franke asked.

"I don't know, what?" Anders asked.

"Head over heels," Franke said.

"I love that," Anders laughed, "Okay, why do templars go crazy if you take away their fix?"

"I don't know, why?" Franke asked.

"Because they're in a state of de-lyrium," Anders said.

Franke chortled and knocked tankards with him. They were sitting on barrels outside the Rusty Anchor, the tavern too crowded on the annum for them to go inside. The door was ever open, barmaids and waitresses flowing in and out of the tavern to take orders from crowds inside and out. Anders' drink was more saltwater than ale, but it was free, and he wasn't complaining.

"Thanks again for getting drinks, Franke," Anders said. "You didn't have to pay for me,"

Someone had to pay for Anders. Anders was out of coin. Anders was always out of coin. It didn't matter how many jobs he took for Collective, how hard he scavenged in the forest or along the coast. Anders could never keep up with what the refugees needed. Anders could barely keep up with what Anders needed.

The refugees seemed to have developed a complicated barter system to combat poverty. Anders healed the sick. Evelina watched the children. Lirene offered shelter. Cor offered protection. Most of the refugees scavenged, some worked the mines, a handful begged. It wasn't pretty, but it was working. Anders was always hungry, but he wasn't exactly starving.

"Hey, come on, it's Wintersend, and I am ready to send winter the fuck away, yeah?" Franke nudged him with his elbow. Franke did what Franke did best: he talked. Anders leaned back against the brine-crusted wall of the tavern, and rested his arm on the windowsill, half-listening. It was a nice day, all in all.

A wind blew in from the Waking Sea, crisp and cool with a touch of salt in the air. Anders had spent all morning at the docks, trying to relax, to let go of his thoughts and all the holds on his mind and let
Justice come forth so he could feel it. 'Remember how you told me magic sings for you? Well it feels for me. The wind right now is sort of what you feel like.' Anders had said to himself.

It hadn't worked. Justice remained a quiet presence in the back of his mind, influencing the occasional thought, but not manifesting in any physical way. Anders had no idea what it took to make that happen. He was barely aware of it when it happened. Justice could bring a thought or word to the forefront, but the only times Anders lost complete control of himself seemed to be when his life was at stake, or when he was having a mental break down. Anders doubted he could learn to do either of those things at will.

It was still a nice day. Justice could see it, Anders assumed, even if he couldn't feel it. Karl could probably see the movement at the docks, if nothing else. Thinking of Karl made Anders rap his fingers on the windowsill. He shouldn't be sitting here. He should be researching Amell's grimoire. All of the demons had escaped in the fire. Anders hadn't even been aware of the fact originally, but when he'd touched the tome for the first time since Vigil's Keep, it had been silent.

Justice had no issues touching it now. Anders had read Amell's entry on shapeshifting five times over, and knew he'd have to open Amell's journal eventually if he wanted to learn anything more. The thought crippled him. The only time Anders had been able to accept Amell's death had been when Anders had taken Justice's hand and resigned himself to dying as well. The last thing he wanted to do was open that damn journal and look at every loving sketch Amell had ever drawn of him.

And what if he wasn't dead? The siege of Amaranthine was over. Anders wasn't on the verge of death. Amell had left the Vigil at the end of Harvestmere. Anders had left on the fifteenth of Haring. Everything had fallen apart so quickly. It had taken less than two months for the Orlesians to ruin everything Amell had built. What if Amell had come back only to find what Anders had done in his absence?

Anders took another drink of his salty ale. Franke was talking about one of the recent gang wars between the Undercuts and the Sharps. Anders didn't doubt a few of them would wander down to his clinic eventually. They might be there right now, bleeding out and looking for his lantern while Anders sat on his ass and drank ale he couldn't even taste. Anders breathed in a whisper of mana and let it slip over an anxious knot in his shoulders.

The magic was like a cool breeze on the back of his neck and helped Anders calm down. It was no wonder he couldn't bring Justice forward at will. He could barely keep his own thoughts in check, let alone decipher which were Justice. Anders rubbed away the prickling sensation Justice left in his fingertips. The spirit was still there, whether or not Anders could summon him at will. Anders was starting to get used to the way he felt, and the occasional breath of healing magic from Justice always seemed to help settle Anders' thoughts.

Alive or dead, the past was the past and that part of Anders' life was over. Karl and the Fereldan refugees were what mattered now. Anders had new obligations and he couldn't keep them sitting here. Anders finished off the last of his tasteless ale, and hopped off the barrel, "I think I'm going to head out, Franke," Anders said.

"Already?" Franke asked, face falling. He looked across the pier to where the impromptu theatre was still being pieced together with scattered crates and barrels, "They've only just started setting up. You not going to stay for the Adventures of the Black Fox?"

"I have some things I need to check on," Anders said.

"That coat, yeah?" Franke guessed, eyeing over Anders' mess of layers. "Winter's over. What do you
"even need that coat for?"

"Fashion," Anders said obviously.

"I hope not," Franke snorted. "Don't tell Lissa I said, but that coat is a mess."

"She's making it from scraps for me, of course it's a mess," Anders said, pressing himself against the wall of the tavern to make room for a passing patron. He should have been leaving, but he liked Franke. The cobbler had a great sense of humor, and if he talked a lot, at least he was aware of it. Franke had joked once his mouth was so big so he could fit his foot in it if he needed.

"That bad in Darktown?" Franke asked.

"Well it's not called Warmtown," Anders said.

"I suppose not," Franke agreed, "Stay safe, yeah?"

"You too," Anders said, "Enjoy the play."

The crowds were heavy at the docks on Wintersend, and staff or not, it was easy for Anders to get lost in them. A few people had recommended he bundle the staff up in firewood and carry it on his back, and while Anders had to admit it would be a good way to hide it, he also had to admit he was carrying more than enough already. He'd seen a handful of people with walking sticks since he'd come to Kirkwall. He wasn't as obvious as he could have been.

Anders made the climb up to Lowtown. Most everyone was heading for the docks. The Knight-Commander was going to have the mages put on a light show for Wintersend come nightfall, and Anders already knew he wasn't going to stay for that. Karl wasn't participating, and Anders was sure the mages who were had been forced into it. Mages were treated like pets in Kirkwall. The only time the templars seemed to let them out was to do tricks for the nobility in Hightown.

The Circle was a disgusting violation of all of the most basic of dignities. Freedom. Privacy. Self-worth. Intimacy. Sometimes thought and even life. Anders felt a wave of tension roll over him and tangle up in his shoulders, bunching his hands into fists around his staff. Anxiety coiled in the pit of his stomach, and Anders had a sudden urge to take action. To do something.

"Yeah I know," Anders said aloud, ignoring the few stares talking to Justice in public won him. "I know. We are. We're going to see Karl. You'll like him. He's kind of everything you were always telling me to be. He's always up for a spot of iconoclasm. I mean he's no-.... he's no Amell but..."

Anders made the rest of the trip to Lirene's shop in silence. He walked through awning-covered alleys, and into the crowded Lowtown market. The flies were out in force with the start of spring, and the rats seemed to have doubled. Anders saw a few children chasing a rat the size of a cat through the streets, and tried to pull on the creature's heart. The rat kept running, unaffected. Anders still couldn't manage blood magic without a casting cut.

It wasn't worth slitting his wrist in public to give a few kids a meal, but Anders hoped he'd get the hang of it someday. He'd never be Nate, prowling through the Wending Woods and taking down a deer with a single shot for their dinner, but if Anders could pick off a rat now and then for himself he would have been happy. Food for thought for later, he supposed.

If nothing else Anders was relieved Justice made no arguments against blood magic as he did demons. Anders supposed it helped that the spirit could finally feel his intent every time Anders sought to use it. There hadn't been many opportunities of late. To be honest, Anders hoped there never would be, but a tiny heart attack was a subtler way to kill a rat or pigeon than a burst of fire or
lightning that would have exposed him for a mage.

Anders reached Lirene's shop. Lirene and Lissa didn't celebrate Wintersend. Lirene had lost her husband to the Blight on Wintersend the year before last, and Lissa stayed in to be supportive. They were sitting together drinking when Anders let himself inside.

"Anders! I have your coat; let me get it." Lissa set her tankard down on the table, and vanished into the backroom. Anders came over to lean on the table and wait for her.

Lirene shook her head at him, "Over a month in this city, and the first thing you ask for is a coat made out of scrap leather. Don't you have any thought of coin?"

"If I do, I'm going about it all wrong," Anders said.

"You are at that," Lirene said. "How is Evelina doing?"

"Good," Anders said, "You know. It's hard for the kids in Darktown but it's better than giving them to the Chantry. I've only had one case so far, just a sprained ankle from playing too hard."

"Good," Lirene said. "You doing alright?"

"I'm alive," Anders said.

"Aren't we all?" Lirene agreed and took another drink.

Lissa came back with his coat and laid it out on the table. Maker, what a mess. The giant bundle was made from mismatched strips of leather in every shade of brown imaginable. The shoulders were made from the feathered spaulders that had been a part of Anders' robe once, and the sleeves had been pieced together from his old brigandine spaulders. The thread was beige, and blatantly topstitched, and didn't match the Warden blue.

"The Dogs scrounged up what they could from the tanners and the trash, but I ran out of fabric and had to use your brigandine for the sleeves," Lissa explained. "A lot of it is suede, too, so you're going to want to be careful in the sewers. It soaks up liquid like you wouldn't believe."

"That's fine," Anders said, "Do you mind if I try it on?"

"No, of course not, let's see it." Lissa said eagerly, taking a seat on the edge of the table. Anders set aside his staff and his satchels, and picked up the coat. It was alarmingly heavy, and ridiculously thick. Anders shrugged into it, and tied the few straps of leather that hung in the front. It went down to his knees, and covered everything he wanted it to cover.

"Perfect," Anders said.

"You almost work that," Lirene mused.

"You think so?" Anders asked.

"Give us a turn!" Lissa said.

Anders spun, and the coat spun with him. That was ten extra pounds for Anders to carry around. He had better be gaining some muscle to make up for all the weight he was losing.

"You really like it?" Lissa asked.

"I love it," Anders said, "You're a doll."
Lissa grinned, and Anders recognized the flush that spread over her cheeks. She brushed a strand of blonde hair back behind her ear with a closed-mouth giggled. Lirene shook her head and took another drink.

"I should go thank the Dogs too, but this is fantastic, Lissa, thanks for putting it together for me," Anders said, hoping to quash that crush before it blossomed into anything dangerous. "Let me know if you think of any way I can repay you."

"You don't have to do that," Lissa said.

"Damn straight he doesn't," Lirene agreed.

"You've been helping out a lot, especially with the water," Lissa said. "I'm glad we could finally do something for you."

Anders thanked both girls again and left them to their drinking. He made his way to the Kennels, and exchanged the same thanks with the Dog Lords he found celebrating there. Anders ended up allowing them to force him to sit and watch the fist-fighting competition they had going on. It helped that he was ravenous, and the Dog Lords were passing around roasted rat.

He watched for an hour before he made his way back to Darktown. A group of refugees called out when he passed by. "Healer, fire's out," One of them begged, gesturing to the pile of rotten wood they were standing around. Anders tossed a handful of fire onto it, and their thanks echoed behind him on his way back to the clinic.

Anders still had no lock, but so far no one had stolen from him. Anders didn't know how long that would last, but it was nice to come back and find none of his makeshift furniture had been taken away, especially now that one of the Sharp's gang had given him a stolen tapestry Anders had taken to using as a blanket. Anders left the lantern out, conjured a fire for himself, and set down his things inside.

It was a struggle for him to get the minecart in front of the door to barricade himself in. Justice had given him some strength, enough that Anders could drag Darrian's corpse without much difficulty, but it wasn't nearly as much as he gave him when Anders was channeling him. It took him close to five minutes of heaving and whining to block the door. When he finally got it, Anders sat down on the space he'd made his bed and went through his satchels.

Karl's letters were in the way of Amell's grimoire and journal. Anders took them out and stacked them carefully on the ground beside him. Depending on how long they kept writing Anders was going to end up needing another satchel. Anders got out Amell's grimoire, and opened it to the pages detailing shape-shifting.

It was a miracle Eylon hadn't burned them. So much of the tome had been lost to flames. It hurt Anders' heart to hold the charred leather in his hands and feel the occasional bit of ruined parchment break off under his fingers. There were four pages dedicated to shapeshifting, detailing the incantations necessary to transform into a crow, a wolf, a wild cat, a bear, a giant spider, even a swarm of insects.

The page Anders had focused on for the past fortnight was the charm necessary to make sure a caster's clothes transformed with them. Seeing it had won a raised eyebrow from Anders and an amused snort at the thought of flying into Karl's room completely naked. It would have been quite an entrance, Anders gave it that, but he wasn't up for making it.

The rest was there. The spells were laid out, but Anders knew there was more to them. Amell had
even put in an annotation in the margins that listed the page of his journal covering shape-shifting in greater detail. Anders had just been putting off reading it. Anders supposed he had to stop that if he ever wanted to see Karl.

Anders picked up the journal and stared at it. It was embossed leather with the sigil for the school of entropy on the cover. Less than subtle, Anders thought. "I don't suppose you can read this for me?" Anders asked aloud.

Unsurprisingly, Justice didn't answer. Anders sighed, and opened the book to the page Amell had noted.

I was so close. I could feel the pinpricks of down sprouting through the skin on my back, my vision seemed sharper, and it felt as if my whole body was being crushed, my skin pulled taut, my muscles contracting and bones breaking and reforming. The pain was euphoric. I laughed through it, or perhaps it was more a scream or maybe a caw, but it was working. I was so close.

Then Alistair came charging through the underbrush looking for me. My focus broke. The spell fell apart. I snapped back into my own skin and the whiplash nearly blinded me. Morrigan was outraged. She screamed that Alistair had nearly killed me interrupting, but I don't think he heard a word. All he could do was stare at me and scream, "Why are you naked!?"

I don't know why he bothered asking. He didn't listen to a word of mine or Morrigan's explanation. It was in the magic. No article of clothing can be tethered to a form until a mage has it mastered, and even then what clothes could I use? I don't have time to make myself a covering of crow feathers and wolf leather and bear skin in the middle of a Blight.

Of course Alistair didn't listen. "You're sleeping with Morrigan!" "You can't sleep with Morrigan!" "She'll suck out your soul!" "I can't believe you would do this to Zevran!"

I have to stop coddling him. I didn't mind at first. A chance to lead and make my own rules? To be at no man's beckon? No templar's leash? I reveled in it, but that was a mistake on my part. Alistair can't be a follower. If today proved anything it's that I could die tomorrow, and if that happens I know Alistair won't be prepared to take my place.

He was coming to ask me where to dig the latrines, of all things. There's not a single choice he feels comfortable making without my approval. I can't fault him for his loyalty, but it's getting out of hand. His screaming drew the whole camp. I never thought I would have to stand in front of all of my friends, completely naked, and scream the words, "I'm not fucking Morrigan! I'm trying to turn into a crow!"

The look on Shale's face. I've never seen the golem look so betrayed. And of course Zevran just laughed. "You are going about it all wrong if that is the case," And then what did he call me... Amorta? Amira? I need to learn Antivan.

I haven't come half as close since. I've spent the past fortnight studying crows, drawing them in the pages here, collecting their feathers, watching the way they move and trying to decipher how they think. It's one spell to make the transformation, and the mage stays transformed until they decide to release their hold on the form. The transformation takes longer the more unfamiliar a mage is with the form, but I know it improves with practice.

I've seen Morrigan make the transformation to wolf or crow instantaneously. A bear still takes her close to a minute. A crow shouldn't take me a fortnight. I've spent hours sitting in the forest naked
and leaving out carrion, trying to transform into a crow while Morrigan takes the form with little more than a breath and sits on my shoulder, pecking at me for my ignorance. I don't understand what I'm doing wrong.

This is absurd. I need this. How am I supposed to defeat the Archdemon if I can't match it in flight? If I could take the form of a crow I could land on the Archdemon's back and make the transformation back to a human, obviously with no weapons, but I think I could bite through my cheek, or cut myself on its scales. With enough blood let (two liters? two and a quarter?) I think I could burst the creature's heart. But I can't do that on the ground.

What am I missing? Is there some contrast of schools I'm not aware of? Like with how my studies of spirit and negation magic make primal and creation magic difficult for me? Is dirth'ena ensalin ara tel'halani? Ar nadas dirthara. Ar nadas halam banalhan. Damn the Circle. If not for their absurd restrictions this magic would be studied more. It would be studied at all. Morrigan has no idea why I can't make the transformation.

This is it. This is why all my jokes are terrible, and I can't come up with anything interesting to do during sex, and I rely on blood magic for everything. I have no imagination. I can't transform into a crow because I can't picture myself as a crow. There's a lack of inhibition to this incantation that I just don't have. I can't even bring myself to laugh in public, how am I supposed to relax enough to slip into another skin?

This is absurd. I can do this. I am Fausten Kieran Amell the Second and I will not be bested by a bird.

The next page contained a sketch of a golem, crushing birds beneath its feet and in its stone grasp. 'Fuck birds' was scrawled in a jagged script as the title. The next entry was completely unrelated to shape-shifting, as was the entry after that, and the one after that. Anders closed the journal laughing to himself, and looked up half-expecting to see Amell standing next to him.

He wasn't there, obviously. Anders was sitting in an abandoned mineshaft. He wasn't at Vigil's Keep. He didn't have a lover. He was alone with a journal, a grimoire, and a coat made out of leather scraps and feathers. Anders set the journal aside and forced himself to reflect on what he'd learned and not the man who'd written it.

Transforming hurt. Interrupting transforming could kill. Transforming took an inordinate amount of time for the inexperienced. Transforming took a vivid imagination, and maybe conflicted with the type of magic crazy dead elves who lived in your ex-lover's head used. "So how do you feel about all this?" Anders asked. "If Amell couldn't do it, do you think we can?"

Justice didn't answer.

Anders spent the next week watching crows in the streets. He doubtless looked insane doing it. An unwashed apostate crouched down in a corner clutching his staff and staring at crows, occasionally throwing them a cockroach he crushed underfoot to see how they'd react. They usually hopped forward to eat it, but they always left one of their group out as a sort of sentinel to watch the others.

It was the start of spring and they were nesting, paired off and gathering up bits of string and rubbish. They played frequently, and moved in hops when they ran, and awkward wobbles when they walked. They had a distinctive call, and when they took flight it was with a crouch to start and a few easy flaps of their wings.
Anders spent the week after that sitting naked in his clinic in the middle of the night, trying to imagine himself as one. It was an easy thought. Karl had the right of it when he said birds were reminiscent of freedom. Anders would have relished the ability to turn into a bird at will, and fly away from the Circles, the templars, and anything that bothered him. He was thinking as much, five days into his attempt, when he felt the pinpricks on his shoulders.

Anders bit back a delighted laugh and forced himself to keep concentrating. Anders took a deep breath and thought of crows, of flying, of escape. Nothing happened. There was no crushing weight on his chest, no sensation of his skin pulling taunt, no crack of his bones breaking. Anders looked down at his arms, and didn't see any hints of down breaking through his skin, but the pinpricks were still there.

It was an uncomfortable sort of tingling in his skin that got worse and made his palms sweat, his skin feel oily, his-

Darkspawn.

Anders scrambled up and threw on his clothes. He grabbed his trousers, his coat, his satchels and his staff before he decided not to bother with the rest and ran out of his clinic. He bolted towards the pull of them, the guttural whispers and tingling sensation that seemed to tug him down one flight of stairs after the next, until he could feel their malicious intent writhing in the back of his mind.

Rage and hunger and malevolence. An unnatural perversion that needed to be purged from the face of the world. Anders jumped down the last step and ran towards a group of refugees, sitting right on top of a storm drain that Anders could feel roiling with the filth of the creatures. "Get away!" Anders screamed. "Get away from the drain!"

Whether it was the fact that he was screaming, running, glowing blue, or half-naked, the refugees bolted. The storm drain birthed a geyser of darkspawn, their muscles cracking through their rotten flesh as much as flames cracked through Anders' own pale skin. The cry of a shriek pierced the air, but Anders' was through flinching for the ear-splitting sound.

His hands lit with lightning, and he let the spell snap off his fingers through the undulating mass of black. It crackled through them, and lit up their faces in the darker depths of the sewers. Their skin was carved from their skulls, peeling back from their lips, and sloughing off them in chunks from his spell. A shriek tackled him, and its jagged claws tore into Anders' bare chest.

The pain was sharp and sudden, and Anders screamed. Each rip of the shriek's claws left cracks for blue flames to burst forth from, and Anders reached for the channel of blood the shriek had opened and used it to boil the creature's blood. It exploded on top of him, and Justice leapt to his feet. He grabbed the genlock that rushed him and crushed its skull in his hand.

A second hand tore through the Veil, clad in a gauntlet of vibrant white light with size to rival an ogre's fist, and slammed the darkspawn back into the storm drain. Justice ran to the edge, and let Anders' magic roar between him, the Fade, and Vigilance. Anders' hand erupted in flame, every color between white and red, and Justice poured it into the drain after the darkspawn.

They burned, and left only charcoal and ash in their wake. Justice knelt, and leapt into the storm drain after the few survivors he could sense. He landed on the corpse of a hurlock, and the charred creature's corpse exploded beneath his bare feet. There were two darkspawn left. Justice lit the sewer with Veilfire, and a snap of lightning killed them.

Justice ran his free hand through the sweat on Anders' brow, and into the smooth strands of his hair before he faded with the feeling. Anders caught himself on his staff when he stumbled, a headache
pulsing behind his eyes a breath of mana washed away. Anders climbed back up the storm drain, and into a crowd of wide-eyed refugees.

The refugees came to their own conclusions. Word spread like wildfire. In under a week there didn't seem to be a soul in Darktown who didn't know him for a Warden, and even more folk clustered around his clinic for healing and protection after that. Anders wished that gratitude had been there before he'd run to find the darkspawn. When he'd gotten back to his clinic, everything he hadn't taken with him had been stolen.

His silverite tipped boots. His tusket gloves. His chest armor, and all his tunics. The one scarf that hadn't been tied around the strap to his satchel. The beautiful silver bracers Amell had locked about his wrists before whispering 'You'll never wear their shackles again.' Anders had cried himself to sleep for the first time since he'd gotten to Kirkwall.

A few of the more compassionate refugees tried to replace what he'd lost. Thom heard and brought an old pair of gloves with a seam torn down the side. Conall gave him an oversized tunic. Franke brought him nothing. The cobbler turned up at his clinic one day not with new shoes, but with tears in his eyes.

Franke slammed open the door to Anders' clinic with enough force to send it bouncing back off the wall. "You're a Warden!" Franke screamed.

Anders jumped, and felt Justice surge to the forefront of his mind. Anders had been reading the book of poetry Amell had given Justice, and not healing anyone, but if he had been he knew he would have lost the spell with how bad Franke startled him. "What?" Anders asked.

"You're one of them!" Franke screamed. "A Warden! A fucking Warden! You burned Amaranthine to the ground! You killed my wife! My little girls! You burned them alive in my fucking shop! And you knew! You knew what you did! For weeks! For months! You pretended to be my friend and you fucking knew what you did to my family!"

"Franke, no, I-" Anders started.

"You fucking bastard!" Franke screamed, and pulled a knife from his belt. Anders scrambled off his stool, and Franke took a wild swing at him.

"Franke stop! I didn't!" Anders stumbled backwards, and tripped over one of the railway tracks in the ground. Franke dove on him, and buried the knife in his shoulder. Pain sliced through Anders and lit his nerves on fire, but he'd had worse. Anders rolled them over with the knife still imbedded in his shoulder, and pinned Franke to the ground.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Franke screamed, thrashing so wildly Anders could barely hold onto him. A thought occurred to Anders, in the seconds between seconds, that he could force Franke to stop, with just a whisper of the blood rushing from his shoulder. Anders pushed past it.

"Franke stop!" Anders yelled at him, "Stop! Listen to me! I deserted! I'm a deserter! I'm not a Warden anymore!"

Franke bit back a snarl, his hands still fisted in Anders' tunic, but he heard him. He heard him without blood magic. Anders didn't need blood magic. Not for everything. Franke sucked in a sharp breath, and Anders heard his teeth grind together, "... before or after the city burned?" Franke asked.

"Before!" Anders said. "Before! You made it to the Chantry. Didn't you hear about the mage who defended it?"
Franke stared at him, wild eyes searching his face, chest still heaving. "... that was you?"

"That was me." Anders said. "I deserted. A lot of us deserted. One of my best friends died to stop the siege."

After a long minute spent staring Franke down, the man broke. He let out a sob, and let go of his hold on Anders' tunic to bury his face in his hands. Anders rolled off him, and Franke rolled over to sob into the tracks. Anders took a deep breath, and pulled the knife out of his shoulder. Pain flared through him, enough to make him snarl, but it was nothing besides the claw Amell had pulled from his leg in Kal'Hirol.

Anders healed the wound, grateful he hadn't been wearing his coat at the time Franke had stormed in. Anders set the knife aside, and the clatter of the rusty blade on the minecart broke Franke out of his sobs, "Fuck. Anders I-I'm so sorry-I thought-fuck-I..."

Anders slid an arm around Franke's shoulders and pulled him into some semblance of a sitting position. Franke gripped him in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought-I thought you were one of them."

"I'm not," Anders promised and hugged him back. The truth of his next words cut deeper than any knife. "I'm not a Warden anymore."

Chapter End Notes

Translation for the Elvish Amell slips into:
Is dirth'ena ensalin ara tel'halani? Ar nadas dirthara. Ar nadas halam banalhan.
Is the knowledge that leads to victory (arcane warrior specialization) not helping me? I have to learn (shapeshifting). I have to stop the Blight.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. Not much of a comment for this chapter, but I hope you're all still enjoying Anders establishing himself in Kirkwall before we get to Hawke. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

Note: Frankie's name is actually Franke. I was spelling it wrong. My mistake!

9:32 Dragon 2 Nubulis Afternoon
The Wounded Coast

Anders pushed his feet into the sand, and watched the way the coarse grains ate up his toes and the smattering of ruddy brown hair on them. There were broken seashells and bits of kelp washed up on the shore; a few pieces of drift wood floated languidly in the shallows. He stood in the shade of a cypress tree, and the sands free of its shadow had been warmed by the sun.

There was more sun in the Free Marches than Ferelden. It took the height of summer to reach the rainy country, but in the Free Marches the sun was out in full come the start of spring. Anders didn't tan. He freckled, and failing that, he burned. The sun felt fantastic on his face, the wind even better on his hair. The scent of brine and bark were all around, mingled with the sounds of the tide and nesting birds.

All of it was beautiful. None of it was attainable. Not for Karl, or any other mage. Not even for Anders, once the templars or the Wardens caught up with him. Anders pulled his coat tighter around his shoulders against the breeze. He wore nothing beneath it. All of his things were locked up in Lirene's backroom, and Anders had to hope they were secure there.

He couldn't keep clinging to them. They were things. They weren't important. If they were stolen, they were stolen. People were important. Karl was important. "Are you ready?" Anders asked aloud.

Anders had stopped expecting an answer, and started trying to feel for one. He felt confident. Certain. Perhaps for the first time in months. Anders knew that had to be Justice.

They had this. Anders didn't know who had shaped the thought, but it had occurred to them to think of this as the Fade. It wasn't imagination, it was will. They could be anything they wanted not because they imagined it, but because they were limitless. It was no fantasy, it was real. They were a crow.

It was that thought that had nearly killed them in the sewers of Kirkwall. Anders had felt the pinpricks of feathers sprouting through his skin as an itch, and embraced it. The rest...

Anders couldn't help admiring Amell. The last thing Anders wanted to do when the transformation started was laugh. There was no euphoria. No feeling of elation. Just pain and panic as bone after bone snapped, collapsed, and hollowed out. His lungs had shrunk and yet somehow inflated, and for the long minute it had taken him to finish the channel Anders couldn't breathe and had nearly passed out.
Then it was over, and he was shorter. Alarmingly shorter. His vision was unnaturally sharp, and he'd spotted ants crawling along the corner of his clinic he hadn't noticed before, along with what looked like a weevil. Anders had started hopping towards it before he realized what he was doing. He'd spent an age staring at the grub, as ravenous as he had been as when he was a human.

Anders ultimately decided he couldn't do it. Besides, one little grub wouldn't fill his stomach, and it was that thought that broke his spell and snapped him back into his own skin in a shower of feathers. The feeling was like someone had laid him out on a torture rack and pulled him apart, or what Anders imagined that would feel like. His every muscle was sore, his skin felt freshly peeled from a sunburn, and there was an ache in his bones that made it impossible for him to do anything more than lie on the floor of his clinic and groan.

But he'd done it.

He did it again, a few days later when his body recovered. And again, and again. He walked around his clinic as a crow, talons scuffing through the dirt, trying to get a sense for the form. He had a new center of gravity and had to learn how to balance without pitching forward onto his beak. He practiced jumping up onto his furniture, and from there he tried to practice flying.

The room was too small. As a human, there was plenty of space for Anders to move, and plenty of light from his makeshift fire pit. As a crow, Anders felt like the walls were closing in. He flew in panicked circles, caged, contained, and always ended up crashing into a corner and snapping back into his human form.

Anders spent two days working charms into his coat. The charms were wrought with blood and it came as no surprise to Anders. The coat, his phylactery, Amell's grimoire. There was no binding anything to his soul without blood. It was in the nature of the magic. Every spell that utilized blood magic tugged at the core of a person, whether to persuade or corrupt or bind.

It came naturally to Anders, and Justice kept quiet. Anders wished he had a way to tell the spirit how much his trust meant to him. Saying as much aloud wasn't the same as being able to say it to Justice's face. But it was all they had, so they made do.

"Ready?" Anders asked again, and again he felt certain. He started the channel, and stared at his feet as they cracked and crunched into talons. Cerulean flames shone through where his skin split and pulled taut, and Anders wondered if Justice was helping him. Then he collapsed.

It never felt like shrinking. It felt like the world grew. A crow stood on the beach, and cocked its head to stare at the cypress it stood beneath. The branches looked welcoming. The crow crouched and launched itself off the ground, and with a few frantic flaps of its wings it reached the branches. Anders' first and last thought as a crow was to grab it with his hands.

Anders lost the spell and snapped back to his human form in an explosion of feathers. He crashed into the sand with a startled yelp and banged his shoulder on a root. "Andraste's fucking tits," Anders groaned, rolling over onto his knees and letting Justice heal his shoulder. "Can't you do this for me? You're the Fade spirit. You understand using your will to manipulate things."

Anders couldn't name the feeling that flitted through his head in response. Frustration or maybe impatience. Anders sighed and tried again. It took a minute of blinding pain, but he had it back. The crow looked at the tree and tried again, launching itself off the ground to flap over the branches. It grabbed for one with a talon, and with a bit of panicked scrambling and flapping of wings managed to land on it.

The crow folded its wings against its sides and paced back and forth on the branch. The crow was a
crow, and being a crow was easy. The crow launched itself off the branch and took flight. Wings up, wings down, a frantic rhythm to start that leveled out when it gained altitude. Flying outside felt infinitely more natural than flying in the tiny cage of its roost.

The crow dipped a wing to practice turning. It dipped its head to practice diving. It mimicked the motions of other crows it had watched in the streets, and it flew. It could fly. It was free, and it felt amazing. The coast fell away beneath it, and the crow soared out over the ocean. It could go anywhere.

It struck a draft of wind, going in the opposite direction, and the force of the gale knocked it end over end. It flapped and fluttered in a mad attempt to right itself, saw the fast approaching ocean, and Anders lost his hold on the spell in a panic. He crashed into the ocean, and the weight of his coat dragged him down under the waves.

Everything was black. Anders lost track of himself in the darkness and couldn't find the surface. He crashed into something sharp, and the rough texture of whatever he'd struck tore open his leg. Salt water rushed into the wound, and Anders snarled in pain and sucked in seawater.

Panic wrapped itself around his heart, and the waters around him lit up with cerulean light. Anders had struck a jagged outcropping of rock. He grabbed for it, and a few of his uneven nails broke against the hard surface. Anders pushed the sting of his leg and his hands out of his mind and climbed.

The weight of his coat had doubled, if not tripled, and Anders shrugged out of it. He climbed hand over hand to break through the surface. His lungs were aflame, parchment burnt to ash in his chest and only held together by the frantic beat of his heart. Anders held onto the rock, struggling to breathe while his leg painted the water around him a light pink.

His coat. He had to get his coat. Anders looked around. He was near the shore, a minute's swim away. The tide must have dragged him in before he hit the rock. Maybe it would drag in his coat. Anders took a deep breath and dove back under the water. There it was. Still caught on the rock, several feet below him. Anders swam down with one hand to the rock and grabbed it. He towed the extra weight behind him on his climb back up the rock, and flung his coat out of the water to drape it on the rock.

Maybe he could drag it back to shore, but not with his leg like this. Anders climbed up the rock and sat on flat surface barely big enough to fit his ass, and looked at his leg. The wound looked surreal. His skin was ripped open beneath his knee, the peeled flesh hanging off to both sides of the bright red muscle the wound exposed.

The rest of his leg was veined in blue flame. Anders looked down at his hands and saw the same. He knew what it signaled, but Anders didn't feel trapped behind his eyes, watching the spirit take action. "Justice?" Anders said aloud.

The word sounded lyrical. An expression of identity, of self, of something he'd never had before he'd left the Fade. Anders ran his fingers around the edge of his wound, and felt a mix of concern and an intense desire to set it right. "This is..." Anders searched for words, and never found them. He set his hands to his leg, and channeled his magic through his palm, Justice, the Fade.

"This is nice," Anders said quietly, smoothing the rent flesh back together. "It feels like you're here with me..."

It felt like more than that. Like the ocean spray and the sea breeze, like cold water running down his
spine. The wound in Anders' leg healed, and his hypersensitivity seemed to fade with the fire breaking through his skin. "No, don't-" Anders grabbed at one of the veins on his arm as it closed. "Don't go! Just sit with me."

Anders was talking to himself. There was no one there. He was alone, and he couldn't keep relying on Justice for company. The spirit was there. It tried, but it wasn't the same as another person. Anders had his patients, but they weren't friends, and his relationship with Franke had been strained ever since their fight in the clinic.

Anders didn't know if Franke was ashamed or if Franke doubted what Anders had told him, but the visits slowed. Anders didn't want to head into Lowtown unless he had to after the templars' raid, and if the small party of darkspawn had taught Anders anything it was that just because the refugees needed him didn't mean they respected him.

He needed Karl. Anders shrugged into his soaking coat and channeled the spell. A drenched crow stood on an outcropping of rock along the Wounded Coast. It shook out its feathers and took flight, riding the wind back to Kirkwall. It flew along the blackrock cliffs, and veered into the chasm, searching for the cracks in the rock.

It found a split in the rock and flew inside. The cave was full of humans and elves, and gave way to mines and sewers. The crow flew towards the mines, and sought out a space it remembered as its roost. There were humans all around. Reflective men of metal and righteous fire. Predators. Templars.

One of the templars was holding a boy from the crow's murder. It was a tiny thing of red down and rags. Walter. That was the sound for the boy. Walter was struggling, keening for help in the templar's grasp. The crow dove at the templar with an angry caw, and pecked at the dark slit in the reflective metal of its helmet. The templar let go of its prey, and the boy fled. The crow flew away.

It flew from the cave and through the blackrock ravine to Lowtown. There it landed on a table with trinkets and was shooed away. It flew to an awning instead, and peered down at a small hole in the wall it remembered as a second roost. There might be more predators inside. The crow had no way of knowing. It flew away.

It flew to a dimly lit space between two walls of rock and landed on the ground. Anders let go of the spell, and pulled his coat tight around his body. The enchanted covering was damp, but not soaking. Anders supposed drying his feathers also meant drying off his coat. The charms in the grimoire hadn't mentioned that, but it was certainly useful. The coat was suede, and greedily soaked up any water it came into contact with.

Anders paced in the alley, trying to think of where he could go. Damn templars. Damn them all to the Void. They didn't care that they were ransacking a free clinic for downtrodden refugees. All they cared about was the magic. They were blind to anything else. They didn't even care that Anders hadn't been there at the time, all they cared about was that he'd been there once.

So they harassed anyone who made the mistake of getting close to him, whether or not they were only children. Whether or not they were sick, desperate, cold, or hungry. They were aiding and abetting an apostate, and that was enough. Anyone who was foolish enough to befriend a mage was at risk. Anders couldn't keep letting the refugees linger around wherever he set up his clinic. He'd heal, and then he'd send them away.

Anders ran his hands through his hair. He'd built that clinic. He had a bed, cots for patients, a bucket for washing, a pumice, two benches, his mine-cart writing desk. All of it was gone. There was no going back to Darktown yet, but he had to go back soon. What had happened to Walter? To the rest
of the children? Where was Evelina? Wasn't she watching them? Had the templars taken her?

She was a mage. Anders had realized it a few days ago, when he finally understood what was going wrong with his vision. Anders wasn't seeing things. Justice was seeing things. A halo around a stranger was a mark of magic. Anders could see it if he looked for it: the soft pulse of the Fade inside Evelina, Evon, and a handful of other refugees he crossed paths with.

All the newfound talent did was worry Anders. Mages weren't safe in Kirkwall. Karl's warning that the templars brought in more corpses than apostates burned bright in Anders' memory, and every time he passed some poor haloed soul Anders wanted to run after them. He wanted to ask where they were staying, how they were doing, to point them towards the Collective, but he didn't. It felt like too much of a risk. The templars had it out for the renegade healer in Darktown. Getting in touch with other apostates would only bring them attention they didn't need.

Thom lived near Lirene's shop. Anders left the alley, and hurried barefoot through the streets of Lowtown to the Marcher's house. He could ask Thom to check Lirene's shop for templars, get his things, and then never ask anyone for anything again.

Anders couldn't keep relying on people to look out for him. He was just putting them at risk. He'd find a new place, leave his things there when he went to see Karl, and if someone stole them someone stole them. He had Justice. He didn't need his staff. He didn't need his cookware or his books. Amell's journal or his grimoire.

Anders knocked on Thom's door. His wife answered. The Beschals were Marchers, and had the look of them. Their skin was tan, their hair was cropped short, their bodies were built thick for hard labor, but they weren't hard folk. Thom had a recurring heart condition, and the chokedamp wasn't helping him any. He visited the clinic often.

"Anders, thank goodness you're here," Thom's wife said, stepping back to usher Anders inside. Anders stepped in, and the dirt floor felt slightly more comfortable than stone on his bare feet. "I went down to your clinic this morning but the lantern was out. Thom's heart is giving him trouble again-" Thom's wife stopped short, hand on the handle to the backroom, "I haven't even asked why you're here."

"It can wait," Anders said.

Thom was in the back room of the small shack, laid up in bed. The fact that it was a bed at all and not a cot meant the Beschals were better off than Anders. Anders bent to heal Thom. It was another clot, and there was only so much Anders could do for him. Thom needed to change his diet and start exercising. Anders told him as much, but Thom waved him off.

"Anders, not that I'm not grateful, but why are you here?" Thom asked. The Marcher pushed himself into a sitting position and rubbed at his aching heart, looking over Anders. He was still only wearing his coat. "Where are your shoes? Did your things get stolen again?"

"Maybe," Anders admitted. "I was going to ask if you could you check Lirene's place for me and see if there were any templars about, but you shouldn't be walking around."

"I'll do it," Thom's wife said. She planted a hard kiss on her husband's forehead, and gave Anders' arm a grateful squeeze through his brigandine sleeves, "We know what happens to mages in this town. It's not going to happen to you."

"Thank you," Anders said.
"I'll be right back," Thom's wife promised and left.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" Anders asked.

"No, of course not," Thom pulled his legs to one side, and Anders sat on the edge of the bed. "What's going on? Another raid?"

"They went after the kids," Anders explained, leaning back against the wall. He took a deep breath, and managed to get some air into his lungs. Thom's house wasn't like Anders' abandoned mineshaft. It was well ventilated, and the air wasn't too stale. Anders could breathe. Anders was alright. "Evelina's kids, all the orphans."

"That's Stannard for you," Thom said. "How much have you heard about her?"

"I know she's made the Gallows into a prison," Anders said. There was more than that, of course. The Knight-Commander was obsessed with order, in the most twisted sense of the word. The Gallows operated on a strict schedule and predictable routine, and what a blessing that knowledge had been. Karl got his meals at the same time every day, without fail. It would be easy to visit him without risk of being caught, now that Anders could fly into his window whenever wanted.

"She's made Kirkwall into a prison," Thom corrected him. "We've been at her mercy for ten years now, ever since she killed the last Viscount. Marlowe is a nobody. His family runs a shipping company. Stannard had him up-jumped, and she's been ruling over his shoulder ever since. At his coronation, she gave him this box, and his face went white as a sheet. No one knows what was in it, but I've heard rumors it was old Viscount Perrin's you-know-what."

"His dick?" Anders guessed.

"Yep," Thom said. "That's the rumor, and honestly I'd buy it. From Stannard a dick in a box is probably a dowry tradition."

Anders managed a hard exhale through his nose. He didn't have it in him to laugh right now. He kept thinking of Thom's wife, running into templars on his behalf. They weren't Fereldan refugees, so they'd have it easier, but the thought worried him all the same. "So are she and the Viscount...?"

"They may as well be," Thom said, "Stannard. Dumar. It's all the same thing. Marlowe never remarried so who knows, really?"

"Dumar?" Anders asked, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

"Marlowe Dumar," Thom said. "He's got a son, about twenty. Supposedly. No one ever sees him at court."

"I swear I've heard that name before." Anders said.

"Well probably. He's the Viscount," Thom said. "Not that his name means a damn down here. It's all about Strand, the Bastard, the Bleeder. Those are the real powers in Lowtown."

"Are the Dogs giving you any trouble?" Anders asked.

"Me and the wife keep off the streets at night, but we're on Strand's side of town," Thom explained. "A few bits a week and the Sharps gang leave us alone."

"What about the guards?" Anders asked. "Don't they care?"
"Guards," Thom snorted. "The day Captain Jeven gives a shit about anything but his coin purse is the day Stannard gives Marlowe back his."

Anders snorted, "Good one."

"Thanks," Thom grinned, and took another look at Anders' feet. His legs were bare up to his knees, where the mismatched leather of his coat tapered off, "Look, Anders, if you need it, I've got an extra pair of shoes. In the very least you shouldn't be barefoot."

"You don't have to do that," Anders said.

"Offer stands if you change your mind." Thom said.

"Thanks," Anders said.

"Food?" Thom offered. "You want to stay for dinner? It's the least we can do. We're having fish stew. It's just the catch of the day, but it's got to be better than whatever you get in Darktown."

"I'll have you know deep mushroom soup is considered a delicacy, but ... yeah, I don't think I can turn down dinner," Anders said.

Thom's wife returned with news that Lirene's shop was templar-free, and Anders left to fetch his things. He got dressed in Lirene's backroom and thanked her for watching over everything, and then went back to have dinner with Thom and his wife. Even thrown together from bottom feeders and shellfish, the stew was probably the best thing Anders had eaten all week.

Thom let Anders borrow his writing desk, and Anders penned out a letter to Karl to let him know he had a crow's form down. He told Karl to leave something reflective in his window, and let Anders know when he wanted him to visit. Anders went down to the Rusty Anchor and passed the letter off to the Collective contact, and then found a spot for himself at the docks where could watch the ships sail back to the Gallows, and know when it would be safe for him to go back to Darktown.

It could take hours. Anders had no idea what to do with himself in the meantime. He thought about reading one of the six books he was always carrying with him, but decided against it. He needed to keep his eyes open in case anyone saw him sitting on the pier and he had to run. The sun had been set for over an hour before a few boats finally sailed their way back to the Gallows, and Anders went back to Darktown.

Anders lit three different fires for three different groups of refugees, conjured a bucket of water for another, and cleansed a fellow who was suffering from gastro before someone pointed him to a small alcove in the blackrock where Evelina had taken the children. All of them were accounted for.

Walter told him a story about how a crow had saved him from templars, and Anders healed the bruise the bastard had left on his arm.

Anders spent the rest of the evening wandering Darktown, trying to find a new place for his clinic, and ended up getting lost. He spent all night in the sewers, trying to find his way back up, and eventually crawled up a mineshaft and into a chamber that seemed Maker-sent. It must have been used for living quarters while Darktown was still being mined.

Two separate mineshafts opened up into the chamber, and from there two more doors opened up into the main expanse of blackrock that all of Darktown ultimately spilled into. It was against the ravine, the blackrock split open just outside the chamber. The view above was of Hightown, and the view below was of the strait that every ship had to sail on their way to the docks. Plenty of escapes, for a human or a crow.
Anders could have fit a score of patients in the chamber. A giant bronze chandelier hung from the ceiling for light, along with a storm drain that piped down the wall. All along where the floor met the walls were sewage drains. It would stink, but while the drains took sewage they could also take dirty water or blood from patients. It was perfect. Anders didn't doubt he'd have to move in a month.

Anders searched through piles of rubble and discarded mining tools until he found a broken lantern, and hung it up outside the front doors. Justice lit it with Veilfire, and Anders started cleaning up. His first patient wandered in no more than an hour later. The next a half hour after that.

More trickled in as they saw the lantern, and then the Dogs came and brought him everything they could salvage from his old clinic. A cot, a bucket, a chair. They also brought him a half-dozen injured from another fight in the streets Anders was all too happy to heal in thanks. It could have been worse. The templars could break him if they wanted. Anders would find a way to put himself back together.

Anders went down to the docks that evening, exhausted from two sleepless nights and only a rat for lunch, but determined to hear from Karl. The letter was short: Karl let him know he'd put up a candle and a mirror to reflect it in his window, and asked him to come tonight. Anders hid his things in one of the mineshafts behind his new clinic, and hoped fervently that no one found them. There were proper doors to his new clinic. Anders imagined he could find a lock in the future, but Karl came first.

A crow escaped the depths of Darktown, and flew out along the cliff face of blackrock. It flew through the Twins of Kirkwall, and over the Waking Sea to the high towers of the Gallows. It circled the spires until a glint of light caught its eye. It tipped a wing, and veered towards the open window set into the stone. It was a long flight, and the crow hadn't slept in two days, and hadn't had much to eat, and its arms were getting tired.

Wings! Not arms, wings! He had wings! Anders lost the spell and crashed through the open window. He hit hard stone, and collided with an armoire with enough force to knock the doors open. Anders groaned and swallowed down a sob. His shoulder felt dislocated. "That gave my bruises bruises," Anders whined.

"Anders?" A familiar voice asked, deep and warm and full of wisdom. Karl's face came into focus over him, hooded eyes, a pinched nose, short grey hair and a close cropped beard. He looked like a mentor should. Clever and composed and—crying?

"Karl," Anders tried for a grin, "Sorry to just drop in like this."

Karl stumbled out of sight. Anders let a breath of healing magic wash over him, but his shoulder was definitely dislocated. He'd have to fix that. Anders grabbed at the armoire and pulled himself to his knees. Karl had a nice room, at least. He had the armoire, a writing desk, a vanity and a space for washing, and what looked like a respectable bed.

It didn't make up for solitary confinement.

Anders aligned himself with the wall and forced his shoulder back into place. He bit his lip to keep from screaming, and another surge from Justice took the pain away. Anders leaned against the wall, and locked his arms over his head to catch his breath.

Karl was sitting on his bed. His eyes were a bright blue, like ice, or the sky on a clear day. Anders hadn't been able to remember the color, and couldn't appreciate it now. Karl had a hand over his mouth, and his expression was pained.
"Not happy to see me?" Anders asked.

"I think I've gone round the bend," Karl said, tiny globes of clear water spilling down his cheeks and into his beard. His voice sounded hoarse from disuse, and it hurt to hear, "Are you really here?"

"I'm really here," Anders promised, with a glance to the door. He was surprised no one had heard his entrance, but no templars were storming in, swords drawn. Anders supposed that meant they were safe.

"I... don't..." Karl's voice cracked. Anders climbed to his feet, and sat next to him on the bed.

"How long has it been?" Anders asked.

"Three months," Karl said, running his hands over his knees, "I think? I didn't want to count."

"... do you want a hug?" Anders offered.

Karl nodded. Anders pulled him into a hug. Karl was wearing the robes of an enchanter, and had the soft build of a mage who'd never left the tower beneath them, but there was nothing soft in the desperate clutch of his hands on Anders' back. Anders didn't mind. He'd broken down crying the first time anyone had touched him after a year in solitary.

"You smell like freedom," Karl said into his shoulder.

"You smell like the Circle," Anders countered. It was an all too familiar scent of lyrium and parchment mixed with lye and soap, and held together with the sour musk of oppression. Anders hated it, but it wasn't Karl's fault.

"Sorry," Karl must have read his mind.

"Whatever," Anders said. "Did you like my entrance?"

"You always knew how to make one," Karl agreed. "Maker, you feel real."

"Why wouldn't I?" Anders asked.

"I might be hallucinating," Karl said.

"Would it help if I pinched you?" Anders offered.

Karl laughed unsteadily and pulled away from him. "It might. I... ah-I saved you my dinner. I know you said you were having trouble finding food, and they do feed me here, so..."

"You didn't have to do that," Anders squeezed Karl's forearm. He didn't feel thin, but Anders knew he was only allowed two meals a day. Anders wasn't about to take one.

"You didn't have to come," Karl countered.

"Yes I did." Anders said. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm not sure," Karl said. "I sleep a lot. I reread your letters. There's... not much else to do." Karl cleared his throat, and gestured at Anders chest, "So this is the coat you mentioned?"

"This is it," Anders agreed, shrugging the coat higher on his shoulders. He was starting to get used to the weight, which seemed important considering it was liable to be the only possession Anders would be able to keep.
"It's certainly colorful," Karl said.

"You hate it." Anders decided.

"No, no, I'm sure the magic is remarkable." Karl assured him.

"It's hideous." Anders guessed he meant.

"That too." Karl agreed.

Anders laughed; he felt it in his chest and his smile hurt his cheeks. It felt like it had been months since he'd had a reason to be happy about anything. Karl's laugh was a shy chuckle paired with a hand on the back of his neck. Anders sought out his free hand and squeezed it, and a flush ran up Karl's neck. It didn't bother Anders the way it had with Lissa. Karl was a mage. Karl had walked the Fade. Templars were nothing to him. To them. Anders could show him. Anders could save him.

"I'm going to get you out of here," Anders promised.
Doubts and Revelations

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. I'm glad you guys seem to like shape-shifter Anders!
Thank you for all your wonderful comments, kudos, subscriptions, and bookmarks, but
most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 3 Nubulis Night
The Gallows

Karl laughed, blue eyes fixed on their tangled hands. He ran his thumb over the back of Anders' palm, circling a freckle. He had soft hands, the same as every mage. Even Amell had soft hands. Anders forced that thought away. "That's an ambitious promise. I think you might need a form a bit bigger than a crow if you plan on carrying me out of here. Maybe a dragon."

"You're a mage too, Karl," Anders reminded him. Anders could even see it if he tilled his head right. A dim halo around Karl that seemed to pulse in time with a heartbeat. "I can teach you."

"... It's not as if I have anything else to do with my time, I suppose," Karl mused.

"Look, if it took me a month, you could probably learn it in a week," Anders said, "You taught me most of the primal magic I know. Just think of it as returning the favor."

"What of my phylactery?" Karl asked, tracing over an eyebrow with the fingers of his free hand. Anders had forgotten all about the old nervous habit, "I don't know if I have it in me to spend the rest of my life on the run, Anders. The things you've told me..."

"All lies," Anders lied. "It's easy."

"The nights you spent on the streets of Denerim sounded anything but easy," Karl said.

"Karl, you can't want to stay here," Anders said.

"I don't," Karl said quickly, "Maker save me, I don't," His voice dropped to a shamed whisper, "I just don't know anything else."

"I can teach you that too," Anders promised.

Karl smiled for him. It still hurt Anders' cheeks to smile back, but Maker knew he needed it. His face was probably going to ache by the time he left, and Anders already hated the thought of leaving. Karl's eyes slipped off his face and back to their hands; the flush on his neck had gone all the way up to his cheeks. It was kind of endearing.

"This is a lot harder in person," Karl mused.

"We could pass notes if you can spare the parchment," Anders joked. "I'm amazed they even give you any."

"I've been tearing out pages of my journal," Karl explained. "But that does sound easier. Maker, I
still can't believe you're sitting here. And-holding my hand. Which you don't have to be doing. I know you said-in your letter-ah..."

"I said I need time, I didn't say no," Anders pointed out. He didn't know whether it was genuine affection or crushing loneliness, but Karl's flustered response to him was sweet. "Look, you're not doing me any favors here, Karl. I could use a friend right now."

"That's good to know," Karl said. "Not that I want you to be lonely, but-"

"I know what you meant," Anders said. "This path month I've been imagining so many things-not those things-but your quarters being dark or too small, the food not being enough, your magic cut off somehow with those fucking shackles."

"I'd gladly give up my magic if it meant getting out of here," Karl said ruefully, "I know it could be worse, my quarters are comfortable-"

"Fuck that, Karl, it could be better," Anders pulled Karl's hand to his chest and gave it a fierce squeeze.

"It could at that," Karl agreed. "... There are so many things I want to say to you, and it's so hard to find the words. Not just because I haven't been talking, but because this isn't something mages are allowed to talk about."

"I know," Anders said. Maker, he knew. Everything he'd left unspoken with Amell was still haunting him, even three months later. "We don't have to talk about it."

"Are you sure you don't want my dinner?" Karl asked. "I really am getting tired of oats and stew."

"No Karl, eat your food," Anders let go of his hand. Their palms were getting sweaty. Anders wasn't used to holding hands with anyone for very long, "I don't want you living off one meal a day."

"Isn't that what you're doing now?" Karl asked. "Let me do something for you. Please. You've have no idea how much you've already done for me."

"I never even found you your flower," Anders said.

"I have a sand coin hidden under my mattress right now thanks to you, and without it I'd never even know what sand feels like," Karl said, frowning, "Stop arguing with me."


"Knowing you, I won't get better," Karl said, and waved him towards his desk, where a bowl of stew sat going cold. Anders got off the bed, and heated it with a breath of mana. He pulled the desk chair over to the bed so he could sit next to Karl, and ate with the bowl in his lap.

"So you keep everything under your mattress?" Anders asked.

"For now," Karl agreed. "It's probably not the best hiding place, but I'm not sure where else I could keep everything."

"They don't search your room?" Anders asked.

"They haven't yet," Karl said.

"Take the bottom drawer of your armoire out, and put your things under there." Anders suggested.
"That's-... actually a much better spot," Karl allotted. He got up to follow Anders' advice, rolling back the top of his mattress to reveal a stack of letters, a sand coin, a pressed cyclamen, and several feathers, "How did you come up with that?"

"I started keeping my mother's pillow there," Anders explained. He didn't want to think about how said pillow was currently hidden in a satchel in a mineshaft, liable to be stolen at any moment, "Paranoia, I guess."

"Justified, I think," Karl said. He pulled out the bottom drawer of his armoire and set it aside. His letters and other trinkets went in on the floor, and the drawer went back in. "Possessions are the first things to go in the Gallows."

"This is a wretched place," Anders snarled into his spoon. He saw a glint of blue reflected in his soup. It was gone when he blinked and Karl stood up.

"I actually miss Kinloch," Karl said with a sigh. He came back to sit next to him, and Anders pushed the half-full bowl at him. Karl took it and ate. "The templars were less vigilant."

"We'll figure it out," Anders promised. "I'll need to review my notes for the transformation, but I'll make you a copy of everything. You'll be out of here before you know it."

"You were nothing if not determined," Karl allotted, "I'll try to believe it."

"You better," Anders said. "I didn't fly all the way out here to hear otherwise."

"What is that like?" Karl asked, "Flying?"

"Exhilarating... and kind of terrifying," Anders admitted, "I hit a gust of wind that knocked me out of the form and almost drowned yesterday." Karl's eyes seemed to pop, and Anders laughed. "It wasn't that bad. Really. I had-... a friend there to help me out." Anders doubted he could have swam his way out of that current if Justice hadn't been feeding his strength into him.

"Someone from the Collective?" Karl guessed.

"It's complicated." Anders said.

"I don't mean to pry-" Karl started.

"It's fine. I just-... don't know if I'm ready to talk about it yet." Anders said. Let him get Karl out first. Then he could worry about how Karl felt about him being an abomination. Anders didn't want to scare him into staying in the Circle. The thought that he might made something twist inside of him. A sick sort of feeling, that left stones in his stomach and a knot in his chest.

Karl finished his dinner and got up to set the bowl back on the desk. Anders watched him from the chair. Karl had been awkward and shy in the Circle. Anders wondered how long he'd been sitting on that crush, and where it had stemmed from. Some days he swore Cera was the only one who'd actually remembered what Anders was really like in the Circle.

Karl sat back on his bed. Anders hesitated. The bed was more comfortable, and the bed had Karl. Anders joined him and sat with his back to the wall. Karl sat with his hands folded his lap, and Anders stared at one for a while before he stole it.

Karl let out a nervous chuckle; it was nice to hear someone he cared about laughing. "Have you heard Senior Enchanter Bader's theory about why spirit healers attract spirits?" Karl asked.
"This is going to bore me, isn't it?" Anders joked.

"It might." Karl allotted, and said nothing. Anders thumped their hands against Karl's leg.

"Tell me Bader's theory," Anders said.

"It's in the Maker's First Children. I know Enchanter Midromel has the more popular breakdown in Beyond the Veil, but I think Bader gives a better extrapolation on Enchanter Brahm's categorization of demons. Um-" Karl cleared his throat. Anders didn't care if he was rambling. Isolation did things to a person. "So Bader claims the virtues and vices spirits embody are pulled from mortals out of a desire to regain the Maker's favor.

"So the theory goes that spirit healers are an embodiment of virtue, and spirits see a spark of the divine in them. So to a spirit, you would look like the Maker."

"That's a bit much, isn't it?" Anders asked, but something in him seized on Karl's words. For one impossible second, Anders loved himself. The feeling was so alien it was almost jarring, and Anders knew it wasn't him.

"I don't think so," Karl said. "It always made sense to me you drew Compassion. Whether or not I ever escape this place, I can't tell you what it means to see you."

"You don't have to," Anders assured him, a pain like a knife in his gut at the mention of Compassion. It was an accurate analogy, Anders finally knew, now that he'd actually felt a sword thrust through his stomach only to pull it out and toss it aside with the strength his new spirit had given him. "I remember solitary. If not for that cat..."

"Anders, there's something I've been meaning to tell you, but I didn't want to put it to paper," Karl let go of his hand and moved so they were facing each other on the bed and not sitting side by side.

"Uh oh, serious Karl," Anders said. "What is it?"

"I don't even know if I should tell you, but... the cat," Karl said meaningfully, "When did you start seeing it?"

"I don't know," Anders admitted. He didn't want to think about it. "A few months in, maybe. Why?"

"Kinloch never had a mouser named Mr. Wiggums, Anders," Karl said.

"What are you talking about?" Anders asked.

"Don't you remember all the spiders? The rats?" Karl asked, and with some hesitation, he managed to pick Anders' hand back up and squeeze it. "There weren't any cats in the tower. Cut off from the Fade, locked in that room... I think you were hallucinating."

Anders pulled his hand back and ran it through his hair. He gathered up a handful of the flaxen strands and yanked, but the pain wasn't nearly as cathartic as it normally was. He scooted back, from Karl and the thought. "No. No, he was real. He stepped into a binding circle and got possessed by a rage demon. Amell said he remembered. He said he heard about it. Everyone I talked to heard about it."

"Did anyone say they saw it?" Karl asked, a crease of sympathy in his forehead, "It was a rumor, Anders... one you started."

"No, I remember him." Anders pressed his fingers into his forehead, trying to summon the memory.
"He was a tabby, and he would sneak in through the food latch. He was the only thing that kept me sane in there. I didn't- I wasn't..."

Karl was still staring at him, still with that damned look of sympathy on his face. "We never said anything because of what you went through... and when we didn't, no one else did, and the rumor started... I'm sorry."

"Maker, I went mad," Anders laughed. The sound cut through his chest and tangled up in his lungs, stealing the air from them. Anders knew his hands belonged over his head, and he tried to keep them there, but he ran them through his hair instead, face half buried in them. "Everyone knew? You all just went along with it, and knew I was just-just crazy?"

"Anders-..." Karl shifted to set a hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't-... I wouldn't have said anything, but hearing you talk about it... It scares me to think you don't realize what they did to you and I keep wondering what else you might have repressed. When you came out of there... Do you even remember what you looked like? All the scars at your throat?"

"That wasn't them," Anders said.

"Anything you did to yourself in there was a templar forcing your hand." Karl said. "... I just didn't want you to keep living their lies."

Anders searched for Karl's hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. He wondered why Justice wasn't reacting to this. The spirit normally couldn't stand to hear anything of the Circle and its crimes against mages. Justice was so infuriated by most of it his voice would rip out of Anders' throat at the topic, or his hand would start scrawling out his ire in Anders' letters to Karl. Why not now?

Justice had to search through his memories to heal him after they'd joined. Maybe the spirit already knew. Maybe he'd already seen Anders' delusions in his memories and wasn't surprised by the revelation. Maybe everyone knew Anders was insane, and that's why all the templars and even the First Enchanter thought he was a joke. Anders swallowed down a pained whine.

So what? So he'd gone mad. He wasn't mad now. It was years ago. He didn't need to think about it.

"Thank you for telling me," Anders said.

"Are you sure I should have?" Karl asked.

"Yes," Anders said. "Yes. I won't let that happen to you. I'll get you out of here. I'll help you learn shapeshifting, and if that doesn't work we have the Collective. We'll find something, and you won't have to worry about hallucinating cats or crows or anything."

Time was a strange concept for Justice, but he knew it passed as Anders spoke with his fellow mage. If he pushed forward enough to feel, he could sense the fatigue in the ache across Anders' shoulders and in his thighs, in the extra weight that seemed to manifest in his arms as the muscles grew weary. More than anything, he could feel it in the way Anders seemed to slip from his mind and leave Justice to take his place.

Justice had long encouraged him to free his fellow mages who remained oppressed, but this was a decision Anders had reached on his own. He knew his fellow mage-Karl, names were important. A sense of identity was important-deserved to live free of the Gallows. A wretched name for a wretched place. It spoke of execution. Of judgment passed for no crime committed.

Karl was a start, but no mage deserved such a fate. Justice wished he had a way to push the thought on to Anders, but Anders was not, Justice had come to realize, an introspective person.
Communicating with him was difficult, if not impossible. Anders could pick up on a feeling from him, and little more. Pride was a demon's indulgence, but Justice had no other name for the feeling Anders' actions stirred in him.

He let the emotion float free, with no real way of knowing if Anders picked up on it. Justice knew Anders tried. Anders spoke to him when they were alone, even knowing Justice couldn't answer. For all Justice had possessed him, Anders was still Compassion, and it meant a great deal.

Of all the things Justice had taken for granted, having his existence acknowledged was one of them. Karl seemed to notice him, as Anders hovered on the edge of sleep, liable to drag them both into the Fade at any moment. He stared at Anders' eyes, and Justice saw a flash of blue reflected on blue before Karl gave Anders' shoulder a shake, and Anders jolted back into wakefulness.

"What?" Anders asked, "I'm here. What's what? What were you saying?"

"You had a light to your eyes," Karl explained. "I think you were starting to drift off and maybe cast in your sleep. The sun is coming up, and the maid will bring breakfast soon. Are you going to be alright to-... fly back to Kirkwall?"

"I'm good," Anders stumbled off Karl's bed. Maker, what a bed. Straw felt like down after a month spent sleeping on blackrock. "I'll try to come back-three days?"

"Are you sure?" Karl asked, standing with him, "You look like you're carrying the Black City under your eyes right now. The transformation won't be too much of a strain?"

"I'll be fine," Anders said. "You know you can keep writing if you need, right?"

"I intended to," Karl admitted.

Anders grinned, and then wondered how they were supposed to say goodbye. A handshake felt like too little, and he wasn't sure if a hug was too much. Karl stood with his thumbs looped through his sash, shifting from foot to foot, and Anders decided a hug was fine. He pulled Karl into one, and inhaled the oppressive scent of the Circle. A week. Maybe a month. Then Karl would be out, and Anders wouldn't be so alone.

"I don't want you to go," Karl said into his shoulder.

"I'll come back," Anders promised.

A crow stood on the hard floor of another's roost. Karl. That was the sound for him. The crow couldn't make it, and cawed instead.

"Remarkable," Karl said, kneeling down beside him. He held out an uncertain hand, on which gleamed a silver ring. It had an attractive shine, and a beautiful call. The crow tapped it with its beak, and Karl twisted the ring on his finger. "... I noticed you weren't wearing yours. I think I'll wait until I'm out to take mine off."

The crow cawed again, and jumped up to the windowsill. It flew from the Gallows, and soared back towards the City of Chains, through the Twins of Kirkwall. Its flight was nothing short of erratic, a struggle against exhaustion the crow barely won in time to land on the windowsill of its own roost, and jump inside. Anders stumbled when he let go of the form, and a handful of feathers scattered at his feet, but he didn't collapse.

He was getting better. Anders staggered to the mineshaft behind his clinic, and let out a sigh of relief when he found his things. Luck. That's all it was. He needed locks. He needed security. He needed
to sleep. Anders dressed, and crawled onto the lone cot that had been salvaged from his old clinic. He fished out his mother's pillow from his satchel, and slept better on the itchy fabric than he had in days.

It couldn't have been more than a few hours before someone found his clinic and woke him, despite the lack of a lantern. It was urgent. The poor man's leg had been scalded from an accident in the foundry, and his skin was sloughing off. Anders decided that was the end of his sleep for the day, and Justice must have agreed, because he lit the lantern in front of clinic for him.

Anders spent the rest of the day cleaning and setting up the clinic and treating the refugees who wandered in. He worked on copying the transformation spell in Amell's grimoire for Karl in his free minutes, and adding in what Anders had learned on his own or read from Amell's journal. He was too hungry to focus, towards the latter end of the day, and closed his clinic to go searching for something to eat.

Long sleeves were essential. A small cut on his wrist, and Anders could stop the heart of any pigeon or rat he stumbled upon without drawing any real suspicion. Justice never stirred. Anders desperately wanted to ask him why he didn't care, when he had seemed so against blood magic at the Vigil, but Justice wasn't with him to answer. Anders brought a pigeon back to his clinic, plucked it, and burnt it to an almost inedible husk trying to cook it.

He ate it anyway, and leaned over the break in the blackrock afterwards to piss into the strait. A vulgar gesture towards the Gallows did wonders for his mood, and Anders washed himself down with a rag afterwards for his bath. He was alright. He was doing well. Everything was alright.

Anders went down to the docks that evening, handed off his letter and instructions for Karl, and was heading back towards Darktown when he felt a prickle across his shoulders.

Darkspawn. Again. Was there no end to the foul creatures?

No. Not darkspawn. There was only one, and that made no sense. Darkspawn always traveled in packs. They were a hive mind. They couldn't survive alone.

Which meant a Warden.

Anders followed the sensation to the piers, and felt the pull from one of the ships sailing in towards the docks. He jogged across the docks to head to a new pier with a better view, and wondered why he bothered. The *Pride of Amaranthine* was painted across the hull. A month. They'd given him a month to run, and Anders had wasted it like he'd wasted Amell's three sovereigns.

He couldn't run now. Not with Karl. But he couldn't stay, either. The Warden would sense him, seek him out, and drag him back to Ferelden, to Aeonar, to death. *He would not allow it.* Anders inhaled sharply and forced down the flames cracking through his skin. Cor. Cor could help him, but Anders had sworn to stop relying on people for help.

It wasn't help. Not really. The Dogs always came to receive any boats in from Ferelden. Anders could ask them to see where the Warden was staying, and Anders would just avoid that part of Kirkwall. It didn't have to be complicated. Anders jogged away from the pier, and waited towards the steps that led up to Lowtown.

Sure enough, not long later, the Dogs wandered down the steps to the docks, jostling one another with their usual playful camaraderie. At first the kinship had made Anders sick with regret, but now he could look past it, and see the way the citizens of Kirkwall carefully skirted around the gang. The Dogs were still dogs. The Bastard was still a bastard. The fact that they were friendly to Anders didn't change the fact that they were dangerous.
"Well if it isn't my favorite magicy mongrel," The man leading the Dogs said, albeit none too loudly. Anders recognized the bulk for Cor. He held out an arm and Anders clasped it because it was the safe thing to do. "What are you doing out, yeah?"

"Errands," Anders said, "Can I ask a favor?"

"You sure fucking can," Cor said.

"There's a boat in from Amaranthine with a Warden on it," Anders explained, "I need to know where they're staying."

"Yeah?" Cor asked, "That all? No bark, no bite?"

"No bark, no bite." Anders said.

"No big then," Cor said, "We'll sniff out your Warden, yeah? You just keep that clinic open."

"Heading back now," Anders promised.

According to the Dogs, the Warden was a man who looked vaguely Orlesian. He had "that noble highbrow, with a nose to break blackrock and a mustache you could hang a swing from." Anders knew that meant Stroud. Anders didn't know if that meant Stroud was here for him. Stroud was staying at The Flagon and Flask in Lowtown. It was on the east side of Kirkwall, while Lirene's shop was on the west. Anders could have easily avoided him, but the fact that he was here at all had him in a panic.

Stroud couldn't find him. Not now. Not with Karl. Anders had to know why he was here. Stroud might have sensed him coming into the docks. It would only take a bit of asking for him to make the connection between Darktown's renegade healer and the fugitive Warden. Anders couldn't ask anyone for help. The Wardens kept their own council. No one would be able to pry Stroud's secrets from him.

Anders was pacing to himself in his clinic when the idea finally came to him. Anders could find out why Stroud was here. He could turn into a crow to sneak into Stroud's room, and go through his things when he was out. And he could do it undetected, because there was a blood magic spell that could mask the Taint. Anders just had to find it.

Amell had started researching it with Velanna after the ambush at the Turnoble estate. He hadn't told Anders, but he might have found something. It wasn't as if they'd ever had the opportunity to use it if Amell had found it. Anders looked through his grimoire, but the pages towards the back had taken the brunt of Eylon's flame. The ritual for summoning ash wraiths, Quentin's notes on reanimation, and anything Amell might have learned from his research were all gone.

His journal wasn't. Anders sat in a corner of his clinic that night, a lantern of Veilfire beside him for comfort, and forced himself to open it. He flipped back through the pages, forcing himself not to read and telling himself not to look at any of the sketches. It had happened a few days before Anders' name-day, and Anders decided to start looking there, skimming over each page if it wasn't about blood magic.

9:31 Parvulis 5? 6?
Fuk what day is it? Wy am I witing tis dow? To fucni drunk for this fuck

9:31 Parvulis 7
I still have a hangover. Just the scratch of my quill is giving me a headache. I think Varel noticed, but I just had my chest ripped open. Literally and figuratively. I'm sure they'll make an allowance this once. If anything Woolsey should be rejoicing now that Anders and I

9:31 Parvulis 8
Oghren is right. I shouldn't have gotten attached. Maleficarum don't fall in love. It's so hard to see him walking through

9:31 Parvulis 9
Wrote to Avernus over what we learned at the Turnoble estate. I expect a letter back in a little under a fortnight. Voldrik says the walls should

9:31 19 Parvulis
The sounds he makes are some of the most beautiful

9:31 20 Parvulis
There are days I wake up and it's still hard for me to believe this isn't another fantasy. Anders lying

9:31 21 Parvulis
I wish Avernus knew more. The spell is useful for an ambush, but a stationary channel that takes blood from every Warden it's meant to mask isn't something I can utilize to infiltrate a nest. Or in combat. Or ever. Still, the implications are worrisome. The darkspawn are already using Grey Warden blood to Awaken themselves. If they recognize the power that lies in the Taint can be utilized for blood magic then the First Warden needs to know.

Nothing. Not a single damned thing that was any help to him. Anders had shifted through two dozen pages and all he'd gotten out of it was a face full of tears. Anders stuffed the journal into his pack and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. Fine. He'd ask for help. The Dogs could watch the Flagon and Flask and let him know when Stroud left, and Anders could break in while he was gone.

Cor agreed. He even offered to do him one better, and send the Dogs in to go through the Stroud's things for him in case there were any locks that needed to be tackled. It almost surprised Anders Cor asked for nothing in return, until Anders remembered he was running a free clinic the Dogs visited with alarming frequency. It also meant Anders didn't have to risk losing his things, and while Anders had told himself they weren't important, he knew it for a lie.

Anders spent the next day pacing until Bree showed up at his clinic with an armful of papers. "No mention of you," Bree promised, handing over the small bundle of leaflets. "He has orders to lead an expedition here in a couple of months. We found some maps, and thought maybe you might want them. We figure you can't lead an expedition if you don't know where to go, yeah? Figure maybe this way he'll fuck off."

"You're sure?" Anders asked, looking at the maps. Worthless. He hated the Deep Roads. He was never going back. "Nothing at all? Was there any mention of investigating an incident in Amaranthine or Vigil's Keep?"

"Nothing at all," Bree assured him. "I mean, we could go back and get the whole bundle if you need, but there were just a couple of missives from the Warden-Commander. Nothing special. We
ransacked the place a bit so it doesn't look too suspicious. That kind of thing happens a lot in Lowtown."

"I can't believe he's not here for me," Anders laughed, and set the maps aside.

"Why not?" Bree asked. "What'd you do that was so bad?"

"I'm a deserter," Anders said.

"So what?" Bree asked. "Are the Wardens really that uptight they'd send someone after you?"

_If you ever do leave, I won't send anyone after you._ Amell had promised, but Amell was dead. Wasn't he?

"... I don't know," Anders said.
Birds of a Feather

Chapter Notes

Here we are! Finally! The story is tagged for Anders and Hawke and it only took us fifty five chapters to introduce him! When I say slow build I mean slow build, haha.

Bit of a rambling Author's Note: I know according to World of Thedas, Karl was an apprentice with Anders and the same age, but we've already butchered the lore with him so much I don't mind twisting it a little more. Not that I don't love the pairing as is, but I didn't care for the idea that Karl was the same age as Anders. When he was first introduced my assumption was he was older, so that's what we have here. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, kudos, bookmarks, and subscriptions, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:32 Dragon 29 Nubulis Just Before Sunrise
Kirkwall Gallows

"So Nate's still cradling his arm, and I say 'Looks like you broke your funny bone,'" Anders laughed, "And he doesn't so much as smile, because of course he doesn't, and he says 'Anders, this isn't funny,' so I say 'No, it's humerus.'"

"I don't think you can fault him," Karl chuckled, "I'm not sure I could laugh if my arm was broken."

"Nate had had worse by then," Anders explained. "We all had. Oghren was in stitches. Literally, after what that shriek did to him."

"Your stories are so fantastical," Karl said, still grinning. He had a nice grin; most of it showed in the lines in his cheeks above his beard. Anders had decided he liked beards, a few painful months ago. "It's like hearing about Dane and the Werewolf. I can't believe all of this happened to you in what? Six months?"

"Neither can I, honestly," Anders said. "It feels like I was a Warden for years. I think it was all the fighting, really. We had to trust each other with our lives every other day. It was... there's nothing like that in the Circle."

"Not unless you want to apply for special dispensation from the Chantry to be a Knight Enchanter or a Battlemage, I suppose," Karl said. "And even then you'd be fighting alongside templars."

"Fuck templars," Anders said.

"It's ridiculous to think I know all of this primal magic to no end," Karl complained, a crackle of electricity running between his fingers. "The Knight-Commander lets us provide 'magical entertainment' for the nobility and nothing else. Conjuring skating rinks for winter parties and summoning fireworks in the summer. It's humiliating. I've never gone, but I've heard stories from mages who have. The nobles point and whisper like you're just another part of the spectacle."

"No surprise there. I can't decide what's worse in Kirkwall, the rats or the people," Anders said. "I
went up to Hightown the other day to visit the Chantry, and I think my coat made a few of the nobles faint.

"I don't think you can blame them there," Karl grinned.

"Oh shut it," Anders gave Karl's shoulder a playful shove. Karl chuckled and rubbed away a growing flush on his neck; his eyes danced over Anders' lips, and Anders wondered if he should pretend he hadn't noticed. It wasn't as if it was the first time it had happened this past month, and it wasn't as if he could really fault Karl.

Anders probably would have been thinking a few things if someone he was sweet on was sitting next to him on his bed. Especially if he was in solitary confinement at the time. The candlelight glow and silvery starlight probably weren't helping the mood any, and after a few hours of talking, Anders could almost forget they were sitting in a prison.

"So um..." Karl said.

"Um?" Anders grinned.

"I can't remember what we were saying." Karl said.

"I figured," Anders said.

"Sorry," Karl said sheepishly.

"I don't mind," Anders said.

"Still," Karl said, "You've only been here three months, and this is the first time you've spoken of the Wardens. Are you-I mean do you want to talk about-

"No," Anders said quickly. "I'd rather talk about you. How's the transformation coming?"

"Horribly," Karl confessed, and a heavy sigh seemed to deflate him. "I don't know how you ever managed it. The whole process eludes me. I understand the premise, but willing myself into a bird? I look at the incantation and I don't even know where to start."

"The feathers, for me," Anders said.

"See I've tried that," Karl said, "I look at the feathers you sent me, I watch the seagulls outside my window, and I'm just not getting anywhere." Karl sighed and traced over a graying eyebrow. "We had another jumper yesterday. I heard the scream outside my window and when I looked out-"

"Why are you telling me this?" Anders grabbed Karl's wrist and pulled it out of the nervous habit, "You'll figure it out. You just need to keep practicing. If I can do it, you can do it."

"Why do you always speak so ill of yourself?" Karl asked. "This isn't easy magic, Anders, don't you realize you're exceptional?"

"No I'm not," Anders said. "There's no spark of the divine in me. I'm normal, and you're normal, and we're just people, and we deserve better than this. You can do this, Karl. You deserve to live as free as any man."

"Maker's breath, you have no idea how badly I want to kiss you when you talk like that," Karl confessed, in no more than a whisper.

"Fine, kiss me." Anders said.
"Do you mean that?" Karl asked; the flush was gone, the stuttering stopped. The consent gave him so much confidence Anders wondered if Karl had assumed Anders wasn't really considering anything with him.

"I said it, didn't I?" Anders ran his tongue over his top lip, and sucked on his bottom lip to wet it. Karl watched him for one enraptured moment before he leaned in to kiss him.

Maker, it felt good to kiss someone. The soft press of Karl's lips contrasted wonderfully with the scratch of his beard, and Anders clasped the back of his head to pull him closer when Karl wrapped his arms around his shoulders. "Watch the feathers," Anders mumbled around his mouth. Karl's hands fell obediently to the small of his back.

This was perfect. Anders didn't have words for how much he'd missed this. The scuff of short hair under his fingers, warm breath on his skin, the soft press of lips and the wet caress of a tongue, with a sweet tinge of lyrium and an undercurrent of salt. And no thinking. No thinking at all.

Anders shifted to better hold Karl. It was so easy to slip into life in the Circle. To stay soundless, even when Karl bit and sucked at his bottom lip, or when Anders clasped his jaw. "I thought-" Karl started, and Anders stopped to let him speak, "I thought you would think I was too old for you."

"How young do you think I am?" Anders asked.

"Younger than I am," Karl said.

"Well that settles it," Anders joked. Karl's eyes really were lovely, like shards of ice or blown blue glass. "Everyone knows you don't fall for a whole person and age is all that matters."

"Is that you saying you're falling for me?" Karl asked.

"I don't know, kiss me again," Anders said.

Karl did. He kissed his upper lip, pulled it between his teeth, and did the same to his bottom lip. Anders wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and as the minutes stretched they turned into a tangled mess of mingled breath, interlaced limbs, and searching hands. Static ran between Karl's fingers and they tingled wherever they touched, and Anders almost returned the gesture when he remembered where his magic came from.

Shit.

Anders broke off from Karl with a self-conscious laugh that had nothing to do with him. Karl didn't seem to mind. His face was flushed, and he was grinning.

"Would you believe it's been three years since I've kissed anyone?" Karl asked.

"Yes," Anders joked.

"No need to spare my feelings," Karl said.

"Kidding," Anders promised. "I'll talk to the Collective. Someone there might be able to help get you out of here if shape-shifting isn't your thing."

"I don't think it is," Karl admitted. "But I'll keep trying."

"Good," Anders said, with a glance to the window and the light creeping across the horizon. "Sun's almost up, so... three days?"
"Alright." Karl agreed, following him to the window. "Um-..."

"I'll come back," Anders promised.

"I know you will." Karl was back to shuffling from foot to foot again. Anders pulled him into a hug, and Karl mumbled, "This coat is so itchy."

"Get out of here and I won't have to wear it anymore." Anders said.

"I will," Karl said.

"Damn right you will," Anders said.

A crow flew from the Gallows across the Waking Sea and through the Twins of Kirkwall. It soared through the strait, and veered into a crack in the blackrock cliffs, where it landed on a window sill, and hopped down into a respectable looking roost. Anders landed on his feet, and didn't stumble. He retrieved his things from the mineshift behind his clinic, less surprised they were still there ever since he'd gotten locks for the front doors.

"So..." Anders said while he dressed, "...I guess we never talked about this, did we? I know there wasn't time. I don't know about you, but I was pretty sure we were going to die in Amaranthine. I guess there was a lot we didn't talk about but this seems... pretty important. I'll be honest, I really don't know where I end and you begin, but I know there's some sort of divide between us, or you wouldn't be you in the Fade and I wouldn't be me here.

"So... look. Karl. This is sort of one of those 'ridiculously personal things' we used to talk about, but if you're not... I mean, if you're not okay with where this is going, you have to do something to tell me, alright?" Anders rolled up his sleeve, but he didn't see his veins turning to flame and cracking through his skin. "... preferably now," Anders clarified.

Nothing. Anders felt a little anxious, but he couldn't decide if he was the one who felt that way. He didn't feel any particular disgust or revulsion, so that was something. It probably helped that Karl was so vastly different from the last person Anders had been with that Anders didn't think about him at all when he was with him. Maker knew Anders didn't need to remember him right now. Or ever. Preferably ever.

Karl was shy and awkward and easily flustered, and while he had the same convictions his confidence was in the cause and not in himself. He didn't throw his shoulders back and stick out his chin and bleed the will out of anyone who stood in his way and-

Anders cut off the train of thought, and affixed the silver stud Sigrun had given him to his ear. One thing at a time. The stories were a good start, as long as he kept to good memories. He could tell Karl about Sigrun the next time he visited. Karl would like her.

Everyone had liked her.

A shudder tangled up in Anders' chest and he rubbed a handful of tears from his eyes. Or maybe not. Anders finished dressing, and Justice lit the lantern in front of his clinic. Anders saw a half dozen patients before afternoon rolled around, and closed up to go talk to Selby. He left his staff in his clinic and made the trip to Lowtown.

Someday Anders was going to have to learn the path through the sewers that lead to the Collective's packaging house, but walking down to Lowtown seemed a smidge less suspicious than bursting out of a storm drain in front of passersby. Flying was always an option, and but Anders felt better with his things about him. Leaving his staff behind was bad enough.
Anders passed by a few people with halos on his way to the packaging house, and did his best to ignore them. Karl came first. Anders reached the packaging house and knocked three times. "Knock knock!" Anders called.

Donal opened the door, and the man's massive bulk took its place. He raised an amused eyebrow at him, "Who's there?"

"Don't encourage him, Donal!" Selby called from inside.

"Orange," Anders said.

"Orange who?" Donal asked.

"Orange you going to let me in?" Anders asked.

"Close the door!" Selby yelled.

Donal let him in with a laugh. Selby was sitting at the front desk and frowning, but there were too many lines on the old girl's face to hide when she was fighting a smile. Anders grinned and held up both hands, "No staff. I'm behaving."

"You're never behaving," Selby shook her head, "What do you need, love? You know where the books are."

"Is anyone working on getting mages out of the Gallows?" Anders asked.

"You got a death wish, love?" Selby asked.

"Is that a yes or a no?" Anders asked.

Selby stood up, and shook out the lovely violet gown that marked her as one of the rare well-to-do folk in Lowtown. The packaging company wasn't just a front. Selby had inherited it from her family, and had run it with her sister until the latter was discovered for a mage. Selby had joined the Collective the day after her sister was taken away. "Let's not talk up front," Selby said, waving him towards the backrooms.

Anders followed her into a room crowded with bookshelves laden with scrolls and parchments Anders guessed had very little to do with packaging. Selby folded her arms over her chest and gave him such a critical look Anders tried not to fidget. "This is for Thekla?" Selby guessed.

"Yes." Anders said.

"I'll tell you what I told Bancroft: we just don't have the resources. We need more than a maidservant and a few mages in the Gallows working with us: we need the templars, and that's just not going to happen. No one will risk it. The last templar who defied Stannard was kicked from the Order just for passing notes. Helping a mage escape? It would be suicide.

"I'm sorry, love. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. We'd need ships, raiders or fishermen or anyone who could ferry mages from the Gallows. We'd need an arrangement with the Coterie to move through the sewers undetected, and we're never going to have the coin to compete with what the templars pay them to smuggle lyrium.

"We're trying, love. We really are. There are a few in the Order who seem sympathetic, and we've been flirting a bit, but you have to take these things slow. Bancroft has been trying to arrange something with the Redwaters, and maybe in a year or two we'll get somewhere, but right now?"
Selby smiled sadly, and gave his upper arm a squeeze. "You're going to have to make do with the letters."

"That's not good enough," Anders said, resisting the urge to pace.

"It never is," Selby agreed.

"Who's Bancroft?" Anders asked.

"Just a man," Selby said, "Bit like you. Thinks he can change the world in a day;"

"Do you know where I can find him?" Anders asked.

"Don't work like that, love," Selby frowned, "I'll let him know you asked about him, but if he wants to meet you, that's his business. I'll let you know next time he comes in what he says, fair?"

"What about the templar?" Anders asked, though the word put a foul taste in his mouth, "The one who got kicked from the Order?"

"Raleigh?" Selby supplied, "He's still out there, poor dear. Lyrium withdrawal. He helps, in his own way, but he doesn't come cheap. He'll get you passage out of Kirkwall if you need it, but he's in no more position to break Thekla out of the Gallows than we are."

Anders bit back a frustrated groan. He paced a few feet and sat on the first thing he could sit on, which happened to be a crate.

"I get it, love, I do," Selby said, "I haven't seen my sister in years. This is just the way it is."

"It's not the way it should be," Anders said.

"Few things are." Selby said.

"Do you think the Coterie needs a healer?" Anders asked.

"Don't you go there," Selby stabbed him in the chest with a stern finger, "Don't you even think it. The Coterie isn't anything like your Dog Lords. They're not a gang, they're a guild. If you let them get their claws in you, they'll tear you apart."

"I have to get Karl out of there," Anders said. "If it means healing a few more people I don't see the problem."

"You think it will stop there?" Selby asked. "It never stops with the Coterie. First it'll be healing them, then it'll be healing no one but them, then it won't just be healing. They'll have you fighting in their gang wars by Summerday. Let it go, love. Take what you can get."

Damn that. Anders was tired of settling. He was going to get what he could take. Anders stood up and flashed Selby a smile, "Thanks for letting me know where we're at."

"Anders," Selby called after him when he made for the door. "Be careful."

Anders stewed on Selby's advice for three long days before he made the flight back to the Gallows.

A crow landed on the windowsill of a place it recognized at the roost of a potential mate, only to find the room occupied by a young girl. The crow let out a furious caw, and the girl jumped.

"Oh my gosh," The girl exclaimed. She leapt from her desk to hover by the windowsill. The crow
paced and bit at its own feathers. The pain felt soothing, "Hey there little guy... don't leave. I've never seen a bird before. Are you a raven? Or... a crow? There weren't any windows at Starkhaven's Circle."

The crow screamed at her.

"Noisy," The girl smiled. "Are you going to bite me if I try to pet you?"

The crow bit its own feathers again, and the girl reached out a shaky hand to run a finger over its head. There were no rings on her fingers. "Wow, feathers are soft. Please don't bite me. You're so pretty. I didn't know birds' eyes could glow like that."

The crow screamed again, and flew back to Kirkwall. Anders lost his hold on the form when he reached his window, and crashed into his clinic. He landed on a table, and went rolling off it onto the floor. A pillar stopped his momentum and knocked the wind out of him.

"Fuck," Anders snarled; He rolled into a ball and let a pulse of benevolent energy flow over him, unsurprised at the flames cracking through his arms. "Andraste's-fucking-flaming-fuck-fuck shit!"

Anders climbed to his knees and stayed there, head in his hands, a cerulean light illuminating the space around him. Think, Anders. Don't panic. So Karl wasn't in his room. That could mean anything. That could mean he'd been released from solitary. That was possible. He'd been given a new room, and Anders would get a letter from him any day telling him where in the Gallows it was.

The flames in his arms didn't go out. Anders couldn't feel them. He couldn't feel anything beyond his heart, which still felt as if it belonged in the body of a crow, the frantic pulse meant for a much smaller body. Anders massaged at his chest and took a deep breath. Karl was just out of solitary. That was all. Nevermind that there was no reason to give him a new room if that was the case.

Justice stared down at Anders' hands, unable to make sense of the fragmented thoughts that flashed through Anders' mind. One word seemed to repeat itself, and Justice seized it. Aeonar. It brought forth memories of chains, of cramped cells and tight shackles. A prison for those who already lived a life of imprisonment. Justice growled, and felt it rumble through Anders' chest. The anger felt good. Righteous. Vindicated. This would not stand.

"We will find this place and see him free from it, if he is there," Justice said. Anders was in no state to hear his words, but Justice hoped his intent made it through. It must have, because the response Justice felt from Anders was Fear. It was an alien feeling to Justice, but it seemed to resonate often with Anders. Justice didn't doubt his presence kept such demons at bay.

Flashes of silver came with the Fear. Swords. Flames. Templars. "I will not let them take him from you."

Anders fell forward onto his hands with a sharp sob. He inhaled shakily, and felt the air slowly fill his lungs. "Fuck, Justice, we have to find him first," Anders choked out. "Maker, no one even knows where Aeonar is." Anders buried his face in hands, and wrapped them around himself in a tight hug when that felt insufficient. "I'm okay. I'm okay. Karl's okay. We're okay."

He felt a wash of affection and of anger, and latched onto the latter. Damn them. Damn all of them. Rolan had an easy fate next to what Anders and Justice would do to Stannard if she'd sent Karl to Aeonar. Unable to sleep, Anders spent the night as a crow, and his thoughts were simpler and quieter.

The next day passed in a daze, and Anders jogged down to the docks the second the sun hit the
horizon. He let himself into the Rusty Anchor and found the Collective contact, who shook her head at him. Anders sat down across from her, and she shook her head again, "I don't know where they moved him. I'll try to find him. Get up. You know I can't be seen with anyone."

It was three days before Anders finally got word. Anders bolted back to his clinic with the letter and ripped it open when he was alone. It was short. A brief explanation that Karl had been moved to smaller quarters to give more luxury to the mages in from Starkhaven. Karl didn't know where in the Gallows he was, but there was a window out into the hall, and he'd finally managed to shape-shift. He'd practiced flying in his room, and meet Anders in the Chantry three nights from now.

"This is a trap," Anders said together with Justice. Anders didn't see how that changed anything. If Karl was going to be there, that was where Anders needed to be. He didn't sleep that night, and come morning he was exhausted. He knew it was a mistake. If he was going to walk into a trap, he should at least do it with his eyes open.

He still had another day. Anders could sleep tonight, and meet Karl in the Chantry tomorrow night, and handle whatever trap the templars wanted to throw at him. They wouldn't bring enough men. If a score of templars and soldiers couldn't kill Anders when he was trapped inside a binding circle, the handful they sent to apprehend the apostate Karl was corresponding with would be nothing.

They were limitless. They could do this.

Unless they killed Karl in a mad frenzy like they might have killed Velanna and Nathaniel.

The thought made Anders sick. He pushed it back as best he was able, but it lingered in the back of his mind, growing like a gangrenous rot until Anders thought he might actually throw up. He was outside his clinic, leaning over the cliff and while his stomach roiled, when he heard someone shouting. Anders looked up, and saw Evelina running down the corridor of blackrock towards him, one of the kids in her arms.

"Anders!" Evelina screamed, with enough panic in her voice Anders hands cracked with flame when he grabbed his staff. He half expected to see her chased by the Coterie, but there were only a handful of children running after her. "Help! Chokedamp! Cricket! He's not breathing!"

Anders ran to meet her. Justice was still there under his finger tips, and it was easy to pull the Fade through the spirit and summon a cleansing aura. The first wave of healing energy washed over the boy like oil on water. "Get him inside. Lie him down. How long has he been unconscious?"

"I don't know!" Evelina ran Cricket to a table, and laid him out. The boy was limp; his limbs flopped bonelessly, and his chest didn't rise or fall, "I don't know, he was playing with Nika," Evelina gestured to one of the young girls following her, and closed the doors behind all of them. The girl looked the same age as Cricket, no more than five, and she was crying.

"We didn't see!" The little girl sobbed, "We didn't see the vent! I'm sorry! Cricket got too close!"

"A few minutes, maybe, I don't know," Evelina said, gathering the girl and a few of the other children in her arms.

Anders shut out the sounds of the children crying and his own nausea to go through the motions. He drew the interlocking circles of a lifeward with his staff, and sent a pulse of creation magic to seek out the thick coating of damp on the boy's lungs. A second surge of healing energies latched onto it, and Anders started a channel to draw it from his lungs.

Andraste preserve him, he should have slept. Every breath of damp he pulled from the boy seemed to
sap at his strength, and by the time Cricket's lungs were clear, the vertigo almost made Anders fall over. It wasn't that simple. He couldn't pass out yet. Anders wove a breath of electricity through a swathe of restorative energies, and sent the pulse into the boy's heart. Once. Twice, and Cricket sat up with a gasp.

Anders found himself a chair and sat down. Anders blinked twice, and fell asleep. A fierce hug woke him seconds later. "I'm-what?" Anders started.

Evelina had her arms locked around him, breasts pressed against Anders' chest and auburn hair spilled into his face. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Evelina planted a hard kiss on his jaw despite the layer of stubble he couldn't shave properly without a straight edge and a mirror. "I thought he was dead."

"Not much for creationism?" Anders guessed, and it was only when Evelina froze that Anders realized no one had ever told him she was a mage. Maker, he was tired.

"How do you know?" Evelina whispered.

"I-...have some unique circumstances," Anders explained, "I can sense it. You didn't give yourself away, I swear."

"Don't tell the children," Evelina said.

"Promise," Anders said.

Evelina let go of him, and Anders wrung his hands on his staff. The kids were running circles around his clinic, rejoicing at Cricket's recovery. Anders managed a smile. "You know you can come see us whenever you want." Evelina said. "The kids love your magic."

"They'd love yours too," Anders whispered.

"No," Evelina said.

Anders heard shouting. Not the panicked screams of a woman desperate for help, but the wild roars of men locked in combat, followed by steel on steel, and boots on blackrock. "Damnit." Anders muttered. The children stopped playing. They looked at the doors to his clinic with wide eyes, and Anders stumbled to his feet. "I told them no fighting outside the clinic. They know I'm just going to heal everyone anyway."

The wall shook with a thunderous bang. Anders guessed someone had been thrown against the door to his clinic. Evelina gave him a nervous look. "Take the kids and wait in the mineshaft," Anders said. "I'll take care of it."

"This way, everyone," Evelina ushered the half dozen kids to the back of his clinic, "We're going to play hide and seek."

"This might be all you," Anders said to himself, rolling his fingers on his staff. He felt a surge of confidence, and threw open the door to his clinic. He let a snap of lightning roar off his staff with the hope it would break up the fighting. The lightning crackled across the ceiling and spilled out into the ravine.

Coterie. Anders recognized the uniforms: boiled leather in dark green, with masks to cover every face. The fight was over, for the most part. Anders counted a little less than a dozen corpses bleeding out onto the blackrock and spilling down the stairs, voided bowels filling the air with the scent of shit and piss. Anders looked to the group they'd been fighting.
A sword lined in flames and set in silver. Templar. Justice lashed out and shattered the shield in a shower of molten metal. "We have made this place of sanctum of healing and salvation, and you will not threaten it!" Justice bellowed, tearing through to the Fade and the limitless potential it offered them, when Anders forced him back. Anders bit down a sob, and collapsed against the doorframe.

Amell.

Five months, and he looked more gorgeous than ever. Tousled raven locks fell down around a square brow, straight and thick eyebrows that curved only just around his almond-shaped eyes and left him with a permanently enigmatic expression. And those damn red eyes Anders knew he had carved straight from their sockets, staring right at him and cutting into his heart.

Then Anders blinked, and it was gone. There was a line cut through his left eyebrow Amell didn't have. He was taller, his shoulders broader, his arms not lean but thick. His skin was a little darker, his nose not quite so round and his lips not quite so full, and his beard didn't grow quite the same way. He looked at Anders without the slightest spark of recognition in his eyes.

They were so red. Why did they have to be so red?

Someone grabbed a fistful of his coat and wrenched his eyes off the stranger. Anders blinked into face full of freckles. "That was Wesley's!" The woman snarled at him. A dog was barking somewhere nearby.

"What?" Anders asked.

"You shattered his shield!" The woman hissed.

"Aveline, stop! We need him!" The stranger said. His voice was a deep bass, not a baritone. Not Amell. It wasn't Amell. Amell wouldn't be holding a bow in one hand with a quiver on his hip.

"Then you deal with him!" Aveline shoved Anders back against the wall. Her uniform was orange and silver, not purple and silver. She was a guard, not a templar. Anders was too dazed to care.

Aside from her, there was a heavy set dwarf sitting on the steps, buried under a leather coat much richer than the one Anders' wore and holding a crossbow. A girl with skin and hair to match Not-Amell was wearing a chainmail shirt, and holding the collar of a slathering mabari who was barring its teeth at Anders.

"Tch!" Not-Amell hissed at the dog. There was a streak of red across his nose to match one painted across the muzzle of his dog. At his hiss, the mabari quieted and laid down on the ground.

"Aveline, you're bleeding!" The girl called after the redhead.

"I'll get a bandage at the barracks," Aveline snarled, slamming a gauntlet clad fist into the wall as she stormed away. Not-Amell took a handful of steps after her, and ran both hands through his hair.

When he turned back around, his face was twisted into a scowl that killed the last of the resemblance. "You're the Grey Warden? We need information about the Deep Roads."

"Hawke said aggressively," The dwarf mumbled.

"What?" Anders managed.

"Okay," The girl stopped the man with a hand on his chest before he reached Anders. "That was our mistake. We shouldn't have come down here with a templar's shield. Let's try this again, because
despite what my brother would have you believe we weren't raised by a pack of rabid brontos. I'm Bethany Hawke, and this is my brother-..."

Bethany let go of her brother, and nodded towards Anders. She had a halo about her.

"Hawke," The man muttered. "Red Iron."

Anders looked at the armor he was wearing, and cleared his throat, "Looks more like Red Leather to me."

Hawke made a confused face at him, but the dwarf laughed from his place on the steps, "Good one, Blondie." With a grunt of effort, the dwarf pulled himself to his feet and staggered over, gingerly stepping over the corpse of a Coterie member. "Varric Tethras, at your service," He said with a sweeping bow that sent flaxen hair falling in front of his face. He tossed it back when he stood.

"May we?" Varric asked with a wave towards his clinic.

Anders thought of Evelina and the kids. "No."

"Okay," Varric held up two gloved hands, "Fair enough. We're interested in getting into the Deep Roads. Rumor has it you were a Warden. We were hoping you knew a way in, and some of us," Varric made an unsubtle gesture towards Hawke, "Were thinking you might want to join the expedition."

Anders choked on a laugh. "Was. Past tense. I will die a happy man if I never think about the blighted Deep Roads again. You can't imagine what I've come through to get here. Find someone else, I'm not interested."

"There is no one else," Hawke said.

"Please," Bethany said, "Any information you have could help saves lives."

"I said-" Anders stopped. Karl's life might need saving. If not from templars, then from Anders. "...Alright. Look. I have Warden maps of the depths in this area, but they're not free. Favor for a favor, does that sound like a fair deal? You help me, I'll help you?"

"What's the favor?" Hawke asked.

"I have-... a friend," Anders said, unable to help glancing at Bethany. They had an apostate with them. They'd known how to find him. There was no reason to assume they might not be sympathetic. "A mage. He's a prisoner in the Gallows, hopefully not for long. He asked me to meet him in the Chantry tomorrow night, but there might be templars with him. I need to free him from them, and I might need help. Help me bring him safely past them, and you'll have your maps."

"No," Hawke said quickly. "Absolutely not, forget it, we'll take our chances with the darkspawn."

Hawke turned around and grabbed Bethany's arm to drag her down the stairs. Bethany smacked his chest with the back of her hand.

"You know we need this!" Bethany hissed. "Yes, it scares me, and I know we don't need to give the templars another reason to hunt us, but what choice do we have?"

Hawke made a strangled sound in the back of his throat and gestured between Bethany and Anders.

"Oh calm down, Garrett, he's an apostate too," Bethany said.
"That doesn't mean anything," Hawke said, "The whole point of this expedition is to keep templars away from you. As in not fighting them. As in the opposite of this. As in no."

Bethany frowned at him, and glanced back at Anders with a smile too sweet to be anything but fake, "Will you excuse us for a minute?" Bethany asked rhetorically, twisting out of her brother's grasp to grab his wrist instead and drag him down the stairs. The dog followed them, but the dwarf stayed.

"So," Varric said, kicking the corpse of one of the Coterie members out into the strait.

"So," Anders agreed, leaning on his staff and trying not to fall asleep.

"I'm sorry to hear about your friend," Varric said. "I'm sure we can do something to help."

"... Thank you," Anders said. "That's not the response I usually get."

"Oh, you'll get it with us, trust me," Varric said, "Hawke's just a little... overprotective of Sunshine."

"Sunshine?" Anders asked.

"Ah, excuse me," Varric rolled his hand in an apologetic gesture. "Bethany. I've a penchant for nicknames."

"Is that a dwarf thing?" Anders asked, unable to help thinking Oghren and Sigrun.

"I don't know about that, but it's definitely a Varric thing," Varric said with a grin.

Bethany came back dragging her brother, the dog still trotting obediently alongside him, seemingly unconcerned with the abomination in front of it after a word from its master. Anders wondered if it could have been that simple with Barkspawn.

"Favor for a favor," Hawke agreed stiffly, and held out a hand.

Anders shook it.

Chapter End Notes

A fan render of Hawke!

An optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter of meeting Anders from Hawke's perspective. It links back to this one.
Hello everyone! Welcome back! I see we picked up a few new readers! This chapter is... this chapter, but now that we've hit rock bottom there's nowhere to go but up. I'm looking forward to trying for attempts at humor again. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:32 Dragon Eluviesta 6 Late Afternoon
Kirkwall Darktown: Outside Anders' Clinic

Hawke's quick handshake was muted by the gloves the both of them wore. "You get me," Hawke pointed a thumb back at Bethany, "Not her. Varric?"

"Bianca's ready and willing," Varric said, thumping the crossbow he held against his thigh, "Maybe Daisy could help?"

"No," Hawke said quickly.

Varric pressed two gloved fingers into his forehead, "Look, Hawke, I know you don't like her, but you've got to admit she's pretty mean in a fight."

Hawke raised an eyebrow at the dwarf, and looked almost wounded, "I never said I didn't like her."

"Then why won't you ever let me go visit her?" Bethany demanded.

"Because she's a bad influence. That doesn't mean I'm going to throw her to the templars." Hawke said, and turned back to Anders. "What's your plan?"

"Plan?" Anders asked.

Hawke's eye twitched.

"In over your head, Blondie?" Varric guessed.

"No," Anders said, trying to stand up straight, but his arms felt so heavy they were dragging his shoulders down, "No, I'm just tired. I'll watch the Chantry tomorrow to see if any templars show up. I'll meet with him. I just need someone there to get him away from the fighting, if there is any."

"How many templars are you expecting?" Hawke asked.

"It won't matter," Anders said.

"Well shit," Varric whistled. "Maybe we're the ones in over our heads."

"Guess," Hawke said.

"A half dozen," Anders guessed.
"I think we can handle that," Varric said. "In the meantime, what do you say to drinks at the Hanged Man? If you're going to be working with us, we could stand to talk a little bit more about what we have planned for the expedition."

"I'm busy," Anders said, thinking of Evelina and the children still waiting for him, but mostly of how hard it was to look into those eyes and not see the adoration he'd taken for granted. "I'll meet you outside the Chantry tomorrow night, after dark."

"Tomorrow night," Hawke agreed. He left for the stairs, and a whistle brought his dog with him.

"I hope you save your friend," Bethany said, with a smile that touched her eyes. Unlike her brother, they were amber, and easier for Anders to look into, "He ought to have his own life, away from the shackles of the Circle. Everyone should."

"Thank you," Anders said.

"Bethany!" Hawke barked over his shoulder; his sister ran after him.

"You see why I call her Sunshine?" Varric asked.

"I can guess," Anders said. "What's her brother? Sunset?"

"Hawke?" Varric snorted, "Hawke is just Hawke, but if I had to pick, I've been thinking about going with Killer."

"Charming," Anders said.

"Not really." Varric laughed. "Ah, his heart's in the right place, at least."

"The left side of his chest?" Anders asked.

"Something like that," Varric grinned, and held out a hand. Anders gave it a shake. "Look forward to working with you, Blondie. Sorry about the mix up with the shield."

"Why did she even have that?" Anders asked.

"It was her husband's," Varric explained with a sad sort of smile, "I haven't heard much about him, but he died during the Blight. I-... wouldn't go anywhere near her for the rest of your life if I were you,"

"She married a templar?" Anders asked. "Is that even allowed?"

"Don't look at me," Varric shrugged. "Templars and mages? Not really my thing, but helping a guy in need? I can get behind that."

Varric rolled a nearby corpse over with his boot. His boots were dark black with gold chains, and Anders bit back an envious sigh. The shoes Anders had gotten to replace the ones that had been stolen from him were little more than a bundle of scrap leather tied together with twine. "So, about these guys. Seems a bit rude to just leave them on your doorstep."

"I'll take care of it," Anders said.

"Well alright then," Varric said. "Tomorrow night."

"It's a date," Anders agreed.
"Don't go there, Blondie, I'll break your heart," Varric grinned, and spared him a wave over his shoulder when he left.

Anders watched the dwarf waddle down the steps, and pause at the bottom for a deep breath and a stretch before he vanished into Darktown. Anders went back into his clinic. "All clear!" Anders called.

The kids ran out from the mineshaft, and Evelina followed them. "Templars?" Evelina asked.

"Just some folk who wanted a favor," Anders explained, thinking of the bodies and the children's reaction to them. "I'll show you the way out through the mineshaft so you don't have to wait for me next time."

Anders led them through the sewers, the magelight he conjured in the form of a crow for the kids' amusement. They chased it around Evelina and himself, running in slower circles than Anders' thoughts. Maker's breath, Hawke looked so much like Amell it hurt. Anders hated thinking about Amell, especially after a five minute conversation proved Hawke was nothing like him.

Amell wouldn't have hesitated to help him save Karl. Not for a favor, but just because it was the right thing to do. Karl... Karl was probably already on his way to Aeonar. Even as bait for Anders, the templars didn't need to keep Karl around. All they had to do was wait in the Chantry for Anders to show up, and Maker knew he would, whether or not he saw Karl. Anders had to cling to the slim hope that Karl would actually be there.

Anders thought of that stupid kiss and wondered what in the Void was wrong with him. Velanna, Nathaniel, Sigrun, Amell. If Sigrun was to be believed, even Oghren might be dead if he'd gone with Amell to his Calling. The list of people Anders cared about never got any longer because he kept losing every person he added to it. Karl didn't deserve Aeonar.

Karl didn't deserve anything but a chance to feel the sun on his skin and the wind in his hair. A chance to climb a mountain, or swim in the ocean, feel sand or snow or grass between his toes and underfoot. Or sit in his room reading one dry tome after the next, but to still know that the choice to do all of those things was out there, waiting for him, and no templar was keeping him from it. He deserved that stupid fucking flower Anders had never found.

Anders bid Evelina and the children goodbye and went back to his clinic. The bodies were still there, and the aroma of death was thicker than ever. Anders dragged all five into a pile, coins and daggers and other bits falling out of the pockets of the dead to frame the smears of blood and feces they left at being moved. Anders stared at the mess, and wondered how desperate he was.

Pretty desperate, Anders decided. He found twelve silver and fifty seven bits on the bodies, three daggers, a carving knife, a handful of lock picks, a wooden drinking flask, a kit of bandages, a signet ring, a necklace, dice, a pouch of marbles, a bundle of elfroot, a pouch of jerky, a pair of shoes and socks that fit him, and better fitted gloves.

The rest was armor and weapons, most broken or damaged by the fighting. Anders made a pile of it and burned the bodies. The smell of cooked flesh and gristle reminded him he was hungry without making him queasy. Anders watched the smoke billow out of the cavern and escape out into the ravine, and wondered what he was supposed to do with the armor.

The Dogs might want it, but wearing Coterie commission gear was a death sentence in Kirkwall. Anders supposed they could use it for scrap, and left it in a corner of his clinic. He covered the pile with a tarp, and went back outside. Anders was staring at the bloodstains outside his clinic and wishing he had a mop or a broom when Franke showed up.
The curly haired cobbler waved when he came into view. Anders tried to rein his surprise at the visit and waved back. Franke stepped over a streak of shit and blood and his face crinkled up in concern. "Do I want to know?" Franke asked.

"Probably not," Anders said. "Are you alright? Do you need a salve or anything...?"

"Right. Fair." Franke rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Fair guess. I know I haven't been the best friend lately. Do you suppose I could come in for a bit? Do what Franke does best?"

"Sure," Anders said cautiously, holding open the door to the clinic for him. Franke wandered in and dropped the pack he was carrying onto the table. The table wobbled at the weight. Anders needed to find something to put under one of the uneven legs.

Franke shook out the pack and a pair of knee-high black boots tumbled onto the table. "I see you already found yourself a new pair, so I suppose these are a little late. They're no tusket, just your basic druffalo hide, but I figure they're better than the mess of twine you were wearing for a bit. I don't know what you got on now, but black goes with everything and the green you're wearing isn't really working with that coat, if you ask Franke."

Anders ran his fingers over one and stood it up on the table. The cheap leather flopped to one side instead of standing straight up the way the thick tusket had, but the gold trim did look fetching. They'd look ridiculous with the rags Anders was wearing, but they matched his leather Warden pants. "You didn't have to make me these."

"Well I had to do something," Franke said. "Don't know if you remember but I did sort of stab you."

"Only sort of," Anders grinned.

"I've been trying to take this day by day, you know?" Franke said. "When I heard you were a Warden, it all came back at once. The wife, the girls, the arrows, the fucking flames... I wasn't thinking. You were on one of the first boats out of Amaranthine, same as me. You're all for healing... I should have known you weren't for burning the city."

"You don't have to explain; I understand," Anders said. Maker, did Anders understand. Day by day was the only way he knew how to keep going.

"Well too late," Franke said with a shrug. "Already did," He ran an anxious hand through the mess of curls on his head, and put on a smile, "You feel like grabbing drinks? It'll just be dock swill, but we could catch up."

"Things are kind of hectic right now, Franke." Anders said, returning the smile to take the sting out of the refusal. "Maybe another day? Are you still staying with Lirene?"

"Still am," Franke said. "She found me some work over at the tanners, but lodgings are still a ways off. Hectic hectic or Franke you fucked up hectic?"

"Hectic hectic," Anders promised. "... You remember my friend at the Gallows?"

"Do now," Franke said.

"Well he might be in trouble and it might be my fault," It was definitely Anders' fault. "I'm a mess right now, Franke. I'm thinking about going to bed as soon as you leave."

No sooner did Anders say it than a refugee ran in, their hand bound in a bloody rag they clutched against their chest. Anders ended up spending the next half hour reattaching the refugee's severed
finger, and Franke fled at the sight of blood. A few more refugees trickled in while Anders was working on the finger, and he ended up working in his clinic until well into the evening.

Anders almost resented night when it fell. The patients stop coming in, and Anders put out his lantern and put up his feet, but sleep eluded him. Anders lay in his cot in the back of his clinic, exhausted and tossing and turning with his thoughts. The dull green glow of Justice's Veilfire from the lamp Anders kept beside his cot did little to soothe him. Anders sat up and pulled his legs against his chest. A few bangs of his forehead against his knees did nothing to settle his nerves.

Anders got dressed and grabbed his staff, and locked up the clinic behind him. During the day, the staff attracted templars, but at night it repelled gangs. Anders made the walk to Hightown mostly undisturbed. A bit of lightning coiled around his fingers was enough to ward off the few gangs who thought about harassing him.

Hightown was a glitzy collection of mansions cut from marble and whitewashed stone. The disparity of wealth in Kirkwall was never more keen as when you stood on the top of the steps and looked down at medley of stone and smog that made up the quarries of Lowtown. Every street in Hightown was lined in wrought iron lamps kept lit throughout the night, the streets were tiled and framed in hedgerows and rosebushes, and beautiful vines crawled up trellises on every other building. Every awning was a beautiful bit of embroidered cloth, and not a ratty tarp strung up over an alley. Banners hung still on the windless night, but there were many, and it was undeniably beautiful and opulent. There were fewer rats, and no cockroaches, and even a few nightly guard patrols Anders skirted quickly pasted on his way to the Chantry.

Anders had been to the Chantry a handful of times in the past three months he'd spent in Kirkwall. It was an imposing building of marble and stone that stretched high into the sky as if whoever had build it had thought to reach the Maker in the clouds instead of in the Fade. A staircase climbed up to meet it, framed in ferns and sunburst banners. Two massive bronze statues of watchful guardians stood on the roof on either side of the twin doors into the Chantry. They seemed to Anders a twisted parallel of the slaves set before the Gallows.

Everything in Kirkwall was rank to death with slavery and oppression. Karl wouldn't have wanted to meet here, but the letter was penned in his hand. Anders couldn't imagine what kind of threats the templars had made to get him to write it, but he knew it wasn't Karl's fault. Anders would tell him as much, assuming Hawke could keep Anders from killing him in the fight that was bound to come.

Anders found a place for his things under a hazel tree in the Chantry arbor, and tried and failed not to think of Velanna. He couldn't help remembering how giddy they'd been to run through the streets of Amaranthine together, snatching one apostate after the next out from under Leonie's nose. It had felt almost like a game, and the two of them cheating to win it. It didn't feel like that now. Anders took off everything but his coat, and dug his toes into the dirt beneath him. It was such a simple feeling, and Karl would never know it.

A crow sat in a hazel tree above a hidden nest of trinkets and baubles, never moving throughout the night and into the day that followed. It watched the passersby, and its thoughts were simple and quiet. Into the night of the day that followed, a hooded figure that the crow recognized as a potential mate made its way up the stairs, and into the Chantry. The crow waited, and waited longer still, but no predators followed it.

The crow jumped down from the tree, and Anders got dressed and picked up his staff. He left the arbor, and made his way back down the stairs. Waiting at the base and leaning against the wall were Hawke, his dog, and Varric. The former was dressed as he had been that morning: a crimson leather vest over a boiled leather chest piece with matching trousers. The latter was actually wearing armor,
in place of the casual jacket and tunic he'd had on when meeting Anders.

Varric wore boiled leather to match Hawke, but it was accented with iron, and complete with a boiled leather half-helm. He was holding his crossbow, but had strapped on a few daggers and what looked like a bomb to his belt, and the gold-chained boots had been replaced with a pair with metal guards. Anders supposed it should have been reassuring they seemed prepared, but he had to wonder how much use two archers and a mabari were going to be if he and Justice decided to burn down the whole Chantry.

Anders jogged down the steps to meet them. The dog noticed him first, and looked up with a low growl. Hawke glanced at him, and hissed the dog into silence. "I saw Karl go inside a few minutes ago," Anders said, "No templars so far. Are you both ready?"

"Give me a moment," Hawke said. He slung a pack off his back and knelt to pull a bow from it.

"Still with the bow and arrow?" Anders asked. "You know we might be fighting templars in full plate, right?"

Hawke grunted in response and focused on stringing his bow.

"I've never seen someone wear their quiver on their hip before." Anders said.

"You want me to save your friend or teach you archery?" Hawke tossed his hair out of his face and scowled up at him. Anders swallowed down a sound of distress for how familiar his face was. Thank the Maker Hawke was an ass or Anders would have been an incoherent mess around him.

"Just making conversation." Anders said.

"That's not really one of his strong points." Varric snorted. "I'm the one who does all the talking. We know our stuff, Blondie, don't worry about it. Let's go save your friend."

Hawke finished and made a clicking noise that set his dog to following him, and jogged up the stairs.

Varric approached them with far less enthusiasm, "Stairs, my old nemesis, we meet again."

"Now that, I know, is a dwarf thing," Anders said.

Varric was huffing breathlessly when he reached the top of the stairs, "When I tell the story of my life I am leaving out the part about my weight. Give me a second, Blondie," Varric took a break to lean back against the wall of the Chantry, and looked at Hawke, "Next time I might just have you carry me."

"Bianca won't be jealous?" Hawke asked, sparing his mabari a pat and looking like a civil human being for all of a second.

"Hmm, good point." Varric mused, taking another deep breath and shoving off the wall. "Don't make that face, Blondie, it doesn't take a lot of muscle to pull a trigger."

"Just watch for templars and keep Karl out of the fighting if there is any," Anders said.

"Let's do this fast," Hawke said.

Anders pushed open the doors, and was immediately assaulted with the scent of incense and hot wax. Bronze statues of robbed figures lined the entry hall, and littered at their feet were red candles decorated with various symbols from sunbursts to the emblem of Kirkwall. The light they cast was
Justice summoned a handful of Veilfire to help illuminate the corridor. It was reassuring to know the spirit was paying attention.

"Karl?" Anders called out, and met with silence.

"He didn't tell you where in the Chantry to meet him?" Hawke asked.

"Downstairs, in the basement, so we don't wake any of the Sisters," Anders said. "I just-haven't spent a lot of time here,"

"It's this way," Hawke said, taking the lead and pushing open the first door on the left hand side of the corridor. It opened up into a stairwell that led both up and down. Anders went down first, Veilfire lighting the way. The basement floor of the Chantry was filled with crates, bolts of cloth, chests of incense, and tapestries for different annums. Karl stood among them, no templars in sight, and Anders breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank the Maker, Karl, you scared the shit out of me," Anders said, throwing the Veilfire into a nearby lamp and jogging over.

"Anders, I knew you would come," Karl said, in a painfully dull monotone, "I knew you would never give up."

"What's wrong?" Anders asked, "Why are you talking like-

Karl turned around. Anders feet slipped out from under him and he fell hard, landing on his backside to stare up at Karl in shock, and the barely visible sunburst under his hood.

"No-" No. Karl was Harrowed. It was illegal. Aeonar-

"I was too rebellious," Karl explained, and it felt like looking at Hawke when Anders expected Amell. There was no affection in his ice blue eyes. No curve to his rose red lips. Not the slightest angle to the silver eyebrows he'd worn thin with worry. "Too much like you. The templars knew I had to be made an example of."

"No," Anders choked on the word. It twisted into a knot in his throat and it was all he could say, "No-no-no!"

"This is the only way we can master ourselves, Anders," Karl said. Empty. Emotionless. Gone. "This is freedom. You will understand, as soon as the templars show you."

"No, Karl-no-no-"

"This is the apostate," Karl said, and Anders saw the flashes of silver among the crates, saw the whispers of sunbursts, the echoes of swords.

Karl was Harrowed. He was Harrowed. He couldn't be made Tranquil. He couldn't. It wasn't possible. It wasn't happening. It wasn't real. Anders dug his blunt nails into his face and screamed into his hands, and the smite hit him.

His nerves lit with fire, and the agony of it corroded his thoughts to a blissful oblivion. Anders' scream turned to a roar, his skin cracked along his veins, and the breath he inhaled burned through his lungs and left his throat raw with the taste of mana. "You will never take another mage as you took him!"

Justice grabbed Vigilance, and brought them to their feet. A templar rushed them, all silverite and
reflective metal, shield tilted to guard against the magic a mage might cast, but they were more than magic, and more than a mage. A gauntlet-clad hand ripped from the Veil, and caught the templar by his left shoulder. A second burst forth to catch him by his right.

The templar ripped in half in an explosion of silverite and blood and fire. Someone drove a sword into his back, and Justice spun. His hand locked onto the templar's helmet, and he clenched his fist, crushing metal, bone, and brain. Silverite bit through the thin leather of his gloves, and Anders' blood mingled with the blood of the templar. Justice flung the combination through the thin viser of another templar, where it boiled into his skin.

Anders' magic made the man explode within his armor. The templar collapsed into a dozen different pieces, gauntlets rolling away from greaves, chunks of pink muscle escaping to splatter on the ground, and all around them a river of blood. Another smite tore through their veins, and the blue flames that marked his presence flickered along Anders' arms. Justice tore into the templar who dared to cast it, and all that was left was feeling.

The cold touch of silverite, made blistering by magic and shattered in a burst of molten metal. The slick caress of blood as it trickled down Anders' arms and his brow. The warmth of the flames licking their skin and the tingle of lightning as it danced between their fingers. The natural harmony that was beating blood and working muscle, and man and might and such magic. Magic that sang with all the strength of the Fade until there was no silver left, and Justice let go.

Anders collapsed. His knees hit the ground, and landed in a puddle of blood that sent droplets of red cascading up into his face. Maker, why? Anders didn't want to come back. He didn't ever want to come back. "No! No, no, come back! Don't make me deal with this! I can't deal with this!"

"Anders!?” Karl's voice came to him, impossibly animated with surprise and concern and something just short of rapture.

Anders looked up. Karl had pulled down his hood, and Maker, his face. His eyebrows were raised, his eyes wide, his lips barely parted in something almost like a smile. Hawke and Varric were in a defensive position in front of him, their weapons trained on Anders. Karl pushed past them and ran to his side, skidding through the blood to hit his knees in front of him.

"How-?” Anders managed, tracing the expressive lines at the corners of Karl's eyes.

"I don't know, it's like a gateway to the Fade is glowing inside you, like a beacon or the sun.” Karl said, "I'd already forgotten what it feels like... Maker's breath, Anders, you can't imagine it. All the color, all the music in the world, gone from the second-” Karl choked on a sob and grabbed Anders' hands despite the blood that slicked them.

"How did they get you?” Anders asked, "What happened?”

"I was writing you a letter,” Karl explained. "I wasn't watching the hour. It wasn't your fault, Anders."

"It wasn't yours, either,” Anders ran a hand through the short strands of Karl's hair, and smeared red through silver, "I know you weren't capable of caring for me anymore.”

"Please-I don't know how you brought it back, but it's fading,” Karl said, "Don't let me live as a templar's puppet."

"Karl-no,” Anders dragged his sleeve over his eyes, angry at the tears that blurred his vision.

"Kill me before I forget again,” Karl begged. "Please,"
"What? No," Hawke interrupted. Anders had forgotten anyone else was even here with them. "Whatever you did helped him. Don't kill him; maybe you can cure it."

"Can you cure a beheading!?" Anders snarled at him, "The dreams of Tranquil mages are severed. It takes away everything human inside you. There's nothing left to fix. If I was Tranquil-I would wish for a friend compassionate enough to kill me."

"Anders, please, it's fading fast," Karl grabbed a fistful of coat to win back his attention. Anders was already bleeding. The cuts on his palms were minor, and Justice apparently hadn't thought them worth healing. Anders shaped the spell with a painfully practiced ease, and set his hand over Karl's heart.

"I'm so sorry, Karl," Anders forced the words out around the sob caught in his throat. He leaned forward and kissed the sunburst on Karl's forehead, and felt the tingle of lyrium on his lips through the brand. He heard the song the lyrium sang, soft and sweet and somehow full of lamentation, and cast the spell. Karl shuddered in his arms, and then stilled.

Anders let his sob go, and buried his face in Karl's hair. He still smelled like the Circle. Like lyrium, and parchment, and oppression. Anders pulled back from him, and found Karl's ring despite the tears blinding him. He took off Karl's ring of study, and clenched it in his fist until the bite of metal hurt. "You can take it off now, Karl," Anders whispered, "You're out."

"Oh fuck," Anders kissed the top of Karl's head, and cradled him against his chest, rocking miserably back and forth. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Blondie-Anders." Varric said, and a hand closed down on his shoulder and squeezed, "We gotta go. You know someone heard all that. Come on. That's all you can do for him."

"Fuck," Anders laid Karl down, and stumbled up and away from his body. He all but ran up the stairs and out of the Chantry, and took the stairs down so fast he tripped and hit his knees at the bottom. Anders dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "Come back. Please. Please come back, please Justice, please,"

The spirit didn't stir. Anders bit down on the heel of his palm until the sting was all he felt. He picked himself up, and it was his own legs that carried him out of Hightown. The streets were quiet, save for the patter of blood draining from his coat and the thud of his staff hitting the cobblestone. Anders didn't know or care if Hawke or Varric were following him. A comfortable sort of numbness settled over him, halfway through Lowtown, and by the time he set foot in his clinic, he felt just sort of Tranquil himself.

Anders glanced behind him. Hawke and his dog and Varric were all still following him. "Maps." Anders remembered. "I promised you maps." He took a step towards the back of his clinic, and realized his fist was still clenched tight around Karl's ring. Anders forced his palm open, the muscles in his hand stiff and aching. The silver ring was coated with blood. Anders dropped it on his table, metal chiming when it hit the wood.

Anders stared at his palms. They were still cut to pieces, and imbedded with shards of silverite. Pulling them out would start the bleeding back up, and Anders wasn't sure he had the strength to heal them. He stared at them in a daze until someone spoke up.

"The Chantry," Hawke said. "What happened to you in there?"

Anders blinked at him. "I killed my friend."
"You know what I mean." Hawke gestured at him, "The light cracking through your skin. The glow. Your voice and eyes changing."

"I-... do you really need me to explain?" Anders asked.

"I might," Varric said. "But maybe now's not the time?"

"I want to hear him say it," Hawke said.

"It's-not what you think." Anders said.

"Oh it's not?" Hawke asked.

"No. I-... this is hard to explain," Anders wondered why he was even explaining himself. He didn't care what some stranger thought of him, but talking about this was easier than thinking about what had just happened. "When I was a Warden I... had a friend. A spirit of Justice. He needed a host to live outside the Fade-"

"A host?" Hawke cut him off, "Call it what it is. You're an abomination."

"Yes, fine, I'm possessed!" Anders threw up his bloody hands, "Happy? But he's not the same as a demon. He's a spirit. A good one."

"That's what you call a good spirit?" Hawke asked. "Do you even have any idea what you did in there? That's why you needed us, wasn't it? It wasn't to keep your friend safe from templars, it was to keep him safe from you."

"Yes!" Anders snapped, "Obviously. It's a madness when he comes out. A frenzy. I only find out after what I might have done. I didn't want to risk Karl falling to that. To me. For all the damn good it did."

"And you don't think maybe we deserved to know that before hand?" Hawke demanded.

"I'm with Hawke on this one, Blondie." Varric agreed; he looked a little green, his smile queasy, "Maybe you just want to watch your word choice, but 'madness' and 'frenzy' don't really instill much confidence."

"Because I'm sure you would have been eager to help if you'd known," Anders sneered.

"... Good point," Varric said.

"How is that a good point?" Hawke snarled, and turned back to him. The look in his eyes cut straight to Anders' heart. He didn't care what Hawke thought, but those damn red eyes looking at him with a mixture of fear, condemnation, and anger were too much for Anders. Anders looked away from them, "You could have damn well killed us in there!"

"Hawke-" Varric started.

"No, he's right," Anders interrupted, looking at the floor instead. "I know I'm a danger. I can't control what I-whatever we've become. I just hoped Karl-... Let me get your maps."

Anders had left his satchels in the back of the clinic by his cot. Feeling came back to Anders slowly, and his palms were starting to ache. He found the maps, and held them gingerly aloft to keep from getting blood on them when he handed them to Hawke. He half expected the man to rip them from his hands, but Hawke took them without any particular force, even if he still looked uneasy.
"I understand if you changed your mind about me joining your expedition," Anders said with a rueful grin.

Hawke hesitated, maps in hand, and Anders raised an eyebrow at him, "... Your friend-"

"Don't." Anders said. "Just don't. If that's all, can you both please leave?"

Hawke left without a word, dog at his heels, but Varric lingered.

"Look... Blondie," Varric cleared his throat, "A lot of shit just went down, and it's gonna take me a while to wrap my head around it, but that guy in there? I know the difference between a friend and a friend. I've got a room at the Hanged Man, if you need to talk."

"Please just go," Anders said.

Varric left. Anders watched the door close behind him, and looked back down at his hands. He plucked out a shard of silverite, and hissed at the pain that lanced through him. His nerves seemed to come alive, his emotions along with them, and Anders choked on the intensity of it all. He crumpled to the floor, sobs wracking his bruised and bleeding body until his throat was raw and his chest was aflame. He ran out of air before the pain stopped, before the memory of Karl shuddering in his arms faded, if it ever would.

Anders fisted a hand around the hilt of his dagger and pulled it from his belt, shards of silverite digging into his palm, but the sting wasn't enough to make him forget. Nothing would be. Anders brought the dagger up, and cracks of flame as bright and blue and beautiful as Karl's eyes carved through the veins in his arm. Anders' hand threw the dagger across his clinic without his consent.

"Oh, now you come out!" Anders screamed into the night. "Now? Not when I beg!? Not when I'm screaming for you!? Now you stop me? Fuck you! I told you I couldn't deal with this! I told you!"

Anders stumbled after his dagger, and a shock of something brought him to his knees before he reached it. "Let go of me! This is my choice! You'll just go back to the Fade! Let go! I can't do this! I can't! I can't keep running and running and losing everyone I care about! I can't do this, I can't fucking do this!"

His skin cracked open. Anders pressed his palms into his face, and saw the flash of blue behind his eyes. Sensation dulled, and it felt like a wave dragged him down into the dark depths of the Waking Sea where everything was muted. Anders was dimly aware of his clinic, of the sights and sounds around him, but he could ignore them. He turned away from it all, into the blissful oblivion of his own mind.

"Anders," Anders heard Justice say. Anders looked back despite himself, and saw the blue flames flickering on his arms. Justice was barely holding their body up on the shaking muscles. The spirit must have been exhausted. "I am here. We are here. You need not run. You can fight. Your Circle can be broken. We can tear it down. We can make an end to it. We can have justice. We can have vengeance. For Karl. For you. For every mage who ever suffered at their hands."

Justice let go, and Anders felt as if he fell back into his own body. He pressed the bloody heels of his palms into his eyes and sobbed.

"Maker, yes."

Chapter End Notes
An optional *Apples and Apostates’ Chapter* that details the events leading up to this chapter from Karl’s perspective. It links back to this one.
Ray of Sunshine

Chapter Notes

It's an entire chapter of dialogue, 80% of it pulled straight from the game! I'm so sorry. I try not to do this, but I really enjoy these conversations and I wanted to include them.

I realize this story is already ridiculously long, and to be honest, we could already have it separated into two stories by now, ending the first on Love is Blind, and the second one on Snap, and starting the third here, but I feel like it's too late now to do anything about this giant mess.

We hit 7000 views! Thank you so much for supporting this story! Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon Eluviesta 12 Sometime
Somewhere

The darkspawn were screaming, not in the chasms deep beneath the earth, but in the ravine of Kirkwall. Their mindless climb up the blackrock painted the cliffs as black as the Void. They burst forth from the sewers in a geyser of rot and filth, dripping thick green embryonic and wearing the faces of children: Walter, Cricket, Nika.

They surged over one another in a tidal wave through the streets of Kirkwall, Amaranthine, Denerim, Harper's Ford, slipping and sliding and squealing. Anders felt the undulating mass of darkspawn on the inside of his skin, as warm and slick as the blood that coated him when he'd dug into Eylon, into Rolan, into templars. They wreathed inside him, corroding him from the inside out, and Maker he loved it.

They sang a song sweeter than lyrium, of such desperate, mind shattering ecstasy Anders would have pursued it to whatever end. He clawed Amell's eyes from his skull, he ripped through Karl's chest, he dug through Eylon's back and into Nathaniel, Velanna, and everyone he'd ever loved, but he loved the song more than all of them. How he wished he had sung it for Sigrun before the flames had taken her from him.

Strong hands locked around Anders' chest, and a caustic cold cut through him and seemed to seep the corruption from his veins. Anders watched it ooze from the cracks in his skin, and fought to push the blackened sludge back inside of himself.

"These nightmares will not avail you." A voice said, rippling with command. "You carry the torment afflicted on your noctivagant soul into your waking hours."

Anders was without words. There was nothing more to him than the song; it rent at his soul and sundered his body. There was no Chant of Light. There was only the Call. He fought the hands restraining him.

"Good," The voice said encouragingly, with no less command that before. It seemed to shake the very air. "Fight. Wake. Suffer in silence no longer."
Anders sat up with a gasp. His clinic was dark, save for the soft emerald glow of Veilfire that flickered in the bronze lamp beside him. It cast shifting patterns across the walls and pillars of his clinic, and reminded Anders of the Fade, of his home. No, not his home. Of Justice's home.

Anders ran his fingers along his scalp, and pulled handful of hair in front of his face. The long strands were soaked through, more brown than blonde. Anders was drenched. His tunic and trousers were stuck to his skin, and he was sitting in a puddle of his own sweat. Anders stripped off his tunic and draped it over the corner of his cot.

Anders looked down at himself and a sob rattled in his chest, but his throat closed on him before it could escape out his mouth. He was grateful for his lack of a looking glass, but Anders didn't need one to see his chest and the ribs framed against his freckled skin. Three months in this city, and Anders had lost over a stone in weight. He was nowhere close to what he'd been after solitary, but he was far from pretty. His hipbones pressed against his trousers, and the flat of his stomach left enough space for his fingers to fit against his skin without touching the fabric of his waistband.

Anders stripped out of his pants and his smalls, and draped all his sodden clothes over his makeshift drying rack. It was a bronze grate, and Maker if Anders knew what its original purpose had been. Most of the grates he'd seen in Kirkwall were round, but this one was a rectangle, and perfect for clothes. If one man's trash was another man's treasure, then Anders supposed he was living in a treasure trove.

Anders stretched and rubbed ineffectually at the knots in his shoulders. He couldn't reach them, and a breath of Justice's magic wouldn't unravel them, but it did soothe the ache. It was enough. Anders flexed his hands, and looked down at the scars still riddling them. Most of them would fade, but there was one that twisted around his left palm he was fairly certain was for life.

Anders had given Justice a lecture on it after the incident. Hands were important, especially for a healer. They took priority if they were injured. If the silverite had cut much deeper, Anders and all his patients would have suffered for it. His hands were stiff enough despite flexing them daily. Anders doubted any permanent damage had been done, but Justice's fixation getting his hands dirty was going to cost them someday.

Anders pissed into the drain along the walls of his clinic and sighed. One day at a time. One night at a time. Anders knocked his head against the wall of his clinic, gentle thuds that didn't get Justice's attention. The spirit had been on edge, ever since Anders had pulled a dagger on himself. Any sort of cathartic pain got Justice's attention. Pulling his hair, biting his cheek, any of his old habits indulged would make Anders flare with blue and stop abruptly.

It was infuriating, and the first time since Amaranthine Anders actually felt possessed. He needed something to stop the few reminiscent thoughts that wandered into his head, but Justice didn't understand that. Couldn't understand that. The spirit only understood pain, and the need to stop it. Anders had even gone so far as to explain aloud that sometimes pain was good, but talking to himself wasn't half as effective as actually talking to the spirit.

He couldn't answer any of Justice's questions. He wasn't even sure if the spirit had any. It was all just one complicated knot of feeling tangled in his head, and if some thoughts felt more intrusive than others Anders didn't know who to blame anymore. Justice wouldn't have conjured a twisted blend of Hawke and Amell, a sneer and the word 'Abomination' on their lips, but the thought was there: intrusive, unwanted.

Anders didn't trust any of his thoughts. Shape-shifting helped, but Anders couldn't live the rest of his life as a crow. Justice wouldn't let him. Anders was ever impatient to do something, whether it was healing the refugees or working with the Collective. Anders didn't particularly mind, especially if the
work was enough to keep his mind blank. It usually was.

Anders conjured water for his bucket and retrieved the rag someone had gifted him to wash himself down. It never seemed to help. Anders could only get so clean without any soap, or pumice, or emery. The rag was thin and threadbare, and Anders ran it over his leg, watching the water run through the ruddy brown hair on his legs and over a smattering of freckles that started up in full force where his coat stopped.

It was spring, the Free Marches were already warming up. Anders had a handful of requests from the Collective for resources from the Planasene Forest and the Wounded Coast, and wished he'd taken a copy of the Botanical Compendium and the Alchemist's Encyclopedia with him from Vigil's Keep instead of Justice's poetry book and Amell's journal. Most of the requests were simple. Elfroot, deep mushrooms, and spindleweed, but some were things Anders had never heard of like glitterdust and orichalcum.

Anders had given up on his hair over a month ago. He tied the long locks into a knot at the back of his head and scratched at the uneven covering of russet on his jaw, and there ended his morning routine. Anders pulled from the Fade and let a wash of heat dry out his clothes. He got dressed, left his coat on his cot, and Justice lit his lantern.

It was a day. It was always a day. There was a lull in the refugees towards midday, and Anders got caught in a loop of washing his hands until they were raw, and Justice forced him back from the bowl when the spirit noticed. Anders felt the pinpricks of irritation crawl up his spine, and shook the sensation away. "I wasn't paying attention. It wasn't on purpose."

"What wasn't on purpose?" A voice too spirited for Darktown asked. Anders looked up from his pink hands and blinked.

Hawke's sister was standing in the entrance to his clinic. She looked out of place in Darktown. The girl had a healthy sheen to her wavy black hair and a complexion fair enough to be nobility. She walked into his clinic on leather boots fine enough to warrant a mugging, and stopped a few feet away from him with a smile that lit up her whole face, from her lips to her cheeks to her eyes. Sweet, merciful amber eyes without a single fleck of red.

"It's still Anders, isn't it?" The girl asked, "I'm Bethany Hawke, in case you forgot my name. I know we didn't talk long last week."

"No, I remember," Anders lied, rolling down his sleeves. All he could remember was that Varric had called her Sunshine, "What can I do for you?"

"Oh no, I'm not injured or anything," Bethany said, "I was actually just hoping to talk to you."

"Talk?" Anders said.

"It's this silly thing people do sometimes when they want to get to know someone," Bethany explained, still grinning. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"... if you can find somewhere clean," Anders said.

Bethany ran her fingers over his table, void of any chairs, and Anders took a quick step to stop her, "No-It wobbles. Here, let me get a stool or something,"

Maker, did he even have any stools? Anders looked around his clinic, and found a few crates to drag together. Bethany sat on the edge of one. She really did look ridiculously out of place. The white tunic wouldn't have held its original shape and color after a few days in Darktown. "I heard about
"I'd rather not talk about it," Anders tapped his fingers along his knee, uncomfortable sitting but not quite willing to pace. This was a lot further than he expected a conversation with anyone who knew he was an abomination to go.

"That's fair," Bethany said. "Aveline is always saying we choose our own ways to mourn. I really am sorry about how we met. With the shield. That was stupid. Have you been an apostate your whole life?"

"Can I ask you something first actually?" Anders stood up, and took a few cautious steps back, "How much did your brother tell you about what happened? With my friend?"

"Just that he was Tranquil... and that you had to kill him," Bethany's eyebrows drew together, and her smile turned strained, "It really was a noble thing you did. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"... That's it?" Anders asked, "He didn't say anything else?"

"Oh, I suppose he did, but just the usual Garrett things," Bethany shrugged, "That you're a danger and I shouldn't go anywhere near you, but he says that about everyone. Really. One time he even said it about our tailor."

"You know, in this case, it might actually be true," Anders said, wondering why Hawke would neglect to mention the abomination rampaging through Darktown.

"Why?" Bethany asked, "Because you're an apostate? I."

The door to his clinic opened, and two elven refugees stumbled in, one dragging the other. The girl being dragged left a trail of blood behind her. Anders ran over and caught her free arm, looping it around his shoulder, "Table," Anders gestured to the table that was more of a plank he used for operations. "What happened?"

"Stepped on piece of scrap metal," The man carrying her explained, helping Anders sit the elf down on the table and scoot her back. Anders picked up her foot by her ankle and exhaled hard through his nose. There was a jagged piece of metal embedded between the elf's big toe. It went halfway down her foot, and cleaved off to the side.

Anders had no idea what type of metal it was. There was too much blood for him to tell the color. Anders rolled his sleeves back up, "Alright, I'm going to have to remove this, and it's going to sting. If you want, I can make it so you sleep through it."

"Please," The girl agreed tearfully.

"Lie down," Anders agreed tearfully.

The girl did, and Anders wove the net of sleep and cast it over her. Anders rummaged through his shelves for the uneven tongs a blacksmith had forged for him last month in exchange for healing a burn injury his forge had left him with, and belatedly remembered he had a visitor. It was a weird thing to have.

"You should probably go if you're squeamish with blood," Anders said over his shoulder. "It's in and out all the time with patients."

"Can I watch? I mean, if you don't mind," Bethany said.
"I wasn't expecting that, but sure," Anders said, dragging his crate over to its place beside his makeshift operating table. "Can you bring me that bowl of water, and the empty one beside it?"

Both bowls appeared on the operating table beside the elven girl's feet. Anders washed his hands off in the bowl of water, ignoring the surge of concern and suspicion from Justice with how raw his hands already were, and set the empty bowl at his feet. Anders flexed the stiffness out of his hands, and pulled the shards of metal from the girl's foot, dropping each into the bowl at his feet.

"You have steady hands," Bethany said.

Anders flinched, and nearly stabbed a piece of metal back into the poor elf's foot.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I won't talk," Bethany said quickly.

"It's-Thank you," Anders finished emptying the girl's foot of the shards he could see, and ran a hand over her foot, tendrils of creationism reaching through flesh and muscle until they collided with shrapnel and stopped. Maker's breath that was deep. Anders hands were nothing but red when he had it out. A stream of regenerative energy knit the rent muscle and tendons back together.

"Oh that's so extraordinary," Bethany said. "I mean, I've heard of spirit healers, but I've never actually seen or felt the energy a spirit gives off when it's being channeled-Oh I'm sorry, I said I wouldn't talk."

"It's fine," Anders said, "I'm mostly done, I just need to hold this for a few minutes."

"Can I ask what kind of spirit you use?" Bethany asked.

"Justice," Anders said, feeling a tingle in his fingers at invoking the spirit's name. Anders bit back a smile.

"Wouldn't that be nice," Bethany said with a wistful sort of sigh.

Anders finished the channel, and the skin on the sole of the elf's foot knit back together, leaving an ugly pink scar in the pale flesh. Anders pulled back the veil of sleep he'd cast over her, and the elf sat up. "Oh, Maker, it still hurts," The girl groaned.

"It's healed, that's what's important," Said the man who'd brought her in.

"Hang on, I'll get you a salve that should help with the pain," Anders did his best to wash his hands off in his bowl of water, but blood was bloody stubborn. Anders gave up and wiped what was left off on his trousers. "You'll need to stay off it for a few days."

Anders found the pouch of elfroot he'd taken off a Coterie corpse and the small kit of bandages, and came back with both. He didn't have a mortar and pestle, or anything remotely close, and resigned himself to squeezing what juice he could from the roots onto the bandage when Bethany spoke up.

"I could help with that," Bethany offered, "Getting the juice. My schools are spirit and creationism."

Anders raised an eyebrow at her and handed the elfroot and bandages over. Anders felt the pull of the Fade, and Bethany's brow furrowed, and a small cage of telekinetic magic closed over the root and crushed every last drop of liquid from it. Anders took the damp bandage back and wrapped it around the elf's foot. "Better?" Anders asked.

"Much, thank you," The elf grinned, "Both of you."
"Thank you, healer," The man agreed, and the two left, one still carrying the other.

Bethany bounced on the balls of her feet until the door to Anders' clinic closed behind them, and let out a delighted giggle. "Oh, I've always wanted to try that. Doing something real with my magic, not just hiding in a corner and keeping up a few auras for everyone. Thank you for letting me help."

"Sure," Anders said. "... Your brother doesn't know you're here, does he?"

"Garrett?" Bethany snorted, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, "He'd lose his mind. Don't worry, Mother's covering for me. He won't find out. I just really wanted to meet you, and get a chance to talk to another mage, and see the kind of magic that has half the city talking about you."

"Half the city?" Anders repeated, "Maker, I hope not. I've got enough templars on my doorstep as it is."

"Well, everyone in Lowtown, it feels like," Bethany said. "All of the Dog Lords, every Ferelden refugee." Bethany dragged her crate across the room and sat down across from him again. "You know when we heard about what you've been doing, even Garrett was impressed. You probably shouldn't stay here. It's dangerous to be around me." Anders picked up the bowl of bloody shards, and rinsed them over the drain along the walls of his clinic with conjured water.

"The last thing I need is another lesson about the dangers of magic," Bethany groaned, "It's dangerous everywhere in Kirkwall, but I'll go mad if I spend the rest of my life in that filth-hole in Lowtown."

Anders had to laugh at that. It was harsh sort of snort, and it hurt the back of his throat to make the sound, but he needed it. He waved a hand around his trash heap of a clinic, "You think this is better?"

"I think this is yours," Bethany said.

"Home shit home, I guess," Anders said, "Until the templars come knocking."

"You have no idea how lucky you are to have your own place," Bethany sighed. "We're staying with our uncle right now, and it's just awful. You never answered my question. About you being an apostate. Or-am I bothering you? We're a real pair, Garrett and I. I talk too much, he doesn't talk at all. I know it can get annoying."

Anders finished washing the shards, and tossed them into the pile of scrap metal he was keeping to go with the scrap leather. The Dogs came by, now and again, to pick it all up. Anders looked back at Bethany, tilting his head to catch the whisper of the Fade that breathed across her skin. Hawke was right to be protective of her. Every mage deserved someone to keep them safe from templars. Anders should have told her to leave, but her hopeful smile restrained him.

"... You're not bothering me," Anders said. If Franke couldn't, no one could. At least not just from talking. Anders conjured another stream of water over his hands to clean the blood dried beneath his finger nails. "No. I was raised in the Circle. I escaped seven times before the Wardens recruited me."
"Maker's breath, seven?" Bethany asked, voice pitching up in awe. "I wouldn't be brave enough to try even once."

"I take it you've been an apostate your whole life?" Anders guessed.

"That's me," Bethany agreed. "I never had to work for anything... It was always other people, taking the risks to keep me free. My magic manifested when I was nine. We were living outside Amaranthine at the time, and there was this bully. Not my bully, Carver's. He was my twin. He died during the Blight."

"I'm sorry," Anders finished washing his hands, picked the last flecks of blood out from beneath his nails before conjuring more water to wash off his operation table. The plank was cracked, and tilted towards the center, and the water and blood slid off together to pool in a bucket he kept at the base of the table.

"Everyone's lost someone, right?" Bethany shrugged one shoulder, "It's probably for the better. Carver would have hated it here. All the sneering nobles, he would have gotten himself arrested on the first day. What was I saying?"

"A bully," Anders reminded her, searching for a rag to wipe the last of the damp from the table.

"Right," Bethany snapped her fingers, "A bully. Carver's bully. I just got so mad, I was so sick of it. I threw him across the field without even touching him. Just a natural for telekinetics, I guess. We had to leave town the same day and only take what we could carry, and everyone just did it. Carver, Garrett, Mother and Father. We just ran. Like it was normal."

"It's always like that," Anders said. "It's the fucking bloody templars."

"There shouldn't be any templars," Bethany agreed. It felt good to finally hear someone agree with him. "If I could just wish them away I would."

"They don't see us as people. They don't care that your someone's daughter. Someone's sister," Anders pressed his hand into his knee to keep his leg from tapping. Maker, it made him angry just to think about, and the anger felt good. "If you're born with magic they hear about it. They search your little rat spit village, and find you. And if you run away, they hunt you down. Again, and again, and again."

"Is that what happened to you?" Bethany asked.

"That's what happened to me," Anders agreed.

The door opened again. A refugee stumbled in gasping, and hit his knees in the threshold. Anders bolted over and slung the man's arm around his shoulder. Flames cracked through his lower back and his legs, and Justice helped him lift the man and bring him to the table. "What happened?" Anders asked, brushing damp bangs aside to feel the man's forehead. Anders set his free hand on the man's neck. No fever, but he was sweating and wheezing. "Where are you hurt?"

The refugee pawed at his chest and coughed up blood onto Anders' shirt. Lungs. Anders dragged the man's shirt off, unsurprised by the massive black and purple bruised painted along his ribs. The man spat up blood again, and it splashed across Anders' collarbone. His hand came up to cover his mouth, and Anders pulled it back down. "It's okay. You want to cough. You don't want any of that staying in your lungs. Breathe deep and slow."

Anders summoned Justice for a cleansing aura to reduce the swelling in his lungs, and the bruises on his chest and ribs. The stains of black and purple receded, giving way to a dark Marcher tan. Anders
finished healing him before the fellow managed to clear his lungs with his coughs. "I'm going to draw the rest of the fluid out of your lungs, alright?" Anders asked. "It's going to feel awful."

The man nodded, and Anders drew the last of the fluids from his lungs and the man vomited them up onto the floor. "Maker, I'm sorry," The refugee wheezed, kneading at his chest. "I couldn't-not-"

"It's fine," Anders said, "We wanted that to happen, remember? You all good?"

"All good." The man agreed, voice hoarse. "Thank the Maker my cousin broke his ankle last week and heard of you. I thought it was just a bruise. A little chest pain and some coughing but it got worse today and I just couldn't breathe."

"A little something can always turn into a big something," Anders said. "Don't ignore it next time."

The man nodded, and stumbled off the table, his feet splashing in his own vomit. "Maker, should I- Do I need to-"

"No, it's fine," Anders said. "You're good. Bethany-can you hand me that pouch of elfroot?"

Bethany fetched it. Anders took out a piece and handed it over to the man, "Chew this. It'll help with the pain in your throat."

"Thank you, healer," The man said and left. Anders stared at the mess of vomit and blood, and went to find a rag. He really needed a mop.

"Can I-... ask you something personal?" Bethany asked hesitantly.

"Sure, why not?" Anders shrugged, coming back with a rag and getting down on his hands and knees to wipe the mess towards the drains in the walls.

"Your eyes glow sometimes," Bethany said. "I saw it before when you were talking, and when we first came to visit your clinic. What is that?"

"Oh, shit did they?" Anders hadn't even noticed. Well... at least Justice would always agree with him. Anders didn't need anyone else. There was no one else who was safe with him. Time for Bethany to run from his clinic like a bat out of the Void, Anders supposed. "That's just uh... That's just Justice."

"Your spirit?" Bethany asked. "He's... inside you?"

Anders snorted, "Well don't make it sound dirty."

"You're possessed?" Bethany asked.

"Guilty," Anders shrugged, glancing up from the floor for her reaction.

Bethany stared at him with wide eyes, and wet her lips several times as if to speak, but no words escaped her. "How?" She managed eventually.

No condemnation. No fear. No anger.

No wonder Hawke told her to stay away from him. Bethany was as trusting as Amell.

"You'd have to ask him," Anders shrugged. He finished moving what he could of the mess, and draped the dripping rag over his drying rack. He needed to change his trousers and tunic, but he had nothing else to change into. He came back to sit on the crate beside Bethany, a little amazed she was
even still here.

"There was ... a battle," Anders said, "A war, almost, when I was still a Warden, and I don't know how much you know of the Order but victory in war is kind of a big thing for them. The two of us... we did what we couldn't do alone. He's not a demon. He's a spirit. He doesn't take anything from me, he just gives." Anders felt an odd sort of affection for himself he knew wasn't any thought of his at the confession, "He was trapped outside the Fade at the time. In a corpse. It was complicated, but I think if I hadn't agreed he would have died."

Died. Gone back to the Fade. Anders didn't know for certain. He thought of the dagger he'd raised against himself and a sudden surge of guilt nearly drowned him.

"And now he helps you heal?" Bethany asked rhetorically, "That all sounds so brave. Trying to help a friend, surely no harm could come of that."

"We meant well," Anders said, and only realized he was smiling when he felt the pain in his cheeks.

"And you seem like you're doing well," Bethany said, "... Does Garrett know?"

"He knows," Anders said.

"Well no wonder he told me to stay away from you," Bethany waved a hand as if her brother were standing next to her and could be brushed aside as easily as a gnat, "He's not a mage. He doesn't understand. I know there's a difference between spirits and demons."

"Not to be rude, but... how?" Anders asked. "If you've been an apostate your whole life, where did you manage to learn your magic? I-... hate isn't a strong enough word for how I feel about the Circle, but it's usually the only decent a training a mage can get."

"Our father was a mage," Bethany explained. "It's why we were used to running, even before my magic manifested. He was in the Circle here, if you can believe it... He met my mother at this fancy banquet, where 'arcane representatives' were sent to provide 'magical entertainment' for the nobility. They fell in love in a day, and eloped a few months later. Can you imagine that? Falling in love so fast and so deep? It was so romantic. I never get tired of that story."

"Yeah that's uh-..." Anders cleared his throat. He bit the inside of his cheek, and was relieved when Justice didn't stop him. The sting killed where his thoughts had been going. "How does anyone escape the Gallows?"

"A templar helped him," Bethany grinned. "He destroyed Father's phylactery and everything. I know, that sounds even more unbelievable, doesn't it? But it's true. Mother left her old life here behind, and they fled to Ferelden, and Father started working as a mercenary. He died... five years ago now. He took ill, and I-we focused in creationism. Auruses. Aptitude. But not healing."

Bethany shrugged, and wiped at the corners of her eyes with her thumb.

"You're lucky, you know," Anders said. "I don't think you even know how lucky. To have someone who loved you and could help you. Most mages would kill for that. I had a friend who-... well, he would have done anything for that."

"I know I am." Bethany said. "I do. It's wonderful, even with Carver and Father gone, and Uncle Gamlen being Uncle Gamlen. Mother and Garrett are there for me... but they're not mages." Bethany rubbed her palms on her thighs and sat up straighter to look him in the eyes, "You've already been so nice, letting me talk to you about all this, but that's not why I came here."
"Well it is, but it's not the only reason. I really am tired of hiding away that hovel, watching my mother eat herself up inside over Carver while Garrett does all the work. I can tell you get a lot of patients, and I know running a free clinic must be a lot of work alone. I want to help. You look like you could use an aide, and I could help with poultices, or cleaning, and maybe if you had time you could teach me a bit of magic?"

"I'm not alone. I have Justice," Anders said, "And I don't think your brother would approve of you being here."

"I don't think I care." Bethany said. "I love Garrett, I really do. He means well, he does, and I know he's just trying to protect me, but he's suffocating me. I can't do it anymore. I want friends. I want a life. If I could choose, I'd choose to be normal, but I'm not. I never will be, and Garrett has to learn that someday. Please say yes. You have no idea what it would mean to me to spend time with another mage. Someone who understands."

... Hawke was going to kill him.

"When do you want to start?"
I have a ten hour shift tomorrow and I stayed up to finish this chapter instead of going to bed! That was ... probably not smart but I hope you guys like the chapter anyway. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon Eluviesta 19 Just Before Sunrise
Kirkwall Docks: Smetty's Fish Guttery

Smetty's Fish Guttery smelled, shockingly, of fish guts. Anders sat on a barrel, idly thumping his heels against the bowed wood. Anders lifted a leg to admire the boot running up to his knee. The black was slimming, and while Anders didn't need to be any slimmer, they were rather fetching. The gold trim made him feel half a noble. He felt a little uncomfortable wearing them in Darktown, but crime at the docks was virtually nonexistent.

The qunari probably had something to do with that, but as far as Anders was concerned the grey giants were worse than the Chantry with what they did to their mages. It made sense to meet here, but just because it made sense didn't mean Anders had to like it. Anders palmed the grimoire latched to his belt, and met with silence. The spelltome was just a tome now. There were no demons within, radiating diffused magic and distributing energy to every mage in the area, but it was still comforting to have when he couldn't bring his staff into the city.

Anders went back to kicking his feet. Workers trickled in slowly, primarily elves. They paid little mind to the human in the ugly coat, sitting on a barrel in the corner. Anders kept waiting for one of them to approach him, growing more anxious as time passed. He knew he was early, but it seemed like the courteous thing to be when being late might mean he was dead or captured.

Eventually the door opened and a man dressed in a heavy cloak with the hood pulled up over his head came inside. Anders gave him a tentative wave and the man came over. "Bancroft?" Anders guessed.

"Anders?" The man countered, pushing down his hood. He was branded. Anders recoiled, and slipped off the barrel. He toppled over and hit the stack of crates behind him, and the entire stack wobbled precariously.

"They would dare!? Again!?" Anders snarled, scrambling to his feet. He felt his skin crack, a tingling sensation that flickered like static up and down his arms, and embraced it. "We will burn every last-"

"Whoa, whoa, stop!" Bancroft grabbed him by his collar and dragged him away from the workers. The flames on Anders' arms lit up the corner of the guttery, but they faded when Anders noticed Bancroft's furrowed brow and frustrated expression.

"Expression. Emotion. Again. Had Anders-had Justice-... was Hawke right? Could they really heal Tranquility? Maker, had he killed Karl for nothing?"
"It's fake," Bancroft insisted, tapping the sunburst between his eyes.

Anders let out the breath tangled up in his chest, and sank back against the wall in relief. "Fake?"

"It's just a brand," Bancroft explained, "No lyrium."

"Why?" Anders asked.

"The Tranquil are the only mages that move unseen in this city," Bancroft said, fingers tracing over raised skin on his forehead. "I had a friend forge the brand for me. Stung for a month, but I can go anywhere now. Gallows. Darktown. Hightown. No one pays the Tranquil any mind."

"How have you not gone mad waking up to that mark every day?" Anders asked. He couldn't even keep eye-contact with the man. His eyes kept drifting up to the sunburst set on his forehead and picturing Karl.

"It reminds me why I'm doing this. I heard about Thekla," Bancroft's eyebrows drew together, in anger and not sympathy. Anders liked that. Anger was easier. "Selby said you wanted to help start our underground for getting mages out of the Gallows. I'll tell you what I've got so far.

"We need safe passage. There's no point getting our brethren out of the Gallows and into the city. They won't survive in Kirkwall. Samson wants fifty silver a mage, and we'll never have that kind of coin. I've been in talks with the Redwaters, but their captain Leech doesn't want to make any moves until they're more established in Kirkwall. There's also the Crimson Weavers, but their captain Jakeson wants two sovereigns before he'll do anything.

"They're both maleficarum, if you can believe it, and sympathetic, but it will be a while, whoever we go with. In the meantime, we can make the trip over land to Ostwick or Cumberland, but that's a week's journey in either direction, probably more with how unaccustomed most of our brethren are to travel. Are you willing to be one of our escorts?"

"Whatever you need," Anders said earnestly, and could almost feel his spirit resonate in agreement with him.

... was that how he thought of Justice now? His spirit?

"Good." Bancroft nodded, "Good. Selby said you had some ideas about the Coterie, and the tunnels under the city?"

"I need someone to get me in touch with them first, but I know the Coterie has a lot of surface dwarves in their guild. I don't know if they have any apostates working with them, or if they need a healer, but I have experience healing through their magical resistance." Anders pushed away the memory of Sigrun screaming in his arms, her skin burnt an ugly black and coming loose beneath his fingers as he dragged her away from fight in Kal'Hirol. "It seems like a fair trade for letting us use the same passages they use for lyrium smuggling." Anders thought of the fight he'd interrupted outside his clinic. "I think they tried to get in contact with me already, but that didn't work out."

"Brilliant," Bancroft said. "I'll press on my contacts, try to get you in touch with them again, then. Let them know you're willing. Look for the green lantern in Darktown, right?"

"That's the rumor," Anders agreed.

"Good," Bancroft said again, "Good, this could work. We still need someone in the Order, but I have a few friends on the inside who have a few ideas. There are two templars so far who seem like they might be willing to help. Ser Thrask and Ser Bardel. Would you be willing to meet with either
of them if we could arrange something?"

Anders felt an itch between his shoulder blades he guessed was Justice. He tried to send some kind of reassurance back, but Anders didn't know how to send emotions at himself. It was a strange thing to even attempt, "Maybe," Anders allotted. "It depends on how far they're willing to go to free mages."

"Bardel, then, maybe," Bancroft said. "He seems more disillusioned than Thrask, from what I've heard. He's been trying to get in touch with us, but it might be a trap. We're not sure. I can't afford to risk meeting with him, and neither can Selby. Evon isn't interested, but if you're willing we can try to arrange something."

"Alright," Anders agreed, despite the tension agreeing put in his shoulders. "I'll be fine if it's a trap, but we have to meet alone. No innocents nearby."

"I'll tell Jake." Bancroft said. "He's been in contact with Bardel. We'll see if we can't arrange something. Stannard keeps the Templars on a strict schedule. It might be hard for him to get away."

"Alright," Anders said.

"Good. Then we're good, unless you need anything from me?" Bancroft asked.

"The name of the templar that made Karl Tranquil," Anders said, remembering the promise Justice had made him in his clinic. "The one who gave the order and the one who held the brand."

"I'll see what I can find," Bancroft promised. "Same time same place next week?"

"I'll see you then," Anders agreed.

Bancroft pulled up his hood and left. Anders made his way back to Darktown, and killed two rats for himself with blood magic on the way. Anders had them skewered and cooking over a fire in his clinic when the door to his clinic opened.

"Knock, knock," Bethany called.

"Who's there?" Anders asked.

"Bethany," Bethany said, ready with a grin when Anders looked over. She'd finally taken Anders' advice and started wearing an apron, rather than risk having to explain why all her tunics were covered with blood and vomit by the end of the day. She found a stool for herself and pulled it over to join him by the fire.

"Bethany who?" Anders asked.

"Hawke...? Oh! You're joking, um- Bethany thing you weren't expecting me to recover from that." Bethany said.

Anders laughed, and couldn't help but feel relieved when it didn't hurt his face. Franke was always good for a laugh, but Anders felt guilty neglecting his patients, and Franke was squeamish with blood. Bethany wasn't, and she was just as good company.

Bethany wrinkled her nose at his rats and pulled her satchel into her lap. "I know the lantern wasn't lit but the door wasn't locked. Garrett went out hunting yesterday, and I convinced him to take me with. I wanted to see if I could find any of the herbs you said we needed. I'm not sure if I got the right kinds but I tried to go off how you described them."
"Give me a second for these to cook and we can go over to the table," Anders said.

Bethany eyed the roasting vermin dubiously. "It really can't be healthy for you to be eating rats and pigeons every day."

"Well it's not like there are carrots and cranberries running through the gutters," Anders pointed out. The thought was beyond appetizing, all the same. The smell of roast rat suddenly made him feel queasy by comparison, "I'm making do."

Bethany made an unhappy noise and chewed on her bottom lip.

"I'm fine, Beth, you don't need to worry about me." Anders insisted. He retrieved his rotisserie rats from the fire and stood, waving the kabob towards the table, "Show me what you found."

Bethany upended her satchel over the table and a medley of herbs and weeds fell out. Anders started sorting them in between bites of rat, each bite a little more nauseating than the last. Anders did his best to ignore it and picked up a vine to move into a 'useless' pile.

"Elfroot?" Bethany asked hopefully.

"Close," Anders grinned, "Grapevine."

"Oh, Maker," Bethany covered her face with a hand. "Did I get anything useful?"

"Embrium," Anders noted, moving a bundle of red flowers into a 'useful' pile. "The pollen is perfect for fighting respiratory problems, and we get a lot of that sort of thing down here with the chokedamp."

"I thought that was heatherum," Bethany confessed.

"This is heatherum," Anders moved a different flower to the 'useful' pile. "But we need foxite to go with it if we're going to distill any concentrating agents for a proper philter."

"I thought this was foxite," Bethany picked up a plant Anders hadn't sorted and pushed it towards him.

"That's a weed." Anders said.

Bethany groaned and dropped her elbows onto the table and her head into her hands.

"Elfroot looks a lot like a weed, it's fair you overlooked it," Anders laughed, "You got a lot of embrium and there's some spindleweed here we could use."

"This is spindleweed?" Bethany asked, rolling the coral leaves between her fingers, "I thought-oh nevermind. So it's not that bad?"

"No, it's great, Beth, this helps a lot. Really." Anders assured her. "You don't need to be embarrassed. I've got some-" Members of an underground resistance who work in secret apart from the Chantry and the Circle at the risk of all our lives if we're discovered? "-friends who want a lot of alchemical components unique to the Free Marches and I feel just as lost when I'm looking for them."

"Really?" Bethany asked, looking up at him from between her fingers. "Like what?"

"Glitterdust and orichalcum." Anders said.
"Oh, I know what glitterdust is," Bethany said eagerly, standing up straight, "It's a type of rock on the Wounded Coast. You turn into a powder. It was a fad among the noble ladies in Hightown until they realized it caused a rash and coughing fits. And it's flammable. Mother went to a party once where a friend tried to use it despite the risks and ended up burning her eyebrows off. Everyone gossiped it was for the best because she was so bad at plucking them anyway."

"That's horrible," Anders snorted.

"I know," Bethany grinned, "The name is pretty self-explanatory, but it glitters and looks like silver or lead if you ever go looking for it again." She looked down at his 'useless' pile and sighed, "So these are all trash?"

"It never hurts to have a bit of kindling in Darktown but... yeah, those are all trash." Anders said.

"Well, at least I know for next time," Bethany said.

"So, that's not the first time you've mentioned your family used to be nobility," Anders said, cupping all of the useless herbs in his hands and burning them down to ash with a contained breath of fire from the Fade. He dumped the ashes in the gutter and dusted his hands off on his trousers, "What happened? Why aren't you still up in Hightown, hobnobbing?"

"Oh, I can just see that," Bethany shook her head, "Silk dresses for me and the family broadsword for Garrett. Carver, jealous as always... We had an estate, you know. I go look at it sometimes and try to imagine living there. Growing up here. Mother was engaged to the Comte de Launcet," Bethany said frumpily, "Before she eloped with Father. If she'd stayed married to him... She probably wouldn't have had the courage to keep me from the templars. My whole family would just be a list of names the Circle kept in my file.

"I would hate that, but I wish the estate was still ours. Uncle Gamlen pissed away the family fortune after Mother left. Sold the whole thing to settle a debt. Maker, I can't believe it sometimes. No, I can believe it, and that's the worst part. He still goes out binging at the Blooming Rose every other week. Garrett's always dragging him back and paying his tab... At this rate we'll never be able to afford our expedition."

"How much do you need to invest?" Anders asked.

"Fifty sovereigns." Bethany said.

Anders choked on his last bite of rat.

Bethany laughed and dragged a hand through her hair, "I know. I know. It sounds so impossible. Garrett's out there every day doing odd jobs for the Red Iron and the guard, and we're not even close. He insists it's not safe for me to help, and Mother... I've tried to get her to find work, but she just sits at home all day and mourns.

"She was never meant for this kind of life. I remember she used to work, when we still lived outside Amaranthine. She used to do needlework, mending torn clothes. It couldn't have paid more than a few bits. She stopped when we moved to Lothering. Garrett was... sixteen by then? He started working as a mercenary and sent back his stipend, and Mother never worked a day after. Carver couldn't wait to join him. I remember... I'm rambling, aren't I?" Bethany said.

"I don't mind," Anders said. "It's nice to hear about a mage with a family." Bethany really had no idea how lucky she was. She was luckier than Anders. Her father had never sent her to another country just to keep from ever seeing her again; her mother was still alive.
"It's just... I don't think it's healthy to talk about Carver with Mother still mourning, and I don't want to burden Garrett, but I miss him. We were twins. We were always together... it's so strange, not having him here. I keep expecting to wake up with my braid nailed to the bed. He was such an ass. Always jealous of Garrett and I for the stupidest little things..." Bethany let out a sigh and pushed the pile of useful herbs towards Anders, "Anyway, how do I prepare all of these?"

"Let me light the lantern and I'll walk you through it between patients," Anders said.

Bethany was a quick learner, not that Anders could say he was a good teacher. He was no Karl and he was no Amell, but he made the attempt all the same. It surprised him that he actually enjoyed it. Anders had hated the thought of taking on an apprentice in the Circle, and blown off the few who'd been assigned to him, or with Surana just faked lessons while they ran off to have sex.

Now that he was out of the Circle, teaching was almost tolerable. Bethany learned by demonstration, which was perfect for Anders, considering he was rubbish at explaining himself. Bethany sat and watched, and only asked the occasional question. She wasn't a spirit healer, but creationism wasn't limited to spirit healers, and she seemed to have the finesse for it after a childhood spent learning needlepoint from her mother.

Herbalism was a little more difficult. Anders didn't have an alembic, or a retort, or even a mortar and pestle. All he had was his cookware and a few cups and bowls, but the rudimentary tools were enough for a few basic philters, and Bethany's telekinetic magic was a huge boon. Having someone else to help clean was another huge boon, but it was the teaching Anders really enjoyed. Watching Beth's face light up when she managed a spell or proper bit of alchemy felt infinitely more rewarding than a stamp on a book in the back of the Collective's packaging house.

So Anders couldn't help starting when Varric wandered into his clinic late that afternoon and saw Bethany there with him. A Dalish wandered in behind him, bundled up in furs and leathers and too many scarves. The tattoos on her face reminded Anders of Velanna, but she didn't have the same walk. She looked at the ceiling instead of where she put her feet, and stepped in a puddle of blood Anders hadn't had a chance to mop.

"Oh my, it's very dirty, isn't it?" The Dalish mumbled, looking at her bare foot in surprise. She jumped a few feet, and rubbed her foot against the leathers on her leg to dry it.

"It's Darktown, Daisy," Varric said, raising an interested eyebrow at Bethany. "Sunshine."

"Please don't tell Garrett," Bethany said, frozen over the operating table she'd been wiping down.

"Sunshine..." Varric sighed, pressing his fingers into his forehead, "Hawke and I have to trust each other for this expedition to work. You know if I saw you here, I'd have no choice but to tell him."

"Varric-" Bethany started.

"So it's a good thing I didn't see you." Varric said. "And since I didn't see you, I can't tell you that Hawke finished up early today and was having a drink with Broody before heading home," Varric gave Bethany what Anders thought was a rather meaningful look, "One drink."

"Shite!" Bethany dropped the rag she was holding and snatched up her satchel. She jumped the puddle and bolted out the door, throwing a panicked, "See you tomorrow, Anders!" over her shoulder.

Anders watched her go, and looked back to his visitors. 'Daisy' was walking circles around Anders' clinic, picking up and toying with everything she came into contact with. She stopped at the shelves
Anders had made from planks set between cinderblocks, and toyed with a vial that held the embrium pollen Anders had taught Bethany how to collect.

"Can you-stop touching everything?" Anders asked.

Daisy jumped and set the vial down. It went rolling off the uneven shelves, and she dove after it in a mad scramble that bounced the vial from hand to hand before setting it down more carefully. She looked appropriately sheepish when she turned around. She buried a hand in her messy black hair, and green eyes slid off Anders' face and down to the dirty floor of his clinic, "Oh I'm sorry. I wasn't stealing anything, I swear," Daisy held up two empty hands. "I was just looking... And I guess touching. Which you told me not to do. Um."

"Blondie, Daisy. Daisy, Blondie." Varric said, gesturing to both of them in turn, "Hope we're not intruding; Daisy wanted to meet you."

"My name is Merrill, actually," Merrill said with a little bow.

"Why...?" Anders asked, fetching the mop he'd finally gotten as a gift from Lirene for the puddle Merrill had stepped in.

"Well I suppose my parents liked the name. It derives from old Elvish and it means bright, which I think-" Merrill stopped, "Oh you mean why did I want to meet you. Um..."

"It's a mage thing, I think," Varric said, gesturing to a stool and waiting for Anders' shrug to sit. It took him a bit of fussing with his coat to sit comfortably, and he pulled out a sheaf of parchment and a bit of graphite and started writing on his thigh. "Don't mind me. I'm just here to chaperone. Daisy gets lost easy, and someone has to be there to help her find her way back home."

"So you wanted to meet me because...?" Anders asked.

"It never hurts to make more friends," Merrill shrugged, wandering in curious circles around his clinic. Her hands rose and fell several times without quite touching anything. "At least, I don't think it does. Everyone has been talking about you and I was so curious. If you're busy- I don't want to be a bother."

"It's fine," Anders said. "If you're both going to stay just make sure you don't get in the way of any patients that come in. ... Why is everyone talking about me?"

"I might have talked you and your friend up a bit." Varric confessed. "Still working on a nickname for him. So far I've got Glowy, Sparky, and Big Blue. Any suggestions?"

"I'd really rather you didn't go around telling everyone about him," Anders frowned, and wrung out his bloody mop over the drains. "My patients are scared enough with the threat of templars without knowing their healer is possessed."

"Blondie, you wound me. I've been keeping your secretly strictly between..." Varric looked down at his hand and started counting on his fingers. When he went past five he gave up, "... a few close friends."

Anders leaned his mop up against the wall and wiped his hands off on his trousers. Varric went back to writing on his thigh, and Merrill was rocking back and forth on barefeet and staring at him. Anders had no idea how to handle visitors that weren't bleeding out or throwing up on him. Bethany was easier. She handled herself and did all the talking.

"Um... Do you want to sit?" Anders offered.
"Oh! Yes, I suppose," Merrill clambered up onto a crate and sat cross-legged. She held onto her feet, and tapped painted nails on her toes. She didn't remind Anders of Velanna in the slightest, but Anders couldn't help thinking of her anyway. He missed her bitching, "I'm sorry. I'm not used to visiting people."

"I'm not used to having visitors," Anders said, finding a spot for himself against a pillar to watch the door for patients.

"This shit is cute," Varric shoved a handful of blond hair back behind his ear, and scribbled down what Anders assumed was what they'd just said, "Do you mind if I write this down? Too late."

"I like your coat," Merrill said. "It's very lively. Like a crow in the middle of anting."

"That's... that's great, thanks," Anders said.

"You know I was wondering about that," Varric said, "Are the feathered pauldrons an essential part of the whole... moody rebel mage persona you've got going here?"

"It's just a coat." Anders lied.

"Well I like it." Merrill said. "But um, I was actually sort of hoping maybe I could talk to your friend? Your spirit. The Keeper talked a lot about... abominations, I suppose? Not that I think you are one, though! She said they warp and change, but you look normal. For a human. I think."

"Thanks," Anders tried and failed not to cringe.

"I said something wrong, didn't I?" Merrill asked.

"A few things, Daisy," Varric said.

"I don't actually know how to let you talk to him," Anders said. "He only seems to come forward when I've lost all control over myself. I don't think he likes... controlling me? I guess?"

"Well that's polite of him I suppose." Merrill said. "I have my own spirit, but he's... well um, our relationship is strictly platonic. What little I've heard about yours just sounds so fascinating, but it was only a little. I'd love to hear you talk about him if you don't mind."

"No, I..." Anders felt a whisper of static make the hair on his arms stand on end and brush against the inside of his sleeves. "... We don't mind. We met in Amaranthine. He's a spirit of Justice and he... I don't know. He likes poetry and lyrium, and he seems to think everything from dog shit to butterflies is beautiful. What did you want to know?"

"How old is he?" Merrill asked.

"I... have no idea." Anders realized, "You know, a friend asked him something like that once, and Justice just said he existed. Like he always had."

"Oh, no, they age." Merrill said. "My spirit is from the time of Arlathan, when the Elvhenan fought the Tevinter Imperium. I suppose the better question is when did he come into being?"

"I don't know," Anders admitted.

"Oh," Merrill said, worrying at her bottom lip. "I guess I just assumed, if you let him inside you..."

"Why does everyone insist on making this sound dirty?" Anders demanded.
"Good one, Daisy," Varric snorted, still scribbling.

"Why are you writing this down?" Anders asked.

"I'm writing an epic poem," Varric explained, "About a hopelessly romantic apostate waging an epic struggle against templars and mercantilism and other forces he can't possibly defeat."

"Mercantilism?" Anders asked.

"A free clinic, Blondie?" Varric raised an eyebrow, pocketing the graphite and rolling up the parchment. He stowed it away in the case he kept on his hip. "That's not a sound business practice at all, and yet here you are. It's definitely poem-worthy, but you know it's only a good story if the hero dies. And you are definitely going to die. Hawke is going to kill you. On a scale of what the shit to what the fuck, what are you doing with Sunshine?"

"I'm not doing anything with her." Anders said.

"Mhm," Varric said.

"I'm not," Anders said. "She wanted to help with the clinic and learn a bit of magic. I don't see what's wrong with that."

"I bet Hawke could think of a few things," Varric said.

"That's not really my problem," Anders said.

"Oh it will be," Varric said. "I get it, you've got Blue. You're not scared of him. But maybe you should be scared of an arrow in your throat? Hawke's pretty mean with that bow. Actually Hawke's just... pretty mean. Especially when Sunshine is involved."

"Well unless he's insane, I don't think he's going to kill me for spending time with his sister," Anders said.

"I'm a writer, I like exaggerating, but my point still stands," Varric said. "There's nothing Hawke cares about more than Sunshine, and he's not going to be happy about your little arrangement."

"I still don't see how that's my problem," Anders said.

"Would it help if I drew you a picture?" Varric asked. "Do you really want fourteen stones of muscle busting down the door to your clinic and scaring off all your patients? I once saw Hawke bark at a guy just for looking at Sunshine wrong. Look, Blondie, I get it. A free clinic probably takes a lot of work, and I'm sure Sunshine is a lot of help, but I think literally anyone else in Kirkwall would be a better idea."

"Oh, I would love to help," Merrill said eagerly. "Not in the clinic. Not really. But I saw you had heatherum with no foxite, and almost no elfroot. I could help you look for herbs. If that's something you do. It would be nice to get out of the city now and then. Do you think we could be friends? Is that-is that a normal way to make friends? Can I just ask?"

"That's a great way to make friends, Daisy," Varric said.

"I--... go out for herbs sometimes," Anders said.

"Could I come with you when you do?" Merrill asked.

"I suppose," Anders said.
"Oh, that's lovely!" Merrill grinned, "Oh-but-should I mention... um... Well. Hawke doesn't really like me spending time with Bethany. Maybe we could go with just us?"

"Maker's breath, how much of an ass can one man be?" Anders demanded.

"I think everyone just has one ass, don't they?" Merrill asked.

Varric slapped a hand over his mouth and turned away, laughing. "Never change, Daisy."

"Oh you meant Hawke is an ass!" Merrill exclaimed. "No one seems to like him, but I think he's nice. He visits me all the time, and he got me my house in the Alienage. The roof leaks sometimes, and it's hard to keep it all clean, but it's better than... well... living down here. Oh dear, that was a mean thing to say, wasn't it? It's just so dark and dreary. It would be so much nicer if they opened it up to get some sunlight. Of course I guess Kirkwall would collapse, then, but... I'm babbling."

"Wait, wait, wait," Varric said, "Daisy, back up. I thought the rest of elves helped you find a place. You know, as a kind of communal thing. Is Hawke paying your rent?"

"What's rent?" Merrill blinked at him.

"Ancestors..." Varric sighed and pressed his forehead into his palm, "We're never getting those fifty sovereigns."

"Why would he do that if he won't even let you near his sister?" Anders asked.

Merrill shrugged, "I guess he doesn't want her around the blood magic. I don't know why. It's not contagious."

Anders' mouth moved uselessly while he struggled for words. It was a miracle the templars hadn't gotten to the poor girl yet.

"... Oh dear, I shouldn't have said that." Merrill realized.

"Okay, Daisy, maybe change a little," Varric sighed.

"No it's - uh," Anders gave his sleeve an involuntary tug, "It's fine. I don't mind."

"Really?" Merrill's eyes lit up, "Oh, that's so nice to hear. Everyone I've met is so twitchy about it. Even my Keeper didn't believe in me, but I know what I'm doing."

"I believe you, but you might want to be a little more careful about who you tell," Anders said. "It's not really something a lot of people are understanding about."

"I'll try to do that," Merrill said. "I just ramble. A lot. I'm not very good at talking to people."

"It just takes practice, Daisy," Varric said, "You're getting better already."

The door to Anders' clinic chose that minute to open, and Anders went to help a fellow bowed over with a cough.

"We'll get out of your hair," Varric said. "Daisy, wait outside for me a second, will you? Don't wander."

"I won't," Merrill hopped off the crate, "It was nice to meet you, Anders. I'll try to come back sometime when Bethany isn't here. I'll probably get lost but-"
"I'll help you, Daisy, don't worry." Varric said.

"Oh, that's very kind of you," Merrill grinned, and skipped away to wait outside. She couldn't have been much more than twenty.

Anders shook his head and channeled Justice for his patient to cleanse the soot coated to his lungs from too much foundry work.

Varric lingered, and Anders spared him a glance. The dwarf was staring at him so intently it made Anders want to fidget. "You might wanna work on your tells, Blondie," Varric said. "Hawke finding out about you and Sunshine is one thing. Finding out about you and Sunshine, and how much you and Daisy have in common? I might not be exaggerating with that arrow."
Hello everyone, welcome back! Lots of yelling in this chapter. I'm sure no one is surprised. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, kudos, subscriptions, and bookmarks, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:32 Dragon 29 Eluviesta Early Morning
Kirkwall Hightown

The peal of the Chantry bells sent a flock of birds winging from the trees and into the sky. Anders thought of following them. A crow in the rafters went unnoticed during the Chantry's morning service, but a Darktown vagabond drew eyes. Anders had taken to attending services as a crow once he'd learned the form, but as he looked up at the blood red banners fluttering in the wind, the golden sunbursts snapping in and out focus, all he could see was Karl.

Anders could barely look at the building. The alabaster stone reminded him of the waxen skin of the dead, and the vines that climbed them were more reminiscent of chains than growth. The holy symbols looked garish, not gilded. The decorations gaudy, not glittering. After four months in Kirkwall, Anders had never seen a Chantry Sister brave the caverns of Darktown. He had never even seen one walk the streets of Lowtown.

The stained glass windows weren't for the beautiful patterns looking out, they were to keep anyone from looking in. The bronze statues weren't watchful guardians, they were vengeful jailors. The incense was as oppressive as their teachings. Anders was never setting foot in that Chantry again, but he still wanted to hear the Chant. He wanted to light a candle for Karl. He wanted to find his own path through the Maker that didn't damn him to the Void.

Anders spent the last of his ill-gotten Coterie coin on a used, unillustrated copy of the Chant of Light from one of the vendors in Hightown before he went back to the sunless sewers where he belonged. Breakfast had been a pigeon. Dinner would likely be a rat. Lunch he knew he'd forget like he so often did. Anders unlocked his clinic and Justice lit their lantern.

Anders sat in his chair. It was a real chair with a back, and armrests, and a deflated cushion. One of the refugees had found it for him and Anders didn't doubt it was stolen, but he was hard pressed to care. Anders looked down at the leather-bound tome in his hands. The cloth page marker was torn, the binding worn, and the corners weathered. It should have been free, but ten silver could have bought him worse.

Anders wasn't interested in creation of the world and the invention of sin, in the blame the Chant placed on mages for the Blight. He didn't want a history lesson. He flipped passed cosmogenesis, past the first sin, past the Blight and the sections on Andraste. He stopped at the hymns, and imagined the Chanters were singing them in Hightown for the benefit of those who already had more than the Maker had given most.

Anders read Trials to himself, and then quietly aloud when felt the tingle he'd come to associate with Justice at his fingertips. Anders knew Justice believed in the Maker without believing in the Chant.
Anders had no idea how the spirit felt about being read to, but it was nice to remember he wasn't alone. "You have grieved as I have, You who made worlds out of nothing. We are alike in sorrow, sculptor and clay, comforting each other in our art."

"I like that verse," Bethany said from the entrance to his clinic. "It helped me a lot, after Carver. Do you always read like that?"

"Like what?" Anders asked, and belatedly realized he was twisted around his chair, a leg draped over one armrest and his ribs digging into the other.

"Nothing," Bethany shook her head and tossed her satchel onto the table. "I bet it's especially true for you. If anything was going to be a comfort to the Maker, it would probably be healing."

"Thanks," Anders said, untangling himself from his chair to set the book down.

"You don't have to stop reading," Bethany said, taking a seat on a crate, "I miss hearing more of the Chant. I used to visit the Lothering Chantry all the time, to sit in meditation or just listen to Sister Leliana tell stories when the templars weren't around."

"I guess if you want to listen," Anders shrugged, picking the book back up and finding where he'd left off, "Do not grieve for me, Maker of All. Though all others may forget You, Your name is etched into my every step. I will not forsake You, even if I forget myself."

"I love Trials," Bethany said, "There's no blame it."

"Exactly!" Anders kept his place with a finger, "Most of Andraste's teachings are just praise for the Maker, not condemnation for mages, but I'll bet you anything the Sisters up in Hightown are going over Transfigurations 1:2 over and over. I can't even look at those sunbursts anymore."

"It's disgusting they use them for the Tranquil," Bethany said.

"That's the whole problem, isn't it?" Anders demanded, "If they didn't have the Rite of Tranquility to hold over us, mages would have so many more options."

"Right!" Bethany said emphatically, "Apostates like us who just want to live, mages like your friend who just want to engage in intelligent debate, they make sure we can't do it."

"Karl was a good mage. He was a good man. It goes against all Chantry law to make him Tranquil."

"Karl was a good mage. He was a good man. It goes against all Chantry law to make him Tranquil."

"The Knight-Commander doesn't even care anymore. She's forcing our hands."

"Whose hands?"

"No one," Anders sighed, trying not to think of how unproductive his last meeting with Bancroft had been. No luck with the Coterie. No luck with Bardel. No word on the templar who'd branded Karl. Just more waiting.

"You can't say that," Bethany kicked at him, "Now I'm curious."

"Just some friends," Anders said. "People who understand things have to change. It's Tranquility or death for mages who don't toe the line. There's no reasoning with templars because they just take away your ability to reason."

Anders tried to picture it. Stealing mages from the Gallows, oversea and underland. It reminded him of Velanna and twisted like a knife in his gut, but he held the thought. Anders forced himself to
remember sitting across from her at the Crown and Lion, laughing over their exploits. Velanna's fierce promise of aid when they spoke of defying the Chantry. He pushed the memory back even further to Amell in that same inn, hoping the vote in Cumberland would change things, and how Anders had laughed him off and promised to cheer from the sidelines.

Anders wanted to pretend they'd be proud of how far he'd come, but for all he knew he'd killed them both.

It wasn't until Bethany pushed a kerchief into his hand Anders realized he was crying. "Fuck, sorry," Anders said, scrubbing his face clean.

"You know when we were first looking for you, we went to this Ferelden Import Shop, run by this woman named Lirene," Bethany said. "She said she'd never met a man who carried more sorrows. I thought she was exaggerating."

"I'm fine," Anders lied, handing her kerchief back.

"If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here." Bethany said.

"Thanks Beth," Anders said.

The clinic door eased open, and a refugee carrying a bucket poked their head inside. "Healer, water?"

Anders got up to see the trickle of refugees that filed in every morning for water and warmth. Bethany helped where she was able, and it was a day like any other, made slightly better for the company. It was past midday when the first trauma patient showed up, and it might not have even registered with Anders as noteworthy if the man weren't tattooed and familiar.

Evon hung off Donal's shoulder, the giant Marcher dragging the small Fereldan. Evon had all the tell-tale signs of a mage who'd suffered a smite without a spirit inside them to suffer the brunt of the shock. His chin was crusted with vomit, his eyes were rolling in his skull, a grisly pallor on his face and nigh violent tremors wracked his body. If that weren't enough, two arrows jutted from his shoulders, twitching in time with Evon's shudders.

"Evon!" Anders dropped the bucket he was in the middle of dumping down the drain and ran over to take his free arm, "Donal, what happened?"

"Templars," Donal said what Anders already knew, propping Evon up on Anders operating table. "Bethany, knife," Anders said, and a hilt pressed into the palm of his outstretched hand a few seconds later. Anders cut away Evon's ruined shirt to get to the arrows imbedded in his back. Anders' thoughts churned in his head like a storm, Justice's anger bleeding into his own, "How did they get to him?"

"Saw his face," Donal explained, accepting a kerchief from Bethany to wipe the vomit off Evon's chin. "Fucking tattoos. Sky opened up over him, and this white pillar came down, and they burned him like Andraste. Stupid fuck. Stupid fucking fuck." Donal grabbed Evon's lulling head in his hands and forced him up to meet his eyes. "You're a stupid fuck."

Evon slumped forward and Anders scrambled half onto the operating table to hold him upright, Justice cracking through the palm of his right hand while Anders channeled him. "Lancet," Anders said. Bethany handed him one, and hovered over his shoulder. Anders made a cut to enlarge the wound around the arrow in Evon's left shoulder. Franke would have already fainted.
"Please don't be in the bone, please don't be in the bone," Anders mumbled, following the shaft with his finger. A searing pain shot up his arm, and Anders snapped his hand back. "Andraste's flaming sword, they're tipped with magebane."

"Maker's breath," Bethany said.

"What does that mean?" Donal asked.

"I need my staff," Anders said. "And tongs or forceps," Bethany ran to fetch both, and Anders drew the glyphs for a lifeward under Evon.

"What does that mean!?" Donal asked.

"Nothing," Bethany said, "It doesn't mean anything. Right, Anders?"

"Right," Anders gave the shaft a twirl instead of trying to follow it. It wasn't stuck. Anders cut the wound large enough to make the extraction and pulled out the first arrow. "Don't touch that," Anders warned, a surge of regenerative energies pulled from the Fade through Justice knitting the first wound closed. He was making the cut for the second when Walter ran into his clinic.

"Anders! Templars!" The boy exclaimed, "It's a raid! They almost got Evelina! They're shooting at anyone who runs!"

"Fucking fuck, we led them here," Donal swore.

"Go out the left mineshaft," Anders said, forcing his hands steady while he finished the cut for the second arrow, "Keep straight. The first storm drain leads up into a hex in East Lowtown."

"Okay!" Walter bolted.

"Evon?" Donal asked.

"I'll get him," Anders promised. "Both of you go."

"I'm not leaving you here!" Bethany said, "We all need to get out of here." Anders knew he didn't deserve that kind of loyalty, but he didn't have time to argue against it. Anders hoped Justice could protect her if it came to it. It seemed a vain hope, but they hadn't hurt Karl. They'd just killed him.

"I gotta stay." Donal said. "Selby'll kill me if I come back without Evon anyway."

Anders set a hand to Evon's shoulder to hold him steady and pulled out the second poisoned arrow. "How many were there?"


"-would be dead if you hadn't brought him," Anders said, holding a cleansing aura to pull the magebane from Evon's system. The bright pink poison trickled out of the wound on Evon's back as it was drawn from his bloodstream and left angry red burns down his skin. "Rag-someone,"

Donal took his shirt off and thrust it at him. Anders wiped up the poison before it burned through Evon's skin and poisoned him all over again.

"Can't feel my face," Evon slurred, drool escaping out of the corner of his mouth, but at least he could finally talk.

"You'll feel a lot less than that in a minute, you stupid fuck," Donal said. "A mage should know
"Dad's Chasind," Evon slurred, "My tribe... not gonna-templars-fucking... my life."

The patrol reached his clinic. Anders could hear the screaming outside, high-pitched shrieks mingled with sobs and bellowed orders. The crash of make-shift shelters being overturned, what few belongings the refugees of Darktown had broken or destroyed by the patrol. Beneath that, the metallic laughter of men indulging the most base of their vices when they could belie themselves into thinking anonymity absolved them of sin.

"Maybe I can lead them away?" Donal offered. "They'll run us down if we all run together. Evon's not moving fast any time soon."

Such corruption did not contend with the Blight, it outmatched it. These were not monsters born from the bellies of women whose minds had been corroded by the Taint; these were men. Living, breathing, thinking men who looked upon the weak and powerless not as patients to be provided for but as prey. They would suffer such no longer. Not for themselves, and not for these mages that had entrusted themselves to their care.

"Anders?" Bethany asked. "You're glowing—are you okay?"

"We are well," Anders said, and heard the echo of Justice in his voice and tasted mana on his tongue. He felt the spirit coiled tight around his thoughts, cracking through his skin, in such a perfect harmony they couldn't tell which of them spoke. "Leave. All of you. None will get past us."

Justice picked up Vigilance and Anders drew a glyph of paralysis before the door of his clinic. They heard the shuffle of Evon stumbling off the operating table, and the door burst open. They waited for the flash of silver, that sword that made a mockery of mercy, and let the Fade embrace them. Flames burned through the cracks in the palm of their hand, and washed up over interlocked shields. An arrow struck him in the shoulder, and the agony it wrought broke Anders.

Justice flung himself up off the ground when Anders collapsed, and the gauntlet-clad fist that had always been his burst through the Veil and continued through the chest of the first templar he saw. Anders had memories of passion, of exuberance, but Justice knew no better than this. This was an evil he could cleanse, a purpose he could fulfill. A templar thrust forward with a spear. Justice whirled with such fluidity of movement it brought to life memories of Anders dancing.

He lashed out with Vigilance, and the spear snapped in half. He lashed out with his hand, and the shield shattered. Justice recalled Anders' warnings about their hands, and grabbed the shocked templar by his throat instead of his helmet. Justice clenched his fist, and tore through throat and muscle, stopping when he encountered bone. He swung the templar by his spine and used his body to catch the second spear thrust towards them.

There was still euphoria in feeling, but agony broke through it. Justice could feel the poison in their veins even as they fought. The templars commanded lyrium-gifted fire, and each smite tore through him and seemed to pull him further from the Fade. A wave of negative energy crashed down on him, and shut him out completely. Justice ripped the head off the templar who cast it through strength alone, and the remaining four broke and fled into Darktown.

Justice breathed deep, felt the cold air fell Anders' lungs, and thought of letting go. He could still feel the magebane twisting through Anders' veins with the Taint, a persistent burn that seemed to tear at his lungs and his every muscle. If Justice stepped back, Anders would suffer. He hesitated, and then ran in pursuit of the fleeing templars. He could weather the pain if it came in pursuit of purpose. His mortal could rest.
Anders woke to darkness, and Justice didn't breathe Veilfire into his fingers to drive it back. Anders grabbed for the Fade, and the mana slipped through his fingers like water. Anders sucked in a panicked breath and scrambled backwards, and his hand slipped in something slick. He fell back on hard stone, and the sharp scent of ammonia and feces filled his nostrils.

Sewers. Not a cell. Not a cell. He wasn't in a cell. Anders scrambled to his feet, hit his head on a low ceiling, and tripped over something on his first step. He fell hard, smashed his chin on the floor, and bit his tongue. The taste of copper filled his mouth, and Anders let out a sob of pain, scrabbling for whatever he'd tripped over. His hands came into contact with hard bone, and static flicked over his palms.

Anders grabbed Vigilance and clutched it to his chest. The elaborate runework augmented his connection to the Fade, and Anders pulled on enough mana to activate the crystal set in the dragonbone. The sewer lit up around him, a small stream of fetid water running along the floor. It was a tube, with not enough space to stand. Anders mouth went dry, and he sucked in a wheezing gasp. He couldn't be here. It was too tight. It was too cramped. It was too dark.

Anders scrambled back up to his feet, the crystal on his staff a flickering white light. His whole body felt like a bruise, the ache a persistent throb Anders felt everywhere from his toes to his gums. Anders half ran, half stumbled through the sewer, his heart hammering in his chest, and came to a dead end.

Worse than a dead end, he came upon a grate. All Anders could see past it was blackrock, but light trickled in through the bars, tauntingly out of reach. Anders heart beat so fast his chest seemed to tighten to contain it. He fell over, stuffed his head between his knees, and laced his hands over his head. "It's not a cell it's not a cell it's not a cell."

Anders lost time, and came back to himself still in the sewers. He stumbled forward, and the sewer eventually dumped him out into Darktown. Anders didn't recognize whatever section of the old mine he was in, and followed the railways until he encountered a group of refugees who pointed him back towards his clinic.

Anders probably shouldn't have gone back, but he'd left all his things in the clinic. He used his staff as a crutch and dragged himself back. He felt queasy and dizzy, and there was an ache in his bones that permeated through his muscles. Magebane. The arrows had been tipped with magebane. Anders felt like he'd been pulled back from the brink of death, and taken a punch in the stomach for good measure.

The smell of feces clung to his clothes from his crawl through the sewers, and halfway to his clinic Anders stumbled to a ledge and retched over it. Anders watched the vomit fall down a level of the mine and splatter along the wall. It was mostly bile. He'd remembered lunch today. He'd eaten a rat. It shouldn't have been bile.

Unless today wasn't today.

Anders ran a hand through his hair and his fingers caught. The strands were stuck together with dried something. Blood or piss. Anders tried not to think about it, and finally came upon the small refugee camp a short distance from his clinic. The makeshift tents had been pitched again, the bits of rubble that made up their furniture pieced back together. Had it been a day? Two?

One of the doors to his clinic had been shattered into splinters and sawdust. The other was broken in half, and hanging off its hinges. Anders stepped inside, tense for a fight, but the clinic was abandoned. It was also in shambles. His furniture was broken and strewn about the room, the walls were covered in scorch marks, stone had broken off from the pillars and rubble littered the floor.
There were no bodies. There were never any bodies. It looked more a slaughterhouse than a battlefield, and Anders picked his way through rent limbs, bent armor, broken weapons and shattered shields. His boots squelched through blood and over bits of pink skin and dark red muscle. Anders didn't know whether the smell or the sight had kept anyone from coming into the clinic, but his things were untouched. Anders tangled himself up in his satchels, one for personal effects, and one for all his medical and cooking supplies.

He kept telling himself to get rid of the former, and never did. Anders cot was intact in the back of the clinic. Anders curled up on it without thinking. However many days had passed, he could spare one more before he found somewhere else to stay. He couldn't have taken another step if he tried. Anders made a nest of his elbow, unwilling to ruin his mother's pillow while he was covered in shit, and fell asleep.

His nightmares woke him. They left him with a cold sweat, and Anders almost felt grateful for how the damp felt on his flushed skin. He conjured frost between his fingers, and dragged them over his forehead to ease back the headache that had come with his fever. Another hour and he'd try healing himself. Anders rested on that thought until he heard shouting outside his clinic.

"No more templars," Anders whined, rolling off his cot and onto the floor. It felt like falling off a cliff, and for a long minute Anders didn't move, but the raised voices forced him to his feet. Vigilance helped, and Anders stumbled into his clinic not entirely sure what he intended to do if he encountered a threat.

Apparently nothing, Anders' exhausted body decided when Hawke stormed into his clinic and grabbed him by the front of his coat. Maker, his eyes were unfair. What Anders wouldn't have given for five minutes in Amell's arms right now. Hawke slammed him back against the nearest pillar, and the sudden shock was enough to wake Anders up.

Hawke snarled into his face, "You brought templars down on my sister!"

Anders shoved him back, but his arms were leaden, and Hawke didn't so much as blink. "Get your hands off me."

"You think I want my hands on you, you filthy fucking sewer rat?" Hawke sneered, "Do you have any idea how much I'm holding back right now?"

"Don't you threaten me, boy," Anders tried to pull on Justice, and felt the spirit flicker faintly over his skin. They were both too exhausted for this, "Do you even know what I am?"

"I know exactly what you are," Hawke kept one hand fisted on Anders' coat, and dug the other under his leather vest to fish out a Chantry amulet and thrust the sunburst into Anders' face, "Go on! Attack me just for wearing it like you attacked Aveline. Maybe then my sister will finally realize you're dangerous."

"Garrett stop!" Bethany yelled. Anders looked away from Hawke to see her leap over a pile of rubble and run into his clinic after her brother, "It wasn't his fault!" Bethany grappled ineffectually with one of Hawke's massive arms to try to pry it off Anders, "It was my fault!"

"It wasn't anyone's fault but the templars," Anders said.

"You're the abomination who decided hunting them was more important than saving my sister's life!" Hawke gave him a shake, "And you call yourself a healer?"

"Stop it, Garrett! Stop it!" Bethany beat her fists on Hawke's shoulder. "Don't talk about him like
that! He's not an abomination, he's my friend."

"Your friend?" Hawke let out a bark of laughter, "He almost got you killed! You almost died last night!"

"It wasn't his fault! You weren't there!" Bethany insisted, "It's not his fault I got hurt!"

"Wait, what?" Anders attempted, and failed, to push Hawke aside so he could look at Bethany, "Beth, you got hurt?"

"Don't remember? What a surprise," Hawke sneered, "My sister stumbles home in the dead of night with an arrow in her lungs, magebane in her veins, collapses half dead in my arms and you don't remember what happened to her."

Anders stared at Bethany. She met his eyes and her mouth opened and closed several times with no sound escaping before she found words. "I wasn't- It just... they came in shooting. It wasn't your fault. I saw you get hit too. I'm fine. Evon and Donal are fine. They brought me home."

"You're fine now!" Hawke snapped at her, and turned back to Anders, "Varric had to press every contact he had to rush her a healer from the Gallows, while you were doing fuck all in the sewers! Do you have any idea what it cost me to break a mage out of the Gallows in under an hour?" Hawke gave him a moment to guess. Anders was still trying to process the fact that Bethany had taken an arrow and he hadn't noticed, "Twenty fucking sovereigns is what it cost me! I was going to invest in our expedition and get the coin to get her away from the Templars, and you led them right to her!"

Hawke shook him again and Bethany all but leapt on his arm, "Garrett stop! It's not his fault! I'm an adult. I can make my own choices. It was my mistake. It was my fault. Leave him alone. Let him go. If you want to be angry at someone be angry at me."

"I am angry at you!" Hawke barked.

"Then yell at me!" Bethany yelled at him. "Leave Anders out of this."

Hawke stared at him, and Anders almost wished he'd punch him. Maker knew he deserved it. Anders knew he was dangerous. He'd known better than to let Bethany spend time with him in his clinic. He'd known it from the moment she'd set foot in clinic. He didn't let refugees stay near his clinic, but for some reason he thought it was alright to risk another apostate just because he wanted a friend. It was selfish. Anders was selfish. He never thought of anyone else until it was too late.

Hawke let go of him, and took a handful of angry steps back. He scratched viciously at the side of his head, and reminded Anders of a dog, "Damnit, Beth, what were you thinking? I told you to stay away from him."

"You tell me to stay away from everyone!" Bethany shot back. "I'm tired of it, Garrett!"

"I don't care if you're tired!" Hawke snapped, "You're safe! I'm trying to protect you and you just-

"Protect me!?" Bethany interrupted him, "By locking me up in that filth hole day and night? How is that any different from the Circle?"

"I'll tell you how! I'm not about to make you Tranquil! Damnit, Beth, you didn't see it," Hawke waved an angry hand at Anders, "His lover didn't even recognize him!"

"At least he had a lover!" Bethany said, "At least he had a friend! Why can't I have that?"
"You have friends!" Hawke snapped.

"You know what I mean!" Bethany said.

"That's what you want now?" Hawke dragged both hands through his hair, "You want more friends at the cost of all this!? What happened to the normal life you begged me for? The home you wanted? I'm trying to take care of you."

"That doesn't mean you should decide who I can be friends with, Garrett!" Bethany argued, "You're not our father!"

"Neither is he!" Hawke waved a hand at Anders again. Anders was too tired to manage much more than a surprised blink, "You think I don't know why you've been sneaking down here? You think I don't know you want someone to teach you magic again? You think I don't wish I could give that to you?"

"Well you can't, Garrett!" Bethany shouted, "Anders can!"

"Anders is an abomination!" Hawke snarled. The word still hurt. Anders wished they'd leave and fight somewhere else, "He's going to live the rest of his life hunted by Templars. You can't be near him. He's going to get you killed. Do you have any idea what that would do to Mother after Carver? Do you have any idea what that would do to me?"

Anders watched the siblings stare at each other for a few seconds before Hawke grabbed Bethany and engulfed her in his arms, hunching to match her height and bury his face in her hair. Bethany hugged him back, and mouthed 'I'm sorry,' over his shoulder to Anders.

Anders shrugged. He wanted to sleep.

Eventually Bethany untangled herself from her brother, and gave Hawke a push that seemed to encourage him to stand a few feet away. He locked his hands over his head, and faced away from them, and Anders couldn't help thinking the breathing exercise looked painfully familiar.

Bethany sighed loudly and ran both hands through her hair in a mirror of what her brother had done earlier, "I'm so sorry about all this, Anders."

"Beth, if I'd known you'd gotten hit I swear I would have done something. Justice would have done something," Anders promised, propping himself up on his staff, "I just-we're not ourselves when we see templars. We both get so angry and it feels like we're just fueling each other until we can't see straight. Andraste's knickers, your expedition..."

"It wasn't your fault," Bethany said. "I'm the one who didn't want to leave you there. I'm so tired of everyone making sacrifices for me, and you did anyway. I saw you get hit... I think we probably owe you a few bits for making you air out our dirty laundry. Is it too awkward after all that to ask for a hug?"

"I smell like shit," Anders warned her. "Literally. Justice left me in a sewer. Thanks for that, by the way." Anders said to his spirit.

"Well... tell him I said thank you for protecting me," Bethany said.

"It doesn't work like that," Anders said, "It's not like we can have a conversation. He's part of me. I don't think anyone could tell you where I end and he begins, but... I think he can hear you, so he probably knows you said thanks."
Anders could barely feel Justice's presence in his mind. The spirit was as exhausted as he was, but it seemed like a decent guess Justice was still paying attention, by the flicker the spirit had managed when Hawke had shoved him.

"Do you want help cleaning up?" Bethany asked.

"No, I need to find a new place to set up," Anders said. "It isn't safe here for my patients now that the templars know this location, and I don't think some of these stains are ever coming out."

"You're going to keep doing this?" Hawke interrupted, somehow lifting one eyebrow out of his scowl to turn it to a sneer that seemed more bewildered than angry, "After you both almost died?"

"If I don't, who will?" Anders asked.

"You're insane," Hawke said.

It took more energy than he had to spare, but somehow Anders laughed, "I'll take that as a compliment."

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter!
Let's Try This Again

Chapter Notes

Alright, alright! You guys wanted him to take a bath and get some food. I hope you're all happy because literally nothing else happens in this chapter. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:32 Dragon 3 Molioris Morning
Kirkwall Darktown

Anders watched the flames licking up around the edge of his pot. He didn't have any kindling, and so held his hand in the space beneath the pot and the floor. The stand meant he could keep a small flame conjured in his palm to heat the water for his stew, but it was cramping his wrist. He wished magic was a substitute for time, and the water would just boil instantly.

Anders wished he could thank Natia again for the forethought to give him the cookware. Maker knew Anders had never had any. Forethought. Cookware too. A letter was out of the question. Anders didn't have the coin to buy the parchment, the ink, and the pounce he'd need to write back to Ferelden. The Collective could manage letters to the Gallows, on good days, but things in Kirkwall were so bad there was no writing out of the city without paying for postage.

Anders leaned his head back against the wall of his new clinic and sighed. He couldn't wait to get up off the floor and get into his chair, and couldn't have been more grateful the thing had been salvaged from his old clinic. The small chamber cut into the blackrock that made up his new clinic didn't have the space for everything from his old one. Anders supposed that was no great loss considering he hadn't salvaged everything from his old clinic.

Anders had spent the past three days healing himself through a bout of dysentery after Justice had left them lying in a sewer, riddled with cuts from arrows and spears and Maker knew what else, wounds ripe for the fetid waters. Anders had sat himself down afterwards and had a very long and one-sided conversation about leaving them in dark, cramped spaces, and met with a feeling of disquiet in response he couldn't possibly hope to translate.

Summerday had come and gone. The wind in the ravine had swallowed up the hymns sung through Hightown, and Anders hadn't heard a word. He hadn't seen the grand procession of boys and girls coming of age and heading to the Chantry. He didn't care. The beginning of summer was supposed to recognized as a time for joy and marriage and neither of those things seemed like they'd be happening in Anders' life any time soon.

The door to his clinic opened, and Anders looked up at the echo of Amell that stood in the doorway. Maker's breath, he was beautiful, and it wasn't just his eyes. It was everything from his strong chin to the way his hair fell recklessly over his brow. Then Anders blinked, and it was just Hawke, and Hawke was an ass. "You need healing?" Anders guessed, cutting off the stream of flame pouring from his palm.

"No," Hawke said, hovering in the doorway with a thumb in his belt, "This your new clinic?"
"Is there a green lantern outside?" Anders asked sarcastically, calling the flames back to finish boiling his water if he didn't have to heal anyone.

Hawke ignored him, "What are you making?"

"Stew," Anders frowned, wondering what in the name of Andraste the man could possibly want with him now, "Or water, depending on your standards."

Hawke didn't laugh. He didn't so much as exhale hard through his nose.

"You're the funny sibling, I see," Anders said.

"Sorry," Hawke said stiffly, taking a few steps into Anders' clinic and letting the door close behind him. Maker why? "I guess I just don't like joking about people starving to death."

"Oh so now I'm people?" Anders sneered, "What happened to 'abomination' or 'filthy fucking sewer rat'?"

"You are a filthy fucking sewer rat," Hawke said.

"Thank the Maker you came," Anders said flatly. "My self-esteem was getting too high."

"My mistake," Hawke said, "I didn't know 'covered in shit' was part of your look."

"Please go away," Anders said.

Hawke growled at him. Actually growled. Anders blinked, and Hawke scratched at the side of his head, "Look-I'm sorry."

"What?" Anders asked.

Hawke dropped a pack he was carrying on Anders' table, "I have this condition where I open my mouth and I'm an asshole."

"See, I'm a healer, so I'm pretty sure that's not a condition." Anders said, eyeing the pack warily and half-expecting a templar to burst out of it. "I think you might just be an asshole."

"Fair," Hawke said; he didn't make eye-contact often. Anders appreciated that, "Beth told me you turned her away yesterday?"

"I know what I am," Anders said, trying not to think of the poor girl and how upset she'd been, but it was for the best. "I don't need you reminding me again. You can go. I'll leave your sister alone."

"Good," Hawke paced a few feet, but not towards the door.

"I don't have any coin, if you're waiting for me to repay you," Anders said. "If you need healing, or help with your expedition-"

"I'm not here for that," Hawke interrupted. "Look, you look like vultures ate your corpse and shit you out into a pile of shit-"

"Hawke, are you flirting with me?" Anders asked.

"-and I know you could use a bath. Food." Hawke waved a hand at Anders' water stew, "I bought you a room at the Hanged Man for a night. Close your clinic for the day and come with me."
"This is a trap," Anders guessed. "You've got the whole Templar Order waiting for me to walk outside, don't you?" Hawke frowned. Anders tilted his head to one side and waited for an answer. "That's a real question."

"I don't want you near Beth," Hawke said, apparently ignoring the question, "You're staying away from Beth. Let me buy you food."

"I cost you twenty sovereigns, and now you want to feed me?" Anders asked.

"I want my sister safe," Hawke dragged his hands through his hair. "She can't help in your clinic. I don't want her near you in the city, but she needs friends, and I'm not...-It's-I'm... fuck. Hang on." Hawke walked out of his clinic. Anders blinked, and his eyes drifted to the pack Hawke had left on the table.

Curiosity killed the cat, Anders.

Anders cut off the flames from his palm. He dumped a few chunks of snake meat and deep mushroom into the boiling water and stood up. Anders dusted off his hands, and Hawke came back in before Anders had a chance to do anything stupid.

"Nature's call?" Anders guessed.

"Needed air. I'm not good at to talking people," Hawke said. "Not when it matters."

"What? No! You?" Anders put on a shocked expression, "I had no idea."

"You heard Beth," Hawke was good at ignoring Anders' barbs. Anders supposed that was for the best, "She's miserable. I don't want that for her. I do a lot of patrols along the coast for the guard, and other odd jobs outside the city where the templars aren't. You're her friend. You want to spend time with her, come with us."

"Look, I know I owe you, and I'll try to find some way to repay you, but I don't know how I feel about neglecting my patients," Or being anywhere near you. Anders sat back down on the floor to keep the fire going under his stew.

"Neglecting yourself is definitely the healthy alternative," Hawke said.

"Because I'm sure you care," Anders sneered. "Why would you want your sister near an abomination if you won't even let her near a blood mage?"

"Because I think you're bullshitting yourself when you say you're dangerous," Hawke said.

"What?" Anders laughed so hard he knocked his pot on accident and burnt his hand on the heated metal, "That's all you've been saying about me for the past month!"

"Beth said you talked to her." Hawke gestured vaguely at him, "Your thing. Demon. Spirit. Whatever. She said it talked to her, and it promised to protect her, and if you were fighting and didn't see the arrow then it's not your fault, and I need to learn how to play nice with everyone or everyone will stop playing with me."

"Beth's a smart girl," Anders said. Whether or not she was worth tolerating her brother's company was another matter altogether. Anders thought back on Varric's warning about blood magic, "What about Merrill?"

"What about Merrill?" Hawke asked.
"She's a friend," Anders said, "She wants more friends. Does she get to come on these little soirées outside the city?"

"Fine," Hawke shrugged. "Sure."

"What happened to her being a bad influence?" Anders asked.

"She is a bad influence," Hawke said, and Anders couldn't help bristling, "But the same thing goes. The templars don't patrol the coast. If you want to bring her, bring her."

"Are you really paying her rent?" Anders asked.

"Who told you that?" Hawke asked.

"That sounds like a yes," Anders said.

"Not your business." Hawke said.


"Things." Hawke said unhelpfully. "For you. But I'm not letting you touch them until you've had a bath. Are you coming with me to the Hanged Man or am I carrying you there?"

"Those are my choices?" Anders asked.

"Those are your choices." Hawke agreed.

"You know I've got food on, right?" Anders asked.

"No you don't," Hawke said.

"What do you call this?" Anders gestured to his stew.

"Not food." Hawke said.

"Fine, but you're walking with an apostate," Anders warned him. He dumped his food down the drain he'd come to decide was an essential thing to have anywhere he setup his clinic. He picked up a rag and wiped the pot down, "I'm not leaving my things here. I don't have a lock yet."

"Fine." Hawke said.

"You're really going to waste more coin on me just because I'm Beth's friend?" Anders asked, stowing the pot and its stand away in his satchel when both were cool and dry.

"I love my sister' isn't a good enough reason for you?" Hawke demanded, picking the pack back up. Anders wondered how heavy it was that he'd bothered to take it off.

"Not really," Anders said. "I mean, abomination, remember?"

"I feel sorry for you." Hawke said.

That wasn't something Anders expected to hear. Definitely not from someone who called him a dangerous abomination and a sewer rat covered in shit. Anders hated taking charity. His patients were refugees, and they didn't have anything they could spare. Hawke wasn't any better. He was trying to get together enough coin to invest in an expedition that could get his sister into Hightown, and out of the templars' reach. Anders couldn't take that from Bethany, but if Hawke could afford to
pay for Merrill's rent, a night at a cheap Lowtown inn wouldn't kill him.

Anders didn't want the pity, but Maker, he needed it.

"... I guess that works." Anders allotted.

Hawke left the clinic, and Anders wandered out after him, half expecting a magebane-tipped arrow to hit him in the face. It didn't. Hawke's dog was waiting outside the clinic, and bounded over to walk next to its master with little more than a sniff in Anders' direction. Anders dispelled the Veilfire in the lantern outside his clinic, and let the crystal set in his staff hold a light for him.

"Why doesn't your dog bark at me?" Anders asked, taking a spot on the opposite side of Hawke from the mabari.

"I told him not to," Hawke said.

"That's it?" Anders asked, "It's that easy?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Hawke asked.

"Because I'm a possessed?" Anders guessed.

"He's mine," Hawke said. "He'd let me use him for target practice if I wanted."

The dog let out a woof of agreement, and Hawke ruffled its head.

"Just because he's imprinted?" Anders asked. Hawke grunted in agreement. Anders looked at the mabari and felt miserable. "What's his name?"

"Dog." Hawke said.

"You named your mabari Dog?" Anders asked.

"He's a dog." Hawke said. "His name is Dog. What do you want?"


They stepped out into one of the larger caverns of Darktown, where shanties and hovels were stacked up against one another, and bleary-eyed refugees stared out at them from underneath moth-eaten shawls. "Healer!" One fellow called, gesturing to the rubbish they'd stacked in a circle of rocks, "Fire's out."

Anders tossed a handful of flame onto the pile and made it a pyre. He passed another group that begged for water and stopped to conjure it, and a third that called, "Healer, ache's back!" Before he gave up.

"Look, thanks, but I have to be here." Anders said, turning off the tracks that led towards the lifts and heading for the group that had called him, "I hope you get your coin back for the room."

"I'll wait," Hawke followed him, and hovered off to the side, arms folded over his chest. He was going to be waiting a while.

Anders knelt to a shanty cobbled together from broken mine carts and stolen tarps, and summoned Justice for the refugee who'd called him. He was a middle-aged fellow, red faced and pot bellied, with a weak stomach and recurring ulcers. "I told you we can't keep meeting like this, Mark," Anders joked. "You need to stop drinking."
"No other way to live down here," Mark said.

Anders healed him, and ended up getting pulled away to heal another fellow with a sprained ankle, and one with a cough that turned out to be the onset of the grippe before he managed to get away and onto the lift with Hawke. Hawke didn't comment on any of it, and handled the crank when they were finally on the lift. The dog shoved itself between Hawke's legs, whining.

"Something wrong?" Anders asked.

"He doesn't like closed spaces," Hawke said.

"You and me both, Dog," Anders said. The lift jolted under foot as it rose and Anders steadied himself on his staff. The dog whined. Hawke cranked silently, "Really not much of a talker, are you?"

"You want to talk, talk," Hawke said.


Hawke made a confused face at him.

"Really?" Anders asked, "No sense of humor? At all?"

"Maybe I just don't think you're funny." Hawke said.

"We're going to be good friends," Anders guessed. "I can tell."

Hawke's laugh was a bark. Anders didn't know why he was surprised. It made Anders jump, and Hawke stare very determinedly at the floor of the lift. "I must be a little funny," Anders said, unable to stand someone who looked so much like Amell being ashamed of their laugh, no matter how much of an ass they were.

The lift rose up into one of the transitional buildings in Lowtown. The dog bolted as soon as it was stable, off the lift and out of the building completely. Anders had never felt so much kinship with a dog before. Hawke's whistle brought the mabari back, and Anders dispelled the light in his staff before he followed him out into Lowtown.

"So what exactly is the plan here?" Anders asked. "I just get a room for a day...?"

"You get a room." Hawke said. "Bathe. Shit. Sleep. I don't care. Norah will do your clothes. Corff has you on my tab for the night so you can eat whatever you want. You can stay in the room or you can come have drinks with me and Varric."

Anders stopped, and leaned back against the wall of the alley they were walking through. A shudder caught in his chest, and he let it out slowly. The dog came back to stare at him, and so did the mabari.

"What?" Hawke asked.

"Nothing," Anders lied, but it had been a persistent pain in the back of his mind for the past four months. Anders massaged his jaw and the mess of uneven stubble that lined it, and dragged his hand up his face and into his unkempt hair, and the words fell out of him despite his best efforts to keep them in, "I'm just so hungry," Anders fought back another shudder, "I don't even think about it anymore."
"Then why are you standing here for?" Hawke demanded, "Come eat."

"Yeah," Anders managed, pushing the butt of his staff on the wall to give him the momentum to keep moving again. Anders cleared his throat, hating himself for the slip in his composure, "How far did I set you back? With your expedition? I mean I know Beth's healer cost twenty sovereigns but how much do you still need?"

"Not your business," Hawke said.

Anders didn't feel like arguing. Hawke led him out of the alley and into the hex. The Hanged Man was a massive multistory inn, carved from sandstone or granite and held together with what looked like wrought iron and will. Spikes decorated every outcropping to ward off birds, and the telltale signs of them, but it was far from aesthetically pleasing. The metal was rusted, and the outside was littered with so much broken glass their boots crunched on the trek to the door.

Hawke pushed the door open, and led Anders inside. It looked like the rest of Lowtown. A patchwork combination of stone, rusted iron, and old wood. Bronze chandeliers hung from the ceiling, a fire roared in a hearth off to Anders' right, and every table was littered with candles melting wax onto the discolored wood. The walls were lined with a mix of graffiti and ratty tapestries, and it was crowded.

Anders clutched his satchels to himself, and Hawke led him past a bar fight, over blood-stained floors, and up sunken stairs to a room on the second story. The building was crumbling like the rest of Kirkwall. Rubble and dirt filled up the corners. Hawke unlocked a door and stepped inside to drop his pack on a table. "That's yours. Quilt is from Mother. She thinks you and Bethany are together. Don't tell me if you are-"

"We aren't," Anders said quickly.

"Good. Don't. There's a straight edge, and a looking glass, and a few other things for you. Varric's room is on the right. Visit if you want, but bathe first. You smell like shit. Norah's downstairs. Give her your clothes. There's something for you to change into in the meantime." Hawke left the pack and the key to the room on the table and stepped around him to leave.

"Hawke-wait-" Anders' mouth decided to betray him. Hawke stopped next to him, and Anders smelled Ferelden: sweat, wet dirt, and dog, before Hawke took a step back and gave them both more space. "I don't know why you did all this, but thank you."

"Told you why. Don't need your thanks," Hawke muttered and ducked out of the room, dragging the door closed behind him.

Anders stared at it for a moment, and turned back to the pack. His hands left a smear of soot on the cloth when he reached for it, and Hawke's suggestion that he bathe before touching it suddenly seemed like a sound idea. Anders looked around the room. Two windows set high in the ceiling let in light and fresh air, and a fire was crackling in the hearth and filled the room with the crisp scent of pine and charcoal.

Aside from the table with the pack, there was another with food already set out for him, surrounded by real, high-backed cushioned chairs. There was bowl of nuts, a loaf of bread, and some cheese slices to go with a pitcher of ale. Anders picked up a piece of cheese despite the smear left by his fingers and bit into it.

A sob slipped out of him, and Anders wouldn't have cared enough to restrain it even if he wasn't alone. It was sharp and peppery, moist and crumbling, and the best thing Anders had ever had in his
mouth in his entire life. Cocks and cunts suddenly couldn't compare to cheese. Anders dropped his
satchels onto the ground and sank into the chair. The cushion was stuffed with down, and impossibly
soft, and it didn't hurt his backside to sit.

Anders doubled over the table and sobbed around another bite. A harsh undercurrent of salt and soot
from his fingers cut into it, and hardly registered with him. Anders bit into the loaf of bread. Chewing
through the hard crust made his teeth hurt, but it was worth it for the way the wheat melted on his
tongue. Anders swallowed it down with a whine and a mouthful of ale. He felt like he'd never eaten
anything that wasn't rat before.

"Fuck," Anders propped his elbows up on the table and buried his forehead in his hands, "Fuck, I'm
crying. Maker... do you want any of this? You don't need to eat. Right. Fuck." Anders took another
bite of bread and choked on it, and even coughing it back up was better than the pungent gamey taste
of rat or the few bites of dark meat he could peel from a pigeon.

Anders forced himself to stop eating before he made himself sick. He was a healer; he knew better.
He hadn't been eating right. He couldn't dive into a three course meal with what living in Kirkwall
had done to his stomach, but Maker, he wanted to. Anders pushed himself back up onto his feet and
propped his staff up against the wall. He locked and latched the door to his room, and walked around
the divider in the center of the room to the bedroom.

It was a real bath, a wooden tub straining against warped and rusted bilge hoops, but big enough for
him to sit with his legs only slightly bent. There was a stand attached with soap and salts, pumice and
emery. The water was already drawn, and a weak fire spell left it steaming. Anders shrugged out of
his coat, and unbuckled his boots. His belt hit the floor with a heavy thud, and his tunic had to be
peeled off his chest. Anders shimmied out of his trousers and smalls and climbed into the bath.

A bath had never felt so decadent before. The water slid up his ankles and over his thighs, warmed
his ass and embraced his hips like the torrid caress of a lover. Anders dropped his head back on the
rim of the tub and wrapped an instinctive hand around his sudden and needful erection. He didn't feel
clean enough for the contact yet, but he was impatient, and thought of nothing but the warmth of the
water on his aching muscles and begrimed skin.

Anders set a slow cadence to the strokes of his hand and the buck of his hips that left the surface of
the water rippling. He lost himself to heat and friction and the coiling tension in his stomach, pushing
his feet against one side of the bath and digging his shoulders into the other. Anders bit his lip to
stifle a moan, ripples of pleasure flaring brighter and brighter until they almost burned.

Anders let his hand slip lower, and pressed the pad of a finger against his entrance. Unbidden, all of
the jokes he'd heard over the past month about having another man inside him came back to him.
Anders groan turned into a gasp, and he sat up, hands snapping out to grab the rim of the tub. "Fuck-
I-" Anders swallowed; his skin was hot enough to make the water feel cold and his thoughts still felt
sluggish.

"Fuck-I forgot," Anders exhaled hard, "How did I forget? Justice? Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't even
think... Are you okay?" Anders stared at his hands, his thoughts still a tangle of arousal and the
desperate need for release. "... Are you even here? I mean-you seemed okay with Karl, and where
that was going-but I never-I mean recently things have been so awful for us my mind hasn't been-...

Anders flexed his hands, and watched the droplets of water caught in the ruddy hair on his arms slide
into the water and ripple on the surface. It was fascinating to watch. Anders ran two fingers down the
inside of his arm and the light caress was enough to make him shiver. "This is weird... I should just
take a bath. My Rage is bad enough, I don't want you corrupted with Desire and every other demon
I've got haunting me..."
"Fuck, I want to get off so bad." Maker's breath, Anders was pathetic. Warm water turned him on. That was how far he'd fallen. He was going to pervert a spirit of Justice over a bath. Anders pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and bit down, but it didn't distract him. It just made him think of two mouths coming together, biting and sucking and licking in a moment of wild abandon.

Anders bit his knuckles, but that didn't help either. He was so aroused the taste of the salt on his skin made his cock ache and throb. The sharp press of his teeth into his hand stung, and Anders tasted mana, and spat his hand out. "Alright, I get it, you don't want me hurting myself, but-... fuck it. I know you can stop me if you want."

Anders rolled onto his knees and wrapped his hand around his cock. He grabbed the rim of the bath to steady himself and thrust into his fist, thinking of nothing but the heat still coiled tight in the pit of his stomach. Anders tightened his grip and let his magic heat his palm and slick his fingers. Thought left him, and feeling took over, and the quick, almost frantic rhythm he set found him a fast end.

It was release; a shiver of pleasure rippled through his cock and down his spine, curling his toes and leaving him gasping and shuddering against the side of the tub. Anders let out a shaky breath, and felt for a moment nothing but comfortably numb in a way that was finally healthy. He watched his hair drip water onto the floor. The arrhythmic pitter patter of the droplets staining the wood was almost worth a giggle.

Anders rolled back into the bath and sank under the water, shaking his hands through his hair and dislodging months' worth of oil and grime. He came back up and shook his head, flaxen strands slapping his face and sticking, and let the giggle slip. Anders dragged uneven nails down his leg, and dyed the waters a darker shade with the dirt he dislodged. "We're going to marry this bath." Anders decided.

In the past four months Anders felt like he'd known filth to beggar the Blight. He wasn't sure if the stain would ever wash out, but he couldn't have been more eager to try. He attacked his skin and hair with salts and soaps, his nails with emery, his skin with pumice. He had to reheat the water twice, and was glad he couldn't see the color beneath the suds left by the soap. Anders crawled out of the tub after he'd worn his skin bright pink. The sting was enough to set Justice on edge.

Anders grabbed at the sensations: concern, confusion, mild irritation, a prickling up his spine. "We needed it. We were disgusting." Anders told him. "Are you okay? With me-I guess there's no good way to put this: getting off? I mean... Hunger is a demon too, but you don't seem to mind when I eat, so..."

Anders couldn't make sense of an answer, which he supposed might mean contentment, and decided to settle. He grabbed himself a towel and wrapped it around his hair, far too long now, and another around his waist before he went back to the pack Hawke had left him. His hands finally looked human. Nails even, no blood beneath them, no dirt caked into the lines on his palm. Anders shook out the pack.

A plain woolen tunic, no dye, with matching trousers and a cord for a belt. A straight edge, scissors and a looking glass. The quilt. A cloak. Maker's sweet saving grace, a comb. Empty flasks and vials. Andraste's knickers, food. Two sacks of tubers and citrus, and one sack of rice. "I take it back," Anders said, "We're going to marry Hawke. Fuck the bath. Kill templars."

Anders propped the looking glass up against the wall, and pulled over a chair to shave his face. He tried not to look too hard at the dark rings around his eyes, and the way his brow furrowed even when he thought his expression was neutral. His face felt blissfully colder free of stubble, and Anders twisted his hair over his shoulder to brush and cut off what he could of the split ends. It hung about his shoulders when he finished. Not perfect, but not noticeably uneven either.
A dusting with his towels cleaned him of the hair that fallen onto his shoulders, and Anders pulled on the gifted trousers. The waist was too wide and they fell past his ankles, which he supposed shouldn't surprise him. They probably belonged to Hawke. Anders tied them off with the cord, and threw on the tunic. It was ridiculously oversized, and slipped off his shoulders, but it was clean. The wool might have been satin for how it felt on his skin.

Anders ate another piece of cheese and a handful of nuts, and swallowed them down with a moan. He put on Sigrun's earring, his Warden necklace, and Karl's ring, and bundled up his old clothes in his coat. Anders wasn't sure how he felt about letting anyone clean his coat, but he couldn't deny the suede had seen better days. Anders grabbed his room key, padded barefoot out into the hall. No socks had come with the outfit, and even sticky with ale, Anders was willing to bet the floor was cleaner than his boots.

Anders locked the door behind him and made for the first story, and bumped into Varric coming up. "Oh, pardon me," Varric stepped around him, and continued up the stairs while Anders went down. "Wait a second!" Anders glanced over his shoulder. Varric gawked at him, "Blondie!?"

"Yes...?" Anders ventured.

"Holy shit," Varric raised the two tankards he was holding towards him in something of a toast. "You clean up."

Anders grinned, "Don't go there. I'll break your heart."

"Oh, consider it broken," Varric pressed one tankard over his heart, "You're coming up for drinks, right? Get yours from Corff. Bartender. Norah's good for the clothes, but she'll never get your order right."

"I'll do that, thanks," Anders said.

Anders made his way downstairs, feet cold but clean on the planks, and talked to Corff who identified Norah. Anders felt slightly guilty for having anyone do his laundry, which seemed ridiculous considering he'd had no problems with the Tranquil in the Circle, or the servants at the Keep. Four months in a sewer had done wonders for helping him realize how privileged his life had been, even on the run.

Corff gave him a choice between roast boar and roast chicken, and Anders picked boar and was promised it delivered to Varric's quarters. He ordered himself an apple ale in the meantime, and carried it back up the stairs. The door was open, and Anders knocked on the frame rather than walk in. What he could see from the doorway reminded him of Kal'Hirol. Stone furniture with knotted dwarven runework.

Varric was visible from the doorway, both the table and the chair he sat in low to the floor. Varric waved him in, and Anders wandered over to the table, "Take a seat," Varric said encouragingly, "Hawke, you recognize this guy?"

Hawke's back had been to the door. Anders fidgeted when the russet eyes swept over him in little more than a cursory glance. Hawke shook his head.

"I can translate, that was a compliment," Varric said helpfully.

Anders took a seat between them, grinning, "I figured. Thanks again for all this."

"Still don't need your thanks," Hawke said.
Somehow, Anders thought that made it mean a little more.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter!
A Preoccupation with Spirits

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. I'm sorry this chapter took so long. I'm dealing with a mess of personal problems right now, and I also rewrote the smut in Chapters 15 and 17 if you feel like rereading it. I'm probably going to rewrite all of the older smut scenes eventually, but one thing at a time.

We hit 8000 views! Thank you so much for supporting this story! Thank you for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:32 Dragon 3 Molioris Afternoon
Kirkwall Lowtown: The Hanged Man

Anders had to swallow a moan when he sank into the chair. It was carved from stone, but Maker, it was covered with velvet blankets and pillows stuffed with down. It was preposterously low to the ground, and Anders' knees were in his ears until he spread them out under the table, bumping what he assumed was Hawke in the process by the man's awkward grumble and the suddenness of which he shifted.

Anders took his first drink of ale. A hint of apple mingled with spirits ran warm down his throat, and Anders dropped his head back against the chair, cradling the tankard to his chest. He could have fallen asleep here if someone let him, but Varric spoke up.

"I'll level with you, Blondie, we might have to do something about the nickname," Varric said.

"I told you not to name it," Hawke said gruffly, "Now you'll want to keep it."

If Anders didn't know better, he'd almost guess it for a joke. "I like 'Blondie' more than 'filthy fucking sewer rat,'" Anders shot Hawke a challenging grin, but the man made a very determined effort not to make eye-contact with anyone. Anders had met friendlier folk.

Varric laughed at least, "You're making the mistake of thinking this is bad guard, good guard," Varric gestured between Hawke and himself, "No, no, no, my friend, this is bad guard, worse guard. See when I picked Blondie, I was going for irony. Whatever color your hair was? Not blonde."

Anders snorted, "There's so much love for me in this room."

"More than you think," Varric grinned, pushing him a bowl full of assorted cheeses. Anders ate a piece that tasted delightfully smoky and went well with his ale. "You gotta admit you needed this, Blondie."

"Not arguing that," Anders said. He was still suppressing sighs at every taste and texture, "I think it's been at least four months since I've had a proper bath or meal."

"You're tugging at my heart strings, here," Varric said, kicking a boot up onto the table and bouncing the cutlery, "Come on, Hawke, let me keep him."
"You'll have to feed him," Hawke pointed out, scratching Dog's ear where the mabari lay at his feet, "Take him for walks."

"Deal with my shit," Anders added.

"Deal with his shit," Hawke agreed, raising his tankard towards him in the first half-civil gesture Anders had seen from him.

"Oh please," Varric huffed, "A guy who runs a free clinic under the city for the desperate and the downtrodden? You only hear about that kind of selflessness in the same stories with magic beans."

"You know there's probably a reason for that," Anders said. "If someone handed me magic beans right now, I'd probably just eat them."

"I'm gonna keep him," Varric decided. "So now that we're getting off on the right foot here, maybe we can try introductions again? What's your story, Blondie?"

"My story?" Anders asked.

"Where are you from? What are you for?" Varric suggested helpfully, "What's the deal with Blue? What's your goal with the clinic?"

"Oh, you know, I thought I'd turn it into a hospice," Anders shrugged, picking the easiest question to avoid. "I petitioned the Viscount for the right to set up shop. I'm expecting an answer back any day now."

"Sounds exciting," Varric grinned. "I imagine things won't be dull with you around."

"I hope not," Anders said, "Don't know if you noticed, but I'm not a fan of when things get Tranquil."

Varric made a grab for his heart, "That was dark, Blondie."

"Gallows humor, I guess," Anders said. Varric laughed and cringed, and Anders even won a bark of laughter from Hawke. Anders shot him a grin and wasn't terribly surprised when Hawke looked away. Anders shrugged and fiddled with his earring, "Ah, I had a friend who told me if your choices are laugh or cry, you should pick laugh."

"Words to live by," Varric tipped his drink at him.

"I'm trying," Anders said, taking another drink.

"So what's the verdict, Blondie?" Varric asked, "You going to be part of our Deep Roads expedition after all?"

"Blight, dampness, festering darkness filled with tainted rats..." Anders mused, "I can't wait. Sounds fun."

"No, you're not thinking big enough here," Varric said eagerly, "There's only a short window after a Blight where the Deep Roads are empty, and word is lately they've been quieter than ever. These old thaigs are littered with treasures the old noble families will pay a fortune for. Bartrand's got it on good information the one we're heading for is one that could set us all up for life."

"I hope you're right," Anders said. The last thing he wanted was to have anything to do with anything that reminded him of the Wardens, but he owed Beth, and Hawke by extension. "The
whole thing gets old after a while, you know? Darkspawn this. Darkspawn that. Taint taint taint
"Stop." Hawke said.

"Taint." Anders grinned. "I'm here though, if you need help with your expedition. It's the least I can
do. I knew better with Beth, and if I owe you one sovereign or twenty, I should help. It would
probably be a good idea for you to have a Warden along anyway. I can sense darkspawn, and heal,
and-" run into Stroud and his expedition if by some impossible stretch of luck yours is at the same
time? Finally find out how many of my friends are dead by my hand? "You know. Help."

"Be glad to have you, Blondie," Varric said sincerely, "Right Hawke?"

Hawke grunted what Anders assumed was an affirmative grunt.

"So close," Varric joked. "So close to words."

"You need a speech every time I open my mouth?" Hawke demanded.

"You didn't actually open your mouth there, Hawke," Varric pointed out.

"He's got a point," Anders agreed, "And considering what you've said of me so far..."

"Yes, a warden and a healer would be invaluable," Hawke said curtly. "Do you need me to tell you
the sky is blue next?"

"You know after four months in Darktown the reminder couldn't hurt," Anders mused.

"The sky is blue," Hawke said.

"Aw, Beth said you had a soft heart under that scruffy exterior," Anders joked.

"She lied," Hawke said. "What are the Deep Roads like?"

"Dark," Anders recalled, "Crammed... The deeper you get the worse the corruption gets. That's a
thing by the way. Corruption. Rotten flesh and muscle that grows on the floor and the walls in the
Deep Roads... It's always bleeding and undulating and it's impossible to keep your balance. We had
these boots with special grooves cut into the soles, but it just wasn't enough.

"You always fall, and then for a second you think maybe the rot smells better than the gas. It's in the
air down there and it stagnates, a thick green damp that's so flammable you can't carry torches. You
can feel it in your lungs when you breathe..."

"Oh, come on Hawke, don't make that face," Varric said. "Sure, we've all heard the stories of legions
of darkspawn, cave-ins, ravenous beasts... but let's just think of this as an adventure."

"An adventure," Hawke rolled his eyes and took another drink. "Great."

"So what's your story?" Anders asked.

"Who are you asking?" Varric asked, "Who am I kidding? Let's just go with who will answer. Me?
I'm a younger brother. It's a difficult and dangerous profession, and a lot of us die of boredom. You'll
get a chance to meet my brother Bartrand on the expedition, and let me just apologize in advance.
Most of my job is cleaning up after him.

"My family came from Orzammar. Noble house Tethras, until my father got caught fixing Provings,
and he and our whole House got exiled. It's no huge loss, really. I was born up here, and sunshine
suits me just fine, when it gets through the foundry smog. I'm a businessman, a storyteller, and
sometimes, I shoot people."

"Sounds like you're living the life," Anders said, eating another piece of cheese.

"I'm living one of them," Varric agreed, grinning. "You want to share, Hawke?"

"No," Hawke said.

"I suppose you already know most of the story from Sunshine," Varric told Hawke's story for him,"Did she tell you Hawke here killed an ogre escaping the Blight? I suppose that's not much for a
Warden, but for the rest of us mortals, it's kind of an achievement. I have been dying to know what
was going through his head at the time."

"It ripped Carver in half in front of me," Hawke said. "What do you think was going through my
head?"

"Shit, Hawke," Varric set his drink down. He wrung his hands together and spent a few seconds
searching for words, "Sunshine never mentioned-I... Shit. Sorry."

"...It's fine." Hawke looked down at his tankard and stood up, "Refills?"

"Sure," Varric said sadly.

"Still working on mine," Anders said. "But I won't argue against another," Maker, eating was hard.
His stomach had to be the size of a walnut at this point. Anders had eaten half a loaf of bread and a
few pieces of cheese, and was caught in a strange state where the Taint insisted he was still hungry,
but his body said otherwise. Anders thought of the boar he'd ordered and felt a little queasy.

"I have had a day." A voice said from the doorway. A painfully familiar woman sauntered in, all
thick thighs and long legs in a thin white dress that barely covered her breasts - and Anders was
staring. The dog ran over to her, and the woman spared it a fond pat.

"Hey, Rivaini," Varric called.

"You know I hate it when you call me that," 'Rivaini wrinkled her nose at the dwarf.

"That's why I call you that," Varric laughed.

'Rivaini' stopped Hawke on his way out to refill their drinks with a hand on his chest. "Well if it isn't
my favorite mercenary." She purred, "When are you going to give me that 'Red Iron' hm?"

"Isabela," Hawke said stiffly. "Drink?"

"Love one, pet." Isabela looked over his shoulder, and her eyes raked over Anders so shamelessly he
couldn't help grinning. "Who. Is. This? Hawke, you've been holding out on me."

"Ask him yourself," Hawke said, escaping out from under her hand and into the hall, dog trailing at
his heels.

"Oh I plan to," Isabela agreed. Maker, but she was familiar. Something in her voice, in the way her
hips moved when she walked and leaned on his chair to look down at him. The motion swayed the
gold coins in her ears and spilled dark chocolate hair over her breasts. "Here I thought the men in this
place were all besotted fools who couldn't hoist the mainsail. When did you sneak in?"
"I'm hoping for besotted later, actually," Anders grinned, and that was enough, but his mouth kept going, "But if you're staying here, I think I might get there sooner."

"Aren't you clever? And lanky. I do like lanky." Isabela ran a finger gloved finger along the collar of his borrowed shirt, barely brushing skin in the process. She frowned, and twisted the fabric around her finger, "Is this Hawke's shirt?"

"Er..." Anders said

Isabela took a step quick step back and held up both hands, "I didn't touch him."

"It's really not like that," Anders said, but the dark-skinned beauty had already abandoned him to take a seat next to Varric. The dwarf laughed, and Isabela threw her feet up on the table next to Varric's feet. Her boots went all the way up her thighs, and with the way she was sitting Anders suddenly couldn't tell if she was wearing anything under the dress.

Anders shook himself. Just because she was gorgeous didn't mean he should have been thinking anything. That part of his life was over. Karl hadn't been safe with him. Bethany hadn't been safe with him. No one was safe with him. He shouldn't be thinking that way about anyone. Besides, he couldn't do that to the bath.

"Rivaini, Blondie," Varric gestured between them, "Blondie, Rivaini."

"It's Isabela," Isabela said, making a rolling motion with her hand reminiscent of a bow, "Previously 'Captain' Isabela, but sadly without my ship the title rings a bit hollow." She gave Anders another long look, "Where are you from? You've got the Fereldan accent, but those delicious little freckles are from somewhere else."

"No, you got it right," Anders said, far from interested in telling his origin story. "I'm Fereldan. And it's Anders."

"I love Fereldans," Isabela grinned, "I was in Denerim during the Blight, you know. I even met the Hero of Ferelden, once."

"You did?" Anders' hand slipped on his tankard, and it nearly went spilling into his lap. He shoved it onto the table and sat forward. "When? What?"

"I didn't meet him meet him," Isabela laughed, "No need to get excited. Believe me, though, I tried. The hands on that man... you could just tell they could do things to a person. We met... the same way I met Hawke, actually. After a bar-fight. He was traveling with an old friend of mine. The three of us had a long chat, and played a bit of cards. He was mean at Wicked Grace, and that's about all I know about him."

"What about you, Blondie?" Varric asked. "You were a Warden. You ever meet him?"

"Yeah," Anders took a long drink, and ale helped push the lump in his throat back down to his stomach. "I met him."

"Any opinion?" Varric asked. "I'm always curious about the people behind the legends."

Anders shrugged. Another bite of cheese helped. "Same as the stories. Ten feet tall with fire in his eyes."

"You can say that again," Isabela shivered. "I remember those eyes. I just wanted to pluck them out and keep them as a necklace."
"You okay there, Blondie?" Varric asked. "You look a little green."

Anders swallowed down the vomit that had crawled up into his throat, and chased away the taste with the last of his ale. "I just haven't eaten any dairy in a while. I think it's upsetting my stomach."

"Then stop eating it," Hawke said from the doorway, a tray piled high with food and drink balanced on his arm. He dropped Anders' plate of roast boar in front of him, and the rich smell suddenly made Anders wish he'd ordered something mild.

Hawke passed out drinks, and fell back into his seat. Anders eyes lingered on him longer than they needed to, but he doubted Hawke would notice. The man rarely looked up from his drink, and when he did it was only for Varric. He sat with one leg draped over his dog, and seemed more or less lost in thought.

He couldn't have been that bad. He took care of Merrill. He even took care of Anders, apparently. If he turned into an ass when he opened his mouth at least he was aware of it. Anders couldn't really fault him for being protective of his sister. Every mage needed someone like that to look out for them.

"So Hawke, tell me everything about you and..." Isabela looked at Anders, "What did you say your name was again?"

"Anders," Anders said. The hunk of boar was surrounded with assorted vegetables, and Anders started with a potato. It slid in half on his fork and melted in his mouth. No tears, Anders. Don't let them see you cry.

"Nothing to tell." Hawke said.

"Nothing? What about that time you had your hands all over me in my clinic?" Anders joked.

"Oh this I have to hear," Isabela said eagerly. "Did he grey your warden?"

"You mean did we buck the forbidden horse?" Anders joked.

"Explore your Deep Roads?" Isabela countered.

"Forge the moaning statue?" Anders grinned.

"Master your taint?" Isabela joked.

Anders laughed, and Varric was wheezing.

"Stop. Both of you," Hawke ordered.

"So he's fair game?" Isabela grinned a predatory grin.

"You'd have to ask Beth." Hawke said.

"I told you, there's nothing going on there." Anders said.

"I haven't given you any reason to tell me the truth if there is," Hawke said. "Mother seems to think so. She's already naming the grandchildren."

"I might have to tell her a few things about the Taint in that case," Anders mused.

"What's she come up with so far?" Varrice asked.
"Astride and Malcolm for boys, Miriam for a girl." Hawke said.

"Maker's breath, you're serious," Varric laughed.

"The poor girl needs some love, still a virgin at twenty," Isabela waggled her eyebrows at Anders. "Or maybe not anymore?"

"I'm not touching that." Anders said and drank instead.

"Stop," Hawke said. "Please."

"Oh Hawke, you know I'd cut his balls off if he hurt her." Isabela nudged Hawke's arm with her boot. "Don't be such a prude."

"New topic," Hawke ordered.

"Messere Hawke?" Norah called from the doorway.

Hawke climbed out of his chair, "What is it?"

"The clothes," Norah explained. "I don't think there's any salvaging them. It might just be better to burn them."

"No!" Anders bolted out of his chair, and didn't move more than a step before Hawke's hand closed on his shoulder and shoved him back down into his seat.

"Calm down. No one's burning your clothes," Hawke said. "I'll get them, Norah."

"Drinks, Norah?" Varric asked.

"I'll keep them coming," Norah agreed.

Hawke left with the barmaid. Anders' head was swimming. "Is he seriously going to go wash my clothes?"

"Oh sweetie," Isabela raised her tankard at him, "Get ready to be pampered."

"I'm getting a lot of mixed signals here," Anders said. "Half of you act like Hawke is a monster and the other half act like he's a saint."

"Why not both?" Isabela shrugged. "Wicked Grace? What do you two say?"

"I'm game," Varric said.

"Alright, but I don't have any coin to bet." Anders said.

"With you and Varric? I'm good for strip Wicked Grace," Isabela grinned.

"Riviani, how many times must I remind you I'm spoken for?" Varric sighed.

Isabela pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, and Anders swore her knew her. "But the chest hair..."

"I'll let you run your fingers through it if you win," Varric offered.

"Oh, Varric, stop!" Isabela squirmed in her chair, "You're making me quiver."
"You know you want to," Varric grinned.

"Oh, I do... I can't resist you," Isabela walked her fingers across the table and up Varric's arm. "No one can."

"I know. It's a terrible burden," Varric stood with a dramatic sigh, "Let me get my cards."

Anders stared at Isabela across the table. The woman was dripping with jewelry, a giant gold choker at her neck set with turquoise, piercings everywhere, bracelets cascading up her arms. Anders was as attracted as he was envious. Isabela grinned at the attention and blew a kiss at him.

"I know I know you," Anders said. "I never forget a pretty face."

"You noticed my face?" Isabela huffed and threw her chest forward, "I'm insulted."

Anders laughed.

"You're Fereldan, you said." Isabela mused. "Ever spend any time at the Pearl? The boys and I use to dock there a lot."

The memory came back in a rush. She hadn't had quite so many piercings, and her hair had been shorter. She'd been wearing armor at the time, and later nothing, and Maker Anders couldn't believe he'd forgotten her. "That's it! You were going to let me join your crew, but the templars caught up with me before you were ready to ship out."

"Oh!" Isabela dropped her feet off the table and leaned forward eagerly, "I remember you! You were the runaway mage who could do that electricity thing. That was nice..."

"I don't think I need to know this about either of you," Varric said, taking his seat back and shuffling his cards.

"I'm glad you got away, sweet thing," Isabela put her feet back up on the table, and collected the cards as Varric dealt them. "I was seriously depressed about that for a few days. Did I mention the electricity thing was nice?"

Anders laughed, and lost. He and Justice had never been good at Wicked Grace, and Anders wasn't expecting to win, but the company was welcome. Anders doubted he'd have allowed himself it if Hawke hadn't forced him into it. The boar was exquisite; the meat was dark and marinated, the vegetables cooked to perfection, and the ale was bottomless. Varric hadn't been wrong; Anders needed it.

Most of Varric's stories centered around Hawke, while Isabela's centered around her time as a ship captain. Anders kept most of his stories to himself. His past wasn't a place he wanted to revisit, and the present was limited to stories of cleansing the grippe and joint pain. The three of them drank ale like water, and Anders knew himself well enough to know that being sloshed meant he should have been crawling into the nearest lap, but Isabela's lap stayed empty.

Anders didn't laugh at every joke. He didn't tell his own. He felt the spirits cloud his head, and could only guess they clashed with his spirit when he felt a mixture disquiet, discomfort, and confusion. Underlying it all was a sense of frustration tinted with fear. Anders knew he never would have felt that way on his own. Which meant Justice must have hated them drunk.

... Well that was just too bloody bad. Anders wanted to be free of everything for one night. He'd damn well earned it. The grief, the nightmares, the hunger, the loneliness, the stress. He was done with it. Maker knew he wasn't getting laid, which left drink if he wanted to forget himself.
Except it wasn't working with Justice's emotions bleeding into his own. Anders had never been an unhappy drunk before, but he was certainly one now. He was too stubborn to stop, and his spirit was too drunk to exert any influence to stop him. Anders didn't even know it was possible to get a spirit drunk.

The thought that he might actually end up hurting Justice was what finally convinced him to put his drink down. Hawke returned when he did, and was dealt in with no comment. His hands were a shade lighter from however hard he had worked to get the stains out of Anders' clothes. Anders spent the entire game staring at him, and trying to think of an appropriate way to thank him. Nothing came to him. All he could think was that he looked like Amell.

"What?" Hawke demanded eventually, when he apparently got sick of Anders' staring.

"What, what?" Anders asked.

"Why are you staring at me for?" Hawke demanded.

"It's the beard," Isabela whispered, and burst into a fit of giggles. At least Anders wasn't the only sloshed. Varric was little better.

"I like your eyes," Anders said.

"Great," Hawke said stiffly.

"Where'd you get them?" Anders asked, momentarily forgetting who he was talking to.

"... Runs in the family." Hawke said.

Anders laughed. It was more of a manic giggle. Justice felt like a storm raging inside his head, but it was easy to drown him out looking into those eyes. It wasn't as if Anders could do anything about the state they were in now. Justice was just going to have to weather it.

"You're drunk," Hawke said.

"Maybe," Anders grinned. "You're a looker."

"What's he looking at?" Isabela asked.

Anders laughed and set his elbows on the table to prop his head up in his hands. Maker, he was going to be sick. An angry spirit in his head felt worse than being on a ship in a storm. "Shut up," Anders muttered, digging the pads of his fingers into his forehead. "Shut up. I can't undo it."

"You okay, Blondie?" Varric asked.

"This will not be permitted again," Anders snarled, and groaned at the flash of blue that reflected on the table.

"Or... Blue?" Varric ventured.

"Fine," Anders groaned, "I'm fine. I just-I should go." Anders pushed himself to his feet. The room spun wildly, and Anders slipped. He scrambled for the table, and caught himself before he hit his knees at the cost of digging his ribs into the edge.

"You do that," Hawke said.

Anders tried, and got nowhere. An arm locked around his waist, and a hand around his wrist, and
before he knew what was happening Hawke heaved him to his feet. He still smelled like Ferelden: dog and dirt and wet.

"I can walk," Anders lied.

"I'll be back, Varrie," Hawke said, dragging him out the door.

"Touch his butt for me!" Isabela called after them.

"Fuck, he's going to make me throw up." Anders groaned.

"Your weird shit?" Hawke guessed.

"His name is Justice," Anders said.

"Give me your key," Hawke ordered, holding him up outside the door to his room. Anders fished for it in his pocket, and eventually managed to take hold of the metal and shove it at Hawke's chest. Hawke had to pry it out of his clenched fist. His hands were rough and calloused and Anders probably shouldn't have noticed.

"You can let go now," Anders slurred. "I should go back to the clinic. I shouldn't be here. I can't control us."

"Shut up." Hawke said, dragging him into his room and closing the door behind them. "Can you stand?" Hawke asked, setting him in the middle of his room and loosening his grip. Anders pitched forward, and Hawke grabbed him and heaved him back onto his shoulder.

"I'm going to be sick," Anders said.

Anders didn't remember being moved to his bed, but he was suddenly sitting on the edge of it. Hawke pushed a chamber pot into his hands, and the smell was enough to push Anders into throwing up into it. Anders sobbed despite himself, not for the feel of his lunch being torn back up his throat, but just for the knowledge that he'd lost the first meal he'd had in months. The bed shifted and Anders felt calloused fingers on his scalp, and his hair was drawn back from his face.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Anders groaned. His head was still reeling, and his throat shuddered, and he threw up again. "Maker-shit."

"Uncle's a sot," Hawke said, "I'm used to it."

"I'm not a sot," Anders snapped.

"Not what I meant," Hawke muttered.

A shudder ran up Anders' spine, and he reached feebly for the floor to set the pot down. Hawke took it from him and traded it for a rag. "I'm not," Anders wiped off his face, "I didn't even have that much."

"You don't need that much," Hawke said, letting go of his hair, "My sister weighs more than you and can't drink half as much."

"I don't." Anders bit down another sob, "I don't know why he won't let me drink."

"He's in your head, and you don't know what he's thinking?" Hawke asked.

"I can't-talk to him," Anders explained. "I just feel things... Maker, I miss him so much." Anders
dropped the rag and buried his face in his hands, thoughts bleeding between Amell and Justice. He wept remembering both, and wasn't sure how long it took him to come up from his hands, but Hawke was still sitting next to him.

The man had propped up a leg and draped his arm over his knee, and was staring off into the distance, paying next to no mind to Anders weeping next to him. He glanced over when the sobbing stopped, and held out a fresh rag.

"I'm sorry," Anders dragged the cloth over his eyes and pinched it at his nose.

"Don't care," Hawke said. "Just don't expect me to know what to say."

"Why are you doing all this for me?" Anders asked. "Why do you even care?"

"I told you why," Hawke said.

"I don't want your pity," Anders tried for a sneer, and imagined it looked ugly with how red his face must be. The anger came easy; Anders didn't doubt half of it was from Justice and directed at him, but it was hard to decipher which emotions were his when it all bled together into a pounding mess in Anders' head.

"Yes you do," Hawke said.

"You don't know me," Anders said.

"You're an apostate." Hawke said. "Don't need to know more than that."

"What does that mean?" Anders asked.

"It means you're alone," Hawke said. "No friends. No family. No home. I know that life. I can't fault you and Beth for wanting something more."

Anders decided liked the hard set to Hawke's eyebrows. It made him look hard, but it also made him look true. Like no matter what he said or who he was saying it to, he'd be honest. "Beth was right. You do have a soft heart."

"I just-... I think-... that's not-..." Hawke stammered.

Maker's breath, was he shy? Was that it?

"I'm making you uncomfortable," Anders guessed.

"Yes." Hawke said quickly. "I mean-... yes. But.. it's- it's fine."

"... even though I'm a filthy fucking sewer rat?" Anders asked.

"You were filthy." Hawke said.

"I guess I was," Anders allotted; he still felt the same chaos of emotion in his head, unsettled and angry when he wanted to feel anything else. He settled on it when he couldn't escape it, "Abomination?"

"Scares the shit out of me," Hawke said.

"Seriously?" Anders asked.
"Go to sleep." Hawke said.

"I'm not tired," Anders said.

"You're drunk," Hawke stood up, and picked up the rancid chamber pot and ruined rags, "Go to sleep anyway. I'll bring your clothes and get you when I've got a job outside the city."

"Hawke," Anders called after him. "Thank you. For my clothes. You didn't have to do that, or any of this after what happened to Beth because of me. I know I don't deserve it, but- I..." Maker, what was he even trying to say?

"I told you not to thank me," Hawke said.

"I'm thanking you anyway," Anders said.

"... you're welcome."

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter! With bonus Amell/Anders!

This is an optional Apples and Apostates Chapter of the past two chapters told from Hawke's perspective should you wish to follow both in chronological order.
Meetings

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. I'm sorry this chapter took forever. Smut scene in Chapter 23 is rewritten if anyone is interested. Thank you all for your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 6 Molioris Early Morning
Kirkwall Docks: Sewers

Anders' boots scuffed across the water-worn floor of the sewers, dislodging rocks and refuse. He knew he needed to stop pacing, but his anxiety was coiled around his spine like a snake, clenching tighter and tighter as every minute passed. What was he doing? Maker, he knew better.

The second they saw that flash of silver, that ironic sword, those cleansing flames, they were going to go mad. The bloody bastard wasn't going to survive his change of heart because Anders was going to rip it out of his chest whether he wanted to or not. Anders felt something keener than hatred for templars, but a templar willing to risk his life for the cause of mages? That was what the Order should have been. Protectors, not purifiers. Anders didn't want to kill him.

Anders breathed life into the flames of the torch illuminating his small space in the sewers so they burned a little brighter. The underground cavern was expansive, but dark. He hoped this wasn't a trap. He didn't want to wake up in another cramped sewer, covered in shit, with no memory of how he'd spent the past few hours. Especially not now that his clothes were clean.

Anders bit down a fond smile. Clean. Maker, what a feeling. Anders ran his hands up his arms beneath his sleeves, relishing in the smooth texture of his own skin. It was one of a few good things to come out of his night at the Hanged Man. Once Anders had stopped being such a sot, he'd come to the sober conclusion that overeating on a weak stomach and overdrinking on a weak body had as much to do with him being ill as Justice.

He still had no idea why his spirit disapproved of drinking, but Anders wasn't about to subject himself to that nightmare again. He was finally full, and that was all that mattered. Hawke had bought him breakfast to replace the dinner he'd lost, and Varric had offered to put him on his tab provided Anders didn't abuse the allowance. Anders hadn't touched it. He could scarcely believe anyone could be so generous.

The two of them were damned liars. It wasn't bad guard, worse guard, it was good guard, better guard, and damned if Anders couldn't tell which was which. Anders kicked a rock across the sewers, and listened to the echo as it fled down a darkened corridor. He had to go to the Deep Roads with them. Even if he didn't owe Hawke for Bethany, he owed them for the kindness.

"Serah?" A voice echoed through the sewers, low and uncertain. Just knowing it for a templar made Anders' shoulders tense and his stomach knot. He took a deep breath when he turned, and let it out in relief. The man wasn't wearing his armor. Thank the Maker.

"Bardel?" Anders guessed.
"I am," Bardel agreed, pulling down his hood and stepping forward into the torch-light. He was a decent enough looking fellow. Close cropped black hair, and a goatee peppered with grey. His brow was heavy with worry lines, and for some reason that reassured Anders. No templar should walk away from the atrocities of the Circle unscathed. "You must be Anders."

"That's the rumor," Anders said.

"I come unarmed," Bardel spread out both arms, cloak billowing out behind him at the motion. "I realize I can do nothing for the lyrium in my veins, but neither can you do anything for the magic in yours. I hope we stand on even footing."

"Close enough," Anders agreed, if only for the cut he'd already made above the bend in his elbow. It was tied off with a bandage, but the blood was there, waiting if he needed it. "You wanted to meet with us?"

"I wanted to meet with you," Bardel said, dragging his fingers through his short hair. "I owe it to Thekla. This is not a conversation to have standing..."

"Well give it a shot," Anders said around the lump in his throat at the mention of Karl.

"I was the one who found him writing to you," Bardel explained, eyes sliding off Anders' face and to the floor. "I reported it. I should have known better after Maddox, but I thought surely... Thekla's blood will forever be on my hands. The blood of my brothers sent to ambush you. Everything that happened."

Static rolled over Anders' skin. His hands were burning, and his only thought was crushing the templar's head in his hand. The broken bones of his skull imbedded in Anders' palm, that carthatic pain and the warmth of his blood like a shock of cold compared to the fire in Anders' stomach. Anders took a deep breath and locked his hands over his head. "Why are you here?"

"For Thekla. For myself. ... Maker save me, for every mage at Alrik's mercy. He's a sadist." Bardel started pacing, hands alternating between his hair and his hips. "It was his idea. Make an example of the Libertarian, nevermind that Thekla was an Enchanter, decorated, Harrowed. He ordered Thekla Tranquil, and I can't anymore.

"This isn't why I joined the Order. My own brother was a mage; I joined to stay close and take care of him. When the Knight-Commander had him moved to Ostwick... I begged for Thekla. I swear it, but Alrik wouldn't hear me. I asked for reassignment. Alrik drove the brand into Thekla's forehead himself, and the Knight-Commander allowed it.

"I need to know you know what happened to him. We don't know enough of the Tranquil. We don't want to, the way they shuffle through the halls like the walking dead. It's easier to ignore them, but there is something left of them, locked away in there by that brand. I swear there is. Thekla cared for you, in his own way, even then.

"I spoke with him. He told me he wanted you Tranquil, and I know how that sounds, but you didn't hear his reason. He said what happened to him would hurt you, and he didn't want you to suffer. If there was nothing left of him, he wouldn't care. If he was emotionless-"

"Why are you telling me this!?!" Anders interrupted, his words broken between a sob and a shout. He smeared away the tears forming at the corners of his eyes and blinked Bardel back into focus. "He's dead. I killed him. Don't tell me he was still in there!"

"I think the Order has told enough lies, don't you?" Bardel asked. "If you killed him, it was a mercy.
I won't deny that. An echo of a man isn't a man, but it still stands that you obviously meant something to him. The last letter was a lie. Alrik had him write it while he was Tranquil. I have the one we confiscated. The one that got him caught, that he never sent."

Bardel reached into a pocket on his cloak and pulled out a piece of torn parchment and the sand coin Anders had picked up off the coast for Karl. It was charred black. Anders dragged his sleeve over his eyes and snatched both from Bardel's hand.

"When we found him... he burnt the rest of the letters and what I assume were gifts from you," Bardel said. "The coin was the only thing the flames didn't consume. Alrik was furious. He had him interrogated and Maker, forgive me, but you and the rest of your brethren need to know what kind of man he is. Alrik likes to see how far he can push mages before they break. Thekla suffered, but he kept silent.

"After he was branded, he answered their questions. They know that you're an apostate in the city who can shape-shift. They know your name is Anders, and they've sent to the other Circles for your phylactery, but they haven't gotten word back. I'm willing to hazard a guess you don't have one, or your name isn't Anders, or both.

"They haven't made the connection between you and the renegade healer in Darktown. I have, and I have to say again, the Tranquil are more than they appear. Thekla didn't volunteer that information to Alrik, but he told me when I asked after you. The templars aren't too concerned with the apostate in the sewers. They don't think you're a threat.

"The Darktown raids are twice a month, on the second day of the second week of the month, and the second to last day of the month. They search the refugee camps, but they send the greens. Something to get them accustomed to exerting their power and influence. I've tried to pretend otherwise. That it's a decent training exercise, and we don't know how many apostates are in from Ferelden, but I can't keep making excuses for the Order.

"I know the shifts in the Gallows. Who sleeps, who drinks, who plays dice, and who stays vigilant. I can get a mage out through the cracks, but I can't do more than that. If I make a hand off, it has to be in the tunnels beneath the Gallows or at the docks. It's not safe for mages in the Gallows anymore. Not with Alrik running loose."

"That all?" Anders leaned back against a dirty pillar and tilted his head back to keep any tears from falling. There was moss and mold on the ceiling above him and the occasional cockroach scuttled past. For some reason, it was easier to look at than the templar.

"It is," Bardel agreed. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"We're there not yet," Anders said.

"Jake told me," Bardel said. "But I thought you deserved to know about Thekla. Do you need anything from me?"

"Connection with the Coterie," Anders said. "We need access to their tunnels."

"I'm no addict." Bardel said. "At least no more than the next templar. I've seen what lyrium can do to a man. I don't have any ties to the Coterie but... There's a man. Raleigh Samson. He's sympathetic to mages and he was expelled from the Order for it, but he's as addicted as they come. I hear he spends his nights in East Lowtown, in the foundry hex. He might be able to get you in touch with his old contacts."
Anders nodded, and stared down at the crumpled parchment in his hand. "... You swear you tried to save him?"

"I tried to reason with Alrik. With the Knight-Commander," Bardel said. "... No one heard me. If your friends can spare even one mage Thekla's fate, I'll do whatever's needed. It's my responsibility as a templar."

"We'll be in touch," Anders said.

Bardel gave him a small bow, pulled up his hood, and left. Anders stayed in the sewer, staring at the letter in his hand, trying and failing not to think of some part of Karl surviving Tranquility. Karl had begged for death. However much of him was left, it wasn't enough. Anders took a deep breath and stored the letter and the burnt coin in his satchel.

Anders pulled up his own gifted cloak, healed the precaution cut on his arm, and went back to his clinic. He'd meet with Selby when he was sure he wasn't being followed. Anders doubted Bardel was lying, but it never hurt to be safe with templars. Bardel might have told him everything just for an excuse to get to the Collective headquarters. Justice lit their lantern, Anders unlocked his clinic. He set down his satchel and took out the letter and the burnt sand coin.

Anders picked up the coin. The texture felt the same, rough and grainy beneath his thumb. It was just a coin. It felt like sand. There was nothing special to it, but Karl had been so happy to have it. Anders set it on his shelf with the seashell he'd never been able to give Karl. He'd tried carrying it as a crow, but it was too heavy.

Anders stared at the letter. He made himself a pot of rice and dusted his furniture. He swept the floors and then mopped them. He beat dust out of his quilt and tarps. He ate his rice. The letter stayed on the table.

How long could he avoid it for?

"Cloak's the right length?" A hard voice asked from the door. Anders breathed a sigh of relief for the distraction and stowed the letter away with the others.

Hawke was clad in dark leather with a red sash wrapped around his waist Anders guessed had something to do with the Red Iron. He had his quiver on his hip and his bow on his back, and Anders guessed they were going somewhere. He managed a smile, "Right at the ankles. Good guess."

"Got a job to kill drakes," Hawke explained. "Interested?"

"Drakes?" Anders asked, "Really? Well, no wonder they call this the Dragon Age. The bloody things are everywhere. Where at?"

"The Bone Pits," Hawke said.

"The Bone Pits?" Anders repeated. "You're working for that Orlesian bastard? Half my patients are from the Bone Pits. The tracks are old and the carts are always toppling over, and Hubert won't splurge for any safety equipment. That place is a bloody death trap. You should let the drakes keep it."

"Drakes aren't offering three sovereigns and half the mine," Hawke said.

"How do you know?" Anders asked. "Have you asked them?"
Anders decided to count the hard exhale and scoff as a laugh. "Are you coming or not? Beth wants to see you."

"Alright," Anders stored his things beneath his cot and grabbed his staff. He locked the door to his clinic behind him. Dog growled when Anders stepped out into Darktown. Hawke flicked its ear and the growling stopped.

"I'm serious about the mine though," Anders said, taking a spot opposite the mabari on their walk through Darktown. "I get needing the coin, but partnering with him? Are you sure about that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Hawke asked.

"Because I didn't think you'd be in favor of perpetuating abusive labor practices against Fereldans?" Anders guessed.

"I'm not," Hawke said.

"Care to explain then?" Anders prodded.

"If it's mine I can fix it," Hawke said.

"I didn't think of it that way," Anders mused. "I doubt you'll turn much of a profit cleaning up Hubert's mess, though." Hawke didn't comment. "So what do they even mine over there?"


"So he can afford to pay for safety equipment is what you're saying." Anders said.

"Yes," Hawke said.

"Well then I guess it's good the workers will have you looking out for them," Anders said, stepping onto the lift with him. Dog whined and crawled across the floor to stuff itself between Hawke's legs while he started cranking. "... That's a thing you do, isn't it? Look out for people?"

Hawke tossed his hair out of his face to stare up at him while cranked; Maker's breath that wasn't fair at all. The way his jet black hair fell around his brow and his beard framed his confused frown, the raised eyebrow over those damned eyes, "Why are you pestering me for?"

"Just trying to figure you out," Anders felt his throat dry up on him and shrugged. "Am I making you uncomfortable again?"

"... I take care of what's mine." Hawke said.

"I like that." Anders said. "You know? I respect it. It's good Beth has you."

"I-" Hawke cleared his throat, and his eyes mercifully slipped away, "The other day- with you- I shouldn't have-..."

"Picked me up and shook me like a rag doll?" Anders guessed.

"... That." Hawke agreed.

"You could try words next time, I'm just saying," Anders said.

"I'm not good at words," Hawke said.
"I noticed," Anders said.

The lift stopped, and Dog ran off and out of the building. A whistle brought him back, and Anders and Hawke got off the lift. Anders followed Hawke through Lowtown to the gates that led from the city, distantly aware he shouldn't be thinking any of the things he was thinking. Then again, it wasn't as if Hawke would notice Anders' eyes on him. The man was staring fixedly forward, uninterested in eye-contact.

It was easier to look at him if Anders didn't have to see his eyes. There was nothing familiar in the rest of Hawke. His dark leather armor was covered with metal guards at the joints, and reminded Anders more of Nathaniel than Amell. The stride was all Velanna, impatient and clipped short for Anders to keep pace with him, but the thighs were definitely Hawke. Anders might have stared more if his mantle didn't extend down past his knees.

"So is the butt cape part of the ensem or something?" Anders asked.

"What?" Hawke half turned, half tripped to face him.

"The butt cape," Anders waved a hand at the flap of leather smacking Hawke in the back of his knees. "What's the point?"

"What's the point of your coat?" Hawke countered.

"It's fashionable," Anders said.

Hawke let out a bark of laughter, and considering Anders had been hoping for it he managed not to jump, "It was my father's."

"Bethany said he used to be a mercenary?" Anders asked.

"Crimson Oars," Hawke gave the red sash a tug.

"The Red Iron doesn't mind you wearing another band's uniform?" Anders asked.

"Armor's busted," Hawke explained.

Anders hummed. It seemed like decent progress. No barking. No biting. Semi-complete sentences. He couldn't think of how to continue the conversation and settled on walking in an almost-companionable silence, broken by the bustle of the city and the butt of Anders' staff hitting the ground every few steps.

"I'm not violent," Hawke said suddenly.

"What?" Anders glanced at him, and wondered why he bothered. Hawke wasn't looking at him.

"I'm not violent." Hawke said again, "With people. Beth... The arrow... It took all night to heal her. She had a seizure somewhere in the middle of it and I thought..."

"Hey, I get it." Anders said. "Look, my best friend in this city stabbed me. Actually stabbed me. Got the bloody blade buried to the hilt in my shoulder. I think if I can take that I can take you roughing me up a little. You had a right to be angry. I knew better."

"... I'm sorry." Hawke said.

"I said it's okay." Anders said.
"No, I mean I'm sorry for you." Hawke elaborated. "For being a mage. If you were normal I wouldn't stop you and Beth from spending time together."

"If I were normal!?!" Anders demanded, tension sweeping up his back, "Where do you get off? First it's an abomination and now how the Maker created me isn't normal?"

"That's not- I meant-" Hawke looked at him, and then quickly away. He ran his hands through his hair, and gesturing down the street. "Nevermind. West Gate's this way. Come or don't."

Hawke left him behind. Anders' flash of anger faded when he was gone. "Well shit," Anders sighed. He knew what Hawke had meant. It didn't make it any better, but Anders supposed he should get used to it. Hawke's sister was a mage, and the Chantry had it so engrained that magic was evil his tongue still slipped.

At least Bethany would be there. Anders picked up his pace and hurried after Hawke. It was a mercy Kirkwall was crowded. The streets were teeming with citizens and refugees, gangs and cutpurses, and the guards were overworked. Even with a staff, Anders could hold it at a slant beneath his cloak, and blend in with the crowds passing through the city gates. He found Hawke down the road, on the path that led up into the Vimmark Mountains.

Merrill was there, dressed up in leather and leaves and cradling a staff against her chest that looked more a piece of driftwood than a mage's weapon. She was rocking back and forth on the broken down half wall that lined the road, and died off into rubble further down. She waved when she saw Anders, and made the rest of the group look over.

Bethany was still in her chainmail; her staff tapered off into a blade and could easily be taken for a partisan. Anders had no such luck. His staff was a staff, through and through. Engraved with runes and set with a crystal, there was no mistaking the dragonbone for anything other than a mage's weapon. Anders thought it was a little ridiculous that life as a Grey Warden was simpler than where he was now.

The guard was there, to Anders' immense dismay. The shield Anders had shattered had been replaced with standard guard issue equipment, the Kirkwall insignia red and dripping on the iron. Anders couldn't see her expression from a distance, but he doubted it was friendly. She slammed a helmet down on her head before Anders reached them.

The last was a soldier. Short, if not elven. Their armor was silverite, dark crow feathers sprouting out from their vambraces and greaves in a style that seemed reminiscent of Tevinter. Their full helm was in the vague shape of a wolf, and they were leaning on a great sword talking to Hawke.

"Hello Anders," Merrill said when Anders stopped by her and Bethany. "Hello Justice. We're going to kill drakes! Isn't that exciting?"

"Hi Merrill," Anders said.

"Anders," Beth grinned wide enough to bunch up her cheeks, "Do I get a hug yet?"

"Sure," Anders shrugged and held out an arm. Bethany switched her staff to her opposite hand and hugged him in an awkward tangle of chainmail and feathers. She smelled like her brother, with the added breath of the Fade.

"You look so much better!" Bethany pulled back to grin. "Doesn't he look better, Merrill?"

"Better how?" Merrill asked, eyes darting over Anders' coat. "Did I miss something?"
"Nothing, Merrill," Anders grinned.

"Do you feel better?" Bethany asked him. "You must. Thank you for coming with us. I know it must be hard to leave the clinic."

"It is, but I could stand to get out of the city." Anders shrugged. "And it's good to see you."

"We're setting out," Hawke interrupted.

Anders jumped and dropped his staff, and made a mad scramble after it before it hit the ground. The man was standing right over his shoulder and had gotten there without a sound. Anders spun, but Hawke was already walking off.

"So, hey," Anders called after him. "Drakes? Do you have a plan for this? Fire balms? A way to keep a dragon on the ground if we find one?"

"Beth has the balms," Hawke said. "Merrill says she can keep any dragons on the ground. We can talk more at the mines, away from the city."

Hawke rejoined the guard and the soldier, and set out down the road. Merrill hopped off the half-wall, and took a spot beside Bethany. Anders was glad the two had finally had a chance to spend together. Anders picked a spot next to Bethany, and surveyed the small group ahead of them. An archer, two warriors, and three mages. Not counting the mabari, right up until they'd recruited Justice, it was a painfully familiar combination.

"Did you like the quilt?" Bethany asked, carrying her staff on her shoulder, "And the cloak? You must. You're wearing it."

"It's marvelous Beth, thanks for thinking of me," Anders said.

"Oh no, that was all Garrett." Bethany said. "I helped a little with the quilt but that's all."

"You could just take the thanks." Anders said, but he supposed he wasn't one to talk.

"I kind of like Garrett getting all the credit for everything," Bethany said. "The bigger shadow he casts the easier it is for me to hide in it."

"I know that feeling." Anders said. "Nice staff."

"Thank you," Bethany grinned, wringing her hands on the leather grip. The staff looked made from ashwood and set with a fire crystal. Anders guessed the blade was red steel. "It's a family heirloom. I don't have the upper body strength to use it like a polearm but it's a good disguise. My father gave it to me. He had another he carved for himself, but it was more like yours. Shameless. Proud. I couldn't carry that around in Kirkwall."

"Why not?" Merrill asked.

"Templars, Merrill." Bethany said.

"Oh! Right," Merrill said. "I suppose that was a silly question."

"You never had to worry about any," Bethany said. "I wish they were something I could forget."

It set the conversation down a dark path Anders didn't want to follow. He nodded his head towards Hawke's companions, "So who are they?"
"You met Aveline," Bethany said. "Fenris is... my brother's friend, for some reason."

"He's very cross," Merrill said brightly. "And not very fond of... well... anything."

"He hates mages, or, I'm sorry," Bethany rolled her eyes, "'Magic.' Can we not talk about him?"

"What should we talk about instead?" Merrill asked.

"Is your staff sylvanwood?" Anders guessed.

"Oh! Yes!" Merrill exclaimed, pushing the tangled knot of driftwood at him, "How did you know? Here! You can feel the forest in it."

A prickle like bramble or nettle ran over Anders' fingers touching the wood. He gave it an experimental spin, but the balance was wild, and not meant for melee combat. The power was there, though, an entropic pull that reminded Anders of the handful of times he'd touched Amell's staff.

"I like it," Anders said.

Merrill beamed. "Can I try yours?"

Anders hesitated, and felt a bit of a bastard for it. "Alright but... be careful with it, it means a lot to me."

Merrill took the dragonbone gingerly, and shivered running her hands over it. "Elgar'nan, it feels like holding lightning." Merrill set her fingers to the crystal and pulled them back, arcs of electricity tethering her to the staff. "It sings... This is ancient."

"Merrill, maybe not until we're off the road?" Bethany begged.

Merrill cut off the spell, face flushing pink beneath her tattoos, "Oh. I'm sorry. You're right." Merrill traded back staffs with him. "It is lovely though. Where did you get it? Oh dear, is that an okay thing for me to ask? It's not rude, is it?"

"Perks of being a Warden," Anders said.

"Could I?" Bethany asked.

Anders shrugged and traded staffs with her. The ashwood felt like coal beneath his fingers, wisps of smoke breaking out around his palm. If he focused, he could almost hear the fire crystal crackling, or maybe Justice could.

"This makes the hair on my arm stand on end," Bethany laughed, fingers sparking on their way down the dragonbone. "How do you stand this?"

"It comforts us," Anders traded back for his staff and rolled his fingers over the runework. The familiar tingle ran up his spine, and felt as soothing as it always did.

Merrill giggled. "You said us!"

"Did I? Well..." Anders shrugged. "I guess Justice likes it too then."

"Are you getting any better at letting him step forward?" Merrill asked.

"No," Anders admitted. "I thinks he's kind of mad at me right now. Turns out he's not much of a drinker. I remember once Oghren, a friend, let him try brandy, but all of Kristoff's- Justice's old
body's taste buds were gone by then, and Justice couldn't really experience it. He was always fascinated with sensations, though. I don't know why he didn't like it."

"I know I don't," Bethany said. "I hate feeling like I'm not in control of myself. It scares me."

"You know that... might actually be it, Beth, thanks." Anders mused. "Do you mind giving me a minute?"

Both girls shrugged allowance, and Anders walked a pace apart. It was always a struggle to make sense of how he felt. He was still dreading Karl's letter, simultaneously grateful to and frustrated with Hawke, happy for Bethany... Trying to find Justice under all of that was a mess. Anders ran his nails along his scalp, wondering how much sensation the spirit was capable of taking away from him when he was locked away behind Anders' eyes. Obviously enough to get drunk.

"Justice," Anders said. The word sounded comforting, familiar. Anders supposed that meant his spirit was listening. "I should have asked. With the drinks. I don't know why I thought it wouldn't affect you."

Nothing. Maker, Anders was bad at this. Anders sighed and rejoined Beth and Merrill, and spent the rest of the walk to the Bone Pits speaking of magic, and all its nuances. Anders did need to get out of the city. Not just because of the smell, though that was a huge influence, but it helped to remember he was a man and a mage every now and then, and not just a renegade healer.

It was a slow climb into the Vimmark Mountains. The sun was high in the sky and beat down on them mercilessly, and Anders was sweating under his coat. He should have left it behind, but he'd grown partial to wearing it to replace the weight he'd lost. The path to the Bone Pits was lined with pine and ferns, and the scent was as overwhelming as it was refreshing. Justice would have liked it here, with so many sensations, especially when Anders felt the Veil thin as they neared the mines.

"Lethallin!" Merrill called, jogging ahead to Hawke's side. The archer fell back for her, "Be careful, this place is setheneran."

"Common, Merrill," Hawke said.

"Oh! Um..." Merrill hesitated.

"She said the Veil is thin," Anders said; he couldn't forget that word if he tried with how many arguments he and Velanna had had over spirits and demons. "And she called you her clan."

"Do you speak Elvish?" Bethany asked.

"No, but I-- I had some friends who did," Anders explained. "I know a word or two."

"Fenris! Aveline!" Hawke called, and the two warriors rejoined the group. Both of them were still wearing their helmets, and Anders had no real gauge of either.

"Hawke?" The giant mass of orange armor that was Aveline said.

"I'm going to scout ahead," Hawke explained, unpacking and stringing up his bow.

"Have a care," The silver wolf that was Fenris said; his voice was a deep growl that seemed to fit the theme of his armor, "This ground is cursed. Many slaves died here... their cries linger in the stone."

"Wait, you can feel the Veil?" Anders asked.
"What I can and cannot do is no concern of yours, mage," Fenris said.

"Here I thought you said he was cross," Anders joked.

Hawke smeared a vial of kaddis over himself and his dog and stood up.

"Are you sure you have enough arrows if you run into a drake?" Anders asked.

"Yes," Hawke said. "All of you wait here for me. Beth, balms."

Bethany handed her brother two balms from her satchel, one Anders imagined was for the dog. Instead of following the path, Hawke vaulted up the side of the hill it was set against. His mabari followed him with a running leap, and both of them vanished into the tree line.

"So you said he was a mercenary," Anders recalled, while Bethany handed out balms to the rest of them, "Any experience leading?"

"He was a sergeant at Ostagar." Aveline volunteered. "He's competent, and that's more than can be said of most."

Anders held up both hands to ward the woman off. Everyone in this ragtag group was overprotective of everyone. Bethany handed Anders his balm, and he unscrewed the lid to frown at watery golden liquid. "This isn't concentrated,"

"We can't afford concentrated," Bethany explained. "Elegant-or, Maker, Lady Elegant," Bethany rolled her eyes, "Gives my brother a discount, but each balm is still thirty silver."

"Wait," Anders struggled to do the math in his head, "So you're making less than a sovereign off this job?"

"Not exactly," Bethany said, her strained smile more a cringe, "Garrett has a friend in the Gallows who's willing to buy whatever we can carve off the drakes. We might get three sovereigns out of this, depending on how intact the bodies are, but even if we don't it's an investment in the mine... so..."

"And if you never manage to afford your expedition?" Fenris asked. "What then?"

"We'll get there." Bethany said.

"Is the Circle here truly so terrible an option?" Fenris asked.

"Do you really have to ask that?" Bethany snapped.

"You would be kept safe from others as well as yourself, and they would be kept safe from you," Fenris said.

"I think you just set a record," Anders mused, "Three sentences, and I already hate you."

"I could say the same," Aveline said.

"Agreed," Fenris said.

"That cloud there looks a bit like a butterfly," Merrill interjected.

"It does, doesn't it?" Bethany agreed.

Hawke and his dog vanished back into the tree-line. "That's inspiring," Anders mumbled, "Nothing like a leader not leading the charge."

Aveline turned her head towards him, and Anders imagined the she was scowling. He held up his hands again and stored his balm in his satchel for later. Aveline drew her sword and led them around the bend, Fenris at her side. The looters were scattered throughout the mining camps, picking over charred corpses and through abandoned chests.

Anders carved out glyphs of repulsion and warding for himself, Bethany, and Merrill. It was an easy routine, engrained in Anders over six long months and not forgotten in four. He felt the Fade swell as Bethany channeled an aura of aptitude, and Aveline charged the nearest cluster of looters, Fenris at her side. Aveline was unremarkable: a soldier with a shield, but Fenris was terrifying.

He wasn't anything like Oghren. He held his great sword aloft, and moved with a fluidity that reminded Anders of dancing. He glowed through the cracks in his armor, an ethereal blue of spirit fire Anders had seen so many times reflected, but never in person. Maker's breath, was he possessed too? Was that why Anders hadn't noticed a halo, but Fenris could feel the Fade?

Anders only broke out of his trance when an arrow flew wide to his right, and his warding glyph hummed beneath his feet. He looked for the looter who cast it, and pulled on the mana for a frost spell, when an arrow took the man in the throat. In the span of the same heartbeat, Hawke reached the looter, grabbed hold of the shaft in his neck, and ripped it free in a spray of blood. He fired it again not a moment later, and went chasing after it.

That... was not how archers fought. There was no way Anders was going to be able to support him. Supporting Nate had been easy; a glyph of paralysis at Nate's feet, and they were set, but Hawke was too mobile, and Bethany was already channeling aptitude for him. The Fade swelled again, and a haze of entropic magic from Merrill swallowed up three of the looters. One escaped from the dark cloud, and Anders threw a handful of ice at his feet. He watched it eat up the man's legs and hold him in place for Aveline to cut his head off, and the fight was over.

"Does anyone need healing?" Anders asked.

No one volunteered anything, but Anders could feel the frantic, post-battle pulse of Fenris' heart within reach of his fingers. Anders stared at him, wondering how to make it clear he knew the man was injured without outing himself for a maleficar, when Merrill saved him.

"Fenris does," Merrill said.

"Fasta vass," Fenris muttered, "I am fine."

"You're bleeding," Merrill said. "I can feel it."

"Watch yourself, witch," Fenris said. "It's a scratch. I've no need of magic."

"Stop whining," Hawke said, grabbing a toppled stool from one of the mining tents and setting it down next to Fenris. "Let Anders heal you."

Fenris sat with an obedience Anders honestly hadn't expected. The warrior took off his left greave and rolled up a brown pant leg to reveal where an arrow had grazed his thigh beneath his tasset. It was more than a scratch. Anders could tell from a distance by the amount of blood, and the bright red
muscle contrasting with dark brown skin. Anders knelt next to him and drew on the mana for a surge of regenerative energies.

He sounded beautiful. Anders could hear the Fade singing through him, like a lost hymn to the Chant of Light. It felt like the chorus of creation, as fluid as his motions when he fought, with all the desperate yearning of the Call. Anders let go of the spell, and Justice stared at the small armored mortal before them. "You sound beautiful."
Acquainted

Chapter Notes

Surprise! A fast update for the first time in a week, I think. We hit 9000 views! I can barely keep up with you guys. It's crazy. Thank you so much for supporting this story! Thank you all for your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 6 Molioris Afternoon
The Bone Pits

"Kaffas!" The mortal screamed, falling off the stool and scrambling backwards through the dirt on all fours. With a breath, he strengthened the song inside him, and glowed with all the fire of the Fade. Justice stayed kneeling, listening. He was radiant. It was so rare for a mortal to understand him, but here he had mentioned the music and the mortal had made it louder.

"You said he could control it!" The mortal screamed at Hawke.

"I thought he could!" Hawke screamed back. Justice had yet to form an opinion on him. "Look, Beth said it's not dangerous-"

"It's a demon!" The singing mortal snarled, "Of course it's dangerous!"

"I am no demon," Justice said, "Who are you to dare label me such?" He was halfway to standing when another mortal leapt in front of him. It was small and Fade-born, and summoned a handful of veilfire that breathed like the Fade and conjured memories of purpose.

"Here, Justice." The tiny mortal took one of Anders' hands, and pulled him away from the song. "Come away, you're scaring them."

"That was not my intent," Justice said, flicking his eyes back to the soul Anders had so recently healed. He couldn't decipher what might signal fear in the way the mortal held itself.

"No, of course not," The small mortal walked him back several paces, where the song was not so loud. "Of course not. Do you recognize me? I'm Merrill. Anders and I are friends. We pick flowers together."

She looked different through Justice's eyes; blood perverted the pulse of the Fade within her, but it was far from terrible. She had proven herself a friend of Anders. Able-bodied and willing to help their cause. "Yes," Justice said.

"Are you okay?" Merrill asked, "It's not too confusing for you to be out here?"

"I spent a great deal of time in the mortal world before joining with Anders," Justice said. They were fond memories, but incomparable to the sensations that a mortal body could bring out in him. The sun warmed Anders' skin and beads of sweat trickling down his spine. His clothes were loose and bunched up against his skin beneath his coat. Without any threat of danger and the chance to appreciate such sensations, they were almost overwhelming.
"Is Anders okay?" Merrill asked, "It's not hurting him to be switched with you?"

"He is... surprised, but not discontent," Justice said; he knew himself, his purpose. It was a simple matter to determine what his mortal was feeling, but far less simple to determine why. "It is my understanding he wanted this for me for many months."

"He did," Merrill said. "We were trying to practice but nothing was working."

"... I am uncertain whether or not this is safe for him. I have no wish to rule this form unless Anders is need of protection, but he sings so sweetly..." Justice glanced back to the mortal beside Hawke, unable to remember his name, and lamenting the loss of the song. Anders wore Karl's Ring of Study for him, but it didn't compare to the purity in what he'd just heard.

A handful of veilage blocked his view of the other mortal. Justice looked back at Merrill. "Magic frightens Fenris, lethallin."

"I would not harm him," Justice said.

"No, of course not." Merrill said, a change in the pitch of her voice Justice couldn't make sense of. "But it still frightens him. I think it would be better if you stayed with me. I have so many questions for you."

"Merrill," Hawke interrupted. Justice glanced over at them; the rest of Anders' companions were keeping their distance from him. Distance was significant in the mortal world, for some reason. Anders had often pressed a hand into Justice's chest armor, and kept them an arm's length apart for 'space' during their talks, "Anders? It just said this might not be safe for him."

"Oh, I'm sure he'd never hurt Anders," Merrill said. "They're friends."

"I have caused him great distress in the past," Justice confessed, and the moments were numerous. Anders mind shattered at Amaranthine. His heart broken at Vigil's Keep. His will in Kirkwall. "Inadvertently or not, it is not something I wish to repeat."

The force of being thrown back into his body knocked Anders to his knees. His staff clattered to the ground next to him, and a crushing migraine replaced the blissful numbness he'd been enjoying behind his own eyes. Anders sucked in a breath of mana and let a wash of creationism seep from his fingers into his aching head, "Maker's breath, Justice, everyone knows you don't pull out that fast."

"Oh dear, that looked like it hurt," Merrill knelt beside him and handed him back his staff. "So self-defense and lyrium can call him? What do you suppose would happen if you drank a lyrium potion?"

"What does lyrium have to do with anything?" Anders asked, taking a deep breath to collect himself. "Oh-um..." Merrill said.

"Fenris has lyrium markings," Bethany explained. "They-"

"Were carved into my flesh against my will, in a ritual I remember only for the agony it caused me. They curse me with the ability to reach into a man and tear out his insides," Fenris interrupted. "I do not want them romanticized. You and your demon will keep away from me."

Anders climbed to his feet, glad to feel Justice's brief infatuation fading fast, "He's not a demon."

"Of course!" Fenris scoffed, keeping a tight grip on his sword, "I'm sure you're harmless! A harmless abomination who would never harm someone!"
"What has Anders ever done to you?" Merrill demanded.

"Nothing yet," Fenris turned away from them to look at Hawke, "He harbors a demon. There is no controlling that. He is already lost. Power corrupts, and a mage has power enough already. An abomination?"

"Stop calling him that!" Bethany interrupted. "Why is Fenris even here, Garrett?"

"It's what he is, isn't it?" Aveline asked over any answer Hawke might have given, "We can't just pretend he's mage like any other. He's two people."

"That's not exactly it," Anders said.

"Isn't it?" Aveline said, "You're obviously of two minds."

"Like most people aren't," Anders sneered.

"Most people are dead set on ending badly," Aveline countered, "If you can't control your 'impulses' it's clear you're going to end up the same way."

"My impulses?" Anders laughed, and gestured to Hawke, "Like some of you are any different."

"That's not fair, Aveline," Merrill said, "Justice is just a spirit. Spirits don't have the same boundaries people do with their desires. He wasn't trying to scare anyone."

"No offense, Merrill, but I'm not sure I trust you as an expert on these things," Aveline said.

"Of course the blood mage defends the demon," Fenris scoffed.

"Everyone shut up!" Hawke interrupted. "Maker's fucking mercy, I told you both he was an abomination. If you can't deal with that, leave."

"Yes, please," Bethany agreed, glaring at Fenris, "No one is stopping you from moving on, you know."

"That's not what I meant," Hawke said quickly. "Fenris?" Hawke gestured away from their group, and the two walked out of earshot to talk.

"Maker, the idiocy. I can't stand him sometimes." Bethany sighed. Her finger tips glowed with crystalline touch of ice magic, and she ran them over her neck and through her hair.

"I don't know, I thought he was charming," Anders joked, adjusting his trousers and shaking out his tunic beneath his cloak and coat. He was resenting the heavy suede more and more with every minute that passed in the summer sun. He conjured a film of ice on his palm and ran it over the back of his neck.

"I wish I knew why Garrett kept him around," Bethany muttered.

"Fenris is a good man," Aveline said.

"Of course you would say that," Bethany snapped.

Aveline took off her helmet; her face was flushed beneath her freckles, down her brow and along her neck. Anders knew armor was murder in summer. He had a sudden involuntary memory of Oghren and Amell stripping for an impromptu swim in the Hafter, and pushed it away.
"Where is all this hostility coming from, Bethany?" Aveline asked. "We're friends."

Bethany sat down on the stool Fenris had abandoned and buried her hands in her hair. "I'm sorry, Aveline. I just can't take this right now. I-Oh, Maker, I'm making this about me. Are you alright, Anders? Justice—... I guess taking over, that didn't hurt did it?"

"Just a headache," Anders brushed the concern off. "Thanks, Merrill. For being there. Justice needs someone who understands spirits looking out for him. You were really good with him there; the veilfire was brilliant."

"Oh!" Merrill ducked her head and twisted her foot into the ground, "I just um... you know... I—... Spirits are my thing."

"Anders is right," Bethany said, "You were so quick on your feet. Like you could have done it blind-folded."

"You're both too kind," Merrill mumbled. "All I did was talk to him. Fenris could have done that if he wasn't so frightened."

"Well I'm glad he didn't," Anders snorted, "I am definitely not into that, but Justice is really into lyrium. It's a good thing all that talk of demons was such a huge turn off. I think he's pouting right now."

"Oh no," Merrill giggled, "That's adorable. And sad. Do you think we could try using lyrium to summon him? Have you had a lyrium potion since you joined?"

"... I haven't, actually," Anders realized. "Ever since Justice, it feels like my connection to the Fade is limitless. I know it's not, and we can still get tired, but it's not like I could get a potion even if I needed one."

"Why not?" Merrill asked.

"Because even if the Circle did sell them to the public, buying one would be a pretty good way to out yourself for a mage," Anders said.

"We can get some," Bethany said. "Garrett has a few contacts in the Red Iron. We never made use of them before because we could never afford it, but maybe after the expedition—"

"You can summon a demon?" Aveline finished for her. "Are you sure that's a risk you want to take? Anders has already proven his restraint is less than admirable."

"Codswallop," Bethany snapped.

"Are you really throwing stones after you brought a templar's shield to an apostate's clinic?" Anders asked incredulously.

"Aveline, can we just have a moment, please?" Bethany begged.

"A moment it is," Aveline allotted, backing out to join Hawke and Fenris.

"I'm sorry," Bethany sighed when she was gone. "I just don't need that right now. We get enough 'mages are evil' preaching every day without hearing it from our friends."

"I don't really mind it," Merrill admitted. "I'm used to people not believing in me. My clan never did..."
"You should mind," Anders said. "This kind of ignorance is something we should be fighting."

"I thought we were fighting drakes," Merrill said lightly.

"I'm serious," Anders said. "The Circle, the Chantry, the Order. All of it has to change, but it's not a war we can fight alone. More people need to understand our plight."

People who weren't mages. People like Bardel, and Donal, and Selby. People like Franke, and Thom, and Lirene. People like Lissa and Natia, Cor and Conall and Bree. They already had the framework of a network; Anders just needed to get in touch with the Coterie, and then things would be different.

"Sometimes, you sound so much like him it hurts," Bethany said with a rueful shake of her head.

"So much like who?" Anders asked.

"My father," Bethany rubbed away the flush that crawled up her neck. "He was so passionate about all of it. Everyone who met him said he was an example of everything a mage should be, even templars."

"I really doubt any templars are saying that about me," Anders said. "Not good ones, at least."

"Then maybe there shouldn't be any templars," Bethany said.

"I've always said so," Anders agreed.

"It would certainly make life easier for my people, knowing our Keepers weren't being hunted," Merrill said.

"It's bigger than that," Anders said. "It's not just about us, or our clans, or our friends. It's about every mage. We deserve a choice, but the Circle doesn't give us any."

Bethany looked about to answer, but her eyes slipped off his face and focused on a point past his shoulder. A short second later, and Hawke rejoined the three of them, "We still have a job to do. Are the two of you staying?"

"Aren't there three of us?" Merrill asked.

"My brother isn't asking me, Merrill," Bethany said.

"Oh! I suppose he wouldn't," Merrill said, "Why wouldn't we?"

"Anders?" Hawke asked.

"Oh, is that me?" Anders wondered, "Sorry, I only answer to abomination or sewer rat these days."

"Garrett didn't mean it, Anders," Bethany said gently.

Hawke certainly didn't look as if he'd meant it. He stood one with one hand on his belt and the other buried in his hair, pushing his head down to stare at the ground. Anders wished he wasn't half so expressive. It made it hard to stay mad at him, and Anders rather liked the warmth of anger of late.

"No, I know," Anders sighed.

"Garrett, maybe try 'possessed' instead of 'abomination'?" Bethany suggested.
"It's fine," Anders said. "I'm just twitchy. You've been great, really. I'm in."

"Mine entrance is this way," Hawke led them all along a pair of tracks that led away from the mining camp, and into the mountain side. The mine was everything Anders had come to expect after treating scores of refugees who had fallen prey to it. The rails were rusty, the planks were rotten, and they were laid out unevenly over the ground, half buried in the dirt in some places and precariously tilted in others.

Broken pieces of mine carts were pushed up against the sides of the mountain, and all of it spoke of neglect. Merrill balanced on one rusty rail, blind to all of it. Anders envied her. The skip in her step, the light in her heart, the stars in her eyes. He'd lost all that months ago. Anders climbed up onto the rail opposite her and Merrill grabbed his hand for balance. They made it all of three steps before they toppled off, and Anders let himself laugh.

"I didn't know you could do that," Merrill said.

"Some days I forget," Anders admitted.

Anders and Bethany conjured light for their staffs and Merrill drew on a handful of veilfire to light their way down into the mines. The stairs were a rickety, rotten wood that reminded Anders of the Silverite Mines in the Wending Woods, without the excuse of being ancient and untended for years. The stairs followed the tracks down into the cave, and the stone reflected the city it had built. White bled into grey and brown and red and black.

A deeper descent led down into a cavern, where a drake lay nestled up with dragonlings, and surrounded by charred mining equipment. Hawke called for a halt at the top of the stairs before the dragons noticed them, "Baby dragons," Bethany whispered, crouching next her brother and peering over the edge, "I hope their mother isn't around."

"Balms," Hawke said, taking his out of his pouch and working the watery liquid into his dog's coat. Anders would have felt more confident if it was concentrated. He didn't doubt he was going to be healing a few burns by the time this was over. Anders unscrewed the lid to his balm and bit back a sigh at the thought of using it.

Even when they weren't concentrated, fire balms were expensive. They were made from a distillation of heatherum and foxite, mixed with shards of lifestone and infused with magic. Anders had never thought to consider how ridiculously privileged the Wardens had been to be able to afford the concentrated versions of the salves. Lifestones only formed from stone in close proximity to lyrium, and they'd managed to find a lyrium mine in the Wending Woods.

Thirty silver seemed cheap for a box the size of Anders' fists. The liquid glowed bright like the sun, and had the same golden tint. Not only were they expensive, they were horrid. The liquid solidified into a mask over skin and clothes and kept both safe from extreme heat, but was absolutely impossible to get off. The servants at Vigil's Keep had taken care of Anders' clothes the last time he'd used a fire balm, but getting the casing off his skin had taken Anders all night even with a proper bath to work from.

"Ready, Hawke," Aveline said.

"As am I," Fenris agreed.

"Me too," Merrill said, "This is exciting."

"Destructive forces of nature, ready and waiting," Anders agreed, fighting the urge to rub the balm
off his skin as it hardened.

"Let's go, brother." Bethany said.

"Aveline," Hawke said. The warrior took the stairs at a jog, and charged the small nest when she hit the bottom, shield raised to block the first gout of flame the drake spat at her. The tilt to her shield was a technique templars used fighting mages, and the sight of it made Anders uncomfortable.

The drake clawed at her, powerful hands biting down into her shield, and the dragonlings ran past her. The mabari tackled one, and Hawke loosed an arrow into another. Merrill caught three in a haze of corrosive blood magic, and Anders froze the fourth. Fenris' great sword was as effective against the drake as Oghren's axe would have been, and the small cluster of dragons fell without much difficulty.

"Healing?" Anders asked.

"Dog," Hawke said. The dragonling had raked down the mabari's haunches, and the dog had its head on Hawke's knee. It was whining faintly. A breath of creationism knit the rent flesh back together, and the whining stopped. Hawke smacked the mabari's thigh, left a smeared hand print in the blood. "Thank you."

"No problem," Anders said.

The next cavern had been worked dry, and was overgrown with moss and deep mushrooms. Another group of dragonlings were guarded by another drake, and Anders managed to find a rhythm with the group. Combined, Merrill and Aveline managed a replacement for Amell, and Fenris was as useful as Oghren. Hawke was an even better archer than Nathaniel, and Bethany managed the auras Anders was used to channeling. He limited himself to glyphs, and more primal magic than he was used to using in fights.

Velanna has always been the offensive mage between them, but someone had to be there with a wall of ice to cut off the few dragonlings that made it past Aveline and Fenris. Anders couldn't complain; one frost spell after the next helped fight off the stifling summer heat, made all the more uncomfortable by being trapped underground with dragons breathing fire and filling up the corridors with smoke.

Despite all his flaws, Hawke was nothing if not painfully conscientious of the mages in his group. They stopped after every encounter, and only moved on when Bethany was comfortable and realigned with the Fade. They cleared out three chambers without anything Anders would consider an incident after his time in the Warden. Aveline and Fenris had their armor dented and scratched, Hawke had his greaves torn, and all of them bore a few burns and lacerations, but aside from armor it was nothing Anders couldn't heal.

Most of the mining equipment they passed had been torn apart or burnt, and some of the tracks had been ripped up. There were no corpses, but there were a handful of dried blood stains. Anders guessed most of the miners had been eaten whole. After the third chamber, they ran into their first survivors. Anders felt the pull of blood, behind a corridor blocked off with an overturned minecart.

Merrill felt it too, and saved him outing himself as a maleficar again, "Someone's alive through here! I can feel a heartbeat,"

"That is incredibly disturbing," Fenris muttered.

"Aveline, help me with this," Hawke said, setting his bow aside to set his back to the minecart.
Aveline set her sword and shield aside, and joined him on the opposite side. "On three?"

"One, two, three," Hawke said. The two heaved, and lifted the toppled cart away from the corridor, and out of the way. It would have been far easier with telekinetic magic, but Bethany didn't have the experience Amell did, and wasn't capable of clearing rubble, building stairs, or cheating at Wicked Grace.

Anders cut off his train of thought and jogged through the corridor. The survivor was propped up against the wall, a makeshift tourniquet tied around a bloody thigh. He was stained with coal and soot, with any man's guess if it was from mining or dragons. His hair was so red it was nearly orange, matching side burns stretching out over his ears and contrasting starkly with his pale face, made paler by blood loss. Anders recognized him.

"Anders?" Jansen's jaw dropped.

"That's the rumor," Anders grinned, kneeling next to him and channeling Justice to heal Jansen's leg and the burns he found on the man's back.

"Praise Andraste you came along," Jansen breathed a sigh of relief, "I thought I was going to bleed to death in here. How do you always know when and where someone's injured?"

"I'm magic," Anders joked, and nodded to where Hawke lingered in the doorway. "Hawke here brought me alone."

Jansen managed a pained laugh, "Well thanks for the rescue, then, heroes. Maker's ass, I can't believe I went from supplying half the eggplant in South Reach to running from dragons with my ass on fire. Some of the boys ran for the surface, do you know if any made it? Hubert sent you right?"

"They made it," Hawke said. "Less than a dozen."

"Fucking shit," Jansen groaned.

"What happened here?" Hawke asked.

"We was mining a new tunnel when the wall collapsed and the dragons came through," Jansen explained. "It was a bloody slaughter. Scared out of my damn wits, running like my ass was on fire, only it actually was. Went the wrong way, and ended up trapped in here. I can't wait to get out of this blight hole.

"Maker, I hope Lirene can find me something," Jansen sighed, "That bastard Hubert is the only one hiring Fereldans, but I need my own dinner, not to be one for some dragon."

"See what I told you?" Anders said, "This place is a bloody deathtrap," Anders untied Jansen's makeshift tourniquet. "You're all healed, Jansen."

"Hubert's giving me half the mine for this," Hawke said, "So expect some changes."

"Really?" Jansen asked, "Well, shit. Be nice to work for one of our own. I mean if you don't give us a fair shake who would? But you're not going to live long enough to give it. There was a huge dragon chased me in here. Did you see it? Did you kill it?"

"Just drakes," Hawke said. "Get a move on. Get out of here."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Jansen said, "But uh... I weren't joking. Damn dragon burned my ass, and straight through my clothes. I stand up, they'll slide right off."
"Here," Anders took off his cloak and handed it to Jensen. "You shouldn't stay. The way back out is clear."

Jansen leaned forward to warp the cloak around his shoulders, and tied it off in the front. He stumbled to his feet, and true to his words his trousers and tunic slid off under the cloak without his burns to keep the fabric stuck to his skin, "Thanks, Anders. I'll give it back next time one of these damn cart turns over on me, yeah?"

"Don't worry about it," Anders said.

Jansen bolted, tossing out his thanks to everyone he passed on his way out of the mine.

Hawke was staring at him. Anders stood up and brushed dirt off his knees, "What?"

"Just wondering if you always give your things away like that," Hawke said.

"Look, he needed it, alright?" Anders said, more than ready to defend sparing a man his dignity at the cost of cloak he didn't need in summer anyway.

"Didn't say he didn't," Hawke said, "Dragon up ahead," Hawke said over his shoulder to the others. "Big."

"Are we going to fight it?" Merrill asked eagerly, skipping ahead with Bethany. "I've never seen a big dragon before today. Or a little dragon. Or a drake. I hope we're going to fight it."

"Glad you're having fun," Hawke said flatly.

"Oh, I am!" Merrill agreed. "This is all so exciting."

"I think that was sarcasm," Anders said from behind his hand, purposefully loud.

Hawke shot him a confused frown, "No?"

"My brother's not much for sarcasm," Bethany said, bumping Hawke with her shoulder. "Or laughing. Or smiling."

"I laugh," Hawke said.

"You do not." Bethany pinched him, "You bark."

"That's how I laugh," Hawke muttered.

Bethany snorted, and stopped when they came to the end of the corridor. The mine shaft opened up out into the main quarry, far too small for a dragon and owing to how Jansen managed to escape. Aveline and Fenris took the lead, followed by Hawke and Merrill, and then Bethany and Anders. The stepped out onto a plateau, just a handful of feet off the floor of the quarry.

The Veil was painfully thin at the bottom of the quarry. Anders felt as if he could reach through it and pull across a spirit across if he tried, even without any specialization in the magic. The cause was one of the most disturbing things Anders had ever seen. The quarry was filled with skeletons. Bones upon bones were piled high, pressed up against the edge of the mountain as if purposefully left on display.

They were a number uncountable. The very sight was obscene, enough to twist Anders' stomach and lend credence to every rumor that the Bone Pits were haunted, and give new and terrible meaning to the name. The ruins of Tevinter's time in Kirkwall lay all around. Broken pillars topped with
carvings of dragon heads and inlaid with stacked skulls were scattered across the quarry floor, apparently pushed down from the lip of the quarry at some point in the past.

"By the Dread Wolf..." Merrill mumbled. "This place is so dismal."

"It is at that," Aveline agreed, "On your guard."

"Is this what the Veil feels like, thin?" Bethany asked. "I feel like I'm breathing mana."

"This is what it feels like," Anders agreed. "Be careful with your spells. Don't expend too much mana in one area. We don't want to deal with a tear in the Veil."

"No blood magic," Merrill agreed.

"There should never be any blood magic," Fenris growled.

"There," Hawke interrupted, pointing down into the quarry to where a dragon lay nestled in a pile of bones. "Back me up." Hawke slid down the plateau and onto the floor of the quarry and was off before Anders knew what was happening. Aveline and Dog were at his heels, and Fenris reacted immediately after, but all three mages took a handful of seconds to collect themselves.

"Oh dear," Merrill slammed her staff into the ground, and a cage of roots burst forth from the stone to swallow her whole, and spit her back out behind the warriors. Anders slid down the plateau and ran after the group, and heard the scattered gravel that marked Bethany following him.

They caught up in time for the dragon to notice them charging, and stand up on its nest of bones. The motion sent femurs, skulls, and spines clattering down the hill. The dragon turned and its head reared back, and Anders recognized the motion from the dragon in the Blackmarsh. He threw up a spell shield over Bethany and himself.

Aveline had her shield, and Anders had to hope the fire balm would be enough for the rest. A wash of flame blinded him, and felt like staring into the sun. Anders brought up an arm to save his eyes, and surveyed the battle field when it past. Hawke and his Dog were nowhere to be seen. Fenris looked unscathed, without even the telltale steam of flames licking over fire balm. Merrill was on the opposite side of the battle field, a hole in the ground where she'd stood previously.

Anders didn't have an explanation for half of it. The dragon dove for Aveline, and the force of its claws raking across her shield sent her staggering back. From the look of it she barely managed to keep from toppling. The beasts' head snapped down like a viper, and locked her around her shield. Aveline twisted out of it before the dragon could rip her arm off. The shield went flying with a toss of the dragon's head.

Anders aimed concentrated frost spells for the dragon's legs as Aveline fell back, and kept it from pursuing her. Arrows shredded the hide on the dragon's left wing, further ruining the creature's capacity for flight. A haze of entropic magic closed around the creature's head, blinding it. A swing from Fenris' great sword decapitated the dragon's thrashing neck, and blood founted messily onto Aveline, painting her orange armor red.

The head went flopping across the quarry, twitching spasmodically and sending the dragon's long neck spiraling in wild circles in the air, the white of its spine outlined against the dark red muscle. The dragon's body collapsed with a heady thud that scattered dust and boned, and the head stilled after a few mad flops. It was surprisingly simplistic compared to fighting a giant dragon made from a thousand wisps while trapped inside a binding circle.

"That's it?" Merrill asked. "My goodness, that was exciting!"
"It was, wasn't it?" Bethany agreed.

"Does anyone need healing?" Anders called across the battlefield to the warriors, and where he assumed Hawke was.

"Here," Aveline said. She approached him and held out her shield arm, and a few searching tendrils of creationism helped Anders determined the limb was wrenched. He healed it with an easy pulse of regenerative energies, and Aveline nodded her thanks. Anders thought he'd deserved at least a word or two, but apparently with this group he shouldn't be holding out hope.

Aveline went searching for her shield. Fenris sat down on a pile of bones, and took off his wolf helmet to drink from a canteen at his hip. He wasn't just short. He was an elf. Anders wasn't surprised. He never had good luck with elves, until Velanna and apparently Merrill. Maybe Dalish were his exception. Fenris' hair was blindingly white, and there was little else Anders could make out from a distance.

He didn't care to close the distance, and sat on the ground in a circle with Bethany and Merrill, drinking from their canteens and making small talk on each other's magic until Hawke appeared. He set them all out on another sweep of the mines which found no more dragons, drakes, or dragonlings. The six of them stopped at the entrance to the mines after the sweep.

"Beth and I are staying to carve," Hawke said.

"Thank you all so much for helping us," Bethany said.

"Not bad, Hawke," Aveline said, "You think you'll be ready for raiders tomorrow?"

"Always," Hawke said.

"Then I'll see you then. Bethany," Aveline nodded to both siblings and set out.

"Drinks tonight?" Fenris asked.

"I'll be there," Hawke promised.

"This was lots of fun, lethallinen," Merrill said, "Thank you for bringing me along. I better hurry and follow them before I get lost. Take care, both of you!"

"Anders, can I have a word?" Hawke asked.

"I wouldn't expect more than one," Anders joked.

"Play nice," Bethany ordered her brother, leaning up to plant a kiss on his beard before heading back to the mines to give them privacy.

"Well?" Anders asked.

"The shit I say," Hawke said, unable to decide on a place for his hands. They went on his brow, into his hair, on the back of his neck. It was a little ridiculous, and Anders had to fight back a grin, "When I open my mouth. Whatever you are, you're obviously not an abomination. And I don't think you're not... you know... normal."

"Thanks," Anders said.

Hawke cleared his throat, and gave him a clipped nod before turning back to the mine.
"... hey Hawke?" Anders called after him. Hawke glanced over his shoulder, and Anders knew better than to expect him to say anything. "Do you want help? You and Beth, with carving?"

"... what about your clinic?" Hawke asked.

Anders thought of Karl's letter and shrugged, "It can wait."
Bloodline Part One

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. The smut scene in chapter 27 is completely rewritten if anyone who doesn't follow me on tumblr is interested in reading it. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 20 Molioris Morning
Kirkwall Darktown

Maybe it was because Hawke looked so much like Amell, or maybe it was because Hawke was embarrassed by his laugh like Amell, or maybe it was because Hawke made an effort to take care of Anders when Anders was always forgetting to take care of himself, or maybe it was because he reminded Anders to get out of his clinic and live his life, or maybe it was just because Anders was living in a sewer now, so that was where his mind was, but Anders liked him.

Once you got passed the metaphorical bite and less than metaphorical bark, Hawke was decent company. Hawke dragged Anders out of his clinic for a job outside the city once a week. So far the jobs had been simple: a patrol along the coast and a band of raiders the guard didn't have the men to deal with. Aside from the jobs, there was also the weekly trip to the Planasene Forest while Hawke went hunting and left Anders with Merrill and Bethany to pick herbs for his clinic, and then Tuesday nights were Wicked Grace at the Hanged Man.

Varric hosted. If the man had a talent for anything, it was nicknames. Bethany was nothing if not a ray of sunshine, and Merrill was as lovely as any patch of daisies. Isabela might not have liked 'Rivaini' but Anders couldn't think of anything better for the dusky pirate beauty. Fenris was 'Broody' and damned if that wasn't the most accurate thing Anders had ever heard. Fenris' sneer was such a permanent feature on his face sometimes Anders wondered if the elf had suffered a stroke.

Aveline didn't have a nickname. Anders couldn't help thinking that was appropriate, considering the woman seemed apart from the rest of the group. In a way, Aveline almost reminded Anders of his initial impression of Justice, but Aveline didn't have the excuse of a spirit's innocence. She took her post as a guardsman far too seriously, and it had only gotten worse since Hawke had helped her expose the previous Captain of the Guard's corruption.

Aveline had been appointed interim Captain of the Guard until the paperwork was finalized. On the one hand, Anders was glad people like Thom and Lirene might finally have the guardsmen looking out for them, but on the other, he couldn't stand her. Aveline nettled and needled everyone about their goings-on in Kirkwall. Varric got the worst of it, but he gave as good as he got. The dwarf's tongue was so sharp Anders thought it was a marvel he hadn't cut himself on it yet.

The odd six seemed to be Hawke's main group of friends, and certainly the only ones with any talent for fighting to accompany him on the odd jobs he was always taking. Anders wondered about the jobs a lot more than he cared to admit to himself. Twenty sovereigns was more coin than Anders had ever had in his entire life, and Hawke had lost in a night. The kind of work Hawke did didn't seem to be nearly enough to recover it.
Anders had asked Bethany, but Hawke handled the family funds, and any inquiries met with a curt 'Not your business.' Anders doubted the man had coin to spare. Hawke took mercenary work, for mercenary pay, and had to worry about supplies for each mission, repairs for his armor, his uncle's constant tab, Merrill's rent, food for his family, and Maker knew what else Hawke was doing for the rest of his friends. Anders still got bags of food from the man on occasion, despite the fact that Anders argued against it.

Anders had never had any self-control, and the food never lasted. Maker save him, but Anders couldn't help himself. He had blood magic. He could catch all the rats and pigeons he needed. The rest of the refugees weren't half so lucky, and Anders wasn't half a bastard to let them starve in his clinic while he made a pot of rice for himself. Word got out, the way word always did, and Anders never held onto a bag of food for more than a day.

Anders hitched the newest sack of food higher on his shoulder, torn between guilty and determined on his walk through Darktown. He made his way through two mineshafts, down a twisted stairwell, and across a cavern before he found the small alcove where Evelina lived with the kids. He'd taken to checking on them ever since the close call with the templars' raids. Half of the room had been cut into the blackrock, the other pieced together with cheap pinewood rotting away in the damp. The poor ventilation and lack of proper drainage had Anders guessing it had been used for storage when the mines were still mines.

Anders knocked on the door, a bit of rusted bronze tilted on its hinges, and it eked open a moment later, the metal grating and sparking across the stone. A young face poked out, torn somewhere between boy and man, still doe-eyed with heavy cheeks, but with a hard brow and too-large nose, "Anders!" The boy's voice broke half-way through his name.

"Hey Pryce," Anders said. "You just going to leave me out here in the rain?"

"What rain?" Pryce asked, setting his shoulders to the door and scrabbling to heave it the rest of the way open. The sharp screech of metal on stone made Anders wince, and inside a child started crying. Anders pointed to a storm drain set in the cavern ceiling behind him. An arrhythmic drip had worn a small bowl in the blackrock beneath it. "That rain."

"That's piss," Pryce said.

"Language!" Evelina yelled from inside.

Pryce ducked his head, and Anders stifled a laugh at the boy's expense. Adolescence was enough of a bitch without anyone adding to it. Anders still had nightmares of being all legs at the Circle, caught at an unfortunate height where his choice of robes either hung well above his ankles or dragged at his heels.

"Are you still working for Athenril?" Anders asked.

"Yeah," Pryce said. "Few bits a job. I'm helping."

"I'll bet," Anders stepped inside the small shanty.

It wasn't much. Nothing in Darktown was, but it was big enough to fit all of the kids. Pryce and his two sisters, Nika, Cricket, and Walter. There was next to nothing by way of furniture, but Evelina had done work with bedding. Piles of straw were covered with tarps and laden with blankets, and if there was one thing Anders had never healed the kids for, it was the grippe. The small horde of small children ran at him, and trapped him before he got more than three steps inside.
"Anders!" "What's in the bag!?" "Is it food?" "I'm hungry!" "Do the bird trick!" "No, do the cat!"

"Let him breathe, you little monsters," Evelina set her hands on two small heads of scruffy hair and parted the circle. Anders escaped.

"So what's our vote?" Anders asked, pulling through to the Fade and letting the mana form beneath his fingers, "Cat? Bird?"

"Cat!" "Bird!" "Shut up Cricket!" "Do the bird!"

"Both?" Anders let the sphere of magic in his hand bloom into the shape of crow, held together with strands of light and ripples of arcane energy. He formed a cat to match, primal energies pulling pebbles, dust, and dirt from the floor to give the summon a little more substance. He released both, and the cat chased the crow in circles around the room to the delighted shrieks of children.

"You really are magic," Evelina shook her head, and offered him a gracious seat on the floor by the wall. Anders took it. Evelina gathered up her skirt and sat beside him while Anders emptied his cookware out of his satchel. "Where do you keep getting all this food?"


"Magic can't do this," Evelina said, setting the small cook-pot up on its stand.

"How would you know?" Anders countered, raising an eyebrow.

Evelina's eyes darted to the children. Anders had learned a few things about her in the months he'd spent healing sprained ankles and runny noses. Evelina was from Kinloch, and had escaped during the Blight. Anders didn't know the circumstances, but whatever they were Evelina seemed ashamed of them. Anders couldn't imagine any other reason she might be reluctant to mark herself for a mage.

The children loved magic. Admittedly, they were still children, and children were prone to chatter. They might end up telling the wrong people about their magical caretaker, and that might mean risking the templars' wrath, but Anders got the sense that Evelina's concerns ran deeper than that. Anders could just hear Hawke's curt, 'Not your business,' at his badgering.

Anders backed off, "You're really going to look a gift-mage in the mouth?"

"That reminds me, Cricket lost another tooth," Evelina said quickly, obviously eager for the change in topic. She glanced to the redhead boy chasing the small conjured cat in circles around the room. "I don't think it's anything, but he was saying his mouth hurt, and I noticed it looked like he had a cold sore?"

"Maybe an abscess," Anders said, laying out the half-empty sack of rice and setting aside the wrapped and carved rabbit Hawke had given him from his last hunting trip. "I'll look at it after I get the rice started."

"How do you do it?" Evelina asked, letting him conjure water for the pot despite the fact that Anders knew she was more than capable of doing it herself.

"Look this good?" Anders guessed, belatedly aware the cheeky quip might not be as ironic as he meant it. Being an abomination might not have made him 'warp and change' as Merrill had said, but the bath certainly had. It had been a few weeks, but Maker knew Anders still looked better than most of the Darktown refugees.

"Keep your spirits up," Evelina elaborated.
Anders snorted gracelessly. It was too bad he'd never had a chance to teach Justice humor. The spirit had no idea what it was missing. Anders conjured a miniaturized wall of fire to heat the water without kindling, and without the need for him to hold his hand beneath the pot. It was a tiny improvement, but even a tiny bit of help meant a lot in Darktown.

"The kids don't help with that?" Anders asked.

Evelina shook her head and leaned back against the wall. She looked like every other Darktown refugee: brown. Her eyes, her hair, her skin, her clothes. Everything that wasn't naturally brown the mines had painted that way. Anders was lucky to look anything else, however long it lasted. Lucky for a bath. Five months in Kirkwall had certainly lowered his standards.

Evelina's eyes followed the children following the summons, and she spoke softly. "I did things back in Kinloch. I spent eight years in that prison... Do you remember Uldred?"

"Never knew him," Anders said, involuntary memories of Karl and Amell colliding and blending together in his head. "... I had a few friends who looked up to him, though."

"I did." Evelina said. "He knew how to find us, somehow. Those of us who used—...with darker talents." Blood magic. That was easy. Anders could do cloak and dagger after all. He'd have to tell Selby. "He found me, and others. He told us about his arrangement with Teyrn Loghain. Help with the Blight and be free of the — be free. So many supported him, but then..."

"That woman. That Aequitarian," Evelina said the word like a curse, "Wynne. She convinced the rest of the Senior Enchanters to back down, after what the Teyrn did at Ostagar, but we couldn't let it go. We thought someone always has to take the first step. Force a change, no matter the cost. But then Uldred went mad... and there was so much death and destruction... I never meant for it."

"Amell saved me. The Hero of Ferelden," Evelina said. A pained whine coiled tight in Anders' throat and he barely kept it from escaping. Why, of all the people in Thedas, did it have to be Amell? Why was it always Amell? There was no man behind the myth. Amell had been everywhere. Amell had touched everyone. Anders was never going to escape him. There was always going to be some little mention, some little memory, even an ocean away.

"I don't know if you knew him," Evelina continued, "He told me that I was more than my mistakes, and I swore I would do something good with my life. He got me out of the— he got me out, and I went to Amaranthine. I found all the children orphaned by the Blight, and I brought them here to keep them safe and try to make up for what I did, but..."

"You're always smiling," Evelina glanced at him, "How do you do it?"

The last thing any mention of Amell made Anders want to do was smile. Andraste preserve him, Anders could see it. Amell's helmet under one arm, the other extending a gauntlet-clad hand for Evelina to shake. The blood magic wouldn't have meant anything to him. It wasn't blood magic Anders ever should have been worried about, it was Amell's blind faith in everyone he met.

Anders tried to force the thought away, but it persisted. He smiled falsely through it, and threw the rice into the boiling water rice, aware it should be washed but without the means to do so.

"I like kids," Anders said. "Believe me, if you could see me when I'm not here you wouldn't recognize me."

"They like you, too," Evelina said, pulling back a leg when Nika nearly tripped over it chasing Anders' cat. "You should visit more often. Not just when you have food."
"You know why that's not safe for any of us," Anders said, refusing to even imagine it. He was just here to make sure the kids ate. He wasn't here to spend time with them. To get attached to them. To pretend they were ever something he could ever have in his life.

"... Aren't you going to say anything?" Evelina asked. "About Uldred?"

"Like what?" Anders asked, twisting his spell so the crow started shifting through a small color spectrum. Inattentive, he could manage three colors, but any more took real focus. The crow turned at his direction and dove at the kids chasing it, and they scattered with delighted shrieks.

"You know what," Evelina said.

"Not sure I do," Anders said. "Trying to change things, taking that first step, whatever it takes, whatever the cost... I'm only sorry it didn't work. Uldred had the right idea, before he went crazy. We need someone like that. A leader to tell the world we won't be punished any longer for our Maker-given gifts."

"I don't think I've ever heard magic called that before," Evelina noted, an impressed lilt to her voice. "Are you sure that leader's not you?"

'Yes' and 'No' fought so passionately in Anders' head the dichotomy gave him a headache. "Yes," Anders exhaled a breath of mana to soothe the ache behind his eyes he guessed came from Justice. "Yes, I'm sure it's not me, I mean."

Anders stood up while the rice cooked, and caught Cricket on a run around the room with an outstretched arm. The boy let out a shriek in protest and flailed, kicking legs throwing him almost horizontal in Anders' arms. "Is this why you call him Cricket?" Anders asked over the boy's laughter, barely able to hold him up.


"Alright, you, let me see that tooth," Anders set Cricket down, and set a hand on his shoulder kept him from running off.

Cricket shoved his fingers into his mouth and opened it wide, "Caa oou hee ehh?"

"Fingers out," Anders said, and Cricket dropped them obediently. Anders tilted the boy's head back with a hand on his jaw and conjured a light on his own fingers to see better. He knelt to look for the abscess, and the motion swung his Warden necklace out of his tunic and left it swaying in front of him.

"Wow!" Cricket spoke, ruining Anders' view of his gums, "Is that blood?"

"Yes," Anders said, "No talking. Evelina, top or bottom?"

"Top right," Evelina said.

Anders found the missing tooth, and the small pimple on the gum beneath it. A light press of his finger made Cricket whine. "That's an abscess," Anders let the boy go back to playing, and stuffed his necklace back under his tunic. "I need to drain it after he eats. He won't want to afterwards. I don't think it's going to affect any of his adult teeth, but it was good thing you noticed it early."

Anders spent the morning entertaining the kids with magic while the rice and rabbit cooked. He conjured fresh water for them for the rest of the day, and saw to Cricket after the boy had eaten. A net of sleep put the boy under, and made it a simple matter for Anders to lance and drain the abscess,
wash away the pus, and heal the small cut in his gums. Cricket would be sore but little else when he woke. Anders lingered long enough for the kids and Evelina to thank him, before his guilt forced him back to his clinic.

They were good kids. Pryce and Walter were the oldest, awkward adolescents forced too fast into adulthood to support the other four kids as best they and Evelina were able. Darktown was no more a place for kids than the Circle, but if Anders had a choice, and he had a lot of those lately, he'd have picked Darktown. He'd take freedom at a struggle over slavery at a stroll any day.

Anders made it back to the clinic, and Justice lit their lantern. Anders stuffed his satchel under his cot alongside the other. It was full of everything Anders forced himself not to think about, but couldn't bring himself to let go of. Amell's journal, his mother's pillow, Karl's letters. All of them remained an unspoken presence in the back of his mind, as inescapable as Justice, and Andraste help him, Anders didn't know what to do for any of them.

So Anders did what had always worked for him in the past, and put on a smile he hoped no one could see through. If he wore it long enough, eventually he started believing in it, and that was almost good enough. Anders was cleaning vomit off the floor of his clinic when Hawke came and found him, and proved as welcome a distraction as he always did of late.

"Got a job," Hawke said from the door to his clinic. He was dressed in his Red Iron leathers again, quiver ready on his hip, bow strapped to his back. An array of throwing knives ran down his opposite leg. That was new. Anders stared at the thick muscle straining beneath the taut leather a little too long, "Coming?"

"I'm not even breathing hard," Anders joked.

Hawke's face pinched up into an expression Anders didn't have a name for. His thinned but curved lips looked torn between exasperated and reluctantly amused. Anders would take it.

"Give me minute here, then sure." Anders shrugged. He pulled on the Fade and a geyser erupted from his free hand to soak the floor and help him mop the vomit into the gutters.

Anders wasn't about it to call it recoiling, but Hawke's head drew back at the casual display of magic. Anders supposed Hawke wouldn't have been used to it with how reserved Bethany was with her own magic.

"Move fast," Hawke said, eyes on the mop instead of Anders. "Reward out for the Viscount's son. Winters say they found him on the coast. I need him first."

"Winters?" Anders wrung his mop out over the gutter. Water and vomit rained down, and half of it hit the floor and splattered over Anders' boots. Anders sighed and balanced awkwardly on one leg and then the other, conjuring water from his palm to clean off his shoes.

"Mercenary band," Hawke explained, "In from Nevarra. Meeran doesn't like the competition."

"Who's Meeran?" Anders asked, shaking his boots dry with every other step on his way to his cot.

"A pain in the ass," Hawke said, hooking a thumb in his belt while he waited and worrying it between his fingers.

"Well that's not always a bad thing," Anders said, buckling on his belt and latching his grimoire to it. Hawke barked, and Anders grinned at the floor for the small victory.

"He leads the Red Iron," Hawke explained. "He's a friend."
"I'd hate to hear how you describe your enemies," Anders joked, throwing his satchel over his shoulder, shrugging into his coat, and picking up his staff.

Hawke eyed the mottled suede, frowning, "Aren't you hot?"

"I don't know, am I?" Anders' mouth blurted before he could help himself. Hawke finally looked at him, but Anders was no better at reading red eyes than he'd ever been. The man's mouth opened only to immediately close, and he lost a hand in his wild hair.

Hawke cleared his throat, "It's summer."

Anders couldn't help the quips. Not since Hawke's awkward but well-meant apology at the Bone Pits. Anders had never had any self-control, and it was hard not to throw them out with Hawke taking pains to provide for him. Especially considering Anders had nothing else to give the man in return, but for the most part all they seemed to do was make Hawke uncomfortable.

"I'm alright." Anders said, waving to let Hawke know he was ready.

Anders followed Hawke out of his clinic, locking up behind him and dispelling the veilfire in his lantern. Dog was there, as always, and walked on the other side of Hawke through the narrow caverns and dimly lit mineshafts. The silence felt awkward, and Anders struggled to conjure an elegant apology to fill it. He failed miserably, and settled on a joke, "Maybe the Qunari have the right idea sewing mages' lips shut."

Hawke shot him a scowl, "That's not funny."

"Just trying to lighten the mood," Anders said.

"Mood's fine," Hawke said.

'Fine' wasn't the word Anders would have picked to describe the strained silence, but Beth had made it clear her brother wasn't one for sarcasm. And if he was being honest with himself, Anders rather liked that Hawke didn't joke about abuse or suffering. Hawke glanced at him and Anders threw up a smile that made Hawke bury a hand in his hair and look away. Anders guessed that meant they were alright.

"You say a lot for someone who doesn't say much," Anders said.

"I just um..." Hawke cleared his throat.

"Um?" Anders teased.

Anders supposed he shouldn't have been surprised when his teasing didn't get a reaction from Hawke. They reached the lift, and the ancient wood platform held steady between its brass bindings when they climbed onto it. The mabari hesitated following. It paced back and forth on the blackrock, whimpering and pawing uncertainly at the lift. Anders still couldn't get over how much he could relate to it.

"Come on," Hawke ordered, and Dog crawled across the platform on its belly to wedge itself between Hawke's legs.

"Does that ever get old for you?" Anders asked when Hawke knelt to crank the lift into motion.

"He's scared," Hawke said simply.
"Well yeah, but you'd figure most people would get tired of dealing with it," Anders said. The lift lurched beneath his feet, and Anders steadied himself on his staff as the blackrock ate away Darktown, and the dim light of its torches. Anders conjured a dim light for his crystal, ready to dispel it when they reached Lowtown. "But I guess you're not most people."

"Do you want a drink?" Hawke asked so suddenly Anders first thought was that he must have been talking to the dog.

"What?" Anders asked.

"A drink," Hawke said, a furrow of concentration in his brow while he cranked, but little other cues to help Anders process what was happening. "Not liquor, I know you can't."

"I thought we were in a hurry," Anders said, his throat drying up and his thoughts slowing to a crawl. That would teach him to tease. It wouldn't, but Anders could dream.


"... are you accosting me?" Anders asked. The lift stuttered to a halt in Lowtown, and Anders stumbled when he forgot to brace himself, the light on his staff going out. Hawke stood up, and for one painfully mesmerizing moment, held eye-contact with him. Anders felt a desperate need to break it. "Is that what's happening here?"

The mabari bolted off the lift, and out of the small building in Lowtown containing it. Hawke actually hesitated calling him back, and Anders decided that was definitely what was happening here. The mabari slunk back in at his whistle, and Anders wrung nervous hands on his staff.

"I thought you were the one doing that... I'm not blind," Hawke said, and Maker's mercy, how it hurt. "Or deaf... was this all just nothing? You keep saying all this shit and staring at me, and I don't-I shouldn't have opened my mouth."

"No-you're right," Anders had to admit, his mouth rambling on without his consent, "I know what I'm doing, I just- we've hardly met but I feel like I know you..."

No. Maker, no he didn't. It was just a memory. Anders was never going to look at Hawke and see anything but an echo of Amell. Even Anders was just an echo of the man he used to be. He was two people now, and neither of them were in any state to be with anyone. They weren't safe. They weren't normal.

... But Hawke knew that, and Hawke wasn't running.

"Do you want to get drinks?" Hawke asked again.

Half of Anders was howling refusal. It thrashed against the confines of his skull and clawed at the backs of his eyes, and Anders pressed the pads of fingers to his brow as if Justice were a physical thing he could restrain.

The other half was lonely.

It was just Hawke. It was just a drink. If Justice didn't have a problem with Karl there was no reason for him to care now. And if he was sweet on Fenris, he really didn't have room to talk. Or feel. Or whatever, but Anders' spirit's protests were giving him a headache. Anders did his best to block them out. It wasn't liquor. It wasn't anything. Justice couldn't take this from him.

"Cider?" Anders asked.
"If you want," Hawke said, a visible bit of tension melting out of his shoulders. Hawke stepped off the lift, and quick steps carried him out into Lowtown. Anders jogged to catch up, and walked a little closer to him, a smile spreading slowly over his face.

This wasn't so bad. People could change. This was what Justice had wanted for him. Justice had wanted him to weed out ignorance, to teach people that magic wasn't something to be feared. Hawke was a good start. Hawke knew he was dangerous. Hawke could take care of himself. Hawke took precautions to keep Anders and the rest of the mages in their group safe. This could work.

Without the winter winds to blow feathers and debris, Kirkwall's streets were still, the only movement the citizens that milled in them. Half-naked children ran through the crowds, half of them cut-purses, all of them thin. The afternoon sun warmed the Lowtown quarry, baking stone and casting a rippling haze on the ground that distorted Anders already distorted vision. A thick, musky smell ran stale in the air from refuse left to cook in the heat, and the hiss of cicadas was a constant chorus to the bustle of the city.

Hawke was right, Anders was hot, but however unlikely it was that his clinic might be broken into, there were some things he wasn't about to risk. His coat. His staff. His grimoire. His mother's pillow. If it meant melting under an extra stone of trimmings and trappings it was worth it. Hawke...

Anders had no idea what Hawke was worth, but the harder Justice raged against the idea, the more Anders wanted to find out. He'd never been very good with being told what to do, and he couldn't imagine a reason Justice would be so against just having a drink with Hawke. It wasn't as if it would hurt either of them.

"So..." Anders said over the spirit protesting in his head. "Should I just check a looking glass more often, or is there something more to this?"

"What?" Hawke asked.

"The drinks," Anders clarified. The streets slanted down towards the East Gate, and Anders had to take them at a bit of a skip that kept his mood light no matter the storm in his head. "What's the point?" Anders asked, belatedly aware of how harsh the question was, and even more belatedly aware Hawke probably wouldn't take it that way.

"I just-think you're worth knowing," Hawke explained, a glance in his direction landing on his feathered pauldrons instead of his face.

"Since when?" Anders asked, unable to his sarcasm. He hoped Hawke didn't notice it.

"Since Lirene," Hawke said.

"She's a doll," Anders said. "... What'd she say about me?"

"The truth," Hawke shrugged, "That you just want a chance at freedom, but now that you have it you don't use it on yourself. That you don't think about coin, or favors, or anything other than who needs healing... You only had that cloak a few days."

"Jansen needed it," Anders argued.

"So?" Hawke raised an eyebrow at him.

"What do you mean, so?" Anders bristled, "I'm not about to let a man run naked through the Vimmark Mountains and half of Kirkwall just because I'm too proud to give up one measly possession."
"All of your possessions are measly," Hawke said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Anders demanded, "If it helps-.... Oh, I see what's happening here."

Hawke's sharp and sudden laugh wasn't anything Anders would have called flattering, but it was real, and Anders didn't want it stifled or restrained.

"... Any comment on my better half?" Anders asked.

"Still scares the shit out of me," Hawke said, idly worrying at his belt with his fingers.

"Well it's nice you're not running away, then," Anders said. There was more Anders wanted to say, it was so hard to hold onto the words with Justice fighting him. "... You probably should, though. Everything you've been doing for me-it all means the world to me, and I don't want you hurt just for knowing me."

"Won't happen," Hawke said, and Anders believed him.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I'm terribly sorry I haven't responded to comments yet. I promise I'll respond soon. I have read them all and they meant the world to me, so thank you! We hit 400 Kudos and 10,000 views! Thank you so much for supporting this story, and thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading.

Disclaimer: Chapter is loosely edited because I am tired and going to bed now.

9:32 Dragon 20 Molioris Afternoon
Kirkwall Lowtown

"Won't happen," Hawke said firmly; red eyes swept over him in a glance that lasted less than a heartbeat, but it was enough to speed Anders' up.

Anders shifted his grip on his staff and held it at a slant to keep it from striking the stone on every step. His mana was overflowing into his fingers and sparking out the end of his staff at the contact with the ground. Anders' staff was overt enough without it crackling with lightning, but he couldn't help it. The static rebounded without a break in the current, and made the hair on Ander's arm and the back of his neck stand up.

Anders needed to discharge it somehow, but save for shocking Hawke, there were no real options for him until they were out of the city. Andraste's grace, Anders was pathetic, but something actually felt like it was going right for him for once. Justice's vehement disapproval made it bittersweet, but Anders would take it after how long he'd spent with just bitter.

"Are you sure?" Anders asked to take his mind off the very literal spark he felt with Hawke, "What if people start talking about seeing you with an apostate? Aren't you scared that will come back on Beth?"

"It's not the Gallows-" Hawke said.

"Good thing too, or we'd both be swinging from them," Anders cut in with a joke.

"-It's just the Hanged Man," Hawke continued as if he hadn't heard him. "I already let Beth come on Tuesday. I'm trying not to be paranoid about this."

"Paranoia's not always a bad thing," Anders said.

"Do you want drinks or not?" Hawke demanded.

"I want drinks," Anders said quickly, "I just... you know, I want her to be safe."

An almost imperceptible smile turned up one corner of Hawke's lips when he glanced at him, and Maker save him, the man had never looked more attractive. Anders ran a hand through his hair, suddenly desperate for a tie, and forgot the static charging his fingers. His hair leapt into his palm,
"What are you doing?" Hawke asked, a shake of laughter in his voice that didn't help Anders' predicament any.

"Oh, you know," Anders shrugged and gave up on his hair. A snap of his fingers against his chest let him discharge some of the static into his coat, "I just thought I felt a spark."

Hawke snorted and looked away from him, and but Anders swore the man's smile broadened. Anders barely knew him and he already liked being the cause of it, "So how is Beth handling the breakup?" Anders joked.

"What?" Hawke asked, a hitch in his step almost tripping him. His quiver rattled against his hip, and Hawke set a hand to it to hold the arrows steady. Anders wondered if he'd want feathers for fletching.

"You seemed pretty certain we had something going on for a while," Anders grinned at Hawke's accusatory frown, "What changed your mind?"

"I asked Beth," Hawke said.

"That doesn't really answer my question," Anders said, dodging up against the wall of the Lowtown alley to make way for a passing fruit cart. The wheels rattled over the uneven cobblestone and an orange went bouncing off the cart and into the street. Anders snatched it up and started peeling it.

"Hungry?" Hawke raised an eyebrow at him.

"No reason to waste it," Anders countered. Funny he could still manage to lie, possessed by a spirit of Justice, "Don't avoid the question. I notice when people do that, you know. You asked Beth before and said we might be lying."

"I think Beth would have said something in this case," Hawke said.

"What, did you tell her you were going to accost me or something?" Anders asked, popping a piece of orange into his mouth and swallowing it down along with a hum at the tangy zest. Anders needed to eat more fruit or he was going to end up with scurvy. He needed to eat more everything. Hawke didn't answer, and Anders glanced over at him. "Wait, seriously, did you?"

"You were staring," Hawke shrugged and ran a hand through his hair, "It bothered me."

"You could just tell me stop," Anders pointed out around another bite of his orange.

"... I don't mind that it bothers me," Hawke told the ground, which seemed a shame, considering Anders wouldn't have minded hearing it.

"How's your mother taking it?" Anders asked, "Is she already mourning—... what did she name the kids again?"


"Why do you even remember that?" Anders laughed.

"My parents liked naming us after other people," Hawke explained. "Astride was my grandfather, Malcolm was my father, Mirriam was the Village Elder in Lothering and my mother's best friend."

"Who was Bethany?" Anders asked.
"My grandmother," Hawke said.

"Garrett?" Anders asked.

"Captain of the Crimson Oars," Hawke said, "Married my parents on his ship, on the voyage from Kirkwall to Amaranthine, and gave my father his first job as a mercenary."

"... Carver?" Anders asked hesitantly. "Or is that not my business?"

"... templar," Hawke said, "Helped my father escape the Circle here."

"Beth talks about him all the time," Anders said, tossing the remains of his orange in the gutter and wiping sticky hands off on his trousers. "He sounded like a special person."

"He was an ass," Hawke said, but he kept his smile. He looked good with one, "... He got it from me. Idiot always wanted to be like me. Even did his hair the same..."

"I'm sorry," Anders said sincerely.

They walked the rest of the walk to the East Gates in silence. Anders was glad for it. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold a conversation with Justice protesting tirelessly inside his skull. Anders looked for something to take his spirit's mind off Hawke's offer, and glanced up at the bronze statues framing the gate as they passed beneath them.

Two slaves on their knees, arms raised in front of their faces. A chain wrapped around their wrists connected them together and made up the arch. Anders didn't care for the sight any more than Justice did, but it was nice to have something else to be angry about. Injustice was everywhere in Kirkwall, whether it was directed at mages, elves, or Fereldan refugees...

"... So what do you think of this city?" Anders asked.

"I'd rather be in Ferelden," Hawke admitted, "You?"

"Same," Anders said, "Something about this place doesn't feel right. Aside from the crumbling Veil and crippling oppression I mean."

"Not enough dog shit?" Hawke guessed.

"Definitely not enough dog shit." Anders grinned.

"Ever going back?" Hawke asked.

"Can't." Anders said. "You?"

"Can't." Hawke said.

"Well we've got that in common at least," Anders said, glad Justice kept quiet through the casual conversation. There was something slightly terrifying about being in a state of dichotomy with Justice. Anders wasn't a stranger to intrusive thoughts or demonic whisperings, but possessed it was worse. Anders felt everything Justice felt, and making the distinction between them was one of the most difficult things Anders had ever done.

It wasn't as if Justice was standing beside him, arms folded over the glittering griffon on his silverite armor, the words "Mortal, I disapprove of your actions," ringing through his helmet. It was just a feeling. A sudden, inexplicable need to run when Hawke mentioned drinks. A burning frustration and tension in his shoulders when Anders didn't. All of it tangled together with Anders' own giddy
delight at the thought this part of his life might not be over after all.

It was exhausting, emotionally and physically, and coupled together with Anders' empty stomach and the Summer sun, and Anders was already ready for a nap. He discharged his lingering static into the air around them once they were out of the city; the simple cantrip wasn't tiring, if nothing else. Dog whined, and Hawke eyed the wild sparks warily, but he didn't comment or recoil.

The road from Kirkwall veered north towards the Vimmark Mountains, and then east through the plains to Ostwick. Hawke led him off the road to the southeast, and down a well worn footpath in the cliff face. Eventually the stone and blackrock gave way to dirt, which gave way to ferns and thistle, which gave way to the distant coast line.

Anders couldn't help his sigh when he noticed Fenris was with the group Hawke had brought with for this mission. The Tevinter was in his silverite armor, the point of his great sword imbedded in the sand, wolf-helmet under his arm. Isabela leaning on a cypress beside him, wearing leather armor that seemed to cup and caress every curve on her body but must have been murder in the heat. Bethany and Varric were across from them, sitting on an outcropping of rock in their respective chainmail and boiled leather, and laughing together.

It was always strange to see Hawke's group gathered. They were nothing like the Wardens. No uniforms, no order, no strategy. The crew was as motley as the city they lived in, but Aveline hadn't been lying. Hawke was competent, and somehow he made it work.

"No Merrill?" Anders asked.

"Don't want the Viscount's son noticing her magic," Hawke explained, "Or yours. Nothing flashy."

"I live for flashy," Anders pouted. "What is magic for if not to shoot lightning at fools?"

"No," Hawke frowned.

"Fine, fine," Anders sighed. "Heals only. I get it. What about Aveline?"

"Viscount doesn't want the guard involved," Hawke said. "Thought you'd be glad."

"Well... yeah," Anders said.

Bethany waved at him. Anders waved back. Beth hopped off the rock she was sitting on, and kicked up sand on her jog over. "Anders. Is Garrett playing nice?"

"I always play nice," Hawke muttered.

"He always plays nice," Anders agreed.

"Viscount's boy was seen a league east of here," Hawke said to the entire group, "Ginnis has a dozen men on this."

"And how many men in the Winters to avenge her when word of her death gets out?" Fenris asked, shouldering his great sword.

"Not your business," Hawke said. "Red Iron'll take the blame."

"You mean you," Fenris deduced. "You should not be so quick to be hunted."

"You know why we need this," Hawke said, and set off down the coast with his dog at his side.
Isabela and Fenris followed him, though not before the latter shot a disdainful sneer in Anders' direction. Anders gave him a smile back, and was delighted to see a coil in the elf's spine as his hackles went up.

"Blondie," Varric struggled off the rock and dusted himself off at Anders' approach. Varric grinned when he had himself righted, and the three of them made up the rear of their small procession across the coast. Whatever their goal, it was a nice walk. Hot sand gave beneath Anders' boots, and an ocean breeze drifted in from the Waking Sea. Sunlight reflected on the foamy waters, and gulls, albatross, and shearwaters, circled overhead, their cries mingling with the sounds of cicadas that filled each cypress tree they passed.

Anders tilted his head back to watch the birds, and imagined joining them. He hadn't been flying in weeks. It never felt like there was time, between his patients, Hawke, and the Collective. If Anders was doing requisition work along the coast, or the mountains, or the forest, it wasn't as if he could fly there. He still had to carry the supplies back, and he couldn't do that as a crow.

"Big sigh, Blondie," Varric noted, smoothing back blonde hair frizzing in the heat. "What's on your mind?"

"Garrett, I'll bet," Bethany said with a grin, shifting her partisan staff on her shoulder. "Don't think I don't know. He would have been pouting if you'd turned him down."

"Now, Sunshine, nothing's confirmed until it's confirmed," Varric said. "It's confirmed though, right, Blondie?"

"We're just having drinks," Anders said, relatively certain the agitation he felt was Justice bothered by Hawke, and not Anders bothered by the questions. That wasn't him. Anders loved talking about Anders.

"Speaking of drinks, why haven't I seen you at the Hanged Man more often?" Varric prodded. "I would have thought you'd have run up at least a few silvers by now."

"Justice doesn't let me drink anymore, remember?" Anders said. "You were there. You saw our little lover's quarrel."

"You know, Blondie, for someone who's always telling everyone not to make you and Blue sound dirty, you do a pretty good job of it all on your own." Varric teased.

"It doesn't count if I do it," Anders said.

"Still," Varric said, "You could stop by now and then, get some food, get a room, get a bath. You keep avoiding me like this and I'll start to think you don't like me."

"I'm there every Tuesday for Wicked Grace," Anders said. "It's not like it's personal. I just need to be there for my patients."

Varric hummed, and Anders didn't trust it at all. The dwarf gave him such a knowing look if Anders didn't know better he'd swear Varric knew Anders gave away most of the food Hawke gave him.

"I think it's wonderful," Bethany said.

"Sunshine, you think everything is wonderful," Varric said.

"Most things are," Bethany said.
"So what's going on here?" Anders asked. "We're rescuing the Viscount's son from a gang of mercenaries who kidnapped him? Is that it?"

"Not quite," Varric said. "The Viscount's son has a history of escaping the Keep. Most of the time the guards bring him back after a few days, but this time it's a little more serious. Now, I didn't hear it from anyone and you didn't hear it from me, but apparently the Viscount's son is a friend of the Qunari. The scandal, right? From what I could gather, we're not rescuing him from anything more than a romantic stroll on the beach."

"I don't think so," Bethany said. "Qunari are dangerous. One of them murdered my best friend back in Lothering. Saemus isn't safe with them."

"No one is," Anders agreed. "I thought the Chantry silenced and collared us, but the Qunari go the distance. Have you seen their mages yet? I have. I was at the docks the other day and one of their bloody handlers was dragging five of them along by their leashes. All of them with their hands chained behind their backs, masks on their faces..."

Anders had nearly lost his mind. The sight was so distressing, so infuriating, he'd taken off like a magister out of the Black City, and had to find himself an alley to pace in and practice breathing until he and Justice managed to calm down.

"Maker..." Bethany ran a hand through her hair. "I had no idea... Garrett doesn't let me go down to the docks... I thought it was just another one of his things."

"It's not," Anders said, unhooking his canteen from his belt for a drink. A league of walking - Maker save him - in the middle of the day, in summer, in a coat. Hawke didn't need to warn him off flashy magic. Anders was going to be too exhausted for any magic by the time they found Saemus.

"Sweet thing," Isabela fell back to coo at Bethany, "That big brother of yours wants to talk to you."

Bethany hurried ahead, boots crunching over a few bits of driftwood scattered along the coast. Isabela sidled up next to Anders. The sun was kinder to the Rivaini than the rest of them. It played in her raven hair rather than frizz it, and set a glow to her skin rather leave it sweating.

Isabela gave him a playful nudge, and yelled in his ear, "Is Anders in there? Can I speak to Anders?"

"You can stop yelling," Anders frowned, "It's always me." Except when it wasn't, he supposed.

"That's not what I heard," Isabela grinned, golden earrings catching in the sun. "I heard a certain someone is sweet on a certain someone else."

"Andraste's knickers, are you really still on about this?" Anders sighed. "Does it have to come up every time we talk?"

"We're just talking, sweet thing," Isabela nudged his shoulder again, "If 'it' comes up, that's not my fault."

"You're wicked, Rivaini," Varric laughed. Anders smothered his laugh with a hard exhale that turned into a scoff.

"I know, I know I keep bringing it up, but I can't stop thinking about it," Isabela said with a shiver, "The two of them together, glowing, glistening, you in here," Isabela tapped her fingers on the side of his head, "Watching. I've even got some of it written down."

"Please tell me you're joking," Anders said.
"Did you bring it?" Varric asked eagerly.

"Of course I brought it," Isabela opened a small pack on her belt and pulled out a folded up piece of parchment to hand to Varric.

"Why?" Anders sighed.

"It's friend fiction!" Isabela said. "I do it out of love."

"It was a breathless battle, every hard thrust met with an eager parry as their tongues fought for dominance," Varric chortled and choked, "Their blades-Haha-their blades straining to be drawn from their sheaths-hahaha!"

"Stop," Anders begged, "Maker, I'm never getting that image out of my head."

"That's not the only thing, I'll bet," Isabela said, "What's it like, by the way? Having him buried deep, deep inside you? Is it hard? Mmm, I bet it's hard."

"I'm walking away from you now," Anders decided, picking up his pace to walk apart from Isabela and Varric. Their laughter followed him. Anders felt torn between a groan and a laugh, and unhooked his canteen for another drink. He fell back a few minutes later, despite himself, and the conversation turned to other things. A league was a long walk, even at a brisk pace, it took them near a half hour to reach the stretch of coastland where Saemus had apparently been sighted.

Hawke came back from the front of their procession and waved them off the sand dunes that made up the shoreline, and up into the outcroppings of rock, cypress trees, and thistle. There were a natural passageway between two hills, and Anders guessed it led into an alcove. Hawke didn't take it, and urged them up the hills instead. Anders knew the vantage point was sensible, but he was exhausted, and his staff did most of the climbing for him.

Anders was clawing his way up the hill by the time they reached the top. Hawke was crouched at the ledge with the others, and Anders dragged himself over to peer into the alcove below. It was barely a dozen feet below. Anders felt like the climb had been longer. The alcove was obviously a campsite, owing to how Saemus had been found. A fire pit and a latrine had been dug, a tent sent up, and none it spoke of a kidnapping.

Saemus wasn't hard to find. He looked the part of a noble. His clothes were dyed a rich teal and fancifully layered, and he carried himself with the same proud set to his shoulders Amell had. He was standing behind a lone Qunari, who was arguing with a woman Anders guessed was Ginnis. The Winters were milling about behind her, able-bodied looking men dressed in uniform boiled leather and brigandine, half with bow and arrow, the other half with swords and shields.

It wasn't an ideal position. If anyone looked up and paid mind to the hilltop, they'd be bound to notice them. The high ground would help more than walking through the choke point between two hills, but Anders still wasn't looking forward to the fight. Saemus had his back to them, perhaps a stone's throw away, and their words carried faintly.

"Last chance, qunari," Ginnis was saying, "Hand over the Viscount's brat."

"I told you, I'm not going," Saemus said. The horned qunari stood firmly in front of him, a tower of grey muscle painted red. Even Anders had to admit he looked less than threatening. The qunari had nothing by way of weapons, and had a satchel at his side stuffed with rolls of parchments. "You can go and tell my father that."

"What's the plan, Hawke?" Varric whispered.
"Isabela's in charge of Saemus," Hawke whispered.

"You're going whether you like it or not, you little shit," Ginnis said, "Your father has five sovereigns out on your head, and I aim to get it, even if it means that's all I bring him."

"Varric, you cover her," Hawke whispered in tandem with Ginnis, "Fenris leads, Anders, Beth, whatever you can do with little flare."


"Sataareth kadan kass-toh issala ebasit," The qunari said, and did not move.

Ginnis laughed, and turned around to pace, dragging an frustrated hand down her face.

"Ready-" Hawke started to say, when Ginnis' hand dropped to her hip and grabbed a throwing dagger. She turned in a whirl and buried it in the qunari's throat. The qunari went stumbling to its knees, choking on its own blood.

"You vashedan bitch!" Saemus screamed, scrabbling for a dagger at his hip that had to have been ceremonial. He ran at Ginnis with it anyway, and the two fell into a grapple.

"Fuck," Hawke snarled, "Varric, can you?"

"I don't have a shot, either, Hawke." Varric said.

"Shit," Isabela swore.

Anders drew his own dagger, yanked up his sleeve, and slit his wrist. Fenris snarled and recoiled.

"Anders, what-?" Bethany stuttered while Anders formed the incantation for a blood binding.

"Go," Anders didn't want to bother worrying about their reactions. They suffered Merrill. They'd suffer him. "I'll hold her. Go save him."

"Fenris," Hawke ordered. The elf flung himself over the edge of the hill, still snarling, and Hawke and his mabari ran down after him. Anders loosed the spell, and Ginnis froze, eyes twitching spasmodically in her skull. Saemus buried his dagger in her throat, screaming without words. The rest of the mercenaries reacted, scrambling to their feet, struggling to string their bows or draw their swords. Anders heard a loud snap to his left, and a crossbow bolt buried itself in one mercenary's eye and knocked the man off his feet.

Isabela slid down the hill and grabbed Saemus, dragging the boy kicking and screaming off Ginnis' corpse. The Winters rushed them, and were intercepted by Fenris. He was grossly outnumbered, but the range his greatsword gave him made him impossible to engage. He drove back two assailants, and when a third tried to flank him, he spun with an unnatural fluidity and made a dance of it, switching between both fronts with broad sweeps of his greatsword.

Anders tore his eyes off him. Fenris didn't need help. The mabari had tackled one of the Winters and was tearing into its throat. A second mercenary looked poised to bring a sword down on the dog's head. Anders corroded his blood, and the man's sword fell out of his hand. He doubled over, vomiting blood. It wasn't half as flashy as a fireball would have been, and it served. A crossbow bolt took the mercenary in the side of the head a few seconds later, and he collapsed.

They were still out-numbered. The rest of the Winters collected themselves before Hawke and Fenris managed to kill the men they were already engaging. There had been a dozen men to start. There
were eight left, and four of them overwhelmed Fenris, one man managing to land a blow against his back. The elf spun, flaring like a sapphire sun, and dove his fist through the man's chest. He ripped out the mercenary's still-beating heart, and the man's ribcage inverted.

Rows of glistening white bone twisted around the mercenary's chest in a macabre embrace. His chest cavity hung open, splotchy pink lungs inflating and deflating with his last gasping breath before he collapsed. The rest of the mercenaries circling Fenris retreated. Hawke wasn't half so lucky. The archer and his mabari were all offense, able only to dodge to spare themselves otherwise fatal blows. Bethany's auras helped keep them mobile, but there was only so much magic could do before it reached the physical limitations of a man's body.

Hawke killed two, and then took a sword through the arm from a man who already had an arrow in his shoulder. The limb fell dead at Hawke's side, and his bow clattered to the ground. The mercenary charged him, blood gushing from the kink in his armor, and drove his sword into Hawke's side. Bethany slid down the hill shrieking, staff raised, and the mercenary lifted off the ground. A cage of telekinetic magic crushed the man into mutilated mass of leather, muscle, and bone.

A cube fell from the sky, and hit the sand, where it splattered into an unidentifiable mass of red and brown chunks. Bethany hit her knees next to Hawke, hands glowing a vibrant white with what little creationism magic Anders had had a chance to teach her over the past month. So much for subtle. Anders half-slid, half-stumbled down the hill after her, catching the last Winters that rushed Beth and Hawke in a net of corrosive blood magic. A crossbow bolt killed the stationary target, and Anders turned to Fenris. The elf was still fighting, though only two men were left.

A quick frost incantation froze one man from the chest out, and Fenris's greatsword shattered him. The elf continued the motion into a spin to drive back into the last surviving Winter, and cleaved through his shoulder, down into his side, and came out at his hip. The man slid in half, his torso toppling one way while his legs took a final few faulty steps in the other.

Anders went to Hawke. He was sitting on his knees in the ground, and looked more annoyed than injured, cradling his wounded arm. Bethany had managed to knit the wound on Hawke's side to half its size, but she had no experience with internal bleeding or bones. Anders set a hand on her shoulder and gave her a tug, "I got him," Anders said.

Bethany cut off her channel, and scooted back in the sand. Anders knelt in her place, threads of creationism seeking out the handful of internal wounds Hawke had borne from the sword. Curative energies stopped the bleeding, and the rent flesh knit back together as if sewn by some ethereal hand. Anders shifted to Hawke's arm afterwards, ignoring the sudden vertigo that followed the spell.

The blow to Hawke's arm had cut through to bone and fractured it. His magic wrapped around the shattered bone and pieced it back together, and an infusion of emollient energies restored torn ligaments, cleaved muscle, and ripped flesh. Anders' connection to the Fade was tethered to Justice. His mana was nigh limitless. The spell shouldn't have exhausted him, but the vertigo rebounded, and the whole world seemed to spin. Anders looked up into sandy skies, seeping with blood, and down to the crystal clear ground, and wanted to throw up.

Anders curled in on himself and buried his face in his hands. A league's walk in the sun and a handful of spells, and Anders was ready to pass out. Passing out sounded fantastic. The sand was soaked with blood and loosened bowels, but Anders was more than willing to curl up in it. He unhooked his canteen form his belt and forced himself to take a drink instead. Maker, his arm was still bleeding. Just the thought of healing it made him tired.

"You alright?" Hawke asked; Bethany had pressed herself up against his side, and was hugging him fiercely. Her arms barely made the stretch around Hawke's broad shoulders, and Hawke gave her
forearm a reassuring squeeze.

"Peachy," Anders said.

"You look like shit," Hawke said.

"You're such a flirt," Anders mumbled, cradling his canteen to his chest.

Varric joined them, the heavy-set dwarf breathing and moving at a slow shuffle. He collapsed into the sand next to him, and Anders was relieved to note he wasn't the only one exhausted by the trek across the coast. Then again, Varric was so overweight he looked like a sphere. Anders didn't have that excuse.

"Well shit," Varric said breathlessly. "What are you going to do now, Hawke? I don't think Junior is in the mood to be granting any favors."

Varric nodded, and Anders followed the tilt of his head across the alcove. The qunari was dead; choked to death on his own blood in the middle of the fight. Anders probably could have saved him if that was where his mind had been, and the thought made him a little sick. Saemus was kneeling next to his corpse, doubled over and sobbing into the sand. Fenris and Isabela hovered awkward nearby, both of them at a complete loss for how to comfort the boy.

"He'll have to," Hawke said.

"Maybe bringing him back will be enough?" Bethany asked, "We could ask for an audience with a Viscount in place of the reward."

"You weren't there, Sunshine," Varric said, "Apparently the Viscount is a 'busy man."

"Varric, can you talk to Saemus?" Hawke asked.

"I could try," Varric said.

"...I'll talk to him," Bethany decided, pushing herself to her feet. "Mother has to get that audience. The estate's ours. Gamlen had no right to hand it over to slavers. I don't want to spend one more minute in that filth-hole with him."

"Good luck, Sunshine," Varric said, "Or is it Lady Amell now?"

Bethany snorted and walked away. Anders felt his heart fall into his stomach. Hawke's mouth was moving, it was all just noise, and Anders couldn't make any sense of it. "What did you just say?"

"It's Hawke," Hawke repeated for him. "Not Amell. That name is dead."

Anders inhaled through his nose, and the air caught his throat and fled back out his mouth without ever reaching his lungs, "What?"

"What, no one ever told you?" Varric asked, "Hawke here is nobility. The scion of the famous Amell line. He has a whole estate up in Hightown his uncle-"

"Amell?" Anders interrupted; choking on the name. "Warden Commander Amell?"

"Cousin," Hawke said. "Why?"

"Cousin?" Anders repeated.
"... Second cousin, through my mother's cousin Revka," Hawke clarified.

"Cousin," Anders said again, "You're his cousin." A snort escaped him, and Anders used his staff to climb to his feet. "You're his fucking cousin." Anders giggled, and broke into a fit of hysterical laughter. He staggered out of the alcove, so dizzy he felt blind, and wandered up the cost until he found a cypress tree to collapse under.

Anders pulled his legs up against his chest and buried his face in his knees, hysterical laughter giving way to hysterical sobs. It wasn't fair. Maker, it wasn't fair. Anders wrapped his arms around his chest beneath his coat and hugged himself, his palms sliding over his pronounced ribs and reminding him of the man whose heart Fenris had ripped out. Anders had never related to anything so keenly before in his entire life.

"Blondie?" Varric called, what felt like an eternity later. The crunch of the dwarf's boots in the sand drew Anders' head up out of his knees. Anders freed one arm from under his coat and wiped off his face, for all the good it did him. His hand came away sticky with tears and snot; his nose was draining and his lashes were so heavy with tears he couldn't see. Varric found him behind his tree, and Anders managed a miserable smile.

"Oh boy," Varric sighed, easing himself down into the sand beside him. "Okay, Blondie, give me the story."

Sounds Anders wouldn't have called words spilled out of his mouth. Anders grabbed the collar of his tunic and dried his face off as best he was able. "I miss him so much," Anders sobbed into the wool. "... can I take a guess?" Varric said. "You and this guy were together?"

Anders' 'yes' came out as more of a whine.

"... Damn, Blondie." Varric exhaled heavily. "... seriously? You and Warden Commander 'Raised an army of the dead at Denerim' Amell?"

"I can't-" Anders choked on a wheezing gasp. "I can't get away from him. I just want to forget about him, and I've been trying so hard not to think about it, but it's like he's haunting me. I see him everywhere, in everything... I can't be in my clinic and not think about him and my old infirmary. I'll heal someone with some ridiculous injury and think about telling him later before I remember-fuck-I... I still have days where I wake up and he's not there-"

Anders shoved his face back into his shirt and battled down a sob.

"... Look, Blondie, I know I don't know you that well, but I think it's pretty obvious you need to talk to someone about the shit you've been through," Varric said gently, "Come to the Hanged Man. Have a drink. Talk about it. Get it out of your system."

"Why do you even care?" Anders hissed into the soaked cotton of his tunic.

"T'd be lying if I said I'm not interested in hearing about the guy," Varric admitted, "But there's just some part of me can't stand to see a human cry. Specifically one with such an intense martyr complex he'll starve himself to death to keep other people fed."

"I'm not-" Anders started.

"Blondie, don't lie, you're bad at it," Varric interrupted him. "I know everything that goes on in this city. You think the refugees aren't going to talk about the miracle healer feeding them? I figure if I can get you to come to the Hanged Man, I can sit you down and watch you actually eat something,
and feel a little better about myself. In exchange, you talk."

"That's not me," Anders dropped his shirt to drag his hands over his face and through his hair, "I don't do that. I don't talk about things."

"Maybe that's the problem," Varric said. "It can't be healthy for you to bottle all this shit up. I think you need to talk about it, and I think you need someone to listen. So you change your mind, you want to tell your story, I want to hear it."

"Why?" Anders snorted, "It's obviously not happy."

"That doesn't mean it's not good," Varric countered, "But it's more than that. There's a catharsis in stories, Blondie. You can make it all mean something. That rank pit you live in? That's just the setting. All the terrible shit that happens to you? That's just character development."

"What's my lover going to an early Calling because his father used blood magic to force me to cut out his eyes?" Anders asked.

"... fucked up."

Chapter End Notes

Translation: Sataareth kadan kass-toh issala ebasit : "It is my purpose to do what I must for those I consider important" so basically "I'm not moving."

Vashedan: Trash
Hello everyone! Welcome back. This is a chitter-chatter chapter, but no one seems to mind them, so here we are. For those of you who don't follow my tumblr, the smut scene in Chapter 29 has been completely rewritten and I think it's worth a bit of a look. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 28 Molioris Afternoon
The Hanged Man

"No, listen," Anders snorted, clearing his throat to force the cider down, "Listen-I'm serious. The note says, 'You are my hen, the mistress of my flock. You nourish my body, and tend to my-"

"Cock?" Franke guessed with a giggle.

"Rooster," Anders said.

Varric shook his head, but his amber eyes were sparkling with mirth and his shoulders shook. "Now you're just fucking with us, Blondie."

"So what then, yeah?" Franke asked, fisherman's soup growing cold while he listened to the story. Anders had already finished his. Because his refined palate was particular to pig entrails and rotten river fish, and not because he was ravenous.

"So Sigrun says we should have a contest," Anders continued, worrying her earring between his fingers until the lobe was irritated, but the words came out. "All of us coming up with our own little bits of poetry, to see if any of us can do any better."

"What's the uh-..." Franke's face scrunched up and he snapped his fingers, "The dwarf..."

"I'm getting there," Anders kicked him under the table with the boots Franke had made for him. "So Oghren volunteers to go first, and right away we all know this is going to be bad. Sigrun's already got her fingers in her ears, going 'I take it back, I take it back.' But Oghren goes anyway, and his was - hang on I remember this - his was, 'I'll be the meat pie, you be the oven, stick it on in and give you some lovin.'"

"Oh," Varric groaned, covering his mouth, "Oh that's awful."

"That's brilliant," Franke laughed.

"Can't remember what Nate's was," Anders gave his empty soup bowl an accusatory frown for the lapse in his memories, "Some bit about Velanna's eyes, I think."

"What about your guy?" Franke asked.

Anders swallowed down a lump in his throat at the possessive. It was just a harmless question. This was what he was supposed to be working up towards. "He uh... His was... Sun-kissed alabaster,
with no sun to be had, never wants for gold, no matter what he's clad."

"This guy was the right apple in your eye, yeah?" Franke said.

"Maker, please don't call him that," Anders whined. He couldn't even count the ways the phrase upset him.

"I'm with Cobbles," Varric chimed in, "Sounds like Creepy really put the romance in necromancer."

"I guess," Anders shrugged, and took another drink of his cider; there wasn't a drop of liquor in it, but apple had always been his favorite flavor, "Made me feel a bit shit. I went first, and mine was some joke about staffs I can't even remember."

"Ah, don't feel too bad, yeah?" Franke took a sip of soup, gone cold, and grimaced. "Maker knows Franke couldn't have cobbled together a bit better than that."

Varric snorted and lifted his tankard towards the wide-mouthed cobbler, "That's good. He's good. I like your taste in friends, Blondie."

"Did you just compliment yourself?" Anders asked, leaning over the table to grab Franke's bowl and heat it with a wash of primal magic before he pushed it back.

"Thanks, yeah?" Franke took another sip of his soup, grimace-free.

"You have to when you look this good," Varric gave his tunic a tug that pulled his plunging neckline even lower on his chest. Anders envied him. Summer in Kirkwall warranted the sort of garb Varric wore: loose and breathy, but Anders didn't dare stray far from his coat. Draping it over the back of his chair was as far as he parted from it.

Anders had lost track of how many times he'd shifted in the carved stone chair. He couldn't find a place for his legs with how low it was to the ground, alternatively throwing them over the armrest or shoving them up against his chest. Varric didn't seem to have any advice for him, save for the occasional bemused snort, and the suggestion that they change his nickname to 'Legs.'

"So where'd the trail end up leading?" Varric asked.

"Oh-that, right," Anders halted his windmilling limbs in their search for space, "We finished the treasure hunt because why not, I guess? The Vigil's soldiers were busy loading up the dragonbones, and there wasn't anything else for us to do. Turns out the guy killed himself. Found his skeleton still clutching the poison bottle and a letter from his lover leaving him."

"Maker's breath, Blondie," Varric said, "Don't you have any happy stories?"

"That was a happy story," Anders laughed. "Remind me to tell you about Keenan sometime."

"Shit, you got something to top the Blackmarsh?" Franke asked around a slurp of carp.

"Who even goes to a place named the Blackmarsh on purpose?" Varric asked. He took another drink of his cider, which unlike Anders' had liquor in it, and wiped his mouth off on his sleeve, "Now if they called it Beermarsh... no, still doesn't work."

"It's the marsh bit, yeah?" Franke guessed, taking a drink of his own alcoholic cider. Anders tried not to resent them for it.

"Kind of cancels out anything else," Anders agreed, groping for an alternative. "Flowermarsh?"
"Kittenmarsh?"

"Not cutting it," Varric said sadly.

"Well, it wasn't as if we had a choice," Anders said, shaking a hand through his hair. The comb and looking glass Hawke had gifted him helped, but Anders hadn't had another bath in close to a month. His hair was laden with oil again, regardless of whether or not it was knotted. There was just no winning for him. "We had to save Kristoff."

"How's he doing, by the way?" Varric asked; the sly dwarf was quickly winning a soft spot in Anders' heart. They were easy to find considering it was riddled with bruises, but Anders couldn't help noticing he seemed to have good luck with dwarves, where he generally had bad luck with elves.

"Well, he's not mad at me anymore," Anders shrugged. His spirit had been quiet ever since Anders had made the decision not to have drinks with Hawke. Fortunately, the awkwardness was at a minimum considering it seemed to be a mutual arrangement once Anders had outted himself for a blood mage.

"I ever get to meet the guy?" Franke asked, finishing off the last of his drink.

Anders snorted into his cider, "Probably not. He's pretty shy. But you know, we're talked about you, and he..." Anders searched for some kind of emotion from Justice and found none. "He thinks you're alright."

"Well alright's alright," Franke chuckled, giving the tankard a spin when he set it down. "Right handy trick that, with the flames, yeah?"

"I've got the touch," Anders agreed, wiggling fingers red with primal magic. Anders glanced at Varric, "So uh... how are things with him, by the way?"

"Gonna have to be more specific, Blondie," Varric said. "I know a lot of him's. You mean Killer?"

"Yeah," Anders said, despite the uneasy roil behind his eyes. "You know, with the Viscount and the expedition."

"You could just ask him yourself, you know," Varric pointed out with a tip of his tankard, "He doesn't bite. ... Well, okay, he bites, but most of it's bark.... or, well-"

"Look, I know he's an ass, but I'm kind of into that." Varric held up a restraining hand to forestall details Anders wasn't about to give, and Anders snorted, "I just... you know, it's not a good time for me, and besides I think he's still mad about last week."

"Couldn't tell you, Blondie," Varric admitted, "I thought he'd lose the last of his marbles when Sunshine got hurt, but here you are, fed, washed, a part of the group." Varric shrugged one shoulder, "Man's a mystery. He's paying Daisy's rent; which - I know the girl needs it, and I've got her groceries - but at this rate we're never going to get those fifty sovereigns."

"Is he paying for anything else?" Anders asked.

"What isn't Hawke paying for?" Varric snorted, planting an elbow on the table and splaying his fingers out to count them down with the thumb of the opposite hand. "Daisy's rent, Uncle Greasy's tab, half of Uncle Greasy's rent, family's food, armor repairs," Varric switched hands and started counting down the other, "Mission supplies, Broody gets a cut to buy his own food, you get food you're giving away to half of Darktown..."
"I've been trying to keep track, but honestly? I think those twenty sovereigns were all he had. Which is no good for us. I've been pressing every contact I have for work, but the business with Sunshine and everything else... I don't see us making the cut. We're due to set out on the first of Solace, and I have no idea how Hawke is going to turn up fifty sovereigns in a month. We wait any longer, and the Deep Roads will be crawling with darkspawn again.

"... I wouldn't worry your head about it though, Blondie," Varric finished with a dismissive wave. "Hawke's as much a problem solver as he is a problem starter. He'll figure something out. In the meantime, I know he's expecting five sovereigns for the job he's on now, so that's something."

"Damn shame blood's my squick," Franke joked, "Sounds like merc life's the way to go, with that kind of pay."

"Not for me. I can't keep up with that life, and I don't want to. And nature?" Varric let an exaggerated shiver play through him; his face scrunched up in revulsion and his tongue lulled briefly, "Never touch the stuff. It's not natural."

"Nature ain't natural?" Franke repeated.

"Not at all," Varric said firmly. "Give me four walls and a roof over my head, and I'll pick it over allergies, thistle on my coat, and sand in my ass any day, Cobbles."

"You say that, but try living your whole life in a prison," Anders said, a final mouthful of cider emptying his tankard. He set it on the table with a spin, and magic kept it spinning, "I guarantee anything in your ass will be a welcome change."

Franke snorted and choked on his soup. Varric held up both hands, shoulders quaking madly, "You're killing me, Blondie."

"I'm just saying," Anders grinned.

Franke kept choking. Anders eyed him when it didn't stop, and Franke's face reddened. Franke stood up to hack and cough over the table.

"Shit," Varric said with a glance at Anders, "You're killing one of us. You wanna take over here, Blondie?"

"No, he's alright," Anders found his legs and stood, hasty steps walking him around the table. He put an encouraging hand on Franke's back. "Come on, you got it. Probably just a bit of fish. Keep coughing."

Franke grabbed at his throat and shook his head. His coughs stops, and his eyes lit with panic. "Alright, I got you," Anders took a spot behind him and wrapped his arms around Franke's waist, "Arms down, touch your belly button." Franke dropped his arms, and Anders formed a fist and set his curled thumb against Franke's abdomen above his navel. He closed his opposite hand over it, "Ready? Here we go, you're fine." Anders thrust his hands in and up, hard, twice, and Franke retched a chunk of fish across the table.

Franke collapsed against the table with a gasp. Anders ran an idle hand over Franke's back while he caught his breath. Varric was staring at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "... What?" Anders asked.

"Fuck, I don't know," Varric ran a hand through his loose blond hair, "That was terrifying?"

"He's fine," Anders said, patting Franke's back, "You're fine. My jokes aren't that deadly."
Franke snorted feebly, and twisted around to sit on the edge of the table. A few deep breaths left his chest rising and falling at a steady rate.

"Good?" Anders asked.

"Yeah, Franke's alright," Franke managed, giving Anders' forearm a grateful squeeze, "Thanks, yeah?"

"No problem," Anders squeezed back. He grabbed a napkin off the table and went to find the piece of fish Franke had launched across the room. Anders found it on the floor and scooped it up, dropping it and the rag in his empty soup bowl before he took his seat. His legs flopped awkwardly over the stone, and Anders found a place for them eventually.

"Me and my big mouth, yeah?" Franke joked, eyeing his soup suspiciously after its betrayal.

"That was a little close for my taste," Varric said, rolling kinks out of his shoulders and the back of his neck, "Glad you were here, Blondie. You always that calm when a guy is turning into a grape?"

"What should I do instead? Light my hair on fire?" Anders asked, summoning a sphere of flame to dance in the center of his palm, "Because I can do that, you know."

"Very funny," Varric exhaled hard.

"What, you can bury a bolt in a man's throat but you can't watch one choke?" Anders snorted, crushing the flame in his palm. It died in wisps of smoke that escaped out between Anders' fingers.

"Never said I watched the others, either," Varric shook his head. "Besides, combat, that's different. You've got the scene set, adrenaline pumping, you're not removed from it, but it's mechanical. A guy choking to death in my room? Not something I want to see. Glad you're alright, Cobbles."

"Yeah, Franke's alright," Franke agreed, nudging his soup away with a distrustful finger and standing. He walked around the table to shake Varric's hand. "But Franke better get back to the tanners before they tan Franke. Good to meet you, Varric," He spared Anders his whole arm, and pulled him up into a quick hug. "Anders, owe you again. Get you some gloves this time, yeah?"

"You don't owe me anything, Franke," Anders promised.

"Yeah, yeah," Franke waved him off and left. Anders sat back down and adjusted a few throw pillows on the carved stone chair so his ribs weren't biting into the armrest.

"So what do you think, Blondie?" Varric asked, standing to refill both their tankards, albeit from separate pitchers. "These lunches helping you any?"

"Well, I'm eating more," Anders allotted, accepting the proffered tankard and taking a drink. He rolled the crisp taste over his tongue before he swallowed, grateful for any flavor that wasn't conjured water. Varric was still waiting for a real answer when Anders looked up. "It's good to see Franke, too. Thanks for letting him come."

"Hey, as long as you don't bring a circus through here without asking me first, you can invite whoever you want," Varric said, sinking back into his own chair and actually fitting in it. "My door's always open. What about you-know-who? Helping any there?"

"I honestly have no idea," Anders said, cradling his tankard against chest and drawing up his knees. "I don't mourn. Last All Soul's Day, I got drunk. Didn't give a two bits about it all. Said the past was in the past, and the dead should stay dead, but they don't. They haunt you. Shit, half of them, I don't
even know if they're dead. You have no idea how many familiar faces I see in every Tainted nightmare...."

"Any you wanna talk about?" Varric asked.

Anders shrugged and took a drink of the nonalcoholic beverage, keeping the mug warm with a low flush of primal magic on his palms. He could barely bring himself to think about his mother. Maker, about Compassion.

"That earring from anyone special?" Varric asked.

"Sigrun. For Satinalia..." Anders ticked out the months with his fingers against his tankard, unable to believe he needed both hands to do it, "Shit... half a year ago now," Andraste preserve him, Anders couldn't decide if it felt like it had been decades or days. Anders ran a hand through his hair, lamenting his lack of a tie as he always did, and bit down a whine when a few flaxen strands came loose. His hairline was receding. He knew it was. "Maker, what the fuck have I been doing?"

"Making yourself one of the most wanted apostates in Kirkwall, and the backbone of all of Undercity," Varric said with a toast of his tankard. "By my count, half a hundred refugees must owe you their lives or at least their spleens by now. How's it feel to be a hero?"

"You'd have to ask a hero," Anders said.

"The self-confidence thing must be a part of the martyr complex," Varric mused, rubbing his chin between thumb and forefinger. He waved dismissively, "Ah, don't worry, I'm sure we can find a way to write it in. Can I guess it played a part in why we missed you Tuesday?"

"Right," Anders snorted, "I'm sure everyone missed the hobo apostate from the sewers who drags in shit and smells like death."

"Sunshine did," Varric told him after another drink of cider. "Something come up?"

Anders shrugged one shoulder, "I just figure things are awkward enough for me with Fenris and Aveline without adding Hawke into the mix."

"You don't know what to say to him," Varric guessed.

"I don't know what to say to him," Anders agreed, shifting in his chair, "It's not really a topic you broach, you know? 'By the way, you look almost exactly like my last lover who also happens to be your cousin, and oh also, do you mind me being a maleficar?' I can just see that working."

"Seemed to work there," Varric noted. "Why don't you give it a shot?"

Anders raised an eyebrow at him, "What happened to that arrow in my neck?"

"Look, Blondie, I'm not fond of rewrites, but if Killer hasn't kicked you out yet, I think it's safe to say the two of you are good." Varric said reassuringly, "I doubt he's happy with the blood magic, but if he puts up with Daisy I don't see why you would be any different."

"It's not just that," Anders said. "Now that I know, I just... I don't know how to be around him."

"Maker's breath, Blondie, how close is this resemblance?" Varric asked.

"Close," Anders set his tankard down to think. "Hawke's more..." Anders waved a hand over his upper arm to imply size, "Phwaa."
"Phwaa?" Varric chortled.

"Well what do you want me to call it?" Anders demanded, unable to help snorting. "Ah, I should get back to the clinic... Thanks for doing all this for me, Varric. So... twice a week? Is that what we're doing?"

"That works for me," Varric agreed. "Still think you should come Tuesdays, though, Blondie. Daisy's got Rivaini when you're gone, but Sunshine just stares at the door. It's some seriously sad shit."

"Fine, fine, if Beth cares," Anders groaned and stood, waving a hand at their scattered bowls and plates, "You need me to get any of this?"

"Ah, no, don't bother," Varric waved him off and stood with him. "Norah'll be up in a bit."

"So I'll see you..." Anders shrugged back into his coat and tried to think.

"Three days?" Varric supplied.

"Three days," Anders agreed; he shook Varric's hand, and left his room unsure whether or not he felt better.

Anders walked through the crumbling hall, and Isabela caught him on his way down the stairs. She was dressed in her dress and glittering with all her jewels. Anders loved watching her move. The woman was a wave. She was always arched, curled, or coiled about something or someone. When she tossed her hair, Anders could practically see her standing on the deck of a ship, one leg propped up, shoulders thrown back, a score of eager men at her command.

And then she opened her mouth and was absolutely ridiculous, and Anders liked her even more. Isabela hadn't bat an eyelash over the blood magic. According to her, she trusted him and Merrill, or 'Kitten', to know what they were doing. Anders hadn't had an opportunity to talk to anyone else about it, considering his self-imposed isolation, but Isabela had chanced upon him on his first lunch with Varric.

Isabela twisted them out of the flow of traffic and practically pinned him to the tavern wall. "Hey there, Sparky," She grinned, "Long time no see. You missed a whole chapter of Love and Lyrium last Tuesday."

"Love and Lyrium?" Anders groaned, "Really? That's what you're going with?"

"Someone sounds interested," Isabela grinned. "Do you want a private reading?"

"I have to get back to my clinic," Anders said.

"You are such a bore now," Isabela sighed. "Don't you ever have fun anymore?"

"I'm loads of fun," Isabela sighed.

"Loads. Love it," Isabela snorted, "But you can't fool me. I was there for that little outburst last week. You know they say the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else."

"Who says that?" Anders demanded.

"I did, just now," Isabela grinned.

"Look, believe me, I appreciate the offer-"
"Who said I was offering?" Isabela interrupted.

"Well then I appreciate the thought, but I'm." Anders chuckled, when the door to the tavern opened and a host of guardsmen marched in, "-shit."

"Boring maybe, but I wouldn't go that far," Isabela stared at him, and followed his eyes over her shoulder. "They're just guards, sweet thing. Not templars," Isabela caught his pale hand in her dark one and gave it a tug, "Here, come on, I'll walk you out."

Isabela led him across the crowded tavern floor, away from the guards and where they found their table. They made it past the hearth and around a group of besotted patrons, and out the door without incident. Lowtown welcomed him with a searing afternoon sun, and Anders shielded his eyes against it. "See?" Isabela said. "No problem."

Anders heard the slam of a door behind them, and glanced over his shoulder to see Aveline approaching them. "You were saying?" Anders sighed.

"Anders," Aveline's long stride overtook them, and she cut them off before they'd gotten far. One look at her face, sun-flushed and scowling, was enough to make Anders want to fly away from it all. "We need to talk."

"Well if it isn't the new 'Captain,'" Isabela purred; Anders appreciated the step she took in front of him, "Can I call you captain? You can call me captain."

"I won't be doing that," Aveline said.

"Neither will I," Isabela said brightly, "Because you're a guard captain. No real authority. Something to remember, big girl."

Aveline ignored her and looked to Anders, "I need to know if you're a threat."


"That last one, definitely," Isabela grinned toothily.

"This city," Aveline said. "Fenris told me what you did on the coast." No surprise there, Anders supposed. "Your 'condition' was one thing when I thought it was well meant, but I don't know that I believe that anymore. You're reckless and obviously stupid, and if I find out you're dangerous, if you ever get Hawke or Bethany hurt, I'll turn you over to the templars myself."

"He is just the naughtiest little healer, isn't he?" Isabela said before Anders could force out words around the anger burning his throat. "Does it get you hot and bothered thinking of him all tied up? It gets me hot and bothered, but my version probably involves more whipped cream than yours."

"Shut up, whore," Aveline snapped at her.

"Where do you get off?" Anders demanded, ignoring the fact he'd already gotten Bethany hurt. He wasn't mad for his sake.

"Nowhere, apparently," Isabela snorted.

"I know you're always prepared for a sudden random phallus, but for once shut your mouth," Aveline glared. "This isn't about you, whore."
"You shut yours," Anders stepped out from behind Isabela, "You think I'm going to stand here and listen to you talk shit about someone just because they get more sex than you? You're damn right I'm a threat, I-"

"Shhh," Isabela covered his mouth with a hand and leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek, "Settle down, sweet thing. I don't need you going all white knight and riding in on your spirit to protect me. She doesn't know me. I know me. Come on, walk me back to this clinic of yours so I know how to find it if I need you."

Isabela tangled an arm in his and dragged him away from the Hanged Man. They walked out of the Hanged Man's courtyard, down a flight of stairs, and were half-way out of the hex before Anders realized they were going the wrong way. Anders took the lead, and led her through the alleys. Isabela stayed on his arm; she smelled like the sea, and her eyes scanned the streets ahead of them with such an easy smile Anders couldn't help relaxing.

"So that was a reaction," Isabela noted, giving his arm a squeeze when Anders stopped tensing it. "I'm sensing a story."

"I guess," Anders sighed, not sure he wanted to go there. Lunch with Varric was hard enough. "... I had a friend—my best friend for a while, actually. Sigrun. Her mother was a noble hunter which is, I don't know, this dwarf thing where their castes go down through gender, and noble hunters try to have a son so they can be noble. But Sigrun's mother—Her name was Jena, I think? No, Jana—Anyway, she had Sigrun instead and it ruined her.

"She had to move back in with her brother, and got a job unloading brontos, but she never resented Sigrun for it. She sounded like a special woman, you know? And I can't tell you how many girls I get in from the Rose. It's not always one of those diseases; sometimes it's bruises from their clients and they just laugh it off when I ask because they're 'just whores.' It's just an ugly word."

"Like abomination?" Isabela guessed.

"Yeah," Anders said.

"Well don't go fighting with the big girl over it," Isabela nudged him when they stepped onto the lift to Darktown. "I give her plenty of shit; she can give me some back."

"No promises," Anders said.

"Gentleman cranks," Isabela gave him a shove, and Anders bent to crank and send the lift down into Darktown. "You get too worked about things, Sparky. You seriously need to unwind a little. You're coming next Tuesday, right?"

"Well if you're offering," Anders joked.

"I like you." Isabela grinned.

"I like you too," Anders grinned back, pulling on a breath of mana for light when the lift fell into darkness. It slid through blackrock, and eventually emerged into the damp mines of Darktown.

Isabela leapt off the lift and over a puddle. She turned in a circle to survey the graffitied cavern walls, dripping sewage, and scattered refugees making nests of refuse and rubbish. "Oh, it's lovely."

"Half of Ferelden is packed into this stinking place," Anders followed her off the lift, and gestured down towards the mineshaft that lead to his clinic. "They'd have done better to fight the darkspawn."
"Said the Grey Warden," Isabela mused, drawing more than a few stares either for her beauty or for the gold dripping from her piercings. Or both. "You know there's one thing I can't wrap my head around with you and your Commander."

"What?" Anders asked, amazed with himself he'd even managed that. Maybe Varric was right. Maybe talking helped.

"Remember how I said I met him?" Isabela asked, "How he was traveling with a friend of mine? His name was Zevran, and the two of them did a lot more than travel together. There's a lot of history with me and Zevran, and I've never known him to turn down sex, but with your Commander... I just... I don't know, I guess I'm worried about him. Do you know what happened to him?"

Anders made the climb up the final flight of stairs that led to his clinic and stopped. He leaned back against the dirt-crusted stone, and forced himself to dredge up the memories, "He left him. During the Blight. I didn't really--" Care? Want to know? Want to care? "-get a lot of the details. I know he's alive, though. He sent Amell a letter saying he was in Antiva, last Satinalia, and he was being hunted by the Crows. I don't know anything more than that."

"Well, as long as he's not dead," Isabela said.

"The whole, hunted by a league of assassins bit doesn't worry you?" Anders asked, searching for his key in his belt pouches.

"Zevran can take care of himself." Isabela said, "I'm not worried about that. I was just worried he might have gotten eaten by the Archdemon or something. Anyway, sweet thing, thanks for showing me your place. With Hawke's death toll approaching natural disaster, you never know when you might need a healer."

"Well if you do," Justice lit the Veilfire for their lantern, and Anders gestured to it, "Look for the lantern. I move a lot, whenever the templars catch on. The refugees can probably point you in the right direction, if you have trouble finding it."

"Aren't you clever?" Isabela grinned, sparing him a wave over her shoulder when she left. "Take care, Sparky. Don't push yourself too hard."

"You too," Anders let himself into his clinic and hung up his coat. The coat rack was a bent bronze rod, propped up with stones, and his latest little attention to the clinic. On the one hand, it was almost cozy, but on the other Anders knew he was going to have to leave it all behind once the templars caught on. He tossed his satchel onto his table, and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows.

It didn't usually take long for the patients to start trickling in, but there was always some down time. Anders usually spent it reading the Chant or cleaning. He went to his shelves to fetch a bowl for water to wash his hands in, and stared at the seashell he'd never had a chance to give Karl. It was a thing of beauty. One of few or many in this world depending on which part of Anders you asked.

Karl would have liked it, but Karl was gone, like everyone else was gone, and sooner or later Anders was going to have to accept it. He set the bowl down on the table for later, and opened his satchel. The letters were still there, resting alongside Amell's journal, his mother's pillow, and everything else Anders couldn't face.

Anders found Karl's last letter, and took a seat with it. His chest felt suddenly and inexplicably tight, and Anders kept the parchment folded in half over one finger. Memories of Karl's lips and his last shudder tangled together in Anders' thoughts. Anders' shoulders shook, threatening sobs, but he had to deal with it someday.
The door to his clinic opened, and a patient walked in. Anders let out the breath he'd been holding, and left the letter on the table, for someday.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I'm terribly sorry for the delay with this chapter, I had some personal obligations to take care of these past three days. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:32 Dragon 30 Molioris Morning
Kirkwall Darktown

Anders jerked awake with a strangled gasp, his heart racing his lungs, an ache in his ribcage from the frantic pace set by both. His legs were shaking when he dragged them off the cot, and let them fall heavy to the floor. Anders pitched forward, elbows on his knees, head in his hands, his breath spilling broken between his fingers. Why? Why, in the name of the Maker, had possession stolen his dreams, but not his nightmares?

Anders peeled his sweat-soaked tunic off his skin and dragged it over his head, catching a few strands of hair in the process. It was cold and damp, but not quite to the point of wringing. Anders tossed it at his drying rack, relieved when the cotton caught and held to the bronze grate by a sleeve. It didn't belong on the floor of his clinic. Damp was one thing, but dirty was another.

Anders didn't own a washboard, and had no real means of cleaning his clothes save to beat at them with a makeshift washing beetle and hope for the best. A cockroach scuttled across his bare foot and Anders wrinkled his nose, kicking the vermin across the clinic with a jerk of his still-trembling leg. It toppled end over end and went scuttling down into the gutters where it belonged. His feet didn't even belong on the floor of his clinic.

Anders wiped the sweat off the back of his neck and smoothed it back through his sodden hair. The nightmares weren't every night. Most nights were peaceful, after a fashion. Anders laid down, closed his eyes, and an indeterminate amount of time later he opened them again feeling relatively rested. For whatever reason the Fade was lost to him, but the darkspawn hivemind remained.

It was always the same in that writhing mass: gnawing through chewy muscle and hard bone, burrowing into flesh and slipping through blood. If it were just a haze of carnage, Anders couldn't have weathered it, but fate was never so merciful. It was always the same: dead faces of friends and family made up his victims, and Anders would have killed them all twice if it meant hearing that Call for just one more second.

Anders wished he'd talked to Amell more about the Calling and what was waiting for him, but that wasn't like him. Anders could deal with it later, like he always did. Ten to thirty years. That was what Amell had said. The nightmares were here to stay. Anders would get used to them someday. He had no choice. His necklace proved that.

The vial of blood hung like a noose about Anders' neck, cold as death against his racing heart. The Taint was there, in his veins and his amulet, and it had claimed Mhairi, Lyna, and a half dozen more. One day it would claim Anders too, and he'd go to his Calling, but Anders didn't know what that
meant for him. More than that, he didn't know what it meant for Justice.

One day, someday, Anders would be just another Kristoff. Justice was immortal. He'd need a new host, or he'd need to return to the Fade, and Anders didn't know how to grant his poor friend either. Anders rubbed at his chest, and wondered what Justice thought of his nightmares. He swore his spirit had pulled him from a few, but that made no sense. Justice wasn't tied to the darkspawn hivemind. Anders shoved the thoughts away, and gripped the rickety edge of his cot. He pushed himself to standing, and left his anxieties abed. It was just a day, like any other.

Anders went to his shelves, where the scent of dried elfroot and embrium was heavy enough to mask the pervading stench of the sewers. They hung from a line of thread against the wall with heatherum and foxite, gathered with Merrill and Bethany on their trips with Hawke to the Planasene Forest. They were vital for his patients, but not for the Collective. Black and blue cohosh were always in demand, to the point where Merrill had started growing the herbs for him in small flower boxes at her home in the alienage.

Maker save him, Anders had asked her to do it. He hated it. He was a healer. He knew better, but what choice did the poor girls have? Anders could follow up with the girls at the Rose, but the girls at the Gallows? Anders left them to chance, and he refused to believe he hadn't already killed someone in the past few months he'd started securing the requisition.

Few things were quite as dangerous as an unsupervised abortion. The girls might retain tissue and placenta, and suffer internal infections. They might suffer kidney or liver damage. They might hemorrhage. The assortment of herbs might not work at all, but Anders went and got them anyway. He prepared them anyway. He handed the small vials off to their girl at the Rusty Anchor, and tried to pretend he was helping and not making it worse.

He found ginger for nausea for the girls who didn't want their children aborted. After Bardel told him disciplined mages weren't being allowed healers, Anders started collecting basil as a muscle relaxer to help recover from smites. He gathered peppermint for indigestion for the mages in solitary who suffered from horrible diets, and to help regulate blood flow after a smite. Feverfew for inflammation, butterbur for headaches, willow for pain and fevers, and whatever else he could think of.

The requisitions didn't always ask for it all, but Anders gathered it anyway. Selby never turned it down, and after a few days, there was always someone in the Gallows who had need of it. It was something, but it wasn't enough. Anders didn't want to make life in the Gallows tolerable. He wanted to make life outside the Gallows possible. He needed to get in touch with the Coterie, but there'd been nothing ever since Hawke had killed the small group outside his clinic.

Anders pulled down the few herbs that had finished drying and stored them in the handful of boxes and jars he'd managed to collect over the month. He would have killed for a proper alembic, quite literally if templars were an option, but he managed well enough with pots and pans, assorted bowls, a round stone that served well enough as a pestle. The clinic was a far cry from his old infirmary, but it served, and so did Anders.

Anders went through his quick morning routine, and was washed, relieved, and dressed, if not necessarily fed when Justice lit their lantern. He hadn't been in his clinic for much more than a few minutes when his first patient walked in. The tanned-skinned marcher with sun-bleached hair looked in no way injured, but Anders had been a healer long enough to know how little that meant.

"What hurts?" Anders asked, hurrying over to the young woman's side. He held out a steadying hand the woman stepped briskly away from. She took a turn about his clinic, boiled leather armor creaking with every step, and was far from reminiscent of Merrill doing the same. Her eyes skirmed over the shelves and operating tables disinterestedly before they settled on him.
They were a sickly green, and Anders didn't care for them, "Nice little place you got here," The woman said, "You looking to keep it?"

"Is that a threat?" Anders asked, "Because I'm busy."

"Feisty," The woman bent her lips back into something almost like a smile, "Careful with that. A little bird told me you'd been looking for us, and we wouldn't want to get off on the wrong foot, now would we?"

"Are you Coterie?" Anders asked eagerly, a hard push of arcane energies swinging the door to his clinic shut. "Thank the Maker, I thought I'd never get in touch with you."

"Yeah?" The woman asked, with a wary glance to the door. "Funny, considering the last time we tried to get in touch with you our boys wound up missing."

"That wasn't me," Anders said quickly, resenting Hawke for what he'd done, however well meant.

"Well lucky you, then, Harlan said to give it another go. Name's Lilley," Lilley said, idly and unnecessarily fingering the hilt at her waist. It would take a lot more than a throwing dagger to kill him. "What's your poison?"

"I want access to your tunnels," Anders explained, trying to decide on a place for his hands. He ended up folding them over his chest. "The ones between the Gallows and Kirkwall you use to smuggle lyrium to the templars."

"The tunnels?" Lilley snorted, "You couldn't afford them. We go forty sovereigns at a discount, and you are not getting a discount."

"Look, I know I don't have the coin, but I've got better," Anders let a ripple of static play over his fingers, bright blue and crackling like spider webs. "You have a lot of surface dwarves in the Coterie, right? I can heal through their innate resistance to magic. Can you imagine how much coin you'll save on poultices, bandages, salves? Give me a few months, and I'll be worth a lot more than forty sovereigns to you."

Lilley ran her tongue over her teeth while she stared at him. It was outrageously unattractive. "I'll talk to Harlan." Lilley decided after a pause. "But you better be legit."

"I am," Anders said quickly, letting the spell taper off, "But I won't be here for Solace. Mid-August, I might be back."

"Works," Lilley said, hand moving from her hilt to her hip. "Harlan gives the go ahead, and we'll put you through the paces in Justinian, sleep on it for Solace, and let you know by August. You better make good on this, though. Once you're in, you stay."

"I know," Anders said; he felt the word resonate in his chest, a certainty from Justice that rebounded eagerly between them. Finally. Finally, they could stop wasting away in this vermin-invested clinic, healing one injustice after another but never preventing them in a vicious cycle that was more depressing than fulfilling.

"Good," Lilley's lips peeled back for another toothy grin, "I think we'll work well together." Lilley rifled through the pouches on her belt, and pulled out a small vial, no bigger than her pinky, glowing a bright and entrancing blue. She tossed it to him, and Anders snapped out a hand to catch it, a ripple of matching blue light playing over the back of his palm. "In good faith, healer. We'll be in touch."

Anders barely heard the door to his clinic open and close as Lilley left. He couldn't see magic, and
the way the Fade pulsed within a person. He couldn't use bursts of spirit energy to affect the world around him. He couldn't hear lyrium, as though Andraste herself were whispering the Chant in his ear, but Justice could, and Anders could through him.

Lyrium. The sapphire liquid was distilled, and encased in glass, but Maker, the song. Anders could feel it like the brush of a feather running up and down his spine. The threnody pulled at him, aching, and he caught himself swaying in time to nothing before he realized what he was doing and shook himself.

"Not yet," Anders said aloud, watching the subtle ripples of blue swimming through his veins beneath freckled skin, "We'll try soon. With Merrill. Somewhere safe."

The blue receded, and Anders grinned. Merrill was right. They just needed a bit of lyrium, and Justice would get over his reluctance to control their body. Theirs. It was theirs. Justice was a part of him, and Anders wasn't going to leave him locked in the back of his mind like some kind of twisted mental solitary. Anders stowed the vial in a way in his satchel for later and went back to his clinic.

He saw to a boy with an infection in his foot from stepping on a stray fishhook, healed another ulcer with Mark, and treated a woman with a gaping thigh wound, before Hawke was back in his clinic. Anders bit down a sigh. Maker, he didn't need this right now. He was having a difficult enough time coming to terms with the loss of the Wardens. He didn't need Amell's echo haunting him.

But there Hawke was anyway, hair as black as the Void tousled about his face, framing all too familiar features set in an unfamiliar posture. Shoulders hunched, thumb in his belt beside his quiver, hand in his hair, feet kicking up dust while his eyes fixed on the floor. Anders supposed it was fine if they stayed there.

"Job?" Anders guessed, wringing a bloodied cloth over his hands to clean them. He wished the man would just wait for their next hunting trip or game of Wicked Grace to bother him.

"Band of qunari deserters on the coast," Hawke explained, "We're setting out this evening. You coming?"

"And we're going to .... have tea with them?" Anders guessed, the air around him drying out while his hands overflowed with water. He poured it into the rag, and wrung it out over the gutters.

"Yes or no?" Hawke asked; he was frowning when Anders glanced over at him, unsurprisingly.

"We've really got to work on that sense of humor, because this definitely sounds like a joke," Anders said, trading his rag for his mop to clean up the streak of blood the refugee with the thigh-injury had left. "Why would I ever want to kill Tal'Vashoth? That's what they're called right? The people who leave the Qun and decide to think for themselves? I'm serious about the tea. I might even throw in a slice of cake."

"They're bandits," Hawke said unapologetically.

"Oh, well, that changes everything," Anders said sarcastically. He spent every day healing gang members, cutpurses, and other criminals who only took to crime because they had no other option. Anders didn't see what made the Tal'Vashoth any different. "Have they actually hurt anyone, or is that just what people call them?"

"Aveline's been having trouble with the whole lot. They've been raiding caravans for weeks, a score strong," Hawke said, taking a few aimless steps about his clinic. "Tintop's offering fifty silver a head."
"If someone offered me fifty silver for head I'd have a lot nicer place," Anders snorted. Hawke laughed, and hastily smothered it with a cough, "Who's Tintop and why does he care so much?"

"A dwarf," Hawke cleared his throat, "They've got a bomb he wants."

"A balm?" Anders asked. "Who pays that much for a balm?"

"A bomb," Hawke said again, louder.

"Has anyone ever told you you mumble?" Anders asked, wringing his mop out over the gutter when he finished cleaning up.

"No," Hawke said stiffly.

Anders raised a challenging eyebrow at him, and felt ridiculously proud when Hawke dragged his thumb over his lips to wipe away a grin. Then he felt anxious and uncomfortable, and couldn't decide whether the emotions belonged to him or Justice. "... Um-

"I-" Hawke started with him, and halted abruptly. "Go ahead."

"I'm sorry," Anders leaned his mop up in the corner, and wandered over to stand a few feet away from Hawke; it was hard to get the words out, but the lack of eye-contact helped, "About that drink. What were you going to say?"

"Just... the same," Hawke said.

"So, a bomb?" Anders asked, battling down the queasy sensation that knotted up in his stomach at turning Hawke down. He probably should have explained himself, but the words weren't coming out, and Hawke wasn't asking, "I think I've heard of that. It's why their ships are so feared, right? We had a dwarf back at the Vigil obsessed with explosives. Every other day his experiments would leave the whole Keep shaking," Or Amaranthine shaking, when your best friend sacrificed herself, and you were so much of a bastard you thought she'd abandoned you. "He used lyrium sand for most of it, I think."

"Tintop says it's not lyrium," Hawke said. "Just a mix of sands and ores anyone can use, not just dwarves."

Anders spent an awkward moment wondering whether to keep the conversation going or get his things. "So-

"Do-" Hawke started with him again. "Go ahead."

Anders laughed, and felt tension uncoil from his shoulders. He rolled down his sleeves and fetched his coat to shrug into. "So the Wounded Coast again, huh?" Anders asked, adjusting his bunched up sleeves under the heavy suede, "At this rate they should probably be calling it the Bloody Coast."

"Anders, what the fuck?" Hawke asked suddenly.

"What the fuck, what, what the fuck?" Anders shot Hawke a bewildered look over his shoulder, and was surprised to find the man actually looking at him.

"Blood magic?" Hawke asked without preamble, "What were you thinking?"

"I should do something to save the Viscount's son,’ maybe?" Anders supplied, adjusting his collar so the feathers weren't pressed against his neck, "Just at a guess?"
"So you go for blood magic?" Hawke asked. "What could possibly possess you to think that's a good idea?"

"Word choice," Anders forced a grin, tempted to order the man out of his clinic on the spot. Hawke looked nothing like Amell in that instant, and looking at him made Anders' face hot in the worst of all possible ways. "Are you really complaining? I saved him, didn't I?"

"That doesn't excuse it," Hawke said. "Magic exists to serve to serve man, and never-"

"Oh don't quote Transfigurations at me," Anders sneered, "You don't think I know that verse? You don't think I have it memorized?"

"No," Hawke scoffed, "I don't think you do, or you'd-"

The door to Anders' clinic swung open, and a refugee came staggering in, cradling their hand to their chest. Their fingers were brutally mangled, twisted off in different directions, and bleeding profusely in the few places bone broke through skin. "Healer-hammer-forge-" The refugee whined, tears spilling down their face, nose draining over their quivering lips.

"Over here," Anders took off his coat and rolled his sleeves back up. He caught the refugee by their shoulders and guided them to sit on a stool set before one of his operating tables. "Put your hand on the table."

"It hurts," The refugee blubbered, hand trembling forward. They barely moved it a few inches of their chest before they broke into a sob. A wedding ring gleamed on one swollen finger, causing the poor fellow even more undue pain.

"I know it does," Anders said, looking over his shoulder to the shelves Hawke was standing beside, "Hawke, give me that towel, and the bowl there. There's a spool of thread on the shelf I need, and the elfroot."

Hawke brought him all four items, and laid them out the operating table without question. Anders took the refugee's quaking wrist and held it over the bowl. A handful of mana took the form of water in Anders' palm, and washed the dirt and blood from the mangled hand. The refugee sniffled, and Anders handed him the elfroot, "Chew this, it'll help with the pain."

Two of the five fingers had bone jutting forth at odd angles, while his thumb was merely sporting a gash that shone through with white. His pinky looked indented, and the ring finger was likely only fractured. Anders cut off the flow of water when the wounds were clean, and picked up the towel. A breath of primal magic coated his hand with ice, safe through the towel, and cooled the swollen digits.

Anders wove threads of creationism through the poor blighter's thumb and knit the split flesh back together. Blood gathered in the towel, escaping from the rent digits with every heartbeat while Anders worked, despite the elevation. Anders conjured one tendril of creationism after the next, and the regenerative energies healed all but the two fingers with bone jutting for them.

Anders realigned them, mumbling a reassuring, "I know," in response to the refugee's many pained whimpers. When he had the wounds sealed, the breaks mended, and the fractures healed, Anders picked up the thread and worked it between swollen flesh and cold metal. He wound the thread about the stuck wedding ring, and pulled the thread from the opposite end when he finished. It was a painfully slow process, but the refugee breathed a sigh of relief when it was off.

Anders handed it to him, and the man pocketed it with his good hand. The refugee gave him a
strained smile, his teeth stained green with elfroot, "Thank you, healer."

"You shouldn't need a splint, but I don't want you using that hand for at least two weeks," Anders warned him, surprised to find Hawke hadn't left, and was leaning quietly against the wall beside his shelves, "Hawke, can you get him more elfroot? One of the packets on the second shelf."

The refugee took his packet, and thanked them both again profusely before he left. Anders picked up the bowl of bloody water, and dumped it out in the gutter. He brought it back to the operating table and snatched up a rag. A roll of Anders' hand refilled the bowl with clean water for him to wash away the blood. "Thanks for helping there," Anders said.

"You need an aide," Hawke said.

"I had an aide," Anders reminded him bitterly.

"Not Beth," Hawke clarified with an unapologetic frown, picking up the bloody towel Anders had abandoned. He folded it, and dunked it into the bowl to scrub out the blood stain.

"Are you volunteering?" Anders couldn't help asking at the sight.

"No, but I'm here now," Hawke said.

"What is with you?" Anders asked, fighting with a particular stubborn stain from his previous patient caught in a groove in the table. "I've never heard you get on Merrill's case about blood magic."

"Merrill's Dalish," Hawke said, "She doesn't know any better."

"What?" Anders laughed in disbelief, "Merrill's a bloody genius. She knows exactly what she's doing and so do I."

"Merrill doesn't know the Chant!" Hawke argued, "You do! You grew up in the Circle. How can you possibly justify using blood magic?"

"How can you not?" Anders demanded, forgetting the table to scowl at the man across from him, "Don't talk to me about the Circle. You've spent your whole life keeping Beth from that. You of all people should understand the need to stand against templars."

"So blood magic is your answer?" Hawke scoffed, abandoning the towel to gesture at the faint scar on Anders' wrist from the week prior, "The same magic that led to the Maker turning His gaze away from us? Are you sure you know Transfigurations?"

"What does that verse even have to do with blood magic!?" Anders demanded. "It's a work of its time. It's about despots, and tyrants. You don't need blood magic to make those things. Just look at the bloody Knight-Commander!"

"The Knight-Commander can't mind control anyone!" Hawke shot back.

"Really?" Anders laughed mirthlessly, "Because she seems to be doing a damn good job with the Viscount."

"The Viscount can think for himself," Hawke said, "His mistakes are his own damn fault. No one is mind-controlling him. A mage using blood magic strips a man of his will. It's no better than the Rite of Tranquility. You can't sit there and tell me it isn't evil."

"Don't compare Tranquility to mind-control," Anders snarled, thrusting a thumb smoking with primal
Magic to his heart. "I've been mind-controlled, and the mage who did it never wanted to rule anything! It's just magic! Nothing more."

"Magic hated and accursed by the Maker," Hawke said with so much blind piety Anders sneered again, "Magic that leads mages to fall prey to demons!"

"And this is a threat to me how?" Anders laughed, "All magic is dangerous. All magic attracts demons, creates temptations. Any mage could tell you that. How is corrupting a man's blood any worse than burning him alive with a fireball?"

"You're just arguing in circles now," Hawke said.

"Well I'm sorry, but they're kind of hard to escape!" Anders snapped. "Do you even know anything about the Circle!? Do you know what would happen to Beth if she went to one? The templars would hold her down while another mage slit her wrist and bled her for her phylactery. They'd cast a charm on her blood, and use it to track her anywhere if she ever tried to escape. Your bloody Chantry condones blood magic, as long as they can use it to oppress mages."

"That doesn't justify it," Hawke said. "Don't talk to me like I agree with what the Chantry's done with the Circle. This isn't about the fucking Circle. This is about blood magic. The same magic used by the magisters Andraste fought against. You think she'd approve of any mage using it?"

"Andraste fought against oppression!" Anders gripped his hips to keep from gesturing wildly. His hands were steaming against his trousers, "The fact that the oppressors of the time were blood mages is irrelevant-"

"Except that blood mages Blackened the Golden City!" Hawke interrupted him. "'You have brought Sin to heaven, and doom upon all the world.'"

"Maker, now it's Threnodies," Anders rolled his eyes.

"You were a Warden!" Hawke snapped, "How can you condone the very magic that led to the creation of the first darkspawn?"

"Threnodies was written by the first Divine, two hundred years after Andraste!" Anders argued, "It's bloody codswallop! You don't think it's a coincidence the people the Chantry blames are the same ones they're trying to oppress?"

"What?" Hawke let out a bark of laughter.

"The darkspawn live in the Deep Roads!" Anders told him, "They breed on their own! They respond to the call of the Old Gods. Why would they have anything to do with mages-or the Maker-at all?"

"What, and the Wardens-" Hawke stopped short. Anders glared at him, and didn't smell the smoke until Hawke grabbed the bowl of bloody water and threw it on his crotch. Anders yelped and brought his hands up, and belated realized they were burning. Anders glanced down at himself, and sank down onto a stool with an unhappy whine.

He'd burned holes in his trousers, all along where his fingers had been digging into his hips. Anders ran the pads of his fingers over the pale skin exposed by his magic, and hated himself for letting his anger get the better of him. His anger was always getting the better of him lately. Anders pitched forward, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. "Damnit," Anders whined into his fingers, "These are my only fucking pair."
Anders didn't hear Hawke move, but he saw the dark leather boots stop in front of him, quickly obscured by the feathered coat Hawke thrust into his chest. "Come on, I'll buy you new ones."

"What do you care?" Anders demanded, snatching his coat out of Hawke's hands. He glared up at the man, and hated the sympathetic expression Hawke gave him in turn.

"I told you I feel sorry for you," Hawke said.

"Fuck your sorry," Anders snapped. "I don't need you getting the wicked maleficar into your debt so you can set him on some path to redemption. I know what I believe." It had taken him months of prayer, of conversation, of debates, of canticle after canticle, but Anders believed it, and no one was going to change his mind.

"I didn't fucking say that, did I?" Hawke demanded. "I said I don't like blood magic."

"I am a blood mage," Anders said fiercely, unashamedly, and Maker how he wished Amell could have heard him, and not just the echo of the man that stood before him. Hawke looked less and less like Amell with every passing day. Right now, the only part of Amell in him was his eyes.

"So is Merrill, and I like her plenty." Hawke ran a hand through his hair and scratched furiously at his scalp.

"Maker's sweet saving grace, do you have lice or something?" Anders asked.

"It's a tic-just-let it go," Hawke said.

That sounded even worse, "Well if it's ticks I can-"

"Not that kind of tic," Hawke interrupted him. "If the Maker can forgive Hessarian He can forgive anyone. Do what you want just-... don't be stupid. Let me buy you new pants."

"Did you seriously just compare to me Hessarian?" Anders asked indignantly, "The man who had Andraste burned-"

"Not what I meant," Hawke cut him off, "I meant your blood magic is between you and the Maker."

"The Maker is gone," Anders shouldn't have had to remind a man keen on spouting canticles from memory, "He's not going to punish me for saving that boy's life. There's no one here but you and me, and you're the only one judging me."

"I'm judging blood magic," Hawke said. "Not you. You want to hear me judge you? That poor bastard wouldn't have his hand if you hadn't been here. After last week, I wouldn't have my fucking arm. Maker fucking knows how many other poor bastards owe you their life or some random body part. I think you're a damned good man and it was damned upsetting to see you using blood magic.

"You're right. I don't know the Circle, but I know magic. I understand how it works. Beth burned Carver a dozen times a day when he was being a tit. Calling it an accident was probably dog shit, but those holes are obviously my fault, and I think you deserve a new pair of pants. Can I buy you them or not?"

"I don't owe you anything if I say yes," Anders warned him.

"Never said you did," Hawke said.

Anders shrugged into his coat, and the weight settled comfortably on his shoulders. His pants weren't
completely ruined. They were thin between the holes left by his fingers, and still clinging together, but given a few days Anders had no doubt they'd rip to the point of indecency. His coat covered the damage when he stood, but they were nice pants. Leather. Old Warden gear. Costly to replace.

"... how close are you to affording your expedition?" Anders asked.

"Not your business," Hawke said, and took a step for the door.

Anders grabbed Hawke's arm, and forced himself to look into his eyes, "The blood magic? Not yours."

Chapter End Notes

Fanart for this chapter!
Safe Harbors

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. This story has a much larger following than I ever thought possible and I promise I'll respond to every comment (sorry I have yet to do this). Thank you so much for the feedback, it makes the story worth it for me. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 30 Molioris Night
Kirkwall Lowtown

Anders was exhausted. There was a weight about his shoulders his coat couldn't claim, and it pulled them down to press against his dragonbone staff with every dragging step. The Tal'Vashoth camp had been more than a score. Hawke had managed to goad a Tal'Vashoth deserter into helping them, and knowing the layout of the camp had helped them plan an ambush, but it hadn't made it easy. There were nearly a score and a half of Tal'Vashoth set up along the Wounded Coast. Hawke had brought everyone, and it still hardly felt like enough. Varric and Hawke had brought an assortment of bombs and traps that gave them something of a defensible position when they made their assault. Anders had summoned a firestorm. Merrill had conjured an entropic cloud. Both of them had done what they could with blood magic, and it was still a struggle.

Bethany had her auras, and that had helped, but there were some things magical adrenaline couldn't compensate for. Size, for example. Even Aveline, a veritable human battering ram, couldn't compare to a qunari. The massive horned race were two heads taller than humans and twice as thick. It gave them such a significant advantage few in their group had come away uninjured.

Something about qunari skin made it hard as metal. On more than one occasion a bolt or arrow Anders swore should have gone straight through merely embedded in the Tal-Vashoth instead. Isabela suffered the most for it. The nimble pirate fought with sword and buckler, the latter of which was far from beneficial against qunari great swords, battle axes, and polearms. At one point she'd taken a spear through the thigh, and Bethany had dragged her out of the fight.

Anders hadn't been able to take his eyes off the woman since. These weren't Wardens, afflicted with the Taint and benefiting from supernatural strength and stamina. They were people, and their lungs and legs had limits. Anders would have to learn them all over again if he was going to support them all properly. Isabela bumped into him on the slog through the dark alleys of Lowtown, and Anders spared her a steadying hand.

Her armor was in shambles. The spear had shredded her greaves, a few glancing blows had done a number on her cuirass, and a strap to her pauldrons had broken. She clutched them in one hand, the straps whispering at Anders' knees with how close they were walking. At every alley juncture, the wind would hit them, and the scent of the sea would wash over Anders. It was a soothing scent, and Anders didn't mind stumbling along at her side.

The rest of their company was little better. Fenris was practically crawling under the weight of his great sword. Aveline moved with all the speed and grace of a sleeping walking druffalo. Varric
tipped backwards at every slanted alley, and Merrill was constantly pushing him forward, half draped over the dwarf's shoulders. Hawke was more or less carrying Bethany, his mabari bumping sleepily against his legs with every other step.

They split up in one of the many hexes that lead to Hightown. Kirkwall was no Amaranthine. There was no town center, no clear-cut districts. It was a disorienting, sprawling maze of alley after alley and as exhausted as they were, Anders didn't doubt some of them were going to end up lost. Aveline and Fenris left for Hightown, and the rest of them continued on towards the Hanged Man.

Anders stopped when they passed by one of the handful of the buildings that housed a still-functional lift down into Darktown. The thought of hunching down on that uneven plank and cranking it down to the depths of the city had Anders resting his head against his staff and closing his eyes. Static played across the dragonbone and its many flickering runes, dancing down his skin and doing less than he'd like to invigorate him.

Isabela nudged him, and Anders tipped precariously to one side. "You look like you could use a hand, sweet thing," Isabela said; fatigue had stolen the purr from her sultry voice, and Anders was surprised to find he didn't miss it. She sounded genuinely concerned without it.

"A few, probably," Anders agreed, surprised the pirate had stayed after he'd given his goodbyes.

"Come on, I'll crank for you," Isabela gave him a push that nearly sent him careening face first into the blackrock. Anders stumbled forward at an involuntary sprint before he found his footing.

"You don't have to do that," Anders said out of habit. The thought of help was more than welcome right now, especially coming from Isabela. Talking to her and Varric, to Merrill and Bethany was refreshing after a brief afternoon with Hawke. Maker save him, the man meant well, but Anders didn't have the patience.

It wasn't even about Hawke. Hawke was the brother and son of a mage, but he was a devout Andrastian. The Chantry had their hooks in him the way they had their hooks in every man. If anything, Hawke was the best Anders could hope to expect from a man who wasn't a mage, and didn't live his life in a state of blithe disregard the way Varric and Isabela did. The thought of trying to change Hawke's mind, and the minds of people like him, or worse than him, was daunting to the point of exhaustion.

Anders couldn't stop thinking about it. Hawke's pious rant turned over and over in Anders' head, and mingled with his memories of Justice, and their many talks when they were still two people. Justice wanted him to strike a blow at his oppressors, and Anders was trying, but he'd also wanted him to teach the world that magic didn't warrant condemnation. Anders didn't know if he could.

Maker, Hawke had only been against the blood magic, and Anders had still burned holes through his trousers. Anders couldn't imagine trying to change the mind of someone who was actually for the Circle, and all its evils. He could barely trade two words with Fenris before they were screaming at each other. Worse, Fenris held to the popular opinions of magic. Anders was going to have to spend the rest of his life facing copies of Fenris, and there was no way he could manage a logical argument with how angry it got him.

With Bethany, with Merrill, Anders could keep a clear head, but he was only preaching to the choir with his friends. They weren't the ones he needed to teach. The people he did need to teach were bigots, fanatics, the masses at the Chantry, and Anders doubted the Grand Cleric was going to offer him a pulpit to give speeches from at every service. Talking to anyone personally was out of the question. Anders wouldn't get two words out before a score of templars were dragging him off to the Gallows, which left... what?
A loud whistle cut off through his thoughts. Anders faltered and caught himself on his staff. The lift had reached Darktown; a bronze chandelier cast scattered light through the threshold, and set shadows to dancing along the blackrock. Isabela blocked most of it, standing in front of him. Her sunset eyes were half-lidded with fatigue but sparkling with mirth, "Hang in there, handsome, you're not home yet."

"Carry me?" Anders joked, stepping off the lift and onto the stable stone. A yawn escaped him, and Anders pressed a hand to the small of his back and stretched. "You heading back up?"

"I could do that," Isabela allotted, a hand on her hip while she looked him over, "Or I could head down."

Anders stared at her, stupefied, "... what?"

"Sex, sweet thing," Isabela clarified, smiling bemusedly at him as if he was still a man in silks and silver, and not just another unwashed refugee. "Do you want to have sex?"

"I-- really?" Anders walked his hands up his staff, and stood a little straighter. "With you?"

Isabela laughed and rolled her eyes, "I wouldn't mind hearing a few naughty fantasies if you had someone else in mind. Look at you. Are you blushing?"

"I-no? Am I? Maybe?" Anders bit down a laugh, eyes slipping traitorously down to the breasts Isabela's armor kept hidden, "Why?"

"Because it sounds fun?" Isabela guessed, taking a step forward to walk her fingers up his chest. "Because I am just dying to see if that little electricity trick is as good as I remember? Because I think you need to relax, and your hands look good on my thighs? Is that good enough? Because I'd rather stroke something other than your ego right now."

"You don't owe me for that," Anders said, wringing his hands tight around his staff and wishing his eyes would stop dropping down to Isabela's lips. They were a dark caramel, and one of the few thoughts left in his head was whether they tasted as good as they looked.

Isabela dropped her hand off his chest with a groan. "See, this is exactly why you need a good lay. You think owing you is the only reason someone would want to have sex with you? You've been through a storm, and you need to get to know you again. Have fun. Relax. Get loose. Get fucked. I could help with both!" Isabela finished the passionate speech with a grin and a giggle, and such a shameless leer Anders almost felt good about himself. "What do you say? One night, no strings?"

"Well..." Anders cleared his throat, a little embarrassed by the shake in his voice, "Yes?"

Isabela walked backwards towards the entrance to Darktown. She might have held him by a leash for how quickly Anders stumbled after her. Isabela smirked and turned, a sway in her hip Anders didn't feel guilty following with his eyes. The shameless sashay helped keep the mood she'd made alive despite the choking damp of the mines and pervading stench of the sewers.

"This feels like a dream, but I don't have those anymore," Anders said.

"Oh, shit, that's right," Isabela snapped her fingers and raised a wicked eyebrow at him, "Threesome?"

"Please don't call it that," Anders begged, "It's not like that. Justice--..." Anders tried to find his spirit beneath the scent of sea and sand, beneath his own flushed skin and quickening pulse. There was nothing. Nothing but a giddy ripple of excitement and a low murmur of disbelief. "... doesn't really
have an opinion here."

"So I shouldn't expect him to come out and play?" Isabela stuck out her bottom lip with a huff. Anders thought of biting down on it and nearly tripped on his way down a flight of stairs.

"I wouldn't count on it," Anders said.

"I suppose you'll do," Isabela sighed, "I was really hoping for some inspiration for my next chapter of Love and Lyrium."

"You're ruining this for me," Anders frowned.

"Let me make it up to you," Isabela fist a gloved hand in his tunic, swinging him around to thud hard against the wall of the mineshaft. The suddenness drew a grunt from him, and Anders' heart raced a little faster when Isabela planted a thick thigh between his legs. A mischievous grin later and her lips were on him. She tasted like fire and spice, but Anders couldn't hold back a grin long enough to enjoy it.

"Now who's ruining this for who?" Isabela demanded, a matching grin on her face when she stepped back and waved him on. "Hurry up, before I change my mind."

Anders grabbed her hand and set off at a jog. He'd meant it for a joke, but Isabela laughed and took off at a run with him. The woman was exactly like the ocean, and Anders wanted to drown in her. Her laughter, her taste, her heat. Maker's breath, Anders envied her. She was untamed and carefree and selfish. She had the life Anders longed for but couldn't bring himself to live.

Anders stumbled to a halt in front of the door to his clinic and fumbled for his key. One night wouldn't hurt. One night wouldn't risk anything. One night was safe. He could be a man and not a mage for just one night. "I don't really have a bed," Anders warned her, trying to imagine his cot holding up with two people atop it.

"I don't really need one," Isabela laughed.

Anders forced the door to his clinic open, and hastily put up his staff and his coat, closing the door behind them. Isabela dropped her pauldrons and assorted weapons onto his table, and leaned against it when she turned around. A 'come-hither' roll of her fingers brought Anders across the clinic in a few quick strides, previous exhaustion forgotten.

Andraste preserve him, Isabela was gorgeous, even clad in armor. Her body was beautiful and she knew it, carrying herself in a way that flattered every feature. The toss of her shoulders and the waves in her hair, the arch in her back and the length in her legs. Anders lived in the sewers, and dressed in mottled leathers and unwashed wool. He smelled like death, and more often than not of late he looked like it. Isabela shouldn't have wanted anything to do with him.

But then her hands were fist in his tunic, and her lips were firm and insistent on his mouth, and 'should have' didn't matter. Isabela swept him up in a storm, and left her armor scattered like driftwood across the floor of his clinic. Anders wound up in a chair, Isabela in his lap; her tunic was nigh transparent, soaked with sweat, and revealed dark breasts and darker nipples Anders moaned to have his hands on.

Then Isabela reached for his tunic, and the cold grip of reality closed around Anders' heart and spread out along his ribs. Anders snapped a hand down to catch her wrist, and wished excuses were magic he could conjure. "Probably-shouldn't," Anders said around a dry throat, "Best laid plans and all that."
Isabela let go, and ran her hands up his chest instead, and Anders realized he was an idiot. Isabela 
was in his lap. She could feel his hips against her thighs, see his wrists where his sleeves spilled 
down his arms, feel the hollows between his ribs and the sharp cut of his collarbone all the way up to 
his shoulders, where her hands squeezed and she grinned. "I like lanky."

Anders' tunic came off, and Isabela's followed. The woman was all dusky curves Anders' vague 
memories couldn't begin to compare to. She stretched her arms above her head for him, lithe and 
limber and lovely, from her slender shoulders, to the dark hair beneath her arms, to the whisper of 
muscle in the flat of her stomach. Anders bent to lave teeth and tongue across pert nipples and 
pendant breasts, drinking in the salty taste of the sea.

After an age, Isabela laughed at him. "Are you ever coming back up?"

"Do I have to?" Anders asked her magnificent cleavage, surprised by the chuckle that shook his 
shoulders.

"No," Isabela tangled her hands in his hair with a giggle. The drag of her nails on his scalp helped 
Anders forget all about the matted strands they ran through.

Anders' grin thinned his lips and made it impossible to make use of his mouth. He settled on another 
laugh instead, and it lingered in his chest when the rest of their clothes fell away. Anders filled her 
with his fingers, with his magic, with his cock, with every part of himself he was tired of living with 
until the only thing left of him was the sweat on his thighs and the fantastic pleasure burning just 
beneath every inch of his flushed skin.

Their push and pull was like a tidal wave, and the chair wasn't made for it. Every rise and fall of 
Isabela's hips made the wood creak, and the thought that the chair might break under them had them 
both laughing nervously. Anders rocked his hips up into the tight embrace of her cunt, moaning and 
all too eager to unravel under the gorgeous, generous, giggling woman in his lap.

Isabela slid off him at his urging, and sat back on his knees with a silly and sated grin. Anders 
kneaded at her ample hips with one hand, and pumped a frantic fist about his cock with the other. 
Isabela arched in his lap, dragging her hands through the sheen of sweat on her skin, and down 
through the damp patch of curls and the folds of her sex. Anders worried his bottom lip between his 
teeth, and the sight sent him over the edge.

His climax hit him like the tide, flaring and fading with every unsteady jerk of his hips that painted 
his stomach white as sea foam. Anders came with a curse, drowning in an ocean of ecstasy for a 
breathless moment that sent heat cascading out from the pit of his stomach and into his legs, his arms, 
his fingers and toes, burning up on his face and escaping out his mouth in a moan turned ragged 
laugh.

Anders slouched in his chair, enjoying the aftershocks that rippled through him and kept his skin 
flush, his muscles weak and trembling, his body even more exhausted than it had been after their 
battle on the coast. Isabela climbed off him, and ruffled his sweat-soaked hair before she went to 
gather up her clothes. "See, sweet thing?" Isabela chuckled, shimmying into her smalls and snapping 
them against her hips. "A little fun never hurt anyone."

Isabela pulled her tunic over her head, and Anders watched her shake out her raven hair and tie her 
scarf back about the curls. Gorgeous. The thought came with an uncomfortable knot about his 
stomach Anders didn't understand. "It might have hurt my chair," Anders said when he found his 
breath. "I'm afraid if I get up it's going to fall apart."

"You too, it looks like," Isabela grinned over her shoulder at him, snatching up her trousers. She
threw herself down on his table, and rolled them onto her long legs. It was playful, and carefree, and something Anders doubted he'd tire of easily. The knot about his stomach tightened, and Anders sat up. The air felt chill on his skin, still dripping with sweat and come. Anders stumbled over to his supply shelves to find a rag and dry himself off.

"So this was a onetime thing?" Anders asked, inexplicably ill at ease despite having the best time of his brief stay in Kirkwall.

"Don't go bringing feelings into this, sweet thing," Isabela warned him, looking up from the boot she was wedging her foot into.

"I wasn't," Anders said quickly, but it felt a lie, and the anxiety persisted, and then suddenly clicked. Feelings. Anders looked down at his hands, and turned them over to stare at the faint outline of his veins at his wrists. Justice didn't care about sex. He cared about feelings. The realization made Anders feel sick for no discernible reason. He knew it wasn't safe to get attached to anyone. Maker, the last time it had happened, Anders had tried to kill himself, and yet...

It didn't matter. That part of his life was over. Justice was right. Anders picked up his scattered clothes, and was lacing up his trousers by the time Isabela had finished dressing. She twirled her pauldrons around her finger by their broken strap, dark thighs an attractive accent to the black leather of her armor through her torn greaves. "That's what I like to see," Isabela grinned, "Flushed face, heaving bosom, sappy smiles. It's a good look for you. You should keep it."

"Bosom?" Anders repeated, kneading self-consciously at his chest, "Really? That's what you're going with? You couldn't have picked... I don't know, chest or something?"

"Bosom's a good word!" Isabela argued unapologetically. "Right up there with busty and buxom."

"I guess it could be worse," Anders allotted.

"That's the spirit," Isabela winked, "Speaking of, he enjoy the show?"

"I'm not answering that," Anders said, if only because he couldn't. Justice's lack of a response to sex didn't necessarily mean he didn't have any feelings on it, but that didn't mean Anders could ask him.

"Bored now," Isabela faked a yawn, her face still split with a smile, "Be good to you, Sparky. I'll see you around."

Isabela left. Anders locked up behind her, and finished collecting and shrugging into his clothes. He dragged his exhausted self over to his cot and climbed into bed, but despite aching muscles and weary bones sleep didn't claim him immediately. Anders lay abed, his mother's pillow a comforting scratch on his cheek, Leandra's quilt draped over him, and thought of Justice.

Anders didn't regret it. Maker, he didn't. Ever since Justice had brought up the plight of mages, Anders hadn't been able to get the cause out of his head. Justice was justice. He was the literal embodiment of the ideal. If he disapproved of something, it was wrong. Anders trusted him wholeheartedly, and he knew that whatever Justice pushed him towards was the right thing for them to do.

And then Anders thought of Justice's anxiety clutching at him when Anders' eyes lingered a little too long on Hawke or Isabela. Justice was right. Anders knew he was right. Anders had lost enough. Just the loss of his pants this afternoon had driven Anders near to tears. Losing another person he let himself care for would ruin him.
It wasn't anything new. Anders' love life had been one shallow encounter after the next in the Circle. He could live that way again. Anders closed his eyes and took a steadying breath, and fell asleep resenting things he'd never said, and would never again have the chance to say.

A dip into darkness later, and Anders woke rested. There was a pleasant ache in his back and legs, and stretching was so obscenely pleasurable Anders moaned. Last night had been worth it. Immensely, absolutely, irrevocably worth it. Anders pushed the ruminations of the previous night away, and brought to mind a handful of memories of Isabela squirming in his lap, gold glittering on her neck, sweat running down the cleft between her breasts, and grinned.

Anders was alright. He was okay. He had a purpose, and thanks to the Coterie he had a means of fulfilling it. Anders climbed out of his creaking cot, and went about his day. Morning took him to the Collective, where he told Selby of Lilley, and the possibility of securing access to the templars' lyrium tunnels. Selby promised to get him back in touch with Bancroft, and from there it was more waiting. Lunch was with Varric, and the rest of the day was reserved for his patients until evening rolled around, and Anders packed up to head to the Hanged Man for Wicked Grace.

A palm full of fire lit the caverns of Darktown, and led Anders to the lift, where a steady crank dragged him up into Lowtown. Not for the first time, Anders hated that the downtrodden in Kirkwall were literally trodden upon. It wasn't just that the city's many statues didn't so much as speak of oppression as shout it at the top of their metaphorical lungs. It was that Kirkwall had been built to enslave. The layout was purposefully confusing and disorienting; it was meant to inspire fear in the populace, and it worked.

Anders swore there were times he could hear whispers. Generations of slaves who had suffered under Tevinter's rule: their echoes lingering like dust upon the stone and crying out for justice. Dust motes hung in the rays of silver cast by the moons, and only seemed to confirm Anders' thoughts. He held a hand out to catch the light from Luna and Satina, and thought the play of silver over his paled skin was nothing if not an exquisite-

"Justice?" Anders said aloud, and felt the thoughts subside. He grinned. The lyrium was tucked safely away in his satchel, distilled and bound in glass, but still enough to draw Justice's eyes towards the mortal world. "You can stay, you know. I like feeling what you're thinking."

Anders felt inexplicably anxious, and pinpointed the emotion to his spirit. "It doesn't make you a demon, Justice," Anders guessed that had to be part of his fear, considering how concerned Justice had seemed with the possibility before. "I'm offering. We can talk with Merrill, but I don't think you're hurting me by being in control of my-our body. This is us, Justice. It's not me anymore. It's not you anymore. We're never going to figure this out if we don't work together."

Anders swore Justice grumbled. He didn't have any other explanation for the odd shudder that played across his shoulder and set Anders rolling them to chase away the sensation. Anders laughed to himself, and made the rest of the trip to the Hanged Man feeling better.

The truth of Varric's words cut Anders surprisingly deep when he walked into Varric's room at the Hanged Man and found Bethany staring wistfully at the door. Her face lit up at his entrance, and she shoved back the chair beside her for him. It was where Anders always sat. Varric sat at the front of the table, Hawke at his right, Isabela at his left. On Isabela's side, there was Fenris, an empty chair for Aveline, and on Hawke's side there was Bethany, and Anders. An empty chair for Merrill sat at the opposite head.

Everyone but Aveline and Merrill had already arrived. Isabela and Varric were talking, and Hawke seemed as included in the conversation as Hawke could get. Anders looped his satchel over the back of his chair, and did the same with his coat before he took a seat. Bethany grinned and shifted in her
chair to face him. "We were worried you weren't going to show."

"Speak for yourself," Fenris muttered.

"No one asked you," Bethany hissed, leaning forward on the table to frown at the elf, "I can't believe you told Aveline about Anders' blood magic. He was saving Saemus."

"Mages will always find an excuse to justify their need for power," Fenris said. "Sooner or later, it will lead to ruin."

"There are mages who go their whole lives without ever falling prey to a demon," Bethany said. "Many of them, in fact."

"I see only one," Fenris said.

"Justice is not a demon," Anders said.

"Keep telling yourself that," Fenris snorted, "You're convincing no one else."

"What do you know?" Bethany demanded. "You're not a mage. I think we can tell the difference between spirits and demons better than you can. And that's beside the point. You saw how he used it. You know he's not like the magisters you saw in Tevinter."

"He is but one step away," Fenris said, and looked back to Anders. "You should have lived in Tevinter. You'd be happier there."

"You're probably right," Anders snorted, thought involuntarily of Amell, and forced himself to end the conversation. He grabbed a mug off the center of the table, and interrupted Varric's conversation with Isabela, "Varric?" Anders gestured at the pitchers set out on the table. "Which one?"

"The one on your left-you got it." Varric said. "Peach this time, hope that's alright."

"It's fine," Anders poured himself a drink of the non-alcoholic cider. It wasn't his favorite flavor but it was free, and Anders wasn't complaining. Aveline wandered in, and stole Fenris' focus, which made the evening more bearable. Norah came up to take their orders for the evening, and was serving food a half-hour later when Merrill finally stumbled in.

"Creators!" Merrill exclaimed, bare feet padding across the wood floor on her way to her chair. "Am I late? Oh I hope I'm not late. I got lost."

"Right on time, Daisy," Varric assured her.

Varric shuffled, cut, and dealt. Anders was, always had been, and likely always would be, rubbish at Wicked Grace. He picked up his cards, and organized the mixed suits at random in his hand. He had the Angels of truth and charity, the Knight of sacrifice, a Serpent of sadness, and a Dagger of war. Anders discarded the Dagger, drew another in its place, and sighed.

Isabela flashed him a grin across the table for the tell. Despite himself, Anders grinned back. Out of all of them, Isabela was undeniably the best at Wicked Grace. The woman had no sleeves to her dress, but there was no doubt in Anders' mind she managed to cheat in spite of the fact. Varric had the benefit of his coat, and Anders knew a few cards had to lose themselves in the dwarf's massive cuffs, but he was never quick enough to catch him, or anyone.

Hawke doubtless would have been as good as Isabela, if not for Bethany. The man's face was slate, his fingers were fast, and his hands were always inexplicably good. But for a man with so many tics,
he had none in Wicked Grace, and the only one who could read him was his sister. It made it easier for the rest of them to use Beth as a gauge for what kind of hand Hawke had. Unfortunately, Bethany was almost as rubbish at Wicked Grace as Anders, and was always out early, unable to help them in later rounds.

Fenris had the face for Wicked Grace. The fact that he didn't seem to care if he won or lost only made reading him worse. The only upside was that Fenris didn't have the dexterity for the game. His hands were random, though generally better than Anders' if only because the elf seemed to be better at accounting for the randomness of the deck. Aveline paid more attention to trying to catch the others at cheating than her own hand and suffered for it.

Merrill very clearly had only the vaguest grasp of the game, and was constantly asking for reminders on the rules, but managed to do surprisingly well. Anders couldn't help wondering if she was a fast learner and a convincing liar, or just obscenely lucky. In despite of Aveline and Fenris, Anders liked Tuesdays nights at the Hanged Man. Isabela and Varric were good friends, he adored Beth, and Merrill was a treasure. Hawke was Hawke, and after yesterday afternoon, Anders still wasn't in the mood for him.

Beth was out first, as usual. She'd done a decent job ruining her brother beforehand, and Hawke was out next. Anders probably should have cut his losses, but he kept on even after Fenris folded. Isabela followed him, no doubt on some cue from Varric. Anders quit then, down five bits, and focused on his food while the survivors hashed it out. Merrill was still in the game, and Anders couldn't help hoping she folded soon. He wanted to talk to her about Justice before she got too tipsy to consider the proposal seriously.

Merrill sobered enough to stand up straight without his help, even if her wide green eyes were still blinking hard and slow. "Is everything alright?"

Merrill reached into his satchel and pulled out the small vial of lyrium the Coterie had given him. "I could use your help."

"Of course! Oh, no one ever wants my help. Not ever. Not even my clan. Of course I will." Merrill clamped her hands over her mouth, and Anders dropped the vial back into satchel. "Of course I'll help! Of course I will."

Her exclamation drew Bethany out of the room, and had the girl raising a curious eyebrow at Merrill's ramble. She stole in between them and frowned at him. "Help with what?"

"Justice," Merrill blurted.

"Shhh," Anders hissed, "You know how the others feel about him. I don't need people talking about this."
"You're really going to do it, then?" Bethany asked. "Summon him?"

"I'm going to try," Anders said.

Bethany glanced over her shoulder at the door, but no one else followed. "... I want to help."
Hello everyone. Welcome back. This chapter is sadly uneventful for 69. I'm seriously considering adding in the latest Apples chapter as a chapter in Accursed Ones just so that chapter 69 lines up with Anders and Isabela because I am ridiculously immature. We hit 500 Kudos! Thank you so much for supporting this story. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 6 Ferventis Early Afternoon
Kirkwall Darktown; Anders' Clinic

Anders' clinic had never been more crowded. The Coterie was everywhere, and they wanted him to heal everyone. The cut-throat cult was nothing like the Dog Lords. Andraste preserve him, Anders liked the flea ridden gang. He liked every ridiculous pun Bree and Manus and all the others were so fond of using, whether they were sniffing, barking, or marking.

There was an 'in' about it. A camaraderie that reminded Anders of the Wardens that Hawke's motley crew didn't have. He liked spending a day at the Kennels after a gang war broke out in the streets. He liked healing everyone and listening to Cor regale him with outrageously exaggerated stories while Conall filled in the blanks with a few kibbles of truth.

He liked being welcome somewhere. Wholeheartedly: without judgment, sidelong looks, or wary whispers, no matter how he'd earned them. The Dog Lords didn't know him for a maleficar or an abomination, and Anders didn't doubt they'd treat him differently if they did, but as long as it was unspoken he could pretend. So he did. And he liked them. And they liked him.

It was an easy alliance, and not at all like what Anders had with the Coterie. Lilley had spoken to Harlan, who was apparently in charge of the decision, and the Coterie had agreed to work with him. The sudden influx of patients had been overwhelming. It wasn't anything like the Dog Lords. Aside from the gang wars, Anders wasn't just treating injuries with the Dog Lords, he was treating poverty. He healed the grippe, cholera, dysentery, malnutrition, food poisoning, and all the other struggles that came from a life lived in the sewers.

With the Coterie, Anders was treating affluence. He healed the gout, venereal diseases, overnutrition, anemia, cirrhosis, and the all the other things a man might be more susceptible to after a life of excess. Worse, the Coterie didn't limit themselves to gang wars. They were always fighting, to the death in Darktown, to the pain in Lowtown, to first blood in Hightown, and always injured. Anders tried to remember their faces, but there were more than he could count.

They were like a swarm. Old men, young women, children, humans, elves, and dwarves: all at the Coterie's debt or disposal, and Anders wasn't any different. It was exhausting, but it was worth it. It was for the cause. No more running. No more living in fear. No more of the words that had always felt synonymous with 'apostate' to him. Anders was more than that now.

Maleficar. Abomination. They were weighted terms, and as far as Anders was concerned he was the only one allowed to use them. To own them. From anyone else, they were a condemnation, not an
acknowledgment of vigilance, of victory, of sacrifice.

Justice had promised. They could fight. They could make a difference. For Karl. For Anders. For every mage that had ever suffered at a templar's hands. No more careless dismissals of injustice, accepting it as the norm or waiting for someone else to do something. Anders was someone. Anders could do something, but Maker, he couldn't do it alone.

He needed Justice. He needed the spirit's iron in his spine and the veilfire in his eyes. The sense of purpose and direction that kept Anders from running to the docks and to a boat to Llomerryn, where he wouldn't have to think of Karl, or Amell's brothers, or the girls taking his cohosh at the Gallows, or Selby's sister, or Bardel's brother, or Evon's heritage, or Evelina's regrets, or Natia's son, or Darrian's sacrifice, or Alim and Melissa's escape, or Solona's struggle, or anyone but Anders.

Anders had thought of Anders enough. He'd spent his whole life thinking of nothing but, and it hadn't made a difference. Biff had been right about him. Anders had lived his life on a yoyo, thinking he was making progress when each escape attempt got him a little further before he was snapped back to the Circle. Anders was done with it. Rylock was right about him, too. He'd never submit again. Justice wouldn't let him.

Anders rolled down the sleeves of his plain woolen tunic over slender wrists and a handful of scars from Amaranthine and the Wounded Coast. Anders had tried to follow Amell's advice. He'd tried to keep a single casting scar above the bend in his elbow, but the reality of it was far from simple. If Anders was just after dinner in Darktown he could do it, but there hadn't been time to worry about the aesthetics of his forearms in Amaranthine, or with Saemus' life on the line. Anders shrugged into his coat, and comforted himself with the thought that no one would know the man beneath it.

Anders had spent a month in his new clinic, and couldn't help thinking he was pushing his luck. According to Bardel the raids were twice a month, on the second day of the second week, and the second to last day of the month. Anders had missed last months' raids, but the next was due in three days. Anders closed his clinic when the templars came to Darktown. His lantern would have drawn them like moths to flame.

He tried to spend those days gathering herbs in the forest, on the mountain side, along the coast, and not thinking of the refugees suffering under the templars' routine 'practice drills' for their green recruits. Failing that, Anders spent those days in flight and tempting fate in the Gallows. The tunnels weren't enough. Anders and Bancroft agreed. They needed a framework. A system. An underground.

Where they disagreed was on how to form the framework. Anders wanted the mages kept within the Collective. Bancroft wanted them kept outside it. To hear Bancroft tell it, the Collective risked enough getting letters in and out of the Gallows. Selby owned the packaging company. If they left a trail that led back to it, Selby would hang for helping apostates, and Maker only knew the fate her sister Elsa would suffer if Meredith decided to find her guilty by association.

The company was the only reason the Collective in Kirkwall had access to their allies in other countries. It was their only steady source of income. Without it and Selby, everything would fall apart. There was nowhere else for apostates to gather or visit without attracting attention. It was too invaluable to risk. Anders agreed, for the most part, but that didn't mean he wanted to put his patients at risk instead.

They couldn't run freed mages straight from the Gallows to Ostwick or Cumberland. They'd needed supplies. Some of the mages might be weak from being 'disciplined' by the templars. They might need days or even weeks to rest and recuperate before they'd be fit for travel. They'd need shelter. They'd need someone to give it to them, and Bancroft suggested the many patients Anders had
indebted to him throughout his stay in Kirkwall.

Anders wasn't inclined to agree. His patients were refugees. The worst of them were barely scraping by in Darktown, and the best of them were barely doing the same in Lowtown. They didn't have the coin, the space, or even the courage to help apostates, and when the penalty was hanging, Anders couldn't blame them. Anders didn't have patients from Hightown. The closest he ever saw were the girls from the Rose and the Coterie, and neither of them were about to join the underground.

In the argument with Bancroft that had ensued, Anders had thought of Lirene and Cor. They were the only two in all of Kirkwall who might have the means and the inclination to shelter apostates. They already had a history with Anders, but Anders had no idea where their generosity ended, and a part of him was afraid to ask. They weren't just resources. They were his friends. Damn that, they'd been his rescuers his first few weeks in Kirkwall.

Anders had promised to think about it, and had walked out on the conversation. They didn't have access to the tunnels yet. There was still all of Justinian and Solace for the Collective to find other resources. If Bancroft could make inroads with the Crimson Weavers or the Redwaters, they wouldn't have to worry about apostates staying in Kirkwall. They could recover in the hold of a ship. And if not them, there was still Samson, assuming anyone could find the man.

Anders had spent an entire night wandering East Lowtown, searching one foundry hex after the next, to no avail. He'd asked Bardel and Selby about it again, and they insisted Samson was there, but the man kept a low profile. The rumor was that Samson was in debt to the Coterie for supplying his lyrium addiction, and Anders could understand the need to stay hidden, but damned if it wasn't frustrating.

Anders had to hope he'd get in contact with Samson eventually. They needed all the help they could get. The Collective in Kirkwall made a mockery of the word. They weren't a collective at all; they were a smattering of desperate apostates and sympathizers Anders could count on his hands, scurrying like rats at the first sight of templars. The extent of their defiance to the Chantry was limited to passing notes and smuggling tinctures and poultices.

They'd hang for it all the same. The thought angered Anders, but it infuriated Justice. Anders could feel him like a fire in his chest, a weight to his thoughts and in his head that was almost disorienting in its intensity, but he couldn't talk to him. He couldn't ask his opinion. He couldn't share his own. For a spirit so obsessed with justice, Justice didn't seem to care about the injustices he'd suffered from their joining, but Anders did.

Anders made the walk to Lowtown with the thought cemented firmly in the forefront of his mind. His satchel bounced against his hip with every step across the wildly slanting streets and alleys of the crooked city. The lyrium vial was nestled in with everything else that was important to Anders, but unlike the letters, the journal, the pillow, this he could face. This he could fix.

The trip to the alienage took Anders through rubbish-ridden alleys where children and cutpurses and child cutpurses spent their days, through fly-invested markets thick with the pungent scent of rotting fish, through crowded courtyards bustling with swindlers loudly peddled their wares in carts that rattled over the uneven stone streets. There was a feel to Lowtown, one of filth and chaos and passive poverty.

The city and its citizens were resigned to their lot in life. Anders hated that he could relate. He yearned for that lackadaisical life as much as he resented ever having lived it. Anders slid the chain of his Warden's pendant between his fingers; that man was as dead as Mhairi, and Lyna, and Sidona, and Sigrun. Anders could mourn him with all the rest, when he was ready.
Anders walked down the crumbling steps to the Kirkwall Alienage, and couldn't help smiling. There was beauty here Anders didn't need Justice to be able to see. It wasn't in the dilapidated apartments, so filthy they looked Tainted, crammed and stacked together and vanishing up into the sky. It wasn't in the pinched and haggard elven faces, their reflective eyes following him across the courtyard at his intrusion. It was in the tree.

Anders didn't know the name of it, and could just imagine Amell or Velanna giving him a long-winded lecture on elven lore. He didn't need to know the name to know that it was beautiful. The truck was massive, bigger than some of the hovels in the alienage, and the elves had painted the burnished bark in red and white and green and all manner of fanciful colors. Littered at the base were candles and incense and all manner of offerings. The canopy of the tree covered the alienage almost entirely; the sun caught in the leaves, and the light that cast through the alienage was tinted emerald and almost reminiscent of the Fade.

Anders thought it was fitting considering one elf in particular. He made his way to an apartment complex in the back of the alienage, and let himself into the foyer through a bronze door inlaid with iron leaves. A group of adolescent elves stopped in the middle of their conversation and eyed him warily when he made his way to the stairwell, their eyes glinting in the light of the sconces that lined the walls. Anders could feel the Fade breathing in it, and couldn't help but feel a little proud of Merrill for daring to offer it.

Anders made the climb up five flights of creaking wooden stairs to the top floor. Merrill's apartment was wedged into the back of complex, a knotted wooden door marked by a painting of a halla and a few wandering vines. Anders knocked, and listened bemusedly to the stumblings and startled shouts from within before Merrill heaved the door open with a wide grin. "You're here! Come in! I'll find something relatively clean for you to sit on."

The little elf hurried back inside, tripped over a book left lying on the floor, and went stumbling into her living room with a startled yelp. She picked herself up easily enough, straightening her scarf and fixing a few strands of her wild raven hair. Anders followed her inside, dodging a rumpled rug, a scurrying rat, and a stack of books. Barring the clutter, Merrill's apartment was beautiful. The elf was an artist, and it showed.

Her walls were lined with watercolor paintings of Sundermount and Ferelden, of halla and elven aravels. Taking up the entire desk before the fireplace was a work in progress of the tree Anders had seen in the center of the alienage. Assorted paints and all the tools to make them occupied the table to Anders' left, joined with brushes and palettes and parchment that waterfalled off the table and scattered across the floor.

A bronze chandelier humming with Veilfire cast the room in a watery emerald light, and contrasted sharply with the wood-born fire crackling in the fireplace. To Anders' right were crates and barrels he wasn't even going to begin to guess the contents of, and stacked up against the walls were bookshelves overflowing with every little book and knickknack Merrill had brought with her to Kirkwall.

The back of the living room held the table and shelves that made up Merrill's kitchen. A few windows were set high in the wall, filled with flower pots growing cohosh and other herbs for Anders' clinic. A ladder was pressed up against the wall, a small watering can beside it, and the entire apartment smelled faintly of burnt pine and fresh soil. A final table sat across the kitchen, surrounded by assortment of chairs that boasted real padding.

A sheath of cerulean encased Merrill's hand, and she pulled out a chair for him with a tug of telekinetic energies. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?" Merrill asked, winding and
unwinding the emerald scarf at her neck, "I have..." Merrill glanced at the table that made up her kitchen. Empty. She let a ripple of elemental magic play across her palm and shrugged, "Water?"

"I'm good," Anders set his satchel on the table, and draped his coat over the back of his chair.

"I'm sorry about the rats," Merrill said, with a nervous tap of her foot on the knotwood floors. "I thought I'd gotten all of their hidey holes."

"Merrill, I live in Darktown," Anders reminded her. "Remember?"

"Oh, I know," Merrill tugged at her scarf again, "I just-Elgar'nan it's such a mess in here. It's clean sometimes, I swear."

"Dark. Town." Anders said again, leaning back against with the table with a laugh.

"I know, I know," Merrill wrung her hands together, "I just-I'm still not used to hosting people. I know I should be but-I'm babbling. Bethany is already here, she's using the washroom. I... um... did you bring the lyrium?"

"Yep," Anders flipped open his satchel and rummaged through it.

A bit of movement to his right marked Bethany appearing at the threshold to Merrill's backroom. "You made it," Bethany said with a smile, taking a chair for herself and sitting down at the table. "I was talking to Merrill about her paintings before you got here. Aren't they beautiful? I feel like they should be hanging up in the Viscount's Keep."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want them there," Merrill said quickly. "I wouldn't be able to look at them then. The guards get angry when I wander up to Hightown."

"They're marvelous, Merrill," Anders said, retrieving the small blue vial. A crackle of blue ran over the back of his palm when he handed it over. "That fire downstairs was brilliant, too. The rest of the elves are alright with you?"

"I don't know, I suppose," Merrill shrugged, wringing her scarf in one hand and spinning the lyrium vial in the other, "How do you know something like that?"

"No one's turned you over to the templars, yet," Bethany pointed out, a small surge of elemental magic refilling the empty cup in front of her. She took a drink of the conjured water and grinned, "That has to count for something."

"I'm trying to be careful," Merrill said, only taking a seat for herself when Anders pulled out a chair for her and waved her to it. "The Keepers know not to work magic around sh-human villages... but it's hard to remember sometimes. No ice when it gets too hot. No light when it gets dark. I'm always forgetting little things."

"Oh, I envy you sometimes," Bethany sighed, planting one elbow on the table and draping her head in her hand, "No Circle... it sounds so nice."

"Magic is a gift of the Creators, why wouldn't we use it?" Merrill blinked wide green eyes at the thought. "It just seems so wasteful that humans lock their mages away where they can't do any good. We could help so much if only they would let us..." Merrill trailed off, rubbing her thumb nail against the cork in the vial with a faraway look in her eyes.

"You get away from your brother alright?" Anders asked Bethany, taking his own seat and turning his happy moan into a hard exhale. Cushioned chairs were Maker-sent. Or Creators-sent. Anders
wasn't feeling terribly picky at the moment.

"He's on a job," Bethany explained.

"How close are you to affording your expedition?" Anders asked.

Bethany snorted, and her face scrunched up into a frown, her voice pitching down several octaves, "Not your business."

Anders laughed so hard he snorted and choked. "That was spot on."

The joke went over Merrill's head, and she blinked confusedly between them.

"He's-" Bethany giggled, and raised a hand to cover her mouth, "I'm mean. Garrett's just fine, really. He stopped trying to keep me locked up with Gamlen and Mother after our fight, but he still doesn't like it if I stay out after dark. This shouldn't take that long, should it? I mean we're just going to sit down and talk with Justice, right?"

"That's the plan," Anders reached back into his satchel to find the list he'd made for Merrill. "So... before we do anything crazy, if this works, just try to be careful with him. He's not dangerous, but he's pretty sensitive. I have a list of things I want you to ask him. They're sort of ridiculously personal, but I really need to know, and I don't know how many chances I'm going to get."

Anders handed Merrill the list; the bright red of her lacquered nails was a sharp contrast to the mottled brown parchment. "... Sex... relationships... Collective..." Merrill mumbled while she read, her face impressively enigmatic. She stopped and looked up at him, "Who are Nathaniel and Velanna?"

Friends I trusted with my life, whose lives I probably took. "Just... friends," Anders said with a tiny shrug.

"Oh, right, personal," Merrill set the list down on the table, and ran her thumb up the vial to pop off the cork. The cloying scent of lyrium reached him, and Anders felt a shiver run up his spine in response. The song was there, as faint as Chantry bells in Darktown, but he heard it. Merrill sniffed it, "It's not very concentrated. If not for what happened with Fenris, I wouldn't expect this to summon anything... I don't think this would even be enough to help me dream again."

"What do you mean help you dream again?" Anders asked, sitting upright.

"You know," Merrill shrugged, "With the blood magic."

"No, I don't," Anders felt a cold knot growing in the pit of his stomach, "What?"

"It takes away your dreams," Merrill explained. "Makes it harder to enter the Beyond. I have a theory that a vial of lyrium before bed could augment my connection to the Beyond and let me dream again, but it's just a theory. The Keeper never let me test it. 'Da'len you walk a dangerous path, and there will be consequences'. She didn't understand. I would sacrifice anything for the People, even my dreams."

"I can't imagine giving that up," Bethany said with a shiver. "My dreams? The Fade? It sounds too much like Tranquility."

"Are you serious?" Anders demanded, an involuntary hand falling to where Amell's grimoire was latched to his hip. Andraste's knickers, what else hadn't Anders had a chance to learn about blood magic? "You're telling me blood magic is why I haven't been dreaming?"
"I don't know, but I would think so," Merrill pushed the cork back into the vial and set it aside for later. "How long have you been practicing?"

"Flames, I don't know," Anders pressed his fingers into his forehead and tried to think, "... Nine or ten months?"

"I don't think so, then," Merrill said after a moment's consideration, "It took me a year of heavy use before my dreams started fading. Maybe this is something else?" Merrill stood up, barefeet padding across the hardwood floors to her bookshelves, "When did it start?"

"After Justice," Anders recalled, with a miserable thought of Compassion and the dreams he missed sharing with her. "... Maker, I can't believe it's been nine months. Justice and I should be expecting our demon baby any day now." Anders joked, and won a giggle from Bethany.

"I think the excess of mana in your blood would mean your children would be mages, but I don't think they would have any special connection to spirits," Merrill said over her shoulder while going through the tomes on her shelf.

"It was a joke Merrill." Anders explained.

"Oh!" Merrill ran a sheepish hand through her sable hair, "That makes more sense I suppose. I'm sorry. I'm always missing things."

"No, you know, it's a good thing to bring up." Anders reassured her. "I'd want to know, you know, if kids were a thing I could have."

"Mages can have families," Bethany said with an unexpected fire. "My father proved that. It's hard, but you don't have to act like it's impossible."

"No, I meant they're literally not a thing I can have." Anders explained. "Warden blood and all that. Makes you sterile. And doomed to an early death, ravenous hunger, and regular night terrors, but the uniforms are snazzy. So you know. Not all bad."

"I'm so sorry," Bethany said sincerely.

"Oh I'm not complaining," Anders shrugged. "Much. So hey... I'm surprised you don't agree with your brother about the blood magic."

Bethany cradled her cup in her hands, a hard exhale spilling from her lips, "I do."

"Wait what?" Anders asked, suddenly sickened. An involuntary memory of Velanna's reaction to him after he'd joined with Justice came to mind. They were mages. They were supposed to understand.

"I'm sorry," Bethany said quickly, "Both of you. I really am, but I think it's dangerous and a sin in the eyes of the Maker. But so are so many other things! I think the Maker is merciful and He sees what's in our hearts. As long as your intentions are good I think He'll forgive anything."

"I don't want the Maker's forgiveness," Anders said hotly. "If anything the Maker should want mine. It's not a sin to want the same freedoms as any other man and go to any lengths to obtain them."

Bethany groaned and set down her cup to run her hands through her hair, "Oh, I don't want to fight about this, please. I'm not judging you, Anders. I think you're good person."

"No, see, this is exactly what your brother was saying," Anders told himself to let it go. He didn't
have many friends to begin with, and even fewer mage friends. He shouldn't have been driving a wedge between them, but he couldn't stop himself. "You can't just separate me from my blood magic. It's part of who I am. If you don't like it, you don't like me."

Bethany kept a hand in her hair and sighed at the table, "I don't know what you want me to say, Anders. We're friends. I don't want this coming between us."

Anders didn't want it coming between them either, but it festered. It felt no better than someone claiming to accept him as a man but not a mage. It wasn't a part of himself Anders wanted ignored, and he couldn't help running his thumb over the spine of Amell's grimoire. Maker, it must have been lonely for him. He forced out a smile all the same, "Right. Me neither."

Anders felt a shiver run up his spine for the lie and rolled it out of his shoulder. Merrill came back with a massive tome the length of her chest and the width of Isabela's and set it on the table with a heavy thud. "I think this is it," Merrill said, heaving open the metal cover. The fall of the pages at its opening reminded Anders of a flutter of wings, and Merrill caught them in the middle. "Here. The awakening of spirits from reformed wisps, wandering the Void before they find their place in the Beyond."

"What does that even mean?" Anders asked.

"You said Justice filters your connection to the Beyond. That you two are one in both realms," Merrill tapped the yellowed parchment with a red nail, singling in on a depiction of a ball of light in a vast expanse of black. "You should wake to his realm if that's true, I think. It's a theory. You said it took a ritual to send you to the Beyond after your joining, but that you went to another spirit's realm. I think maybe, it's a theory, that the reason you can't dream is because Justice has no place to wake to in the Beyond. You did say you met him in the realm of a spirit of Pride. He should have his own realm, with his own purpose, but I don't think he did. I think he found his way out of the Void seeking injustice, and found purpose in another spirit's realm without enough memories to shape his own. Which would make him a young spirit. Very young."

"Are you saying..." Anders sat back, trying to make sense of himself and the two minds coiled together in his head, "... Maker, are you saying Nate was right?" Anders choked on a chuckle, "A little self-righteous baby of Justice crawling around the Fade? No wonder your knickers were in such a twist when he said that! Andraste's tits, haha, that's----Maker, that's horrible..."

Anders cut off his callous laughter and stared down at his calloused hands. A young spirit. They'd ripped a young spirit of Justice out of the Fade before he'd had even found his own cause to champion, twisted and influenced him, and then Anders had joined with him and afflicted countless horrors on a spirit without even enough memories to shape its own realm. Maker's sweet saving grace, Compassion had been with Anders for most of his life and had barely been able to handle the Taint. What had he done to Justice?

Bethany squeezed his upper arm, and Anders looked up into her amber eyes, crinkled in concern. "Anders? Why is it horrible? Spirits aren't like humans. They're ideals. Their age doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters!" Anders shook her off. "He's not just an ideal. He's a person! Maker, he's a bloody child, and we kidnapped him from the Fade and his home... I think I might sick. I feel like a bloody templar."

"What?!" Bethany's cup clattered out of her hands, and she caught it before setting it aside. "What are you talking about? That wasn't you. You told me the Pride demon bound him outside the Fade. You've been good to him! You're his friend, and I bet he appreciated having one."
A sudden realization dropped Anders elbows to the table and buried his face in his hands, "Andraste's holy knickerweasels, I had sex with a child in my head. I'm no better than Gerod."

"Who?" Merrill blinked.

"Stop that!" Bethany shoved him, and a corresponding rumble coiled around Anders' spine. "It's different! You know it is! Merrill, tell him it's different."

"Oh, absolutely different!" Merrill agreed eagerly, flipping back a page. Her nails scratched down the page to a passage Anders didn't bother trying to read. "I think, it's a theory, but spirits form from wisps. Expressions of thought and ideals gathered over eons. So you see even if he awakened recently he would have a full understanding of his purpose, just not how to pursue it. Spirits have no memories. That's what their realms are for. They can't really grow, they just find a place for themselves. And Justice has that with you! So really you're like his realm. I think. Maybe."

"You see?" Bethany said.

Anders threw himself back in his chair with a groan. His shoulders were tense and his stomach was turning, and Anders couldn't make sense of any of it. He felt wretched.

"Stop it," Bethany pinched the arm Anders left dangling over the chair. "You're overreacting. Look, that's what we're here for, right? We'll just ask him. It'll be fine."

"That reminds me!" Merrill abandoned the book to head for her desk, "Are we setting up a binding circle as a precaution or-"

"No!" Anders jerked upright and tasted mana in his throat at the shout. Maker, no. Never again would they suffer such injustice. They wouldn't be controlled. They wouldn't be contained. They wouldn't be bound. There was nothing and no one that would hold them. That could hold them. That should hold them.

Merrill was staring at him, emerald eyes wide and reflecting with veilfire. Anders took a deep breath rolled the tension from his shoulders. "No. I'm sorry, Merrill, I didn't mean to shout. Justice doesn't need anything like that. He'll be fine, I promise."

"He's been fine the few times we've met him," Bethany said soothingly. "I think the veilfire in here will help keep him calm, after what we saw at the Bone Pits. Did you set that up just for this, Merrill?"

"Oh!" Merrill twisted a foot into the floorboards, "Yes, I suppose. Um... Well alright, I think I can keep him calm. There's not enough lyrium for a proper ritual of any sort, so..." Merrill picked up the vial and flicked it before handing it over to him.

"What?" Anders snorted, unable to help noticing the flicker of blue on the back of his palm when he took it, "You just want me to drink it? Just like that? You think it will be that easy?"

"All he had to do was be near Fenris," Merrill said. "Lyrium and well, blood, have always been able to summon spirits. It might not work in the future, but I think for now, considering you haven't had any since you joined, and Justice has never experienced it, it should work. I don't know, really. The spirits I work with are in the Beyond, or bound to runes and idols, not people. It's all theories, but I think the lyrium will probably be overwhelming for him."

Anders swirled the lyrium into a small whirlpool in the vial, the brilliant sapphire singing as softly as it always did since he'd joined with Justice. He knew the saccharine taste and the whisper of static it left in its wake, and had tasted it on more than one occasion when Justice spoke with their voice. He
could feel it now at just the thought of drinking it, and see the whispers of sapphire that played through his veins pulled to the surface as he brought the vial to his lips.

This would work. It had to work. Anders took a deep breath, and forced a smile, "Well... bottoms up."
Hello everyone. Welcome back! Not much of a comment for this one, but I promise to get to all the comments soon and I absolutely appreciate them. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, kudos, subscriptions, and bookmarks, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 6 Ferventis Afternoon
Kirkwall Alienage; Merrill's Apartment

The vial was cold against his lips and on the tip of his tongue. The lyrium slid down the glass tube with the texture of syrup, thick and grainy, and it fell heavy on his tongue with sparks of static that shivered through his teeth, and coated the inside of his mouth with ice. The sickly sweet taste was almost nauseating in its intensity, but it was nothing beside the song. It sang his veins at the first swallow, burning him up from the inside out.

It was a cold burn; his bones felt frozen, his lungs thick with sleet, his every muscle contracting at the chill and dropping him to his knees. His chair pitched over with a clatter Anders barely heard over the song. This was his Calling, that inalienable part of himself Anders would follow to his grave. It wasn't the taint in his blood, it was the lyrium, singing in his throat with all the strength of the Chant as if it alone could turn the Maker's gaze back to man.

It was beyond exquisite, beyond beauty; it was the splendor of the Fade contained in one tiny thimble, and he ached for it. He ached for it as he had never ached for anything, not freedom nor love nor purpose. Justice lost himself to it with a moan he did not even comprehend why he made. It was a sound for mortals, but the lyrium brought him low and he felt indistinguishable from one in that ecstatic moment before he came back to himself.

Justice stared at the floor where he'd fallen; intricate knotwood patterns in the plank before him held to the whisper of the oak it once was. Fainter still was memory of two lovers carving out their initials in the bark, in defiance of an injustice that would later tear them apart, but there in the dust on the wood was one moment where they had hid from the world and all its troubles, and their love was pure.

It was louder here.

Justice sat up, trying to filter sound, sight, and sensation. Kristoff had been simpler. Kristoff had been dead. Justice had not felt the dull ache in his knees, the kinks in his neck, the dirt beneath his nails, the oil on his scalp, the sweat on his brow, the friction of his clothes and the caress of still air on his skin. He had not tasted it in his lungs. He had not felt the sting of light in his eyes. He had not lived the life of a mortal, and he did not want to do so now.

The mortals were there, singing with the same magic he recalled from his last involuntary step forward into their world. Justice knew their names from Anders' time with them, and the echoes of conversations that filtered through when Justice deigned to listen. Bethany's magic was muted, almost apart from the mortal entirely, but the Fade pulsed in Merrill. Perverted and dark, thick and cloying and queerly comforting, as was the veilfire in her hand.
"Hello again, Justice. We're sorry we called you like this. I know it's a lot to take in at once," Merrill said, a lilt to her voice Justice didn't understand the significance of but recognized as apart from her normal speech patterns, "Try to focus on one thing. Rocking back and forth helps me."

"I told Anders I had no wish to wield this form," Justice stood on Anders' legs, and felt one joint crack, the woolen fabric shift against his skin, the slight rush of air against his face at the motion. He did not need to rock. Justice set a hand on the back of Anders' chair where his coat lay draped, the feathered pauldrons a gentle abrasion against his fingers, and pulled his hand away.

... Pacing he may not be averse to.

"We know," Bethany said, while Justice walked the length of the apartment, eyes on the veilfire chandelier and not the many mortal eccentricities scattered about the room. He missed the thrill of combat and the call of lyrium, and the way both could steal his focus from himself. From Anders' self. "Believe me, we know. I feel the same way about my magic, but we don't always have a choice."

"Why would you say such a thing?" Justice demanded, halting his stride to look closer at the mage and the subtlety of her magic. It was not locked away in lyrium, severed from the Fade and weeping free at his touch. It was there, and yet not. "To wield magic is to touch the Fade at a whim. You shape this realm as my kind might the Fade. It is beautiful. It is a gift. It is not the same as what Anders and I have become."

"But neither of us have a choice about what we are," Bethany stood up, but made no effort to walk towards him. Rules of mortal engagement were still so strange. "Hiding from it isn't healthy."

"Controlling this form is not healthy for Anders," Justice argued stubbornly, and turned to Merrill where she stood holding the veilfire and rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. "I can still feel the lyrium in our veins holding me here. I do not want this. Fix it that I might release him, I beg you."

"Maybe I could try to see if you're hurting him, first?" Merrill offered in compromise, "I want to help. I really do."

"And Anders really wanted this for you," Bethany added, picking up a parchment from off the table. He was no forgotten presence in the back of Anders' mind. Justice had seen Anders write it, but he had not deigned to pay attention to the words, too unsettled by Anders' plans for them. "He has a lot of questions for you. Don't you want to answer them? To reassure him?"

"I broke his mind," Justice snarled for the memory, and for whatever reason Bethany took a step back. "My presence overwhelmed him, memories shattered like the shards of a broken mirror, reflected into eternity. I will not subject him to the same injustice again just to assuage whatever concerns he may have for me. I am no demon."

"You're a spirit of Justice," Merrill said with the same lilt from before. Justice wondered if it was meant to be soothing. She crossed the room to stand in front of him, though Justice couldn't make much sense of her features. Mortals all looked the same to him, but he appreciated the unique pull of the Fade and the breath of veilfire in Merrill. "Nothing will change that. Can I look at the spirit fire on your skin?"

"It is Anders' skin." Justice said stiffly. He could barely feel Anders beneath the lyrium coating his throat and lingering on his tongue, a sheet of ice in his stomach and a song woven through his pulse. "... but I do not believe he would be averse to contact."
"What about you?" Merrill persisted, dispelling the veilfire from her palm. It was a fascinating display of magic, the dismissal of her old spell characterized by a certainty and strength of will reminiscent of Velanna. "It's your body too."

"I am not averse to further sensation if it will help determine if I am harming Anders." Justice held out Anders' left arm. Merrill took it, her thumb against his palm and her fingers against the back of his hand. The touch was simultaneously warm and soft, and decidedly pleasant. It seemed mortals should hold hands more often.

Merrill rolled Anders' sleeve up to his shoulder, and traced over Anders' veins where the lyrium in his blood burned bright with Justice's presence. Merrill hummed quietly and turned his arm over, glancing up at his face and the spirit fire that burned in his eyes. "Do you mind if I draw some of your blood?"

"To what end?" Justice asked.

"To see how Anders' is processing the lyrium in his blood with you here, and determine whether your presence and the increased capacity for magic is giving Anders mana imbalance, and whether or not he's at risk for any of this poisoning him." Merrill explained.

"I do not mind," Justice assured her, turning his arm back over and clenching his fist to pull Anders' veins to the surface as Anders so often did for his own magic.

Merrill drew a dagger from her hip, a pull of flame at her finger tips sterilizing the edge and a breath of ice cooling it. It was always fascinating to see how mortal mages differed in their expressions of magic. There was an edge to Merrill's magic, one that cut through the Veil and left wisps wary of clinging to her spells. It was nothing beside the artistry of Anders' magic, but it was beautiful in its own right.

"Do you not mind?" Bethany spoke up, and drew Justice's gaze away from his arm. "I know it's not my place to ask - it's not on Anders' list - but you're one of the Maker's first children. I thought maybe you might not approve of blood magic."

"I can feel Anders' intent with every spell cast," Justice said, glancing down at the sting of the blade at Merrill's shallow cut. Their blood ran warm over the edge of Anders' clenched arm, the lyrium's glow diminished as it fled from their veins and left a trail of red through dark gold freckles. "He cannot lie to me as he does to himself. I trust him. I am him."

"But... The Chant teaches it's a sin in the eyes of the Maker," Bethany said; the crinkle Justice felt in his brow and the harsh edge to his next breath surprised him. It made him conscious of his own breathing, and made the next few breaths a struggle. Breath came naturally for mortals, and had to Justice in Anders' form, but there were nuances to living bodies, and on occasion he would irritate Anders' eyes forgetting to blink. "Are you okay with that?"

"Anders believes in the Chant," Justice said, while Merrill worked a spell with his blood, muttering beneath her breath in Elvish. It was an uncommon language to find in the Fade, and neither Anders nor Kristoff had known it, and thus neither did Justice. "I do not. The Chantry is a corrupt institution built upon the abuse of marginalized peoples. It encourages a tyranny of the masses and faults the oppressed for their oppression. If there is a Maker calling us to a higher purpose, it is not this."

Merrill abandoned his arm to vanish into the backroom of her apartment. Justice relaxed his arm and held it steady, watching the way the blood slid over Anders' skin, a thick crimson gel that tickled at the hairs on his forearm before dripping down to the floor. Merrill returned quickly enough, a roll of bandages clutched in her hand.
"Oh, I can get it," Bethany said, hurrying over to him. She closed her hand over the wound, and sang unsteadily with healing magic. The Fade was more threnody than melody in her; Bethany plucked her spells from across the Veil. The magic was certain, but the mana wasn't, and it aggrieved him to see a mage untouched by the Chantry shaped by it still.

There was no light in the Chant. Justice placed no faith in it, nor would he ever. It was a thing of wickedness, and Anders would have done better to write his own song to turn the Maker's gaze back to the realm of mortals if he so ardently believed such a thing to be possible. If not that, then the Chant and all its shackles would be better cast aside. Yet Anders clung to all the things that caused him pain. Justice did not understand it.

"There we go," Bethany said, squeezing his arm. The scar was faint and fresh; she was an inexperienced healer, but an earnest one.

"Thank you," Justice said. "I can draw on Anders' magic, but I am no healer."

"Oh, that's alright," Merrill set down the bundle of unused bandages on her table. "We all have our own talents. I can't heal either. It gets so messy sometimes. It's nice to have Anders around to help. And he seems fine, by the way. The transition looks a little overwhelming, and that might be a strain to go through, but as long as you're not... switching? - Is that what I should call it? Elgar'nan, why don't we know more about these things? - Well, as long as you're not switching too often he should be fine.

"I think the spirit fire you give off is discharging any excess lyrium or mana from his blood, and that's why it follows your veins," Merrill explained, taking his hand back to turn it palm up, where the veins were more pronounced against Anders' pale skin, "You see? It's not much, but you can feel it standing near you. The diffused magic, I mean. Can't you, Bethany?"

"Oh!" A flush rose to Bethany's face when she looked between them, "Yes-I-didn't know what it was. I thought it was just because Justice is a spirit, I didn't think anything about the implications. You really are brilliant, Merrill."

"Oh, no, no I-... they're just theories," Merrill cleared her throat, "I think Fenris might work the same way, with his markings. Discharging lyrium, I mean, but he won't let me test the theory. For you, I thought that might be it with the dust? When you manifested, you see, you sort of gave off a bit of something like lyrium dust - it's really very pretty. It's burnt, though, so I can't use it and I'll probably need to sweep it up... Where did my broom go..."

"You are sure of this?" Justice asked; Anders trusted both mages, and Anders did not trust easily, but Justice worried all the same. "Existing in this fashion will not harm Anders? I cannot feel him well beneath the lyrium... it is disconcerting."

"That was our fault, but we had to talk to you somehow." Bethany set her hands to Anders' chair and pulled it out from the table. "Anders has a lot of questions for you. Do you mind if we ask them?"

Justice knew little of either mortal, but they seemed earnest enough, and Anders had trusted him with them. More than that, Anders had wanted this experience for him almost as much as Justice wanted it for himself. If it made him no demon... "I do not mind."

Justice sat in the chair he was offered. Both mages sat with him, and Justice pulled the sleeve of Anders' coat into his lap to worry the suede with his fingers and narrow his focus. He was glad to have found a new cause with Anders. One worthy of them both. It was far simpler to delve into the Deep Roads and fight evil made manifest than it was to cleanse it from the hearts and minds of men. It was a noble struggle, and a righteous cause to champion, and yet...
They had not even begun such a fight in Kirkwall, and already Justice missed being able to experience the mortal world. They had both sacrificed for this, Anders perhaps more so, and Justice could allow a day of rest while their alliances took time to come to fruition. Time was one of the few mortal constructs Justice had found he did not care for. The time it took to build friendship and establish alliances felt wasteful, if not exploitive, but mortals did not have the ability to look into each other's minds and know the truth of their purpose. It had to be proven, and it was ridiculously inefficient.

Merrill picked up the parchment from off the table and cleared her throat. "Alright... um... So, I'm just going to read it how he wrote it, so pretend you're talking to him. Does that make sense?"

"Sigrun explained this concept to me," Justice said, with a flare of pride for her memory and the valor of her sacrifice, "I cannot lie, but I can make an attempt to follow along."

"Really?" Bethany asked. "You can't lie? Not even a little white lie?"

"No," Justice said.

"So-alright-um..." Merrill shifted in her chair, "This isn't me-this is just Anders- how do you feel about us having sex?"

"I do not understand Anders' preoccupation with this subject," Justice said. "It is a need of his body no different from hunger or sleep, with the same potential to give rise to demons if overindulged in, but Anders has shown commendable restraint in each of these things."

"I don't think I would call that restraint, Justice," Bethany said; for whatever reason her face was flushed again. "You can tell he doesn't eat or sleep well just looking at him. His eyes are always so red and shadowed, and he's so thin..."

"Nightmares inflicted by the Taint keep his rest short, but the same corruption is capable of sustaining him indefinitely without food," Justice said. "I... confess I do not know what is normal for a mortal for sustenance or sleep."

"Well... eight hours, normally," Bethany said, "For sleep. And three meals a day for food."

"This is far less than what Anders allows himself," Justice decided after a moment's consideration. "Their form did feel noticeably weaker than it had in Amaranthine, or the few fights with templars Anders had encountered in Kirkwall, but Justice had assumed it came from a lack of adrenaline in combat. "I will make an effort to encourage him to take better care of himself."

"How do you feel about relationships?" Merrill asked.

"I do not understand the question," Justice said.

"Oh dear, um..." Merrill worried at her bottom lip with her teeth.

"I think I know what he means," Bethany said, "Is it okay with you if Anders is with anyone? Romantically?"

"No," Justice said.

"Well that's... kind of horrible," Bethany said. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Our cause places us and anyone close to Anders at risk," Justice explained, grateful for the block the lyrium had placed between them. A part of him feared even making mention of what his mortal
had lost, knowing what lengths Anders went to to avoid such memories. "His allies understand this risk, and Anders is prepared to lose them. He is not prepared to lose another lover. Grief makes Anders irrational, in more ways than one.

"He is easily taken advantage of when he is aggrieved; I realize now this is something I did to him in Amaranthine, unintentionally or not. I do not think Anders would have agreed to possession had Sigrun not sacrificed herself. Nor do I believe he would have attempted suicide and self harm had he not lost Karl. It is a necessary sacrifice. I take no issues with Anders seeking companionship, but he loves too deeply, and hurts too easily, and I cannot condone it."

"What's our..." Merrill started.

"What do you mean you can't condone it?" Bethany interrupted, "That's a terrible thing to say! Everyone needs some kind of support, and Anders doesn't have any family. It's not fair to tell him he can't be with whoever he wants."

"Anders agreed to this cause," Justice said, recalling the way Anders had held them through the night, their minds tangled together in such a perfect harmony their tears had burned with lyrium after Karl's death. Never again, not for any mage. They had sworn. "He is aware of the injustices the Chantry has subjected upon all mages and I believe he will make whatever sacrifices are necessary to ensure they are not repeated."

Bethany's mouth moved soundlessly, and Justice couldn't make sense of it. Merrill asked, "What's our goal with the Collective?"

"To see an end to the Circle," Justice said.

"Are you happy?" Merrill asked.

"It is not a question of happiness, it is a question of whether or not I am able to fulfill my purpose," Justice said. "Anders has granted me many opportunities through our work in his clinic and with the Collective."

"I'll just count that as a yes," Merrill mumbled, folding the parchment over her fingers as she worked further down the list, "What happened to Nathaniel and Velanna?"

"... I had anticipated this question," Justice stared down at Anders' hands, and the bleed of memory that clung to them. The way the abomination's mutilated muscle had felt giving beneath his fingers, the way the templar's face had melted in his hand, the hot thrill of battle interlaced with the agony of their mana burning in their veins as smite after smite crashed down on them. "I have no memory of them. I can recall only the pain of Anders' seizure and the battle that ensued in its wake."

"Seizure..." Bethany whispered. "Maker, suicide attempt. What else has he been through?"

"Much," Justice said.

"We talked about two more questions, but there's a little bit here I'll just read first," Merrill said, folding the parchment further. "Thank you for saving me. I don't know if you can feel me thinking about Compassion, but it doesn't mean I don't want you with me. I know that a lot has changed for us, but I'm still a spirit healer. I know you don't have a choice anymore, but I hope you want to be my spirit. I'll try to take care of you either way."

"I... do not know quite how to respond..." Justice let go of the sleeve to Anders' coat, and though the words were warm and well meant, they were twisted with sorrow. He could feel Anders' intent, and hear his words when the man spoke aloud to him, but Anders had never come even remotely close to
offering such a bond. They'd made their sacrifices. They were what they were. Anders was right, they had no choice in the matter, but to offer it anyway...

"May I see the parchment?" Justice held out a hand for it, and Merrill handed it over to him. Anders had not handled it long. The memories were muted, but Justice could feel them all the same if he focused. A sweaty palm pressing the parchment into the uneven surface of the table at their clinic while a quill scratched carefully across it. *Have to get it right.* Justice set the parchment down, and lamented that he hadn't paid attention when Anders had wrote it.

"Of course," Justice said when he found the words. "I would not leave him even had I the option."

"Two more questions, then," Merrill said with a ready smile, "Do you not have a realm in the Beyond?"

"I do not," Justice said. "My existence in the Fade was spent seeking out wrongs to right. I could not achieve this by giving into sloth and forming my own realm from the memories of mortals."

"But you and Anders work together now," Bethany said. "You can right wrongs in our world. Do you think maybe you could try forming a realm so Anders has a place to dream?"

"I will consider this," Justice allotted. Anders had encountered more than enough injustice for Justice to shape an entire realm from his experiences. Compassion had done so, after all. "I do not think it just his noctivagant soul has nothing but nightmares to retire to."

"Alright, last question," Merrill said, "Age is of no real consequence to spirits, especially without a realm to store memories but-"

An explosion rocked the entire complex. Books leapt off the shelves and clattered to the floor, a scroll hit the ground and unraveled across the kitchen. Paintings rattled on the walls, jars of paint danced across the far table, and a stray rat went scurrying along the wall to vanish beneath the floorboards. Dust fell from the ceiling to settle on the table, and Bethany and Merrill leapt to their feet.

"What was that?" Bethany pushed in her chair and stepped back against the wall, "Do you think it's an earthquake?"

"I'll check," Merrill darted across the living room, barefeet slapping at the floorboards. She ducked outside, and closed the door behind her.

"I doubt it was an earthquake," Justice stood up, and eyed the door, "Anders has cast many and I am familiar with them."

"Maker save us, then, what?" Bethany asked, tugging her scarf out of her collar to wipe sweat off her brow. The small bit of fabric was red; a passionate color, reminiscent of eyes or blood or fire. The things a mage should be, but that Bethany could not be so long as the Circle stood.

"A bomb, I believe," Justice guessed. "Whatever the cause, I will not allow harm to come to you. You need not be afraid."

Merrill sprinted back inside and slammed the door behind her. Her magic cut through to the Fade, and encased her hands in a brilliant sapphire to match the lyrium in his veins. "Mythal, emma isala halani. Ma ghilani dareth." Merrill rambled while she cast, telekinetic energies ripping out boards in the wall to her bedroom. The wall cavity that should have been filled with insulation had been hollowed out. Book after scroll after book leapt from her shelves, and hid themselves away.
"Merrill?" Bethany asked, "What's going on?"

"Oh-I-just- I have to hide these, they're all magic," Merrill's tongue twisted on the words, and they came out in a jumble, "They're downstairs-I saw the silver-we'll be fine. We'll be fine, I just have to hide these."

"Templars?" Bethany's voice cracked, "Here? Why? Is there another way out? Tell me there's another way out."

"I'll be alright," Merrill promised, "I can do this. I'll do what I do with the guards. Everyone already thinks I'm stupid. Maybe you two can hide in the back?"

"I will do no such thing," Justice rumbled; the mere sight of templars was enough to send a powerful blood mage into a frenzy. The mention was enough to leave another mage shaking and crumpling in on herself against the wall. The templars did not seek out criminals, they sought out victims, and they would seek no more. "They will not touch you. I will not allow it."

Justice stepped past Merrill, and the books flying from her shelves to bury themselves in the wall cavity. This was not the way of things. He had laid witness to the darktown raids, and would not stand to see them spread throughout the rest of the accursed city. The abused and the oppressed deserved someone to champion them.

He didn't reach the door before he heard the clatter of Merrill's books hitting the floor, her spell abandoned. She bolted in front of him, a handful of veilfire doing very little to distract him. He had heard Anders' fears. He was no child to be swayed by colorful baubles. Veilfire reminded him of home and was a comfort, nothing more.

"Justice, you have to stay here," Merrill said, "Please, go hide in the back with Bethany."

"They are searching for magic," Justice said. "I would have them find it."

"No-no, don't you see, that's the opposite of what we want to happen," Merrill said, her voice taking on a frantic pitch, "They can't find anything. If we just play stupid they'll go away."

Another explosion threw Merrill forward, and she collided with his chest. A vial of paint toppled off the table and shattered on the floor, red splattered on knotted brown. Justice righted Merrill to the sounds of chaos on the floor below. He felt heat through the floorboards, and a crash that sounded like a door being kicked in. Bellowed orders and the pull of the Fade that marked another mage, hidden in the complex, and exposed by the templars' raid. Screams of fear, pleas for mercy, cries for justice that he would answer. Justice pushed past the small elf and reached for the door when her scream and the magic laced through it stopped him.

"No!" Merrill ordered, and the word was sacrosanct. Justice felt it in his veins, mingled with blood and lyrium and taint, cutting through to his core. He halted and felt the act resonate with him and all that he was. He turned back around to see Merrill with her upper arm sliced open, dagger still in hand; blood rained down to join paint, the two shades of red an imperfect harmony on the knotwood floors.

"This way," Merrill led him to her backroom, and a pull of telekinetic energy moved a dresser to reveal a small nook in the wall. She ordered him in, and Justice sat. Bethany followed them, hovering behind Merrill and watching them with wide eyes, black eating up amber in her fear, which no longer concerned him so, "Beth, sit with him. He won't do anything. I have to hide everything."

"Won't they see your arm?" Bethany asked, scooting in nervously beside him.
"No, I have a shawl," Merrill abandoned them, and vanished back into the main room only to return a moment later and dump Anders' coat, satchel, and the parchment with its promise on him. Another pull of telekinetic energy moved the dresser back in front of them, and all was dark and quiet save for the glow of veilfire and the rapid breath of the young woman crouched beside him.

"Maker, my enemies are abundant," Bethany whispered, and Justice turned his head to watch her pull her knees up to her chest and hug her arms about them, "Many are those who rise up against me, but my faith sustains me; I shall not fear the legion, should they set themselves against me.... Maker, Garrett, I'm so sorry, you were right, I should have stayed home."

Justice sat. Bethany prayed under her breath. Time was irrelevant, but it passed, and eventually the dresser was encased in sapphire, and pulled away. Red and orange light filtered in from the living room, shadowed by where Merrill stood before it, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. "You can come out, it's safe."

"What happened?" Bethany croaked, stumbling to her feet and creeping out into bedroom. Justice put on Anders' coat and satchel at Merrill's urging, picked up the parchment, and followed her out.

"They left," Merrill explained. "... I think maybe they were searching for someone else. The other mage downstairs... Creators, the screams. I watched them take him away from the window, but you could see the blood... I don't-I didn't even know his name. Or that he was a mage at all. I don't think he'll make it to the Gallows."

"Maker..." Bethany let out a long breath and ran her hands through her hair. "But they're all gone? They left?"

"I think so," Merrill said, a slight sway in her step and a pallor to her skin when she walked them out into the living room, "I don't know. I think so."

"What now?" Bethany asked.

"Now... I have to let go of this spell," Merrill said, holding onto the table to keep herself upright. "Elgar'nan, I've never bound an abomination before. I think I might be sick. It takes so much blood for just one order. It's like binding two minds at once."

"Is it-..." Bethany walked around Justice to pull out a chair for Merrill help her into it, rather than use the telekinetic energies she had at her disposal, "Are you going to be okay? Are they?"

"I hope so," Merrill said, and let go of the spell.

The pain Justice experienced was worse than the mana boiling in his veins from a templar's smite. It was a soul-crushing agony that shattered his mind as he had shattered Anders', ripping at his core and pulling him apart. It felt as if his heart exploded, as if his skull imploded. It was pain in its purest form, and he collapsed, a roar muffled into his knees as he struggled to find purpose and pull himself together.

Justice. Justice. He was Justice. He was not a summon. A slave. A spell. He was Justice, and he was Anders, and he was not a demon to be bound to a maleficar's whim. "I am no demon for your bindings," Justice snarled brokenly into his knees, arms shaking in his vain efforts to climb to his feet. "You would stand idly by and watch as your fellow mages are abducted and tortured! You would see me corrupted from my purpose for your cowardice, and deny others the freedom you so desperately pray for!"

Justice didn't hear the excuses they threw at him over the agony in his skull. Blood and pain had
taken the place of lyrium, and beneath it all Justice could finally feel Anders' panic reach him. Anders knew. He knew what they had risked. Of course he knew. Justice was a spirit. Spirits were not bound. It was not done. It corrupted. Perverted. Amell had sworn, in some of his first words to him, never to turn his magic against him, and those Anders would call friends had done it on their second meeting.

Justice tried to stand again. He couldn't. It hurt. It took everything just to hold onto himself through the pain, the pull of blood, the wrongness of it. Anders urged him back into the comforting embrace of his own mind, where things were simpler, quieter, and Justice curled up in the darkness of his own choosing, and no blood mage's command.

Anders fell into himself with a choking gasp. His throat ached with the cold burn of lyrium and the pain in his head was split between blood magic and his transition with Justice. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and smacked it off without ever looking up to see who it was. "What the bloody fuck is wrong with you!?" Anders screamed at both of them.

"Anders-" Bethany started.

"No!" Anders grabbed onto his chair to drag himself to his feet. It toppled to the ground with a clatter, but Anders managed to stumble up anyway. His stupid parchment with all its stupid questions crumpled in his fist when he pointed a finger at Merrill. "No, what the bloody fuck is wrong with you!? You're supposed to be an expert on spirits! You know better than to bind them! You think fightingtemplars is bad!? Have you ever seen a full-fledged abomination before!? Do you have any idea what you could have turned him into!? You haven't seen a real abomination before! I have! We could have destroyed this entire alienage! We could have-Maker-I-you-..." Anders wheezed, fear and anger choking him.

His friends were staring at him, fear in their every feature, from their wide eyes to their cautiously outstretched hands. Maker, what had he been thinking? What had any of them been thinking? He wasn't safe. They weren't safe. How many lessons did he need before he learned?

Anders turned and ran.
Hello everyone, welcome back! Not much of a comment for this chapter, save to promise I'll respond to all of the comments and apologize that I've yet to do so (I really do love and read all of them). Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:32 Dragon 6 Ferventis Late Afternoon
Kirkwall Alienage

Anders bolted from the room and collided with the railing, the entire stairwell creaking dangerously. If his friends were calling after him, Anders couldn't hear them over his pulse, like the rush of rapids in his ears and his spirit the roar of a waterfall. Maker, it felt like their own personal Harrowing. Anders took the stairs at a sprint, crashing into walls to halt his momentum on his way down. They couldn't be here.

Justice felt splintered, pieces of the spirit digging into the inside of Anders' skull and crying out in such profound confusion Anders felt disoriented. He could barely hold onto where he was; the walls seemed fold inward while the ground rolled up to meet him. There was such a chaos in his mind he might have been in the Fade. Anders tripped himself on his way out of the apartment complex, barely conscious of what he was doing or where he was going.

A dozen pairs of reflective eyes turned to watch him when he shot from the complex. Anders staggered, and caught himself on the mottled stone of the building, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Mana came easily, even through the pain, and Anders wove it into a pulse of creationism that did very little to ease Justice's distress. Maker, how could he fix this? He had to fix this. Justice had fixed him when his mind had broken. This wasn't any different. There had to be a way.

Anders started forward, and stopped. There could still be templars in the alienage, waiting to catch any other mages who might decided to run at the first sign of their departure. A human in the alienage was already a rare sight, but one running from it immediately after a raid? Anders leaned back against the wall of the complex and locked his hands above his head, forcing himself to breathe. To focus.

Elves. There were only elves in the courtyard. Elves wouldn't be working with the templars. Anders inhaled and held the scent of elfroot and stale foundry smoke in his lungs for several counts. They were just elves. He was being paranoid. The templars wouldn't have any elves working as spies, waiting to rat each other out. They were a close knit community.

So close knit Merrill hadn't even known the elf the floor below was a mage. A shrill sound of fury twisted inside Anders' skull at the thought, and Anders doubled over. "Justice, stop," Anders begged, face in his hands, but the bite of his nails wasn't nearly cathartic enough to take his focus from the spirit breaking apart behind his eyes. "Stop. I know what she did. I know. Just-just stop-I'll fix it, I swear. Just let me get back to the clinic."

The howling subsided, even if the anger and confusion remained. Anders forced himself to move.
He must have looked mad. Maker, he felt mad, jumping at shadows and clutching his satchel to his chest as he crossed the courtyard, the ground rolling up to meet his every step and the scent of bark so thick it was suffocating. Some insane part of him went so far as to insist it was there to mask the scent of lyrium he might have caught from a templar.

It made no sense. The templars didn't raid the alienage. Meredith didn't have the influence to harass all of Kirkwall with abandon, though Maker knew she was close. The templars raided Darktown. They harassed refugees and criminals who couldn't bring their complaints to the city guard and the viscount. They couldn't reach Lowtown and its alienage. They couldn't. Bardel would have warned him.

Raids weren't even scheduled for today. The second day of the second week. Bardel had told him. Anders staggered up the stairs from the alienage, clutching his head and breathing creationism to try to hold Justice together. He clung to the anger, the confusion, anything that spoke of his spirit and tangled them together to keep them from breaking. They were supposed to have three days left to prepare for another raid. Everything had gone wrong.

Merrill knew better. They twisted their hands in their shoulder strap and swallowed down snarls, or maybe sobs. They weren't bound. It wasn't done. It twisted them from their purpose and corrupted them into something lesser, something broken, something wrong. "You're okay," The part of them that was Anders said; the whisper echoed, and they stumbled into an alley to keep from being overheard. "You're okay. You're not broken."

They made a blind path through Lowtown, clutching at crumbling stone and rusted bronze supports, stumbling down stairs, and weaving away from crowds. They couldn't go straight back to their clinic. The templars might have followed them from the alienage, and they had no way of knowing with Kirkwall falling apart beneath them like the demesne of a half-mad demon. They must have looked like a tosspot. They prayed they looked like a tosspot, toppling over themselves in Kirkwall's slanted streets.

Not the lift. Walking was safer. Walking gave them time to decide whether or not they were being followed. The sun made the descent to Darktown with them, casting long shadows through the Lowtown quarries as it slid past the horizon. Anders took a stairwell down into darkness and blackrock, and had to stop on the steps before he could force himself into the dimly lit passageway. It was too dark. It was too cramped. They were too broken.

Broken and bound and blind, perverted from purpose, lost and locked away and forgotten. Screaming for Mercy and watching her fall apart beneath their hands, going mad as they'd gone mad, Compassion little more than a hallucination of reflective eyes in that unbearable dark, and it was too late for Justice but they could still have Vengeance. Anders crumpled on the steps, head between their knees, breath coming in shallow gasps. Not them. Not them. Breathe. Not them. It wasn't them.

"I can fix it," The part of them that was Anders promised, grasping fingers chasing the flicker of azure that ran through their veins, flaring at the surface every few frantic heartbeats, "I can fix it, just let me get back to the clinic. We can fix it. We'll be okay. You saved Compassion. You can do this. If I could get through this you can get through this. You're Justice. You're not Vengeance."

They had suffered such a corruption of purpose before. Boots sinking into a blood soaked field, hands still hot with the vestiges of an inferno they had never meant to cast, lover's light and life fading as they lay forgotten in aftermath of the slaughter. Not them. It hadn't been them. They didn't leave the dying for dead; they healed. They'd healed them and they'd heal now. Anders got them back on their feet, and let Justice cling to the memory of recovery.

They faltered but they walked, through one dark passage after another. They slipped down stone
steps worn smooth by the passage of slaves and refugees, sloughed through puddles without the energy to jump them, ducked under low beams in crumbling mineshafts, and eventually found their way back to their clinic. They walked past it, and found a spot on a stairwell a few yards away to wait and watch.

The minutes stretched, and no one followed them. Paranoid. They were just paranoid, caught up in the chaos of their fractured mind, but if they couldn't trust their friends to keep them safe how could they trust the city? Kirkwall was no friend. It was a sprawling metropolis of oppression and it would make slaves of them if they let it. Slaves to the templars. Slaves to their friends. Slaves to fear.

Anders pushed the panic down, and went to his clinic. The door was nestled in the blackrock, rotten wood held together by greening bronze panels and protected by one rusty lock. The lantern hung beside it, fragments of broken glass clinging to an old iron frame, with no wick nor candle nor oil burner. It was too obvious. The lantern was only good for holding magic. Anders dug his key out from his coat pocket and unlocked the door, snatching the lantern off its hook on his way inside.

Anders shoved the door closed behind him, and let the lantern fall from his grasp. It hit the ground with a clatter, glass breaking from the iron casing to shatter into dust on the floor. Anders ignored it, fighting out of his coat and missing the coat rack when he tossed the hefty suede towards the bronze hook. He shrugged off his satchel and it hit the ground with a heavy thud that scattered dirt and vermin, and let the key hit the ground beside it.

Anders crawled onto his cot with no memory of crossing the room to reach it. The canvas sank at his weight, and Anders knocked off the quilt Leandra had made for him rolling onto his back. He pillow was still in his satchel, not that Anders could have slept if he tried. The woven hemp felt rough through the thin fabric of his tunic and unyielding against his shoulder blades. His boots were still on, the laces too tight and the socks too damp with sweat, his belt cutting into his waist and catching on his hip bones.

He was too sensitive to all of it. He'd tangled himself in Justice and didn't dare to let the spirit go, despite how it overwhelmed him. His spirit was scrabbling at the inside of his skull, each rake of its ethereal claws dislodging a torrent of scattered thoughts and feelings. They could barely find themselves under it all: fear and fury, dismay and despair. Anders buried his hands in his hair, tangled strands cold and grounding against his fingers.

Anders heard the whispers of demons reaching through the Veil and ignored them, infusing mana with Justice and channeling the spirit's own energy inward. The abrupt whiplash at the spell was agonizing. Anders bit down a scream and felt like his neck had snapped; he clutched for his spine in a mad panic, but the pain stopped the second he released the spell. Anders choked on a sob, unable to tell if Justice had fought him or if he couldn't call on him at all.

"Okay," Anders rolled onto his side and fist his hands in his hair; Maker, it was a struggle to even remember his name. A person could recover from blood magic; people were complex, people were multifaceted. Parts of them could be rewritten without destroying who they were at their core. Spirits weren't the same. They weren't even close. "It's okay. It's okay. Justice, it's me. It's just me. We've done this before. Let me heal you. It's not a binding. It's just us. You know you can trust me."

It might have been a mistake, but Anders reached for Justice again, and siphoning the spirit's benevolent energy and potential for restorative magics and filtering it inward. Justice had managed to mend his broken mind after their joining; it had to be possible for Anders to do the same. There was no whiplash on his second attempt, but Maker, it hurt. It felt like dragging his hands through the broken glass of his lantern, but Anders held onto the spell, and Justice let him cast it.

The pain turned numbing after a point. Anders wasn't sure whether or not the spell was helping, but
he didn't know what else to do. It had to work. They had to fix this. Anders didn't want to see them as some twisted mirror of Darrian. The man had rampaged through the docks, killing the very people he set out to save, and Anders hated that he could picture the same for himself in Darktown. Worse still, Anders didn't want to see Justice as a twisted mirror of Compassion, falling apart at the loss of her purpose.

Unable to decide what else to do, Anders started talking, "... So remember how we talked about some things being ridiculously personal? Me trying to end it all after Karl, kind of one of those things," Anders forced a laugh for his own sake, unsure whether or not Justice could even hear him right now through the pain of his splintered mind, "I know you couldn't feel me back there, with the lyrium, but I heard all of it. Kind of surprised I forgot to mention the blood magic... It never felt like you had a problem with it, but it was nice to hear it. You know, out loud, that you trust me... Maker, I hope this is working."

"I remember back at the Vigil you were never for it," Anders said, willing himself to move now that he'd numbed to the pain. His fingers were stiff when Anders relinquished their grip on his hair, and lowered them in front of his face. Four red crescents were pressed into each palm, tendons visibly stiff and straining beneath dry skin. Anders flexed his hands experimentally, cobalt light playing over the veins on his palm through the channel.

Anders traced one line down his palm and over his wrist, across the few pale white scars on his forearm to where the vein vanished at the bend in his arm. "You're okay," Anders reassured them both, "Heh.... You remember back at the Vigil when you tore open that hole in your side? And I had to stitch it back together because there's no healing the dead? That was a mess worse than this. We're okay. It'll be alright. Dandy, even. Thedas' greatest healer over here. Still waiting on that trophy, though...."

Anders dragged his thumb back up the incandescent vein, nail a gentle abrasion over his skin. The sensation didn't bother him quite as much as the coarse scratch of his tunic or the stiff embrace of his canvas. "You're alright," Anders mumbled at the slow recession of his migraine, "You're a spirit. A virtue. Just... think about Justice-y things. Killing templars, saving mages, healthy spots of iconoclasm, freeing enslaved cats from wicked apostates."

The whisper of a shiver played out over Anders' shoulders, and he didn't have anything else to liken it to but an exhausted grumble. Anders chuckled; it was drained and forced and his voice cracked with nerves, but he chuckled. Anders focused the spell from his left hand, and a crackle of spirit fire broke out along the veins in his palm. He ran his fingers over them in a gentle trace, broken by the occasional brush against Karl's ring of study.

He couldn't feel the touch in his left hand, but he felt it in his right: the spirit fire was cool without being cold, and felt familiar to him after months spent casting with Justice as his spirit. "I miss that stupid cat. Isn't that ridiculous? You'd think I'd have more important things to worry about, but every time Hawke comes by with that damn dog I think about that cat and what he'd do if he could see me now, after Barkspawn and that horse.

"That was a bloody mess, wasn't it?" Anders joked, to what felt like another exhausted grumble for his ill-timed humor. "Sure, pretend all you like, but I remember that cheeky bastard back at the Vigil. No white lies, maybe, but no one said anything about lies of omission."

Anders massaged knots of tension from his palm with his thumb, fingers rolling and catching on the skin on the back of his palm, letting his mouth ramble with his thoughts with the assumption Justice could follow, "Maker, when did everything get so complicated? Maybe that's what helped you when the Baroness trapped you here, you know? It was simple. Kristoff was dead; you didn't have to deal
with any of the sensations that normally overwhelm spirits. Not until me, but you had a chance to adjust to our world by then... "Is this helping?" Anders pressed down faintly on one vein, and watched the way the flames licked around his thumb, "Maybe we could practice with little things to help you get used to sensations. You know, like just my hand-haha-Maker that sounded bad-I mean... well, you're me, you know what I mean." Anders couldn't decipher an answer, but no part of him was insisting it was a bad idea. His migraine had dulled to a headache, and Anders had a better handle on himself and his memories and could only hope Justice felt the same. "You know when someone came up with the term 'spirit healer' I bet this wasn't what they had in mind." Justice ignored him. Anders kept up the spell until the ache in his head subsided. A bone deep exhaustion took its place, his connection to the Fade drained to the last drop of mana. Anders collapsed back on his cot, quilt and pillow still discarded, boots still on, but too weary to do anything about it. "Mind blowing day, right?" Anders joked, and Justice grumbled. They slept, but didn't dream. Banging woke Anders an indefinite amount of time later. He rolled out of bed with a whine and a "Wait!" and hit the floor with a thud that startled a nearby cricket. Anders crawled across his clinic on his hands and knees until his body folded upright of its own accord. He collided with the door when he reached it, and reached for the lock when something stopped him. Caution. Paranoia. Anders didn't know or care. He wrapped his hand around the hilt of his dagger and eased the door open, but it was only Hawke. His arms were folded, foot tapping, a smear of kaddis over the bridge of his nose and bags big enough to smuggle lyrium under his eyes. "No lantern," Hawke noted, "Thought you moved. Things alright?" The exact opposite, actually. "You need healing?" Anders asked. "No," Hawke shifted his weight from one foot to the other and rattled the quiver on his hip. "Just want to talk." "Who are you and what have you done with Hawke?" Anders joked, letting his hand fall off the dagger. He pushed the door open, and the archer strode in, leather creaking, hands lost between hip and hair. "I'm loving the new look, by the way," Anders joked, with a wave at Hawke's face, "The eyeshadow really brings out the color in your eyes. You sure you don't need healing?" Anders pressed, not sure why he even offered. He didn't have the mana to help if Hawke needed it. "You look like dog shit yourself," Hawke said. "Is that better or worse than vulture shit?" Anders asked. "Better," Hawke allotted, "Barely. What happened to you?" "Not your business," Anders joked, a traitorous grin touching his lips at Hawke's bark of laughter. "You want to sit?" "On what?" Hawke asked.
Anders gestured to one of the crates surrounding his table. "That's a chair."

Hawke sat. Anders slid in across from him, tempted to curl up on his table and go straight back to sleep. "What happened to you?" Anders asked.

"Job," Hawke said. "Huge cock up with a Chantry sister."

Anders snorted and rested his head in his hand to keep it from sliding down to the table, "Details. I've never boffed a Sister. Are they all as dirty as they seem?"

"A fuck up, not a fuck," Hawke clarified with a laugh more chuff than bark, and to Anders' absolute shock a smile lingered after it. "Chantry was offering work. A Sister found one of those Qunari mages, still in chains with his lips sewn shut..." Hawke paused to roll a shudder out of one shoulder, his face twisted in disgust, "Said she wanted to free him, bring him to those Tal'Vashoth you like so much. Took him through the warrens, and straight into a group of qunari... templars? Fuck, I don't know.

"Anyway, they're all dead, and I have something for you," Hawke said, unhooking a leather pouch from his belt.

"Wait, what?" Anders sat up, and even Justice stirred at the mention of warrens, and mages, and freedom. "Back up, what happened? To the mage? To their templars? You can't just tell me all that and end it with 'anyway.'"

Hawke set the pouch on the table, red eyes flicking briefly up to meet Anders' own. "Anyway's better than what happened. Dumb bastard burned himself alive. Killed every last templar to the man, and he says he has to die because he spent a damn day off his leash. Said he might be possessed."

Hawke finished with a morbid laugh.

"Are you shitting me?" Anders demanded, and felt Justice roiling in an angry accord, "Just like that? Freedom was right there and he killed himself over that?"

"Didn't even want freedom," Hawke shrugged, "Pulled the stitches out of his mouth, and the first he does is tell us we were wrong to try to save him. Said he'd rather die in the Qun than live without it. We tried to tell him we might be able to tell if he was possessed, but he didn't give a shit."

Hawke flicked all his fingers off his thumb, mimicking an explosion, and blew out a hard breath to go with it.

"Of all the ridiculous, spineless, mind-controlled, senseless piece of shit arguments I've ever heard," Anders dragged his hands through his hair, indignation spilling between him and Justice until it boiled over. "That's disgusting. Maker, I haven't given nearly enough thought to the plight of mages under the Qun. And I thought Chantry indoctrination was bad."

"Circle indoctrination," Hawke corrected him.

Maker, there it was. Anders rolled his eyes so hard they hurt, "Who do you think runs the bloody Circles?"

"I'm not arguing the Chantry's in the right with magic-" Hawke started.

"Then what are you arguing?" Anders interrupted, "You can't condone things in bits and pieces-"

"Why not?" Hawke shot back, "I don't have to love the fact that my uncle blows his rent on booze and vomits it all back up on my boots to love him. Everything is bits and pieces. The Chantry's wrong about the Circle. That doesn't mean they're wrong about everything."
"It doesn't matter!" Anders snapped, "You can't just ignore that they're a-" Shit, what had Justice said? Corrupt institution that... Something. Why wasn't Anders that loquacious? "You can't just ignore the systematic abuse and imprisonment of an entire people because you don't like it. The Chantry you love so much would see Beth locked away if they had the chance."

"You believe in the Chant," Hawke said as if the Chant had anything to do with the Chantry. "Aren't you doing the exact same thing? The Chantry does good things. If not for the Lothering Chantry, my family wouldn't have made it after my father died. They take care of widows and orphans-"

"Take care of them?" Anders scoffed, "That's what you call it? Those orphans are raised to be Brothers and Sisters and templars. Mage hunters. They're not taking care of anyone but their own interests indoctrinating people young."

"What, you want them starving on the streets instead?" Hawke asked.

"Yes," Anders laughed, "I would rather fight for freedom than submit to slavery; is that really so hard to believe? There are orphans living on the streets right now the Chantry up in Hightown doesn't give a damn about, and yes, I think they're better off."

"They're only better off because you've been giving them everything I've been giving you," Hawke shot back. So much for Varric keeping secrets, "If you weren't here to take care of them, they'd have to go to the Chantry."

"And why wouldn't I be here?" Anders countered, "If the templars caught me, right? And who do you think controls them? Who do you think is letting them walk around making Harrowed mages Tranquil!?" Anders hissed, voice cracking at just the thought of Karl, "Funny everything is full circle with the Chantry, isn't it?"

Anders was expecting a counterargument. Something to encourage the faint whisper of static on his hands and the lyrium in his throat, even as exhausted as he and Justice were. Hawke didn't give him one. He ran a hand through his jet black hair down to his beard, where his hand clamped over his mouth and muffled whatever his immediate response would have been. When Hawke took his hand away, he even managed to hold his gaze. "I'm sorry about Karl."

"Sorry isn't good enough," Anders wasn't letting go of his anger that easily.

"Didn't say it was," Hawke said, shifting on the crate that served as his chair, "Look, the Sister. The cock up. She set me up. I'm Meeran's man and people know the name Hawke, and she thought if I died trying to free a mage from the Qun it would start something between the Chantry and the Qunari. I'm trying to get an audience with the Grand Cleric, and if I get one I'll tell her about what the Knight-Commander did to Karl."

Anders snorted, "You think that will make a difference?"

"Why wouldn't it?" Hawke asked, "She's the Grand Cleric. Policing the Knight-Commander is her job."

"Because she's been doing it so well for the past dozen years," Anders said. "Are you even paying attention?"

"The Knight-Commander wasn't making Harrowed mages Tranquil for the past dozen years," Hawke said. "What, you want me to let it go?"

"... No," Anders admitted; he still couldn't even bring himself to look at the letter Karl had never had a chance to send him. Anders would see himself or that bastard Alrik dead before he ever let it go.
"... No. Thank you."

"Welcome," Hawke cracked his knuckles, not quite meeting his eyes, but at least he wasn't looking at floor. Maker, Anders couldn't make sense of the man. He'd never understand how a family of apostates had managed to live their lives on the run while dragging the chains of Chantry dogma behind them. "...That's for you," Hawke said again, with a nod to the small pouch on the table.

"Is it the Knight-Commanders head on a pike?" Anders asked hopefully, picking up the pouch and tossing it into his hand.

"That small?" Hawke asked.

"It's not like she needs room for a brain," Anders joked, unlacing the pouch and tipping it upside down into his palm. A necklace tumbled out, a bit of black on a leather cord. "You shouldn't have," Anders said with false levity: Maker, Hawke really shouldn't have. Anders chewed on how to turn the man down when Hawke spoke up.

"The qunari gave it to me," Hawke explained, "The mage. Figured you'd get more use out of it than I would."

"You don't know what it is," Anders guessed.

"Not a clue," Hawke said.

"So this could be nug shit for all you know and your first thought was to give it to me," Anders said.

"Figured it was magic nug shit," Hawke shrugged.

"I'm touched," Anders joked, "Really."

"You don't want it, give it back," Hawke frowned.

"No, it's mine!" Anders cradled the necklace against his breast before he even realized what he was doing. Maker, Hawke was going to be the death of him. He'd been arguing theology with the man not five minutes prior and one look into those eyes and Anders was back to flirting. "I mean-it's a gift, right? I don't owe you for it?"

"Not a bit," Hawke promised. "My fences won't take anything enchanted anyway. Why, is it worth anything?"

"I'm not telling," Anders huffed, and won another rare smile from the man. Anders couldn't help returning it, clinging to the necklace like a starving man clung to food.

It was just a bit of black. Onyx, if Anders had to guess, with an uneven polish and the hint of a piece of bone at the gem's core. It was beyond alluring, and seemed to pull at the darker corners of Anders' mind where Justice feared to tread. Blood magic. Anders could feel the pulse on the necklace, writhing beneath his fingertips and slowing to match his own the longer he held onto it. Looking at it for too long made Anders' face hot.

"... Thank the Maker you didn't take this to anyone else," Anders said, rubbing the onyx beneath his fingers and trying to get a sense for the enchantment. "It's not worth anything but the hangman's noose. Your qunari mage was a maleficar... Do the qunari allow that?"

"Doubt it," Hawke said, "He said it was a secret."
"Maker, maybe that's why he killed himself," Anders looked back down at the necklace, "If he went back, they'd find out."

"Doubt it," Hawke said again. "They were set to kill him anyway."

"Then what the fuck!?!" Anders snarled, clenching his thigh with his free hand to keep from slamming his fist on anything. "Andraste's holy knickers, I can't believe someone would throw their life away like that. Of all the ungrateful, selfish, garbage things to do. There are so many things worse than death, and he escaped all of them. Maker, it's as bad as the apprentices who ask to be made Tranquil. You know they do that, right? Your precious Chantry uses the Chant to teach mages their very existence is a sign of the Maker's hatred."

"Then they're teaching it wrong," Hawke said.

"That might be the most sensible thing I've ever heard you say," Anders said.

"More sensible than admitting I'm an ass?" Hawke raised an eyebrow at him.

"... close second," Anders changed his mind; biting the inside of his cheek didn't help him hide his smile as much as he wished it had. Hawke ran a hand through his hair and used it to push his head down, and when he glanced back at up at him he almost looked coy. A grumble from Justice helped Anders get a handle on himself. "So-hey. Listen, what you said before, about warrens? The ones you used to get the mage out of the city?"

"What of them?" Hawke asked.

"Do you think you could show me?" Anders asked, and Justice kept silent when the lie spilled out of him, "You know, in case the templars get too uppity with me and I need to duck out for a bit?"

"Alright," Hawke said with a shrug, hands on his knees prepping him to stand, "Right now?"

"Right now works," Anders agreed, glancing at the necklace in his hand when Hawke went for the door. He was already wearing one, but Anders slipped it on anyway, the onyx settling in beside his warden necklace against his heart when he followed Hawke out of his clinic.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart for this chapter!
Hello everyone! I thought for certain the next chapter would be us getting into the Deep Roads, but this one came to me and so here we are. Nothing happens in this chapter, sorry about that. (Again I'm terribly sorry I haven't responded to comments, but it's the weekend! So I'll do that now that I have some more free time.) Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:32 Dragon 17 Ferventis Early Morning
In the Undercity of Kirkwall

It wasn't easy. Between the Coterie and the Collective and the riven spirit in his head, Justinian was working out to be Anders' least favorite month. It was rat for breakfast, again, and the pungent meat was a close second to oats on Anders' most hated list. If anything, oats might have been a reprieve after six months in Kirkwall. Anders spent more time chewing the gamy fare than he did cooking it, but it was food, and it was free.

Free. There was a word. Anders loved that word. Justice loved that word. It was a damn good word, right up there with buttermilk, biscuit, and iconoclasm, and two out of four wasn't bad. A decent meal was something Anders could only find at the Hanged Man now. Hawke's generosity had finally found an end, though Anders suspected the man didn't have a choice in the matter.

Solace was creeping up, the way creepy things did. Hawke had to get his fifty sovereigns somewhere, and Anders doubted he was going to get them giving them all away. It would have been a neat trick, if nothing else. Anders stretched out his left leg until the muscle tensed and shook, sitting on the floor of his clinic with his back braced against the wall. The crates were well and good, but they were murder on his posture, and recently Anders rather liked the new perspective.

Things were working out. They might not have been working out quite right, but they were working out. The Coterie was working with him. The Collective was counting on him. The Deep Roads were waiting for him. Justice was healing with him. A roach made a break for his boot, and Anders cut it off with a shock of primal magic that sent the bug flying through the air several paces. "And he wins the toss," Anders cheered under his breath with another bite of rat.

Anders pulled his left leg up to his chest and stretched out the other. A game of queek didn't sound half bad right now, not that Anders had anything but roaches and the spirit in his head to play it with. Anders would have won those games more often if not for Amell cheating. Anders knew the smug bastard had used telekinesis for everything, and not just Wicked Grace. Anders allowed himself another bite of rat in lieu of the fond smile he couldn't quite conjure. Magic had its limits, after all.

One year. A whole bloody year since Anders had woken up to Biff's ugly mug and half a bowl of oats, and thought all his problems ended there. A whole bloody year since he'd broken out of his cell and decided to tackle darkspawn with nothing but a rapier made of wit and a shield made of sarcasm. A whole bloody year since the only thing Anders had claimed to want was freedom, when what he really needed was a pair of silver shackles. A whole bloody year of blood and sweat and tears, and
Anders was back where he started: with nothing, and the only difference now was he was okay with it.

Now it meant something. Now it was about more than just Anders. Anders was one mage, and one mage or even two were nothing in the face of templars. Rylock had shown him that. The only way to change things, to stop going in circles, was to think about every mage. The vote in Cumberland had failed. Queen Anora had failed, but Anders refused. He would face the Maker and walk backwards into the Void before he walked away from the cause.

It was thinking about every mage that had Anders sitting on the floor of his clinic with the rats and the roaches. It wasn't enough just to free them. Anders knew that; Biff had known that; Rylock and Rolan had known that; Amell had known that. Something had to be done to make sure they stayed free, but even if he knew the spell, Anders wasn't sitting on a silver chalice, the Rite of Conscription, and a full flask of Tainted blood.

That was what it always boiled down to: blood. The Taint in the blood of a Warden that kept them safe from Chantry law. The mana in the blood of a Circle mage that kept them bound to it. The spell a maleficar had to cast to give rise to either. It was always blood, and no mage Anders freed was going anywhere while the templars still had a hold on theirs. Their phylacteries had to be destroyed, and the Collective had to find a way to do it.

Apprentices would still have their phylacteries at the Gallows, but according to Bardel Harrowed mages had theirs sent to the Chantry. Anders wondered why they even bothered. With Harrowed mages made Tranquil on a bit, the templars obviously didn't care about the distinction between them and apprentices. Anders embraced the surge of righteous indignation from Justice at the thought, as relieved his spirit was feeling up to it as he was to feel something other than grief.

"So hey, I've got a good one. How many templars does it take to light a torch?" Anders joked, reaching up to set the copper wire his rat had been roasted on on a nearby crate now that he was finished. Justice didn't answer in the interim, "Two. One to light the torch and the other to accuse the first of being an apostate." Anders chuckled to himself, basking in the warmth of Justice's anger like he might the sun. "I hate them too, buddy."

Maker, did Anders hate them, but until Justice he'd never done anything productive with that hatred. He'd never had the means and it made him into a craven, with fear enough to bleed through to the Fade and summon demons Anders couldn't face. It had to be Amell, fighting demons and templars for him, thoughtlessly and selflessly defending him at every turn, and it still hadn't been enough. The templars still had his phylactery.

Anders didn't know how many lives he had left, but once Kinloch Hold sent his phylactery to Kirkwall, he was liable to lose them all. It felt like too much to hope they'd send a routine patrol like they had to the Vigil. A half dozen templars would be nothing to Justice. He'd see them all burn, and pry Anders' phylactery from their lieutenant's cold dead fingers. He'd see it shattered, the blood of Anders' old life before the Taint had taken him just one more drop of red in the river they'd leave behind them.

Anders pulled himself out of the mental picture with a hard shake of his head that rattled his brain in his skull and made Justice grumble. "Maker's breath, man, settle down." Anders tasted the mana of his spirit's refusal and chuckled. "I wish it was that easy, Justice, I really do, but it won't be like that. With Alrik asking after me, word will eventually get back to the Wardens, and Leonie will tell them what we are if she knows. They'll send scores. We can't fight that many."

Anders felt for Justice's response, and if he had to put the feeling to words, he'd swear Justice would have said, "Watch me." A good natured roll of his eyes made Justice grumble, and Anders shoved
the thoughts of his own phylactery away. It was the Gallows' mages' phylactery he needed to be worrying about. A crow might go unnoticed on the ramparts of the Gallows or the rafters of the Chantry, but wandering through the halls it was bound to attract attention.

Rats, on the other hand, were everywhere. Anders watched a pair scuttling in the far corner of his clinic, and knew one would go unnoticed in the Gallows. The Chantry was another matter. Hightown had its rats, but they were far from unnoticed. The last thing Anders needed was some noble fop pointing a finger at his transformed self, shrieking bloody murder and siccing the dogs on him. Anders didn't know what he could use for that scenario, but the rats were a start.

Except Amell didn't have a page in his grimoire dedicated to the nuances of shapeshifting into a rat. There was the crow, the wolf, the wild cat, the bear, the giant spider, and the swarm of insects, and nothing more. Aside from the swarm of insects, which was obscenely complicated, most of the incantations had only minor alterations based on the form, and those were primarily centered around the size and shape of the creature. Anders had to reason it would be possible for him to assume other forms, so long as he followed the guidelines Morrigan had told Amell.

Or he would mutate into a horrible wererat abomination, but Anders was an optimist. So the filthy sewer rat sat on the floor watching the rest of the filthy sewer rats, and doing his best to picture himself with matted fur, oil-slick skin, a long nose, beady red eyes, and a tail. All in all, three out of five was a good start. Once he had it down, Anders would be able to travel as safely as Bancroft could in the Gallows.

From Anders' extensive experience, Circle repositories where apprentices' phylacteries were kept were the same across Thedas. All of them were guarded by the Victim's Door, and if that wasn't bloody accurate Anders didn't know what was. There was no way past the wards save for a mage and a templar to enter together. A templar had to speak a password to prime the door's ward, and a mage had to touch the ward with mana to release it. Bardel was their templar, but either Anders or Bancroft could be their mage.

The repositories at the Chantry were less secure, after a fashion. Anders had been able to walk into the Chantry in the middle of the night to meet with Karl, though the more he thought on that night, the more Anders decided everything about it had been a carefully laid trap. He doubted the undercroft would be unguarded under normal circumstances had the templars not wanted to find him there, and after Anders had killed all of them, security was bound to be tight.

There was no Victim's Door there, though considering the kind of people that turned to the Chantry, there damn well should have been. Anders thought of Hawke's adamant defense of the Chantry, and somehow managed to do so without lighting his pants on fire. Anders understood better than most the need to turn to the Maker's light when life was dark, but Hawke and his family had taken it a step too far. The prayers of the desperate were just the sort of the thing the Chantry preyed upon.

Anders bit back a sigh and a grumble from Justice, thinking of Bethany. The Circle had never touched the poor girl, but they'd clearly touched her father, and it showed in how he'd raised his daughter, as much as Dalish teachings showed with Merrill. Anders tried not to blame them for what had happened, but he wasn't half as good a man as he aimed to be. There was no forgiving and forgetting the night he'd spent tangled in his spirit, answering every anguished howl with a surge of creationism and a random reassuring remark until exhaustion had claimed them.

Anders had tried. He'd gone with Hawke on their usual hunting trip to the Planasene Forest, and he'd done what Anders did best when something was bothering him: he ignored it. He'd put on his coat and put on a smile and hadn't gotten two steps out of the city before Merrill was pestering him about Justice, without even the faintest imaginings of what she'd almost done to his spirit. What she'd
almost done to both of them.

One screaming match about the distinction between spirits and demons later and Anders was back in his clinic, his boots wearing a new cavern into the blackrock for his pacing. Maker, Anders should have known better. He'd spent months arguing with Velanna about the clear breakdown of spirits and demons into virtues and vices, while Velanna had kept on with her ridiculous insistence that all spirits were a dangerous spectrum.

There was no grey with spirits. There was good, and there was evil. There was whole, and there was broken. Justice had said so himself. Demons were spirits perverted by their desires, or in some cases corrupted by blood mages whose magic prevented them from pursuing their purpose. It was easier to forgive Beth. She hadn't bound them. She didn't approve of blood magic. She'd done nothing but curl into a ball and pray when the templars had raided the alienage.

It was what most mages did in the face of templars. The memory, even through Justice's eyes, still made Anders' blood boil. The poor girl had feigned ignorance the entire fight in front of Hawke, and Anders didn't blame her. No one should have to hear their sister had come so close to death, to a life of imprisonment, to tranquility, to whatever the templars were in the mood for that day. If they could save even one mage from that fate, their time in Kirkwall would be worth it.

What a time it was. Anders stretched out his legs and leaned back against the wall of his free clinic, watching roaches parade through the gutters. One brave fool scuttled free of the drain and across the floor, and another shock of lightning launched it across mage's clinic. The roaches were always worse in the mornings, when everyone high and low in Kirkwall was dumping their pisspots into the dark. The roaches weren't the sort of fools Anders had originally pictured unleashing his lightning on, but they served well enough in lieu of templars.

When you got right down to it there wasn't much of a difference, Anders thought with a chuckle, save that the little blighters weren't running around in skirts. Amell had been right: killing got easier. Anders didn't doubt that had something to do with Justice, coloring Anders' every reflection on the templars they'd killed with righteous anger. Anders didn't know whether or not to be grateful for it. A part of him worried what it said about him that he didn't think at all about the families or loved ones the templars left behind.

The other part of him didn't care that he didn't care. Anders watched the slow trickle of filth running through the drains along his walls, and coated himself with primal magic to kill the smell. A layer of stone and rock formed on his skin, dust and dirt taking to the air with the scent of freshly fallen rain. It helped, albeit only a little. Anders had never thought the phrase, "Don't piss on my back and tell me it's raining," would be something he'd take so literally.

Less literally, it was all Anders could think whenever he heard the Circle or the Chantry justified. It made him feel slightly less guilty about his lack of guilt over killing templars. The templars knew what they were doing. They were the sort of folk who signed on to use and abuse mages, and if any one of them was worth a damn they'd be like Bardel and working with the Collective, or like Samson and thrown out of the Order entirely.

If Anders had to kill them to see mages freed then Anders would kill them. Maker knew Amell had certainly never hesitated. Anders thought back on his panic over the death of Rylock and her two conspirators in the Amaranthine warehouse and wanted to laugh. He'd left a slew of bodies in his wake since then, and hadn't given the disposal of any a single thought. It was just the way Darktown was to hear Varric tell it. The most expensive real estate in Kirkwall: paid for in body parts. If a patrol went missing here and there, a patrol went missing here and there.

Anders still didn't know what Amell had done with those bodies. The corpse's morbid struggle to
mount his severed head back on his spine had been horrifying at the time, but Anders could only
look back on the whole ordeal with a grin and a giggle. What did Anders care now if someone
stumbled on the bodies of a few dead templars? Better they take it for a warning, and leave the
refugees alone, but that kind of logic was too much to hope for from Meredith's lackeys.

Anders could learn what had happened if he wanted, he supposed. He had Amell's journal, and the
man had kept it well enough. It was getting easier to think about him, to talk about him, to do more
than just break down at the memory. And if he could get over Amell, he could get over Sigrun, and
Karl, and his mother, and Compassion. He just had to start. Anders set a hand to the wall behind him
and heaved himself to standing.

The journal was in Anders' satchel, always. Anders retrieved it from where it was nestled in with
Karl's letters, and brought it back to his cot. A sigil for entropy was embossed in ram leather, dyed
the same deep russet that was and always had been Amell. Anders rolled onto his stomach and
opened the journal, letting the pages flip past his thumb with no real thought to what he wanted to
read.

Ferventis blurred past him, and Anders stopped and flipped back to one year ago today.

9:31 17 Ferventis

Glavonak's explosions blocked off the cellars. Sergeant Maverlies says they'll take a week to clear. I
can't believe I have to handle this sober. The kitchens were spared, but the few casks of ale are so
watered down I wouldn't call them ale anymore. Oghren threw in a handful of dirt when we shared a
drink to serve it Tapster style, and I honestly think it tasted better.

Urthemiel met his end at Oghren's axe. His blood will be nothing for him. His blood has to be
nothing for him. He has the strongest physical and mental fortitude of any man I've ever met. I won't
lose him to my own incantation. Oghren would find a way to survive just to spare me the guilt.
Anders

Damnit he's going to die. I'm going to hand him the chalice and he's going to drink it with a smirk
and wink and die by my hand. I told him to run. I told him twice. I gave him every opportunity and
he's still

He'll be fine. Any man who can defy the templars like he can has the mental fortitude to withstand
the Taint, and he was capable enough to hold his own when we fought. He'll be fine. but fine isn't
good enough. Three sovereigns could have gotten him to Tevinter, well outside the reach of any
templar. He deserves better than the life of a Warden, death at thirty-six or fifty-six answering
Razikale and Lusacan's Call.

I shouldn't have had to conscript him at all. I was promised autonomy for the Circle.
Anora looked me in the eye while Alistair looked away. Let it be known that Ferelden's mages have
earned the right to watch over themselves. The tower shall be restored and returned to the Circle. To
hear those words as the Queen's decree, to the horror of all gathered...

I can still hear the silence. Every bann and arl who gave me their vote and their voice at the
Landsmeet cast their eyes away and coughed. They forgot me for a mage and they were ashamed to
be reminded. I let them forget. Damn me, I followed Eamon's advice and I came before them as a
Warden. I fought Loghain on even footing, with sword and shield, because I respected the man. I
should have known better.

One crushing prison. One breath of blood. I already had half of them ensorcelled; it would have
made no difference what armor I wore. If the vote at the Landsmeet had been cast for a mage, if a mage had their respect, if mage had their fear, I might have had their voice at the post-coronation ceremony. Instead, a silence so profound I swear I could have used it to raise Dumat himself from the grave, the same way I rose Denerim's armies.

So many sacrifices...

They were so ready to forget. Dastards. Because it was ugly? Because it was forbidden? Because it was magic? It worked. Damn them all. War comes with sacrifices, as many sacrifices as are needed. Most of them were dying of the Taint already. All of them were willing. None of it could have been done without magic, but they'd name me Hero just so they didn't have to call me Mage.

You will guard them and they will hate you for it. Whenever there is not a Blight actively crawling over the surface, humanity will do its best to forget how much they need you. Riordan gave us the same speech Fontaine gave him, that the rest of the late Warden-Commanders gave her, and I don't think the man realized how true the words rang not just for Wardens but for mages. Freedom shouldn't be a boon. I shouldn't have to ask.

Kinloch is mine. Damn the Chantry and damn Irving and damn Greagoir and damn the lot and damn me. I could fill Lake Calenhad with what I bled for the Circle. Thirty five abominations dead by my hand. Twenty-one templars, and more demons and undead that I'd dared to count. I cleansed the tower when Greagoir and his templars abandoned it. I saved scores while they waited for the Rite. They'd see us dead before they risked their lives to save ours and these are the men the Chantry entrusts us to.

Anora told me the Chantry wouldn't concede to giving the Circle autonomy, but we shouldn't need their concession. A mage shouldn't have to earn their freedom. The Chantry would point to Tevinter and claim they act in the greater good to prevent such horrors, as if they know anything of either. The Divine would choke on the first drop from the chalice. Tevinter has their slaves, but the Chantry solves nothing enslaving mages instead.

I saved the Circle. I saved Ferelden. I earned everything as a mage, and the Chantry turned a blind eye to all of it. Making me an arl won't change anything. I never asked for this. I could have demanded lands, a title, riches, anything, but I asked for freedom and no one listened. I'll be damned before I let their platitudes silence me. I've had enough of templars silencing me. The dastards think they can bribe the magic out of me.

Six months. Six months spent as an advisor to the crown, working with Anora to bring a little stability back to the country while Alistair sulked and I rued the day I ever put him on the throne. Damn the man. Damn him. He knew what taking Barkspawn would do to me. I told him what it was like it in the Circle. I told him what they do to us. I told him what they do to us. I told him I let him. I gave him the right. I put a templar on the throne, and he did exactly what a templar would. He took the only thing I had left. He took the only damn thing in this whole damn world that ever loved me and he locked it in a fucking cell. Damn him damn him damn him.

Harellan’alas tu melava var falonan halam. Harellan tu ar u’him la ar tel'las abelas. Emma souveri suledin. Ar nuvenin enasal.

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Fenedhis lasa. Ar melava halam banal’lan la ar tel’abelas ar tel’dirthavaren da’nan. Emma melava banal’lan la ar tu suv enasal. Sahlin ar era la enen isala revas. Tel’atisha lasa revas; mien harel lasa revas vir lin la numin la mien la Damnit, I did it again. Get a hold on yourself, Fausten. I can just imagine Anders’ face if I launch into Elvish on a bit. He’ll think I’m mad. I’m not sure whether that would be better or worse than him remembering me from the Circle. At least he didn’t call me Apple this time.
I hope he killed those templars outside his cell. They're the last that will ever set foot in this Vigil so long as I have a say about it. If they won't respect autonomy for mages they'll respect autonomy for Wardens. The second the chalice touches his lips Anders and any other mage I recruit is mine, and I'll boil the blood of any templars that come for them before I let them lay their shackles on him again. I should march down to Kinloch and conscript the lot.

He's still so beautiful. He's not even a maleficar, and he still came back. He said he couldn't leave without helping, and I wanted to scream at him almost as much as I wanted to kiss him. He can't always have been that brave. I hope he's still not that brave. Lusacan please take him. Please don't let him be here in the morning. I don't want to risk him to the Joining. I don't want to hand him that chalice. I don't. I don't.

What am I saying? The Wardens are the closest thing to freedom a mage can hope for, and freedom is all Anders has ever wanted. He has a right to the risk no matter my feelings. Maybe I can offer him a post as a recruiter after the darkspawn here are dealt with. Recruiters are free to travel... assuming Anders even wants to travel, and doesn't just want to settle down somewhere as a freeman. I have no idea. I don't know anything about him.

I'll have to assign him to the infirmary in the meantime, if I haven't already. He didn't even ask for anything for healing the wounded. Just lunch. The bastards didn't even feed him. He was so optimistic about it all. The darkspawn, the blood magic, the wardens. I don't understand how he has it in him. It's like the sun shines inside him. In every golden freckle, every flaxen strand, those gorgeous amber eyes...

He's too good for this accursed world. He deserves better. All mages do. Anora won't go back on her word. She's her father's daughter. I just have to wait and work with the Collective for now. In peace, vigilance, and they gave me a Vigil.

Anders had started reading lying on his stomach, and wasn't sure how he ended up on his back with his legs braced against the wall, but if nothing else it made it easier to read through his tears. A handful of droplets clung to his lashes and the ink blurred and bled when he blinked, but they weren't a river. He wasn't sobbing, and every time a shudder played through his chest it came paired with a ripple of sapphire on his hands.

The part of him that was Justice would manifest as a deep breath that left Anders tasting mana, and kept him calm. Anders wiped his eyes off on a sleeve darktown had stained, and skimmed the entry for a while longer before he set the journal aside. Maker, what a mess. Anders couldn't help wondering if he would be better off pretending Amell had never existed. Everything he learned about the man just made Anders miss him more.

The worst of the whole thing had been Amell claiming not to know him, when in twenty-seven years no one had known Anders better. There'd been no judgments. No defense of the Chantry. No arguments about blood magic that Anders didn't start. There'd been no debts. No bindings that weren't absolutely necessary, and apologized for time and again until the word lost all meaning. They'd had their fights, but they'd had so much more than that.

Anders couldn't think of anyone or anything who had ever done more for him, and asked for nothing in return. Three fights with templars, freedom offered at every turn, his every fear embraced and understood or overturned. For five short months Anders had everything he'd ever wanted: a pretty lover, a decent meal, and the right to use his magic at will. Bethany was right. It didn't seem possible to fall for someone so hard and so fast, and maybe there was a reason for it: it hurt.

When Anders pushed past that, he thought about what he'd read, and wondered what in Thedas he
thought he was doing. Amell was more than Anders would ever be. He'd saved everyone from the Blight, and it still wasn't enough to make a difference with the Chantry. The Chantry was never going to accept mages as equal. An abomination running a free clinic in the sewers of the City of Chains wasn't going to change that.

He and Justice might save one, or a dozen, or even a score of mages, and in the grand scheme of things it wouldn't make any difference. The Chantry was never going to stop. Velanna was right about them, and it was bloody ironic. Andraste had fought a tyrannical empire only for her followers to become one themselves. The Chantry was inherently flawed, its laws based on fear of an empire that crumbled a thousand years ago.

Something had to be done. Justice wanted an end to the Circles, but Anders didn't know where to start. He doubted Hawke asking the Grand Cleric's audience would make any difference, but it was a pleasant fantasy. A Chantry that didn't blame mages for the sins of magisters, a Chantry that held templars accountable for their actions, a Chantry that was good, a Chantry that was just. It was a pleasant fantasy, but a fantasy all the same.

The Divine wasn't a mouthpiece for the Maker. She was a demented old crone who had never cared for mages to begin with, and had been the one to put the templars in their place of power in Kirkwall in the first place. Thom had told Anders the story of Viscount Threnhold, and how Divine Beatrix III had turned the templars on him. The late Knight-Commander had died, and Grand Cleric Elthina had appointed Stannard in his stead.

If Stannard was making Harrowed mages Tranquil, it was with Elthina's consent. Begging that old biddy would get Hawke nowhere. Change wasn't going to come in increments. Maker, change might not come at all. Anders stumbled out of bed and Justice's fire pushed the thoughts away. They would make a difference someday. It just took time. Time and sweat and blood and tears.

A whole bloody year. Anders unhooked his canteen from his hip and poured it into the gutter; the grime clung stubbornly to the rusted piping, and the waterfall changed nothing, but the man had. "Happy anniversary, Creepy."

Chapter End Notes

Translation: That dirty traitor made an end to our friendship. He's the reason I'm alone and I will not forgive him. I am tired of enduring. I want to be happy. Fuck it. I ended the blight and I'm not sorry I broke my promise to him for his petty vengeance. I was a warden and I won. Now I am a mage and mages need freedom. Freedom will not come from peace, it will come from revolution, through blood and tears and swords and
Hello everyone, welcome back. I keep saying I'm going to respond to comments and then... not... doing that. Oops. Thank you for all your comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 28 Ferventis Afternoon
Kirkwall Lowtown

Anders did his best to keep out of the way whenever he was out. He may have been a lark in the Circle, grandstanding at every occasion, but he'd still been a mage. He knew when to duck his head and fall in line. It was never safe for a mage to be alone in the Circle and if Anders insisted everyone know his name, or what passed for it, it was only because he wanted them to notice when he was gone.

Granted, in the Circle, gone could mean anything. Maybe it meant a mage had escaped. Maybe it meant they'd been killed. Maybe it meant they'd been moved to another Circle. Maybe it meant they were in solitary. The First Enchanter never said, and the templars weren't liable to go around assuaging any fears. They'd rather everyone assume missing meant dead so mages didn't get any ideas about missing meaning free and give it a go.

Bunks just turned up empty. Apprentices. Mages. Even enchanters. It was the way of it and no one stopped to think it wasn't normal. That people just didn't up and vanish out in the real world. Hardly anyone even said anything about it. Failed his Harrowing, if it was an apprentice. Broke out last night, if it was a mage. Got sent away, if it was an enchanter. No curiosity, no questions, not when the templars were watching.

So Anders went out of his way to make sure that everyone knew him, that no one would forget him, that someone would ask about him. It hadn't mattered. He'd spent a year in solitary anyway. Lenient, Irving had said, when the standard punishment was three. Lenient, Irving had said, when the templars dragged him in from every escape attempt because he was too weak to walk. Lenient, Irving had said, that all they did was boil the mana in his blood to catch him.

Discipline, Irving had said, when the templars turned their fists against him on every journey back to the Circle. Discipline, Irving had said, when they had assigned a templar to his every waking hour and denied him any modesty. Discipline, Irving had said, when Anders had learned to go without it and been beaten for his insolence. Discipline, Irving had said, when they'd left him to starve on one meal a day, and Anders had been too big a coward to make it stop.

So Anders made a scene. He made a joke of it. He made it mean something. He made it his own when it was the only thing he could have, but it hadn't changed anything. They'd thrown him in solitary anyway. He was a mage, and when it came right down to it, that was all that mattered. When he was out on his own, when he was free (or near enough) Anders kept his head down. He kept his eyes open. He kept his things close. He kept out of the way.

It worked, right up until Anders wanted to talk to someone, or someone wanted to talk to Anders. It was too engrained in him: the need to make noise, to be heard, to be noticed before it was too late. In
the past, if he could get another mage to stand with him, suddenly he wasn't worth the trouble, and he was sent back to his quarters instead of his cell. There was nothing like that now, nor had there been for years, and Anders knew it was a habit that needed breaking. A mage on the defensive in Kirkwall was a recipe for disaster, and Anders should have known better than to let anything ruffle his feathers.

But Anders couldn't help himself. So he burned off his pants, he gave impromptu speeches to any refugees that would listen, he slaughtered templar patrols in the dark, he gave away dangerous artifacts enchanted by unknown maleficarum to his patients, and somehow no one had caught him yet. Instead everyone else suffered for him, just as Cera had predicted, but Anders was determined not to learn from his mistakes.

So Anders sat on the chair Thom had offered him, his hands on the man's arm, feeding tendrils of creationism through his veins while a cut on the man's wrist gave him access to his pulse: blood magic right out in the open. The necklace helped. The qunari mage must have had a similar heart condition, because the enchantment served to regulate blood flow. It served better making sure Thom stayed healthy than it did making sure Anders felt pretty, so Anders gave it to Thom.

"You're good," Anders said after a quick check of the man's humors. His blood wasn't putting as much pressure on his veins, and there was a strength about it that would have made it a better medium for magic if Anders had used it to cast anything. "No heart murmurs? Dizziness? Memory loss? Fatigue? Anything irregular?"

"Nothing," Thom promised, "Been a great two weeks. Easier to breathe, no heartburn, no cramps."

"It's perfect," Thom's wife Abigail promised, setting a bowl of fish stew in front of him. "You're a life saver, Anders."

"That's the goal," Anders said, a final pulse of creationism knitting the cut on Thom's arm back together. It was blood magic, no two ways about it, but Anders had been delighted to learn it. There was no other way to treat an illness like Thom's. It was in his blood, and the strength of it was something only a blood mage could gauge. "I don't think the necklace is overcorrecting. You should be safe to wear it while I'm gone."

"He will," Abigail said firmly, setting down a second bowl for Thom. "Won't he?"

"Yes, yes, he will," Thom sighed, rolling down his sleeve and dragging his bowl over, "Anders knows I'm grateful, but I don't think it's unreasonable for me to be a little wary."

"Wary's good," Anders assured him. "You need to be wary. No one can ever know about the necklace, Thom. If a templar found you wearing it, you'd hang."

"And the wife too, no doubt," Thom pulled the necklace out from under his shirt, and ran his thumb over the onyx with a thoughtful frown on his face.

"The wife can take care of herself," Abigail said firmly, "We need this, Thom. You remember your last heart attack. If Bill hadn't gotten you to the Gallows-"

"I was there, woman, I know what happened," Thom sighed.

"Then put that back in your shirt and leave well enough alone," Abigail ordered, and turned a warm smile on Anders. "We love it, Anders, thank you. You're a treasure, and a thin one. Eat your stew."

"Eating," Anders promised, picking up his spoon to go fishing for the chunks of shellfish in the catch of the day.
"So this necklace I'm going to be wearing for the rest of my life," Thom said, "How does it work? I know it's blood magic, but I've never heard of blood magic purifying anything."

"There's nothing inherently evil about blood magic," Anders said. "It's magic, like any other."

Anders was going to get himself killed one of these days, but there was no denying the necklace. Thom needed it, he needed to be warned about it, and he'd already seen more than enough of Anders healing him to guess at the magic. He doubted Thom was going to turn him over for it, but that didn't mean the next patient with a heart problem wouldn't.

It was easier not to think about it.

"There's no other way to treat what you have, Thom," Anders said. "The problem is that that enchantment is advanced. There's no way anyone with the cursory understanding of blood magic the Chantry approves of could make it. You need an in-depth understanding of blood and the way it moves through the body, of eldritch magic and how to shape it, and either lyrium or blood to hold the enchantment.

On a maleficar, less impurities in the blood means less blood for spells. It's a weapon, but it doesn't have to be. For you it's just a way to keep your heart healthy, but the Chantry won't care about that if they catch you wearing it."

"They won't," Abigail said.

"And you made this for me?" Thom asked.

"Found it, if you can believe it," Anders said. There was no reason to bring Hawke into this after all. "But I'd like to learn how to make it for anyone else with a heart problem like yours. I have a few ideas, but I need to keep studying it. I can do that on these checkups. No reason you should go without it if it can help you now."

"You'll want to be careful with that, I imagine," Thom said. "I don't know how many people will be as understanding about it."

"Doesn't mean I shouldn't try," Anders said.

Anders finished eating and had bid the Beshcals goodbye when Thom's wife stopped him at the door. "Anders, wait a minute," Abigail begged, closing the door behind them to talk to him on the doorstep.

"If this is about my things-" Anders guessed.

"What? No, don't be ridiculous," Abigail said, with a quick glance to ensure they were alone. "We can hold onto a few letters for you while you're off on your expedition. It's no trouble. I just wanted to ask if you're sure about what you said last week? If blood magic can help Thom's heart maybe it can do something for me."

"I'm sorry, Abby," Anders put on what he hoped was a comforting smile, "If there is a spell like that I don't know it." The closest thing Anders knew to a spell for conception was one that forced erections, and it wasn't as if the Beshcals weren't trying. Abigail was just barren.

"It would be too good to be true, wouldn't it?" Abigail sighed.

"I know how you feel, believe me," Anders felt his smile twist, and tried to keep it in his eyes. "Being around the kids- ... Actually, Abby, maybe there is something. Have you and Thom ever
thought about adopting?"

"Adopt who?" Abigail asked, leaning back against the doorframe. There was a resigned sort of lethargy about her that depressed him just to see, "The Chantry takes in all the orphans."

"Not all of them," Anders said. "I know a few kids who could use a good home, if you're interested."

Abigail pushed herself off the door and wrung her hands together thoughtfully for several long seconds, "... Any boys?"

"A few, yeah," Anders said.

"... I'll talk to Thom." Abigail decided, a smile touching her lips, "Maybe we could go meet them when you're back from your expedition?"

"I'll have to talk to their guardian, but it's a date," Anders agreed.

Anders didn't doubt Evelina wouldn't mind the Beschals adopting one of the boys. Pryce wouldn't go without his sisters, but Cricket or Walter would be fine on their own. Evelina was attached to them, enough to keep them from the Chantry, but she'd want to see them go to good homes. Maker knew it would be better for them than living in the sewers. Anders recalled Aveline's callous remark last week at Wicked Grace and bristled.

"Why you and the rest of the refugees choose to live down there is beyond me," Aveline had said, as if anyone would choose to spend their days slogging through shit and their nights plagued with chokedamp. The woman couldn't open her mouth without making Anders hate her more. Anders relit a few fires on his way back to his clinic to the gratitude of a few refugees, who would have been anywhere else if they had the choice, because it was bloody common sense no one wanted to freeze to death in the dark.

Anders let himself into his clinic and lit his lantern, feeling a little lighter without his satchel. He'd taken care of everything. The Beschals had agreed to watch his things, with Lirene's shop and the Dog's Kennels facing too much traffic and regular raids by the guards or the templars. The Coterie knew in advance he was leaving, and he'd gathered up as many supplies as he could for the Collective in his absence.

Anders was dreading the Deep Roads, but he didn't see a choice in the matter. He'd risked Bethany's life twice, and the least he could do for the girl was protect her brother and the rest of the fools determined to risk their lives for the mad underground venture. Anders could already picture himself covered in filth and knee-deep in blood, in the dark, with nothing but the light of a wisp fighting back the black in those caverns. It wasn't a terribly pretty picture.

Then again, Darktown wasn't much better. Anders saw to a half dozen patients before evening, before hunger and Justice forced him to dispel the light from his lantern. The spirit didn't always recognize hunger, drifting between his thoughts and the dark recesses of his mind, but when Anders was healing, and Justice was at his fingertips, the spirit noticed the pangs of hunger Anders had learned to ignore.

He manifested in a kink in Anders' neck, a disassociation to his thoughts, an odd and urgent need to move that left Anders pacing restlessly between patients until he recognized the feeling for Justice trying to force him into finding food. It was harder than it had been, ever since Anders had stopped using blood magic to hunt rats, but he didn't see a choice. He needed to dream. He needed a way to talk to Justice.
If blood magic took that from him, it wasn't a price Anders was willing to pay, which meant using it sparingly. For patients, and nothing else, Anders had decided shortly after the revelation and so far he'd managed to hold to it. Anders cleaned up his clinic, and was reaching for his coat when Hawke knocked on his door.

There was no mistaking the man; the way his fist pounded on the door as if he intended to break it down, and the impatient, "Anders!" that accompanied the ruckus.

Anders left his coat on the hook, and stopped in front of his door to bang loudly back. "Hawke!"

The pounding stopped. Anders chuckled, and opened the door with a grin Hawke met with a frown. 
Anders broke eye-contact with him a heartbeat later to snort and wave at the lantern hanging from hook beside the door, "Fire's out."

"I was just about to head out to find dinner," Anders explained, taking a step back to wave the man inside.

"Find it for you, for a favor," Hawke offered.

"Let's be more specific," Anders waved him to a crate, and took one for himself. "I don't do anything involving children or animals."

"Where do drunken sots fall on your list?" Hawke asked.

"Something happen with your uncle?" Anders guessed, trying to keep his eyes off the man's thighs, but it was near impossible with Hawke running his hands over them and squeezing idly at the leather.

"Threw out his back," Hawke explained, "Don't have the coin to support him while I'm gone, and he can't work laid up in bed."

"That's right, he uh..." Eyes up, Anders. What were they even talking about again? Thank the Maker Hawke rarely made eye-contact, so he rarely saw when Anders failed to do the same.

"Works the cocks," Hawke couldn't have said, but that's what Anders heard.

Anders snorted, and broke into a fit of hysterical laughter. "What?"

"Docks," Hawke enunciated loudly, "Docks. He works the docks." Anders bit his knuckles to contain his laughter, and it didn't help him any when Hawke started chuckling, "Though with the time he spends at the Rose I wouldn't be surprised."

"That would be a good way to go, though, wouldn't it?" Anders snorted, rolling his shoulder at the prickle of static he knew came from Justice. Maker, man, I don't need a chaperone, Anders thought to himself, with the hope Justice could pick up on his intent, if nothing else. "Of course I'll come help, though you know that means you'd have another apostate in your home. Not worried for Beth?"

"I'm always worried for Beth," Hawke said. "I can't leave her and mother to listen to Gamlen's bitching for an entire month. They'd be better off with the darkspawn."

"Thanks for trusting me with that, by the way," Anders said. "You don't want her in the Deep Roads. All it takes is one bite, or a bit of a blood in an open wound, and you're tainted. Ghouls... Maker, you don't want to see them."
"I wasn't going to bring her along anyway," Hawke said. "Seen enough darkspawn to know I'm not letting my family anywhere near them again."

"Look um... Carver-"

"-is dead." Hawke interrupted him. "Leave him that way."

"Where'd that come from?" Anders demanded, remembering how fondly Hawke had spoken of his younger brother just weeks ago before he corrected himself, "No-I'm sorry-you're right, it's on you if you want that left alone."

Hawke growled his way through a sigh and scratched at his scalp, "Thanks. It's a bad week... I don't know if I can talk about him right now, but go ahead."

"I was just going to say it's probably going to be hard to be around so many darkspawn, after what happened to him." Anders said.

"So long as I can kill them," Hawke said.

"What happened this week?" Anders asked. "Anything I can help with?"

"Just work." Hawke said unhelpfully. "You got everything squared for the trip?"

"If I had to pick a shape, sure," Anders shrugged.

"Well I know you're not going with Circle," Hawke... joked? Anders snickered, and won a grin. Andraste's grace, it was a joke.

"So how did you get the coin together?" Anders prodded, "Or-let me guess-it's not my business?" Hawke grinned, and Anders flicked a bit of grit off the table towards him, "Come on, at least aim for a little creativity there. Magic, or a wizard did it, or something."

"A wizard did something," Hawke said, "Thanks for helping pick the entrance for the trip."

"You know if you really wanted to thank me you could leave Fenris behind," Anders said.

"You just don't know him," Hawke said, "He's got a good heart."

"Right, I bet he keeps it in a jar," Anders snorted. "Ah, you ready to head out? Probably shouldn't keep your uncle waiting."

Anders locked up the clinic when they left, and shrugged his coat up on his shoulders on the walk through Darktown. "Seriously though, Fenris?" Anders asked, following Hawke over one of the many rickety bridges that spanned the divides in Darktown. "I'm beginning to think you hate me. You couldn't bring anyone else?"

"Aveline has the guard and I need her here to look over Beth and Mother, Isabela's claustrophobic and thinks she has a lead on her relic and Merrill wants to stay to help her. Meeran's got Gustav working, and no one else in this city knows a blade from a butter knife."

"One of them's pointier, right?" Anders guessed, holding his breath over another bridge that passed over a sewage drain.

"One of them's pointier," Hawke agreed. He was wearing his father's old armor again, for whatever reason, and the switch of his mantle was distracting, but it also reminded Anders his assorted rags didn't count much for armor. He thought of the darkspawn claw that had pierced his leg in Kal'Hirol,
and rubbed a phantom pain from his thigh for the memory. Maker, this expedition was going to be a mess.

"So your uncle's back," Anders asked, "How bad is it?"

"How bad do I think it is or how bad does Gamlen act like it is?" Hawke asked.

"Both," Anders shrugged, jogging a few feet to catch up with the bridges behind them, and space enough to walk side by side again.

"I think Gamlen could get a job in a cattle barn with how hard he's milking this," Hawke said. "But he didn't end up in a ditch on his way home and that's better than he usually does."

"I have vague memories of you claiming to love this fellow," Anders mused.

"I do love him," Hawke said, stepping onto the lift and taking to the crank when Anders followed. "But Gamlen can't say 'good morning' without lying twice. Just ignore the shit that comes out of his mouth when we get there."

"Reminds me a bit of someone." Anders joked, rocking back and forth on his feet in the lift to the sound of rattling chains and grating metal as it eked its way into Lowtown. "It's you," Anders said in a loud whisper when Hawke didn't respond.

"Not a liar," Hawke said, but he snorted.

Anders grinned, "So I take it I finally get to meet your mother? It'll be nice to have a chance to thank her for the quilt."

"Just... don't let her get to you," Hawke said.

"That's not ominous or anything," Anders noted, "I thought I was her favorite son-in-law."

"'Favorite' doesn't mean what you think it means with my mother." Hawke said as the lift lurched to a halt in Lowtown. The roof of the building the lift was in had caved in in one corner, rock and rubble strew along the edge of the platform, and a sickly light broke through the foundry fog. Whether it was chokedamp or smog, the air was never clean in Kirkwall, but there was no sense complaining about it when it was all there was to breathe.

"She doesn't know what happened to Beth last month," Hawke warned him when they stepped out into Lowtown. "Don't tell her."

"How can she possibly not know?" Anders asked, "Evon and Donal carried her home."

"In the middle of the night," Hawke said. "She's a heavy sleeper. I took Beth to the Hanged Man, and we waited for the healer there."

"I'm sorry," Anders said.

"It's done," Hawke said.

Bright red and orange awnings decorated the alleys that led to the hex Hawke and his family lived in, all of them ripped and laden with pigeon crap in the traditional Lowtown style. A summer haze clung to the cobblestone, and the piles of filth that had been left to marinade in the sun buzzed with flies and swarmed with roaches. It wasn't quite as bad on the main streets, and Anders managed to snatch a kiwi off a fruit cart as it trundled past to cool down on their way to Hawke's home.
The courtyard had been a quarry like the rest of the Lowtown, and still had scaffolding rotting away against the walls from when it had been built. Hawke's house was stuffed into the corner block of apartments, on the second story and held together by red and rusted metalwork. The door was iron, or near enough, and graffitied with the words "PAY UP" that someone had worked in vain to wash away.

"Friendly neighbors?" Anders guessed.

"Gamlen's friends," Hawke stopped at the door and made no moves to open it.

"Downright sporting, from the looks of it," Anders mused, "Are we waiting for something?"

"... Try to forget what you hear in here," Hawke sighed, knocking three times before he shoved the door open. The house seemed a house like any other on the inside. It looked much like all of Lowtown, walls of mottled wood and stone, held together with rusted metalwork and covered by ratty tarps and tapestries. Light cast through a few windows set high in the wall, and a fireplace across the room in front of which Bethany sat with a woman who looked like an older version of her.

Her hair was grey, but done in the same style, tied off just at the base of her neck, and she wore a dress in place of Bethany's trousers, the light beige of undyed wool tied off with a brown leather corset and a pretty blue sash. She looked up at their entrance with a smile that crumpled into a frown, "Sweetheart. You're back. Is this....?"

"Anders, to the rescue," Anders introduced himself, dodging out of the way when a blur of brown came rushing past to slam Hawke into the door and slather all over his face.

"Off!" Hawke ordered, and Dog dropped off his chest. The mabari paced in a circle, whining, and threw itself down in the middle of the living room with a huff.

"That better be the bloody healer!" A raspy voice yelled from the room over.

"Shut it!" Bethany yelled back, leaving her chair to come greet him. Anders felt a flicker of irritation from Justice, and ignored it to return the hug Bethany offered him. "Anders! It's so good to see you. It feels like we never get a chance anymore now that you don't come on our hunting trips."

"Sorry," Anders said, "Busy. You know how it is."

"I know," Bethany smiled sadly, and a loud cough from Hawke's mother interrupted them.

"Do I get an introduction?" The older woman asked, dusting off her dress and standing to look him over with such a critical eye Anders couldn't help fidgeting.

"Mother, this is Anders," Bethany introduced them, while Hawke left his boots on a rack by the door, "Anders, this is my mother, Leandra Amell."

"Bethany mentioned you've been teaching her healing magic," Leandra noted; her voice was light and airy and everything Anders would have expected from a noble. Her posture matched it, her back ram-rod straight and her hands entwined delicately at her waist. At least Hawke and Bethany hadn't inherited that air of aristocracy, not that Anders was sure Bethany's cowardice or Hawke's aggression was any better.

"Here and there," Anders agreed, trying not to wince at the surname.

"So when did you and Bethany start courting?" Leandra asked.
Anders choked, Hawke snorted, and Bethany turned beet red. "Mother!" Bethany hissed. "I told you we're just friends."

"I'm not so old I don't remember what that means," Leandra said with an absolutely uncalled for twinkle in her eyes. "Like mother like daughter, after all."

"Mother," Bethany whined.

"It's not like that, really," Anders said.

"Sweetheart, you don't need to be embarrassed," Leandra said, "Of course, I am a little concerned you might end up living the same life as your father and I, but-"

"Is that the fucking healer or not!?!" The raspy voice yelled again.

"I said shut it!" Bethany yelled back.

"So-that reminds me actually of why I'm here, so..." Anders pointed to one of the two doors in the small hovel as a guess and raised an eyebrow.

"He's in there," Hawke said, and Anders skirted past the group to the back room.

Anders wasn't about to call it a mess, but it was certainly cluttered. The room had been divided down the middle and it wasn't hard to guess which side belonged to Hawke. There was a blanket covered with dog hair thrown down beside the cot, and a hook above it that held his bow in a quiver. Three armor stands encircled a small space littered with feathers, bits of wood, and a carving knife. There was a lute leaning on the cot, and a copy of the Chant of Light on the canvas.

The other half of the room very clearly belonged to his uncle, and not just because the man was laid up in bed. A wallop mallet hung on the wall, empty bottles were strewn along the floor, and in the center of it all was a table holding a stained mug, dice, and cards that had yet to be put away, if there was even any place to put them with how the armoire spilled out onto the floor.

Anders picked his way across the room and grabbed a chair to drag across the floor and set beside Hawke's uncle's cot. "Gamlen, isn't it?" Anders asked; there was less resemblance to the man than the rest of his family. Varric hadn't picked wrong with his nickname. There was such a shine to Gamlen's complex Anders could have used it as a mirror, with enough grease in his hair the candle on his nightstand made Anders nervous.

He was built like a Marcher, sturdy and stocky save for the stomach one too many ales had given him. "My nephew bring you to heal me or not?" Gamlen snarled.

"Charmed." Anders decided, holding a hand a few inches over the man to send tendrils of creationism down his spine until he found the problem in his lower back. It was a protrusion on his spinal cord, between the discs, and Anders channeled a cleansing aura to bring down the inflammation. It set off the magic in his veins, and cast the faint blue light that was Justice throughout the room.

Gamlen frowned at him, "Noisy shit's gonna get you caught one day, boy."


"Girl's always going on about you," Gamlen muttered. "Couldn't have taught her enough for her to do this shit on her own?"
"A mage can't sustain a cleansing aura without a spirit to back it, and Bethany's not a spirit healer," Anders said. "You've got a tear between the discs in your spine that's inflamed. If you didn't have a spirit healer it would take three months of you in bed to heal on its own, if it healed at all."

"Well aren't you a special snowflake," Gamlen said.

"I think so," Anders grinned.

"... Back feels better already," Gamlen noted.

"That's the plan," Anders said.

"And you do this shit for free?" Gamlen asked, "Damn waste. You could be making a killing."

"Healer, remember?" Anders wiggled the fingers of his free hand at the man, and his veins flared with magic at his beckon. "Killing is kind of the opposite of what I'm going for."

"You're as bad as my nephew," Gamlen muttered. "When can I get up?"

"Not for a day, at least," Anders said, "I'm still not done."

Gamlen grunted and grumbled when Anders finished cleansing the inflammation about how ridiculous it was he had to stay lying down when nothing was wrong with him, but he stayed in his cot, which was all Anders asked. If nothing else, at least Gamlen was sympathetic enough to care about the possibility of Anders getting caught. All in all he could have been worse.

Anders saw himself out, and into the main room where Bethany and Hawke were working at the counter that made up their kitchen on what Anders assumed was dinner. Leandra was setting the table with what looked to be wooden cutlery, and looked up at his entrance. "You are staying for dinner, aren't you, Anders? Did you want to have a bath first?"

"Mother!" Bethany hissed.

"I'd love one, actually," Anders said, grinning at how aghast Bethany looked at the suggestion.

"The wash is just through there," Leandra said with a nod towards the room Anders hadn't been in. Anders went with a wave of thanks, and wasn't terribly surprised to see the room was a mirror of the one Hawke shared with Gamlen. Bethany's side of the room was littered with books and tomes, and an assorted collection of herbs with a proper alchemy set. Her staff hung on the wall, with a set of oils on the desk beneath it for maintenance.

Leandra's side had yarn, thread, and needles laid out for needlepoint and knitting on her cot. A small desk was littered with pressed or pressing flowers, a diary, and a much neater armoire than her brother's was set against the wall. A divider in the center of the room hid the wash, where a real wooden tub and a vanity were waiting.

Anders' quick bath did nothing for his clothes, but wonders for his hair and his mood. It was like to be his last for an entire month, with the Deep Roads waiting for him, and Anders appreciated the offer no matter how Leandra had meant it. His hair was still wet when he came back into the living room in time for dinner.

"Thanks for the offer Leandra," Anders said, taking the only seat left at the table, which happened to be opposite the woman. Bethany and Leandra smiled at him, while Hawke glowered at his plate as if it had personally insulted him. Anders couldn't imagine how. Dinner looked to be an inoffensive salted venison and roasted potatoes. "I probably needed it."
"Oh it's not your fault, poor thing," Leandra said, to another hissed 'Mother!' from Bethany, "Living in the sewers! Maker, I can't imagine it. Sometimes I forget what Gamlen spared us. I can't say I approve of Bethany being involved in any sort of mage business and risking the eye of the Circle, but it is so dear of you to do what you do, and I've heard only good things about you."

"Really?" Anders raised an eyebrow at Hawke the man missed in his staring contest with his dinner. Not going into details about Beth was one thing, but Anders would have assumed the man would voice an opinion or two considering the debt Anders owed him.

"Leandra!" Gamlen whined from the other room, "Where's my dinner?"

"Maker's breath," Bethany muttered, "Please tell me he'll be on his feet by tomorrow."

"He'll be up on his feet by tomorrow," Anders promised.

"I can't believe you're leaving me here with him, brother," Bethany said.

"It's safer for you here," Hawke said.

"Is this dwarven venture truly the only way?" Leandra asked, "I hate to think of you going willingly into the darkspawn's grasp."

"We have a Warden with us," Hawke pointed out, finally looking up from his plate to spare Anders a long look that made his face heat up and his throat dry out, "We'll be fine."
No Turning Back

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back! I'm so sorry this chapter took so long; I hate the Deep Roads. The song in this chapter is an adaptation of The Circle by Blackmore's Night. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 3 Solis Early Morning
Free Marches - Southeastern side of the Vimmark Mountains

The entrance to the Deep Roads was a cave anyone might have mistaken for something belonging to a bear, nestled in the southeastern side of the Vimmark Mountains, north of the road between Kirkwall and Ostwick. There were four throughout the Free Marches that Anders had been able to make out on the map the Dogs had stolen from Stroud, well back in Drakonis. The man had been planning his own expedition into the Deep Roads, though Anders couldn't say if there was a chance it would line up with the one Bartrand was leading on Hawke's mysterious and very likely ill-gotten coin.

The more Anders learned about the expedition, the less he liked it. Bartrand was going on dwarven hearsay of a thaig supposedly buried a week below the surface, rumors of which had apparently abounded since the Third Blight. The thaig was rumored to be from before the time of the First Blight, and the original source of lyrium to every dwarven city throughout Thedas, the name of which was lost to legend. Orzammar would pay for a fortune for the location alone, presuming they ever found it, and didn't just die a few days into the mad venture.

The expedition was a half-score of workers, a score of hired muscle, and a few miscellaneous tagalongs. Anders was expecting to lose more than half of them. The same scrapes and bruises the Wardens bore with a bandage would blight a normal man. The more muscle Bartrand hired just meant more blood to taint, and knowing the ritual for the Joining didn't mean Anders had the lyrium or enchanted chalice to cast it. It also didn't do much for Anders' confidence that the muscle Bartrand had hired wasn't exactly keen on defending their little trio.

If nothing else, the Winters were certainly living up to their name. Anders had never had such a cold reception in his entire life, and he'd spent twenty-six years at the mercy of templars. At just the sight of Hawke, half of them had walked out, and the other half had threatened to kill the man on the spot. Coin won out, the way coin often did, but for summer the air was noticeably chilly, and the looks were nothing if not icy.

"I told you this would come back on you," Fenris had muttered after the shouting war had ended in something like a truce. As far as Anders was concerned, it was the most civil thing to come out of the elf's mouth the entire two days it had taken them to make the journey to the Deep Road's entrance. Next to a character like Fenris, Hawke looked like rainbows and butterfly farts, and considering he was often with Varric, it was where Anders gravitated more often than not.

It wasn't to say there wasn't other company for him in the expedition. The Winters might have hated him out of association, but the workers had nothing against him. They were Fereldans, the lot of them, and as desperate for coin in unforgiving Kirkwall as Hawke. Anders had met two blokes
worth the time of day, and no doubt the time of night when they lost the sun and moons beneath the earth. Ralf was a blond giant with mutton chops that were a sheep's envy, and Miles looked like something someone might have pulled out of the supply carts: ladder-tall with braid enough it could have served for rope in a pinch.

As to the supply carts themselves... Anders could have done without. A fellow by the name of Bodahn Feddic was supplying the expedition, and while he might have manifested a set of cheap leather armor for Anders out of his ass, it didn't make his company any more tolerable. There was nothing wrong with the man, per se, though his overbearing enthusiasm for the Deep Roads was a little grating. It was his history and Varric's incessant need to hear it that drove Anders away.

Of course, he was from Ferelden. And of course, he'd been there during the Blight. And of course, he knew the Hero of Ferelden. And of course, he hadn't just met him, he'd spent the entire year traveling with him. And of course, he had stories, but you folk wouldn't be interested in-oh you were? Well then, of course, he could tell you all about Amell and his every fantastical adventure and this reminded him of the time that - Maker, make it fucking stop.

The taint might have given Anders an insatiable hunger, but it was his own fault he was a glutton for punishment. There was no other explanation for why he kept drifting over to Varric and Bodahn to listen the occasional story on those two long days to the Deep Roads. Apparently, Amell, and the King himself, and one of them great grand qunari, and a very intimidating wilder girl, and a lovely young songstress had saved Bodahn and his son Sandal from the darkspawn.

They'd spent the rest of the Blight trailing along behind them, scavenging the dead and picking up every odd trinket left behind to sell in the cities. Before then, Bodahn had lived in Orzammar and made a living scavenging abandoned thaigs, but nobles could be so sensitive about those sorts of things and a little disagreement over the definition of stealing had led to his exile. The brief history lesson explained the man's completely unwarranted enthusiasm for the Deep Roads, if nothing else. Apparently, he'd left a wife behind in Denerim just to be part of Bartrand's venture.

Anders couldn't imagine it. If he had a wife and a happy life, he'd never had left them for the blighted Deep Roads, even for a month. The torches were lit when they reached the cave, and Anders let out a sigh that felt strong enough to put them right back out. "Maker, why are we doing this again?"

"Because I have to look after Bartrand, and you think Hawke is cute," Varric gestured to where the archer was walking at the head of the procession with Bartrand. "That wasn't a serious question, was it, Blondie?"

"He is pretty cute," Anders allotted, waving away the torch one of the workers offered him. He summoned a light to radiate through the crystal set in his staff, and the worker offered it to Varric instead, who took it with a word of thanks.

"Getting any easier to look at him without seeing your guy?" Varric asked.

"A lottle," Anders said.

"A what?" Varric asked.

"A lottle," Anders said again, "You know, a little and a lot."

Varric shook his head, and the light died above them as they passed beneath the cave, "So this Warden business. How does it work? You get some kind of voice in your head - another voice in your head - that says 'Look out! A dozen darkspawn ahead!' or a muscle spasm that makes you point in the right direction, or what?"
"I'd have a seizure with that last one," Anders snorted, "It's the Deep Roads. There are darkspawn everywhere. It's... I don't know how to explain it. It's a hive mind. I can feel them when we're close to them. It's like being outside of your body, and knowing there's you, but however far away, there's them. Like a bird's eye view on it all, I guess. Supposedly makes strategy a little easier, because you can't not picture the battlefield in your mind."

"Battlefield," Varric repeated, "That's definitely something I want to think about before heading into a cramped, dark cave."

"Tell me about it," Anders sighed. It was already uncomfortable, though not unbearably so. The cave was a cave, like any other. The walls were grey, the ground was brown, and there were weeds caught between the two. There was space enough for their procession to walk five abreast, though Anders didn't doubt the carts and the donkeys dragging them would run into trouble the further down they went.

More often than not, Varric spent his time on the back of one of said carts. By his own admission, he was built for rolling, not walking, and even his blisters had blisters with how much walking they'd done already. Anders couldn't go anywhere near them, no matter how tired his feet were, or the even-tempered beasts of burden would go mad, reeling in their yokes and braying at the top of their lungs.

"Don't you worry about it, messere," Bodahn had assured him the first time Anders had forgotten, and set the donkeys off. "Mages'll do that sometimes, I'm afraid. The Hero traveled with one of the sweetest women I've ever met, an enchanter from the Circle I believe, but my old ass at the time wouldn't have none of it. A bad smell, I think. You need anything from the supply carts, let me know, and I'll get it for you." The dwarf was nice. It wasn't his fault he'd known Amell. At this rate, there wasn't a soul in all of Thedas who didn't.

The cave changed, the further back they traveled. It was an entrance utilized by the Wardens, one of only four, and it showed. The ground was worn smooth, the walls had been chiseled wide, the ceilings beamed high. Hooks were imbedded in the stone every few yards, fit to hold lanterns that must have been removed at some point. Anders guessed that meant this entrance was currently in a state of disuse, and hope it meant they wouldn't run into any Wardens asking questions about why and how they were here.

The last thing Anders wanted was to run into Stroud down here. He could just picture the man's mustache drooped with disappointment or outrage at the sight of him, hear the man's accented accusations and anger for Maker knew how many men Anders and Justice killed in their escape from the Vigil. The thought of Velanna and Nathaniel put a physical ache in his chest, and as much as Anders wanted closure, he didn't want the only kind of closure he could imagine getting.

"You've got that look again, Blondie," Varric noted. "Trying your best Broody impression? Your face is going to get stuck that way if you're not careful."

"Have a care with your words, dwarf," Fenris' low voice rumbled quite suddenly from behind them. Anders made a sound that didn't bear repeating in civilized company, and even Varric squealed.

"Maker's breath, Broody," Varric wheezed, pawing at his chest where his low neckline left it exposed, "Put your armor on, cough, fart, sing or something. How are you so quiet?"

"Shall I do all of these things at once, or in any particular order?" Fenris wondered, his bare feet moving soundlessly over the dirt when he took a spot beside Varric. He was dressed in his leotard, the mottled emerald decorated with feathers at the joints, and covered with a matching vest clinched tight with a belt laden with pouches Anders had come to learn contained everything he owned.
"With the darkspawn, I'd start with the armor," Anders suggested.

"Already?" Fenris asked.

"Well, we're underground, so I'm going to go with yes," Anders said. "You know a small scouting party made it into Kirkwall, on Wintersend? Burst right up through a bloody storm drain like cockroaches."

"I imagine you were there to stop them," Fenris said.

"Well they weren't there to chat," Anders said. "... not this time at least."

"I'm still not sure I'm buying that, Blondie," Varric said. "Talking darkspawn? What's next? Talking dogs?"

"Mabari come pretty close," Anders mused.

"As well they should," Fenris said, "The magisters bred them. It's said the-"

"Maker. Fucking. Save me," Anders interrupted with a groan, "Is everything about magisters with you?"

"No more so than everything is about templars with you," Fenris sneered. "I was merely going to say the breed is remarkably intelligent."

"Really?" Anders demanded, "That's all?"

"That, and that they were said to defect during the Imperium's invasion of Ferelden because they found the barbarians more palatable than the mages. Merely a tale, but you can see a bit of the truth of it before us," Fenris waved to where Hawke was still walking up ahead with Bartrand and Dog.

"That's what I thought," Anders rolled his eyes. "Are you ever going to stop harping on mages?"

"No," Fenris said.

"We're not all what you saw in Tevinter, you know," Anders argued. It had taken him an age to finally learn the man's history, but when he'd heard it, he couldn't help his sympathy and wasn't even sure how much of it came from Justice. Anders had learned it the same time he'd learned Isabela had freed an entire ship full of slaves, and that that was what had landed her in debt with the Raiders of the Waking Sea, and led to her mad hunt for a mysterious relic to erase said debt.

Apparently Fenris had been the slave of a powerful magister by the name of Danarius, who was the same man who'd carved the lyrium markings into his flesh and cost him his memories. Danarius had kept him as a bodyguard and a symbol of his magical prowess for years, until Fenris had finally escaped under circumstances the elf wasn't keen to share with him.

As much as Anders knew the man had suffered, he would have thought he would take that suffering and use it to help free others from oppression, as opposed to blaming the actions of one man on an entire group of peoples, but apparently that was giving Fenris too much credit. "The moment they are free, mages will make themselves magisters."

"They're slaves!" Anders snapped, and tasted mana with his words, "You should want to help them!"

"I don't," Fenris sneered.
"Now, now, boys," Varric raised two large gloved hands above his head and into their line of sight. "Play nice. Try to think of things you have in common! Like, um... good hair?"

"That's a joke, right?" Anders guessed.

"It's absolutely a joke," Varric laughed. "Ancestors, look at you two. Broody cuts his hair with a knife, and you style yours with piss and shit. You look horrible! But the important thing is you look horrible together."

"You're right, I feel so much closer to him already," Anders cooed.

"I don't use a knife," Fenris muttered.

"What do you use then, Broody?" Varric asked, "Your hands?"

"Yes, I endure the agony of activating my lyrium markings purely for the sake of my morning ritual," Fenris said flatly.

"Beauty is pain," Anders hummed.

"Life is pain," Fenris said.

"That's it," Varric sighed, "I'm getting you a lute, and you two can put this shit into a song, because there's no other way I'm taking it seriously."

"I get to sing," Anders said.

"Not unless I'm writing the lyrics," Fenris said.

"Can I guess?" Anders mused, "Mages are bad, mages are mean. Mages are evil, they make me scream."

"Nevermind," Fenris decided, "You can write the lyrics."

"The last line's the best, because you can kind of take it as a sexy sort of thing," Anders said.

Fenris made a disgusted noise and rolled eyes. With the torches lighting their descent into the caves beneath the Vimmark Mountains, his eyes were a bright green, and glinting along with Varric's hazel, but not quite glowing in the dark. Anders wasn't sure if he was ready for that nightmare just yet. He could still remember all the times Velanna, Sigrun, and Oghren had him shrieking and shaking in his knickers, and he wasn't looking forward to more anxiety in the Deep Roads.

"I think it has promise," Varric said.

"Thank you," Anders grinned. "I wouldn't mind or song or two to lighten things up, to be honest. Maker knows it's all downhill from here."

"Nice one," Varric snorted.

"You speak of disliking the Deep Roads a great deal," Fenris noted; wonder of wonders, apparently the man listened to a few things that came out of Anders' mouth, "Why?"

"Besides the obvious, you mean?" Anders asked.

"It's a dangerous place. The darkspawn are another charming gift from the magisters, but they're less of a threat to a Grey Warden." Anders rolled his eyes so hard they hurt at the mention of the
Chantry's nonsensical magister propaganda when Fenris continued, "If not for you, this expedition might not have even the slightest chance at success."

"Why, Fenris, was that a compliment?" Anders asked.

"It was an observation, nothing more," Fenris said.

"What's there to like?" Anders demanded; once Leonie had taken charge, everything had gone to shit. "They're the Deep Roads. They're filled with darkspawn and taint, and I had more than enough of them the first time I went. When I left the Wardens, I thought I'd never spend another minute in the Deep Roads."

"'Left' sounds like it was a mutual arrangement." Fenris noted.

"Fine, I ran away," Anders snapped. "This may shock you, but even the Taint Brigade draws the line at abominations. What's it to you?"

"Ran away from the Circle, ran away from the Wardens... it sounds like a habit," Fenris shrugged.

"And you ran away from Danarius," Anders said, when a thought occurred to him, "Maybe we're more alike than you think."

"I've always said so," Varric agreed. "Bad hair, a love of freedom, you both glow blue. You're practically brothers!"

"Considering the relationship you have with your brother, I'm almost inclined to agree," Fenris mused.

"Sure, why not?" Anders shrugged, "But you know that means the templars will just take you away from me someday. I'm already tearing up about it."

Fenris made a disgusted noise and stormed away from him to walk with Hawke.

"I think that's a new record," Varric noted. "Five minutes of talking, just about? I'm going to mark it on my calendar. Nine thirty-two, third of Solace, Blondie and Broody were sort of civil."

"We should make it an annum," Anders agreed.

"What do we call it?" Varric asked. "Courdayous? Dayplomatic?"

"Accomodayting?" Anders shrugged. "Genteelia?"

"Oh, I like that," Varric said, "Kind of dirty, too. Suits you, 'Blondie.'"

"I know, I'm a filthy little mage," Anders snorted. "My mind's always in the gutter."

"That's so dark I don't think I should be laughing," Varric chuckled.

"Deep Roads dark, or Void dark?" Anders asked.

"Which is worse?" Varric asked, and after a pause, said in tandem with him, "Deep Roads."

"And we're not even there yet," Anders noted. "You're not going to like me in a few days."

"Ah, Blondie, I'm sure there's no amount of bitching that could make me hate you," Varric assured him, "Trust me, I'm right there with you."
Anders assumed it was night when the expedition stopped at the Warden's first base camp. It was long abandoned, but it had the markings of being inhabited once. A firepit had been dug in the stone in the center of the alcove, along with several latrines a fair distance from camp. Hooks were nailed along the cave wall for lanterns, and there were rotten wooden beams strewn about for pitching tents. They weren't any good for anything but firewood at this point, but they had their supply carts, and the means to pitch their own.

The expedition split off into their own cliques when Bodahn passed out rations. Anders' small group of four and a half sat in their own cluster about the fire. Hawke and Varric laid on opposite sides of Dog, who looked all too happy to be used as a pillow, while Fenris sat on his legs, back straight, hands on his knees, his toes bent in the most uncomfortable position Anders had ever seen. "How can you stand to sit like that?" Anders asked, leaning back on his hands with his familiar dinner of hardtack and jerky in his lap.

"What? Is the way I sit oppressing you?" Fenris demanded.

"It's making me a little uncomfortable," Anders said. "So sure, why not?"

Hawke reached out with a foot and knocked Fenris off balance, "Stop oppressing him."

Varric broke. The poor dwarf practically exploded, his entire body wracked with laughter so violent Anders thought he might hurt himself, and Maker, he wasn't much better. Anders rolled onto his side and knocked his dinner onto the dirt, and laughed so hard he snorted. Fenris spent a few bewildered seconds on his ass before he chuckled, and pulled his legs up to his chest instead.

"I still don't see what's wrong with me sitting that way," Fenris mumbled, and took a bite of his hardtack.

"That the way slaves sit?" Hawke guessed.

"... What of it?" That was a yes if Anders ever heard one, and damned if it didn't shock him. He hadn't even considered Fenris' posture would mean anything, but with how it put his body on display, it made sense. Just because the man was cross and whined about life being pain didn't mean he wanted it that way.

"There's something wrong with it," Hawke said.

Killer was a damned good nickname for Hawke. He didn't just kill everyone he met, he killed the mood. A somber silence passed over the four of them, broken only by the crackle of the fire and conversations just distant enough that Anders could only make out the occasional word or phrase. Pieced together, they were nonsense, and not even the funny kind. "... anyone have a song?" Anders asked.

"Sure, Blondie," Varric allotted, wiping crumbs off on his trousers, "What kind of song are you in the mood for?"

"Something cheery," Anders said.

"Alright, sure," Varric dug through the inside pockets of his coat, and dug out what looked like two strips of white, "I always carry a few bones on me."

"Those aren't actual bones, are they?" Fenris asked.

"Druffalo bones, Broody," Varric grinned, reaching for his cup and a long drink of water to clear his throat, "Great for improv. How about a traditional Free Marches song? I bet everyone here will
appreciate it."

"Sounds great," Anders agreed.

"I've been here for a thousand years,
Through the joy, through the tears
But when I am gone, we will march on,
Because we're Marchers, marching free.

"I saw the quarries carved from stone,
I saw this city built on bones
The shackles locked, the passage blocked,
But we were Marchers, marching free.

"I was here for Andraste's charge,
When Black Cadre was still at large,
The Orlesians' fall, and through it all
Cried we're Marchers, marching free.

"I was here when Tevinter fled
When qunari and the darkspawn spread
Maker turned his back, the sky went black
But we were Marchers, marching free.

"So lock us up or chain us down
We'll take your rules and tear them down
The moons still shine, the stars align
And we're Marchers, marching free.

"That's how the story goes, my friend
Oppression always meets its end
Whether not they learn, or if they return
We'll be Marchers, marching free."

The rest of the expedition quieted to listen, but none of them joined in with the song. The Winters were from Nevarra, and the workers were from Ferelden, which left Varric the only born and raised Kirkwaller among them. Anders loved it, and was clapping madly at its end. Fenris muttered a quiet, "Well sung," drowned out by the rest of the group clapping, and throwing out requests for more songs from Varric once they heard his singing voice.

Anders listened through Dane and the Werewolf and Andraste's Mabari before he decided to call it a night. Anders heaved himself to his feet and stopped on the way back to his tent when he heard the thudding footfalls of someone jogging after him. He turned around into a face full of Hawke and grinned. "Yes?" Anders drawled.

"I um-" Hawke cleared his throat. Maker, the poor bastard was painfully shy. His eyes hit the ground and his hand went into his hair and Anders had to fight back the urge to laugh. "You. How are you doing?"

"How am I what?" Anders asked.

"With the caves and shit," Hawke explained. "I know you hate the Deep Roads."

"Aw, you do care," Anders teased, and a rumble curdled in his throat from one very displeased spirit.
Anders swallowed it down, "I'm good, thanks. You know? It's shit, I hate it, and I hate you a little for bringing me, but I'm good. As long as there's light and the passages aren't too cramped. I'm a big boy; I can pull up my knickers when I need to."

"Good," Hawke shuffled from foot to foot, and didn't go anywhere.

"Yes?" Anders drawled again.

"Thank you for doing this," Hawke said.

"Yeah," Anders shrugged, "You know. I owe you."

"You still could have told me to piss off," Hawke pointed out.

"That's true, I could have," Anders mused, "Why didn't I do that? Then I wouldn't have to be in the blighted Deep Roads."

"Too nice for your own good, probably," Hawke guessed.

"Probably," Anders agreed.

"Right... well," Hawke cleared his throat, and gave him a clipped nod, "Goodnight."

"What, no kiss?" Anders joked at Hawke's back. The man stopped and looked back at him with a bark of laughter, and walked away with a bewildered shake of his head. "Your loss!"

Anders crawled into his tent and out of his armor, and went to sleep. He had nightmares of darkspawn, this close to the hivemind, and did every day of the journey that followed. The first day had been uneventful, as was the second, though with the depth they were at, Anders ordered everyone into their armor. The Winters kept watch without his guidance, though Anders couldn't help wondering what good it did.

Darkspawn were notorious for attacking from the shadows, and Anders doubted there was a way the Winters would notice their mottled armor against the black before it was too late. Their worries didn't even end with the darkspawn. True enough, air was never a problem, no matter how deep they dove beneath the ground. The dwarves had built the Deep Roads with complicated air ducts that gave them cleaner air than Kirkwall, and magma passages that gave them better light.

But the Deep Roads still had cave beetles, deepstalkers, spiders, glowing slimes, spiders, and other horrors. Travel was dangerous enough with every little bit of seismic activity throughout the ages wrecking havoc on the tunnels, and littering them with rock and rumble without adding in the constant threat of attack. The atmosphere changed, at the shift from caverns to Deep Roads, filling the air with the sickly sweet scent of lyrium and death.

The first hints of the blight came on the third day, slime on the floor and char along the walls, the occasional piece of discarded darkspawn weaponry or armaments. Their first attack came on the third night, when setting up camp disturbed a nest of cave beetles that devoured a man's foot before one of the Winters managed to hack it off in time for Anders to reach the commotion and light the creatures aflame.

The second attack came on the fourth day, when the passages took them too close to an old lyrium mine, and one of the Winters had the skin on their face melted off by a glowing slime. The poor blighter died of shock in the time it took them to think to get Anders instead of trying to scrape the slime off his face with their knives, which consequently also resulted in two of them burning the skin off their fingers and palms. Anders healed it as best he could, but the Deep Roads were no place for
him to worry about skin grafts, and bandages had to serve in the meantime.

The third attack came later during the fourth day, when Anders finally sensed darkspawn. He gave the warning, and the expedition collapsed in on itself, workers huddling together in and around the supply carts while the Winters formed a defensive perimeter around them. Anders did everything that he could thing to do. He dropped paralysis glyphs before their ranged warriors and glyphs of warding for all of them, he channeled an aura of aptitude through Justice, he imbued Fenris' sword with flames, he bound a wisp above them all to radiate white light and blind the shrieks that came for them.

It didn't matter. The Winters weren't Wardens. They didn't have the strength, the stamina, the skill, or the speed to stand against darkspawn. Anders thought of Sidona and Eram, and Maker, even Wardens didn't have the ability to stand against darkspawn. Hurlocks fired crossbolts into their group from the shadows, and genlocks threw out smoke bombs to fight back the light for shrieks, which came in shrieking.

A handful of men and women dropped their weapons outright to cover their ears. They died to the first charge, and the group barely recovered in time to fight off the second. Anders' hands erupted with a cone of frost, and froze the darkspawn that charged his side of the caravan solid. Hawke's dog tore into them with claw alone at the archer's instructions, and the rest of them turned to join the Winters in their struggle.

And it was a struggle. There was no other word for it. Darkspawn kept fighting long after normal men would have died, or succumb to shock. Anders saw a few men make the mistake of turning from them after a single stab from their sword, only for the darkspawn they were facing to sink their teeth into their neck the second they turned. Fenris was one of the few who didn't make that mistake.

The elf fared exceptionally well, taking all of Anders' advice to heart, wherever he kept it and whoever's chest he'd ripped it from. His lyrium markings flared whenever a darkspawn closed on him, and he stepped out of existence and into the Fade to spare himself any contact with them. Mercifully, Hawke and Varric didn't have the same problem as archers, but Anders wasn't worried for them so much as he was worried for the workers.

When the Winters fell, there was no one left to defend Ralf and Miles and the handful of other fellows who might not have been his patients but felt near enough. It wasn't just for Bethany, but for what Bethany had said that he'd joined the expedition. He was here to keep these people safe, and damned if he wasn't going to do it. Anders vaulted onto the cart, where Miles holding a genlock back with a shovel, and threw a handful of ice that froze the blighter for the refugee to shatter.

The sounds of battle echoed through the Deep Roads; the darkspawn's guttural murmurs and hoarse cackles sounded almost like talking. It put a terror colder than his spells in Anders' gut at the thought that the Awakened had stretched their reach this far, or might someday come to do so if the Wardens didn't discover what was behind their newfound intelligence, but battle wasn't the time to think about what that might mean.

Anders conjured lightning between his fingers and held it until it crackled; he loosed it through a pack of shrieks hanging back for fear of his light with the smoke balms dissipated, and watched five of them explode. The rest screamed in outrage for the electrical burns that turned their black skin grey. One of the darkspawn wailed at the sight, and dropped its rusty sword before it turned tail and fled, quickly followed by its fellows.

Just like that, the fight was over. Varric, Hawke, and a few of the Winters archers managed to pick off a half-dozen of the retreating darkspawn, but numbers were nothing when the monsters breed like rats beneath the earth. Anders climbed down off the cart, mumbling acknowledgement at the few
refugees who reached out to paw at his coat in thanks. "I need everyone injured!" Anders called out, and winced at the line that formed before him.

He had them all strip to go over every joint and crack in armor, and search for the slightest paper cut. Maker, this venture was mad. Five of the Winters were dead. Three of them injured, not counting the two who had burned off their hands, or the one who had lost his foot, and there was no telling if any of them were blighted without time, and it was only the fourth day.

Anders found a spot for himself against the cavern wall when he finished and propped up his staff. The Winters handled their dead while the expedition set up a hasty camp. His mana exhausted, Anders was too tired to think much of anything when Hawke knelt down beside him. "Holding up?"

"Sitting down, actually," Anders joked, and gestured to the dead man being dragged into an ever-growing pile on the side of the cavern. "That could have been you, you know."

"It wasn't," Hawke said. "Don't borrow trouble."

"I don't need to borrow it," Anders snorted, running hands still chilled by his spells over his battle-flushed skin, "We'll get enough of it down here, just wait. Three of those Winters might be ghouls in the next few days. Maker, I hate being down here. Brings back memories."

"No turning back now," Hawke said.

"There never is."
Hello everyone, welcome back! Sorry for the slow pace for these chapters; I swear I am trying to get them out fast. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 9 Solis Sometime
The Deep Roads

"What's that smell?" Ralf asked, scratching irritably at his majestic sideburns.

"Don't look at me," Miles snorted.

"Smells like sulfur," Ralf noted. "... Are we in a volcano?"

"Probably," Anders shrugged, his boots and his staff crunching over red sand. Anything was an improvement over the thick stench of damp and rot that pervaded most of the Deep Roads. Their expedition had been forced to deviate into the side passages the darkspawn dug after they'd found the main route sealed off. Anders wasn't even surprised Bartrand subscribed to the belief that two tons of metal barred and welded shut meant "Just go around," and not "Stop, stop, for the love of all that's holy, stop!"

"What if it... you know, goes off while we're in here?" Ralf asked.

"No idea, but I lava good surprise," Anders joked.

Ralf's face wrinkled up into an unamused frown, but Miles chortled, "Ain't no active volcanoes this close to Kirkwall, Ralf, ya git."

"Well who says we're still close to Kirkwall?" Ralf demanded, "We been down here a week. We could be at Ostwick by now."

"Ain't no active volcanoes close to Ostwick neither," Miles said.

"That ain't the point, Miles," Ralf snapped, "The point is it's a bleeding volcano. What if it blows with us inside?"

"At this point, I'm not sure I care," Varric grumbled, "I am getting truly sick of looking at stalagmites... or are they stalactites? Shit, I don't know. Punch one for me, would you, Hawke?"

"First one I can reach," Hawke promised.

"I'm not healing your hand when you break it," Anders warned him.

"If I break it," Hawke corrected him.

"You'll break it," Fenris said. "I could manage it, activating my markings to punch through the rock and then discharging the lyrium to shatter it."
"You'd do that for me, Broody?" Varric asked.

"Well, you are my favorite dwarf," Fenris mused.

"You don't know any other dwarves, do you?" Hawke asked.

"I do not," Fenris agreed, to a round of chuckles.

"Bartrand doesn't count?" Anders asked.

"Not past ten," Varric quipped. Anders shook his head, chortling, and Hawke's bark of laughter startled Ralf and Miles.

"How long are we supposed to be down here, again?" Ralf asked.

"Three weeks, boys," Varric said, his feet dragging unhappily through the sand with every step. "A third of the way through."

"Maker," Ralf muttered, "Two more weeks of this? We're all going to catch the blight. I just know it. That Winter fellow yesterday-"

"Oh, shut it, Ralf," Miles interrupted, "Why ya gotta bring that shit up?"

"He peeled off his own fuckin' face!" Ralf exclaimed, startling a few nearby groups of workers and Winters into glancing their way. Miles elbowed him, and Ralf lowered his voice, "Buried his bloody fingers in his eyes and ripped his cheeks right off! I can still see the strips... wibbling..."

"A lovely image," Fenris said flatly.

"Well it fuckin' happened, didn't it?" Ralf demanded.

"Not to you," Hawke said.

"Not yet," Ralf muttered.

"We're fine," Anders assured him, "There aren't any darkspawn nearby, and assuming we don't run into any deepstalkers, spiders, cave beetles, rampaging bronto, glowing slimes."

"The fuck are those shits?" Ralf interrupted. "I mean - sorry, Warden - What are those things, anyway?"

"What are whats?" Anders asked.

"The slime things that ate that Winter guy's face a few days back," Ralf clarified.

"Dropping like flies, they are," Miles muttered.

"Mold," Anders explained, reiterating what Sigrun had told him months upon months ago, "Mold that grows too close to lyrium veins. It leeches off the lyrium, the way lifestones do, and sort of mutates. We're fine so long as we have a line of salt around the camp at night, and no one else tries to stick their face into it again."

"Thought darkspawn would be all there was to worry about down here," Ralf muttered.

"Trust me, it could be worse," Anders snorted.
"That is not disturbing in the slightest," Fenris mused. "Clearly dwarves are insane to live down here."

"You can say that again," Varric muttered as the procession slowed to a halt. "Oh, ancestors, what now?"

They'd finally left the volcanic passages to head back into the Deep Roads, only to come to an abrupt halt. A few quick steps vaulted Hawke up onto a nearby chunk of rock, and gave him a vantage point from which to frown towards the front of expedition. Dog barked at him, and the corridor carried an echo that sounded almost like "Run." By Ralf's quaking, Anders couldn't have been the only one who heard it.

"Bridge is out." Hawke declared.

"Of course it is," Fenris grunted.

"Think we need to turn around?" Ralf asked.

"Let's hope not, or Bartrand will beat us within an inch of our lives if we do," Miles said.

"Not our fuckin' fault!" Ralf argued.

"Well he can't beat the bridge if it ain't there, can he?" Miles demanded.

"Ugh," Varric grumbled, toddling and waddling around carts and crowds to the front of the procession, where Bartrand was screaming at one of the scouts. Ralf and Miles abandoned them to rejoin the workers, and Anders took a seat on the rock Hawke was still standing on. The archer climbed down and went off after Varric, and Fenris came to sit beside him.

The elf kicked his heels against the rock, silverite ringing on stone, and draped his hands over his knees. It was getting a little easier to tolerate his company, though Anders didn't doubt that was due in part to the forced proximity, limited options, and Justice's continued fascination with the way the man's skin seemed to sing.

"Come up with any new lyrics?" Fenris asked. The dry humor and the fact that he was kind of cute didn't hurt, either.

"A few," Anders grinned, "One mage was evil, so the rest are bad too, I hate all logic but love Chantry spew."

"You think I need the Chantry to tell me mages are dangerous?" Fenris snorted.

"Well you buy into their magister bullshit," Anders pointed out. "Didn't seem like a stretch."

"So I must believe the rest?" Fenris demanded. "The Maker abandoned us all. I'll not pray to him nor any god."

"I don't know whether or not that reassures me," Anders said.

"I'm not here to reassure you," Fenris said.

"But you're doing such a bang up job!" Anders joked. "Here I was worried it might just be the brainwashed Chantry types that would be hard to convince to join the cause. Good to know I have my work cut out for me."

"Don't hold your breath on my account," Fenris said. "... On second thought, do."
"You know holding your breath can't kill you," Anders said. "You pass out first."

"I never claimed to want you dead," Fenris said.

"Aw, I love you too," Anders joked.

"Pardon me, messeres," Bodahn interrupted, the sprightly dwarf toting a bag of rations over his shoulder. "Word is we're making camp. Just making sure everyone gets fed." Bodahn produced hardtack and jerky for both of them. "Oh, and Master Anders, when you have a moment, the water barrel could use some refilling. No hurries, though! Enjoy your dinner."

"My thanks," Fenris said.

"I'll get it, Bodahn, thanks," Anders assured him.

"Don't you be thanking me," Bodahn laughed, "You have no idea what you saved me on this venture. Three carts worth of just water barrels and an ass for each, down to a single cart and one ass with you here to refill the water."

"I count two," Fenris mumbled before biting into his hardtack.

"Oh, I get it," Anders grinned, "Because I'm a card, right? Cart, card? Good one."

Fenris rolled his eyes and Bodahn moved onto the rest of the expedition. "How is it anything can live down here?" Fenris asked, watching the stocky blonde pass out more rations, "We have only crossed one pack of deepstalkers in near a week. What do the darkspawn feed on?"

"They don't eat," Anders said, when a vivid memory of a darkspawn biting off Biff's nose had him correcting himself, "Unless it's for sport. The taint sustains them."

"Hmph," Fenris snorted, "Perfect. And this taint sustains you as well?"

"It can," Anders said, filling their canteens with conjured water. "I don't think it's good for me to starve myself, but it can."

Hawke returned when Anders had finished his jerky, Dog and Varric trotting along behind him. "I still don't see why we can't just leave the cart if the thaig isn't more than a day's journey from here," Hawke was saying.

"What are we doing now?" Anders asked.

Varric trundled out from behind Hawke, and shooed Fenris from his spot on the rock with a few waves of his hand and threat of his ass that had Fenris scrambling out of the way before Varric sat on him. "We're going to try to find another way around through the side passages."

"Yay," Anders drawled unhappily.

"There's more than enough of the bridge left to cross," Hawke muttered.

"Maybe for you, Twinkle-Toes," Varric unhooked his canteen from his belt and took a long drink, "Blondie, do me a favor, and make sure Killer here didn't give me a heart attack walking out over a river of magma on a beam the size of my pinky finger."

"You did what now?" Anders asked.

"He's exaggerating," Hawke said, "It's what he does."
"Oh good, because I was not looking forward to getting lost in the blighted Deep Roads," Anders joked unhappily, knowing full well he had no choice. "So what are we really doing? Waiting until the workers build a better bridge?"

"You wish, Blondie," Varric sighed. "I'm sure there's a way around. From the look of it, we just need to find another darkspawn passage somewhere on the east side of this corridor and head north until we come out on the other side of the bridge up ahead."

"Is your dwarven Stone Sense telling you that?" Anders wondered.

"My dwarven 'Kick you in the Stone' sense is telling me that," Varric nudged him with his elbow. "It's hard enough for me to get around Kirkwall, and I've lived there my entire life. I'm counting on your Wardeny Powers to see us through this, Blondie."

"Don't look at me," Anders snorted, "Nate handled the maps on the surface, and Oghren and Sig kept track underground. They just kept me around to look pretty."

"I'm sure you had other uses," Hawke said.

"Oh, ow," Anders set a wounded hand to his chest, "Are you saying I'm not pretty?"

"Just saying you have other uses," Hawke mumbled.

Fenris saved him before Hawke could wedge his foot too far up his mouth, "I know the way north."

"Well sure, Broody, right now," Varric said, "I'm talking when we're in those caves, walking in circles through one identical cavern after the next until we don't know left from right."

"I always know the way north," Fenris said. "A life spent on the run isn't a long one without a good sense of direction."

"I beg to differ," Anders grinned, "I figure if I don't know where I'm going, there's no way the templars do."

"Anyone see Bodahn?" Varric asked. "I could use a last meal before we run headlong into death."

"I don't plan on hardtack and jerky being my last meal," Hawke said, vaulting onto the rock with a steadying hand on Varric's shoulder. "He's just there."

"That's not vague at all," Anders joked.

"Left just there or right just there?" Varric asked.

"I'll get him," Hawke muttered, hopping off the rock and heading across the cavern. There was something terribly attractive about the way the man moved. He was all leather, and it creaked and clung to powerful thighs and a limber form. It was a nice distraction from the rot and festering dark, alongside Varric's humor and the soft song from Fenris' markings.

This long in the Deep Roads, and Anders might have gone mad if not for the company. The irony of it wasn't lost on him, considering the same company drove him mad on the surface more often than not. Hawke returned a short while later, with news that Bodahn's boy had wandered off, because of course he had. And of course, no one had seen him wander off. And of course, now they had to search the tunnels for him and a way across the bridge. And of course, the Winters weren't inclined to help.
Hawke had the right of it with his callous prediction that the boy was as good as dead. Anders wasn't even sure he could call it callous. It was just plain realistic. They had to double back through the Deep Roads to find a crack in the corridor, where the darkspawn had dug through or old seismic activity had split the stone. Not five minutes into the passage, and they were attacked by darkspawn, which put the boy's odds of survival prodigiously low.

It put their odds of survival prodigiously low, Anders revised, when they crossed a lone shriek who managed half a cry before Hawke put an arrow through its throat. It was enough to summon half a dozen more from a nearby chasm, and their echoing cries deafened them all. Hurlocks came running through the passages in answer, and Anders hadn't quite finished carving out a paralysis glyph with his staff when one tackled him.

Anders hit the ground, and Vigilance flew from his grasp to clatter somewhere out of sight. The hurlock pinned him by his shoulders, and Anders summoned an unfocused burst of elemental magic. His fingers slipped through a thick film of rot as he struggled to get the darkspawn off him, its skin blackened by his spell and melting off the bone. The creature screamed, brown teeth crooked and cracked in its bleeding gums, spit strung between each fang and spraying onto Anders' face.

A glowing hand burst through the darkspawn's rotten ribcage, spraying filth over Anders' chest and face. The hurlock convulsed, foul fat and muscle smeared across one lyrium-branded fist, and collapsed atop him. The weight of its gnarled body and rusted armor was suffocating, until the same hand flung it off him, and heaved him to his feet. Anders didn't have time to thank Fenris for his rescue before a shriek was rushing them, and a wild blast of ice from Anders' palms froze it for Dog to tackle.

The first sound Anders heard that wasn't the ringing the shrieks had left in his ears was the rhythmic thud of Varric's crossbow, and the underlying hum of Fenris' lyrium. Anders spotted Vigilance, the crystal set in the dragonbone reflecting off the light of the wisp he'd conjured to walk the passages. He ran for it, unfocused primal magic crackling up his arms for the two hurlocks who got between him and his staff.

He couldn't have unleashed it if he were anywhere near his companions. The magic went wild, ricocheting off walls, burning through the darkspawn and superheating their armor. Anders heard the snap and crack of the magic, and the darkspawn's wails as their bodies spasmed in a macabre dance. They collapsed not black but grey, bodies maimed by the electrical onslaught. Anders darted around them and snatched up his staff to turn back to the battle.

It could have been worse. It could have been better. Fenris fared the best, as Fenris so often seemed to fare. Varric was making a steady retreat, caltrops and elemental mines scattered before him. The occasional shriek tried to brave the field with a leap that resulted in a grisly explosion of black blood and twisted limbs, but the darkspawn were slowly clearing a path for themselves Anders shored up with a glyph of paralysis.

Hawke was fine. The archer was living up to his nickname, arrows finding easy kinks in the rusted wrought iron armor. The darkspawn pieced it all together from the spoils of their kills, or forged it from ore they ripped from the stone with their bare and bleeding hands. It was no silverite, and it offered only the most base of protection. Hawke had an easy time of it. There was a dexterity in his every motion that kept the darkspawn from him, a quick roll and a quicker dodge that left him untouched despite the swarms.

It was the damn dog that needed looking out for. The mabari couldn't warp the Veil and phase its existence into the Fade when a darkspawn dove it. It wore a small set of armor, a mix of plate and lames that protected it from stray claws or gnashing teeth, but Anders couldn't help his paranoia.
Barkspawn had been a Warden in his own right. Amell had joined the poor fellow with the help of a flower that could be distilled into a special tincture for canines, but it only grew in the Kokari Wilds. If Dog wound up with the Taint, the mabari wouldn't last the week it would take them to get back to the surface, let alone to Ferelden.

Anders hated Hawke for bringing the mabari, but the man was imprinted on it, and there was no leaving it behind. If nothing else, Dog was smart enough to understand Hawke's firm order of "No biting," that had held throughout their week in the Deep Roads. In lieu of the proper front line the warriors in the Wardens had formed, the dog served well enough, but Anders was still nervous. He channeled an aura of aptitude through Justice, and kept adrenaline pumping through their veins; it kept them agile, and ultimately it kept them alive.

The aftermath was carnage. The air was hot with the fetid stench of excrement, char, and vomit, and the passage was clogged with the eviscerated bodies of hurlocks, shrieks, and genlocks. The stone seemed to weep with blood and shit, and each step came with a squelching sound that made Anders especially grateful Bodahn had been able to spare him a set of leather armor so he didn't have to ruin Franke's boots trekking through the Deep Roads in them.

"Is everyone still alive?" Anders asked, pulling for the life-force of the three and a half men around him, and relieved to find no answer. No access to blood meant no cuts, but it didn't mean no injuries, or no swallowed blood.

"I think that's the last of them," Hawke said, with so much blood on his face Anders could barely make out the kaddis he smeared across the bridge of his nose.

"Nobody wander off," Varric called out, picking up the few scattered caltrops and elemental mines that hadn't been set off by the darkspawn.

"So many darkspawn... do they ever rest?" Fenris took off his helmet and hooked it under his arm, and for once in his life Anders approved of it. There was no blood on the elf's tattooed face, despite how much of it was painted across his armor.

"Never," Anders stepped over a dead shriek to Hawke's side, and waved him towards an outcropping of rock, "Sit down, you don't want this on your face."

Obediently, Hawke sat. There was more of the blood in his beard, in his hair, on his gloves. One careless swipe of his hand would be the death of him. "Head back, eyes closed," Anders ordered, letting mana well in his palm and shape into water. He poured it over Hawke's upturned face, scrubbing his gloved fingers through the man's mustache and beard. The water ran off worryingly black, and Anders had to hope he hadn't licked his lips at all in the fight.

Hawke shook his head to dry himself off when Anders finished. It vaguely reminded Anders of a dog, but the way the black strands whipped across his dusky skin was ridiculously attractive. Focus, Anders. Darkspawn bad. Grrr. Warden business. Pay no mind to the attractive man who let you run your fingers through his beard. He's just a patient. He's Amell's cousin. He called you dog shit. He's for the Chantry.

The last one saved him. Anders abandoned Hawke to turn to Varric, "Your turn, Scribbles."

"Scribbles?" Varric repeated indignantly, double checking the pouches on his belt before trundling over. "Come on, Blondie, you can do better than that. What about Chesty or Heartbreaker or-"

A shrill shriek interrupted them. Hawke launched himself off the rock he'd been sitting on, smacking at his shoulders and his chest, violent splashes of blood following his feet as he danced in a wil
"What?" Anders demanded, summoning a breath of elemental magic to coat his hand, "Cave beetle? Slime? What is it? Bloody hold still! What is it?"

Fenris grabbed Hawke's shoulder to put a stop to his flailing. The man's pupils were blown, black overtaking red, his hands still smacking at his armor. "What is the matter?" Fenris demanded.

"I-fuck-where did it go?" Hawke asked, scraping at his arms like they were covered in slime.

"Settle down, Killer, where did what go?" Varric asked, "Please tell me we're not sitting on another nest of cave beetles."

"No-no-fuck," Hawke wheezed, and ran a hand through his hair, "Fucking-spiders."

"Spiders," Anders repeated, letting his mana disperse, "Seriously?"

"A deadly foe," Fenris chuckled into his hand.

Varric snorted, "Really, Hawke?"

"It fucking fell on me," Hawke scratched madly at his shoulder where the little arachnid had allegedly landed.

"This is too easy," Varric shook his head, and launched into song, "So young Ser Hawke, sat on a rock, all around death and decay, along came a spider, who fell down beside Ser, and frightened Ser Hawke away."

"That's not funny," Hawke muttered.

"No, it's fucking hilarious," Anders laughed so hard he wheezed.

"I hate all of you," Hawke mumbled, and went about collecting his arrows. He grumbled to himself the entire time, Dog trotting along happily beside him and nipping playfully at his master's fingers as if trying to cheer him. It made it all the more amusing, and Anders washed off Varric's face still chuckling. The dwarf went about collecting the bolts to his crossbow afterwards while Anders healed a few bruises Fenris had borne before they were on their way again.

The northerly passages took them past no further darkspawn, which Anders counted a mercy, until they ended at a crossroads. North was an impasse. The cavern was coated with lyrium veins, throbbing in time to a song that left Justice tingling just beneath his skin, and had Anders stepping back a pace.

"Shit," Varric whistled, "We must be getting close to Bartrand's thaig. Look at that. Just one of those veins could set a man up for life."

"A magister would pay a fortune," Fenris agreed.

"Not that way," Anders said.

"Something wrong, Blondie?" Varric asked.

"It's lyrium," Anders said. Of course something was bloody wrong. He didn't want to bloody die. At Varric's blank expression, Anders belatedly recalled he was the only mage among them. "Raw lyrium. I go anywhere near that, I'm a dead man. A seriously dead man. Raw lyrium kills mages."
"What about the rest of us?" Hawke asked.

"What, you planning on leaving the Warden behind?" Anders joked; it wouldn't have been a disaster. He could always leave his things on Bodahn's cart, transform into a crow, and fly across the downed bridge to meet up with everyone on the other side, but no one knew him for a shapeshifter, and Anders wasn't sure he wanted to play that card just yet. "Varric would be fine if he didn't touch it, and Fenris must have some kind of natural resistance by now, but you'd feel nauseous the whole way through and probably end up demented."

"We still haven't found Bodahn's boy," Varric pointed out, "What if he went this way?"

"At this rate, the only thing we'll find is his body," Hawke said. "We'll go around."

They doubled back, and shadows seemed to skitter away in the face of the luminescence from the crystal set in Anders' staff. Hawke was a mess. The poor man kept scratching at his arms and shoulders, and jumping at every bit of black. Anders tried for a bit of sympathy, but it was far easier to laugh at Hawke's phobia than acknowledge any of his own. Like the fact that if not for his magic the caverns would be pitch black, and the narrow passageways forced them to walk in pairs.

The passageway opened up into a chamber with the same volcanic sand that floored most of the caves, and Anders summoned a wisp from across the Veil to hold the incantation for light. He cast out into the sunken cavern, and it traveled through the black, illuminating a tangled web of white so thick Anders couldn't see through it. An angry chorus of hissing and skittering came at the light, and it stopped in the center of the chamber to reveal it had a northern exit.

Apparently, Hawke didn't care. The man did an abrupt about-face, and started back towards the passageway. "No."

"Come on, Hawke," Varric chuckled, "I don't like it either, but we need to get to the other side of the bridge. Ideally without going mad from lyrium poisoning, but I'm not feeling too picky right now."

"We can find another way around," Hawke argued.

"Where?" Fenris demanded, "These are the only passages that run north."

"Well-fucking... dammit," Hawke glared at the hissing, writhing mass of cobwebs in the distance as if he could set it on fire with his eyes.

... Actually, that idea wasn't half bad. "I've got a plan," Anders said.

"Does it involve spiders?" Hawke asked.

"It involves killing spiders," Anders grinned.

"I'm for it," Hawke decided, with no apparent need to hear the plan in detail, but Anders told him anyway.

"I'll summon a grease slick, and set fire to it," Anders explained, trying to forget why he knew the spell combination, "The whole nest should go up, and we'll have dead spiders."

"Or flaming ones," Fenris said.

"Great," Hawke said. "Go for it."

Anders pulled through the Veil and welled the magic for a grease slick in his hands. He loosed it
when the oil started seeping up to his wrist, and it ran down into the sunken chamber like a river welled into a lake. Anders followed it up with a weak fireball that did little more than warm his palms, and the resulting explosion brought everyone's hands up to cover their faces.

The nest screamed. The gigantic arachnids sounded close to shrieks in their intensity; spider after spider fell from the ceiling, the size of mabari, and landed twitching and blackened on the ground. The entire chamber was teeming with them, and several ran for one of the two exits to the chamber. Close to a half dozen crazed, flaming spiders rushed them and even without a phobia the sight was terrifying.

Fenris rushed to meet them, great sword cleaving through one of the creatures and carving it in half. Blood and poison burst from the spider's body, its mandibles still twitching when it collapsed. A second tackled Fenris, and the elf struggled under the convulsing mass before glowing blue and tearing the spider apart. Bolts and arrows embedded themselves into the many-eyed faces of the remaining spiders, and Anders summoned a swath of lightning to kill off the survivors.

Fenris dragged himself out from under the corpse of the spider he'd torn apart, swearing under his breath in Tevene. "You injured?" Anders guessed, eyeing the nest for more spiders.

"That was most unpleasant," Fenris muttered, sticky with blood and venom and strips of furred skin. "My armor bore the worst."

Anders offered him a hand to help him up. Fenris took, and cast a cursory rejuvenation spell on him to handle any bruises. Varric trundled to the edge of the sunken chamber, and surveyed the ash raining down from the ceiling onto the multitude of spider corpses that made a graveyard of it. He whistled appreciatively, "Damn, Blondie, you do get results."

"Well, you don't really come out of the Wardens without knowing a bit of strategy," Anders shrugged.

"Nicely done," Hawke said.

"Indeed," Fenris said. "You carried the day."

"Stop it, you two, you're making me blush," Anders joked, starting down into the chamber at a skip. He nudged the occasionally spider corpse with the butt of his staff, but none of them flipped back onto their feet and tackled him, so Anders counted it a victory. Hawke practically sprinted across the chamber and to the opposite exit, and Anders couldn't help laughing at him.

It could have been worse. They had this. This deep underground, they weren't like to run into too many darkspawn. The blight had stopped two days back, which meant no broodmothers, which meant the only darkspawn they would encounter were roaming bands. Slime was a constant risk with lyrium so near, and would only get worse the closer they got to the thaig, but it was easy to look out for.

They left the chamber and headed north, and eventually emerged on the opposite side of the bridge. Anders sent across a small firework to win the expedition's attention, and heard cheers echo back across the chasm. Their small group turned back around, and only stopped when they came upon the crossroads where the lyrium veins sprouted up through the rock.

"I gotta check," Varric sighed. "It'll haunt me if I don't."

"Uh-uh," Anders said, "Bad idea. I don't sense any darkspawn, but lyrium veins mean slimes. You remember what happened to the mercenary? No face seems like a bad look for you."
"I could work it," Varric tugged at the collar to his armor, "No one's looking at my face anyway when the chest hair comes out."

"I'm serious, Varric," Anders said, "You don't want Bianca to end up a widow, do you?"

"Who is Bianca?" Fenris asked.

"My crossbow," Varric explained, lifting said weapon from its latch on his back and holding it out for inspection, "Say hello, Bianca."

"But why Bianca?" Fenris asked, "You must have named her after someone."

"Nope," Varric shrugged, petting his crossbow, "Mirabelle was taken."

Fenris grunted, "The way you fondle your weapon is disturbing."

"Hey, I'm a perfect gentleman," Varric huffed, "In public. And besides, Bianca's at no risk of becoming a widow any time soon. She can look after me. I'm just going to walk the corridor a bit, and see if I can find Bodahn's boy. Give me... shit, I don't know. A quarter hour. If I come running back, screaming, you'll know not going this way was the right decision."

"I'll accompany you," Fenris said. "Lyrium has little effect on me these days."

"You two are going to get yourselves killed," Hawke said.

"Shed a tear for me, then, will you, Hawke?" Varric joked, and set off towards the passageway with Fenris at his side.

Anders watched them go, neither man flinching at the lyrium that would have killed a mage to cross paths with. Maker, he felt sick just a few yards away. Anders backed up a few paces, and leaned on his staff. Hawke knelt down to check Dog's armor and ruffle the mabari's ears before he came to join him, thumbs in his belt and eyes on the passageway.

"Five bits they come back screaming?" Anders joked.

"Five bits they don't come back at all," Hawke said.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. I apologize in advance for the quality of this chapter, it was written mostly on cough drops and chloraseptic, but it's done and it's posted, so here we are! We hit 600 kudos, which is absolutely amazing. Thank you so much for supporting this story with all your wonderful subscriptions, bookmarks, comments, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 11 Solis Sometime
The Deep Roads

Wouldn't you know it, everything turned out grand. By some miracle of the Maker, Varric and Fenris returned with Bodahn's boy between them, and the walk back to the expedition was uneventful. Anders didn't like it. It was too simple. Any second now, the ground was going to rumble and there would be a cave-in, a volcanic eruption, a horde of darkspawn. Nothing in his life was ever this easy, and he didn't trust it to last.

Yet last it did. Bodahn was delighted to have his son returned, and even Bartrand seemed slightly more tolerable for their good fortune. The expedition moved through the tunnels with no encounters of darkspawn, deep stalkers, slime, or spiders, and the mood was all the better for it. Everyone looked on in awe of the lyrium veins, and chatter started up knowing they were nearing the thaig.

The entrance to the thaig was a massive chamber carved with ancient dwarven runes not a man among them could read. It was framed with inert golems to which no control rods could be found, without a single swath of blight. There was no dragon guarding it, no inferno golem, no pride demon, no horde of rampaging bronto or other monstrosities. It wasn't barred, locked, or sealed shut. It was just there, forgotten in the dark.

Bartrand was ecstatic; to hear him talk, he believed the dwarves who once lived where they stood were unique. There were no statues of paragons, no contemporary dwarven runes, not even any familiar architecture. The thaig was nothing like Kal'Hirol. The underground city seemed carved from onyx, claws ripping up from the ground as if a dragon the size of a mountain were trying to rip its way to the surface. According to Fenris, they were Tevinter in style, and no one had an explanation for it.

Scattered all around were statues the like of which Anders had never seen. They were winged things, almost like locusts, or man-made-locust, and eerie to look upon. All along the walls, in place of magma, small cases like windows were set in the stone to give light to the city. They held what looked to be lyrium, but it was wrong. It was red, and it sang backwards, and listening to it made Anders feel hollow.

"Bartrand sure seems taken by this place," Ralf said, spinning in a circle to gawk up at sprawling metropolis when they made camp.

"Why?" Miles asked, "I don't get it. Looks like the rest of the Deep Roads to me."

"Says he's never seen anything like it," Ralf explained, "Says it might be some kind of forgotten
"The dwarves forget stuff like this?" Miles asked, casting a dubious eye on one of the red lyrium lamps.

"I guess so," Ralf said.

"This is what you all were looking for, right?" Miles asked.

"I sure hope so," Varric said.

"Bartrand's far more enthralled with this place than you are," Hawke noted.

"Well, unlike Bartrand, I wasn't born in Orzammar," Varric muttered. "I wouldn't even be down here if there wasn't profit in it. This entire place gives me the chills. Let's hope it's worth it."

"I'm going to have a look around," Hawke said, "See if there's a vault somewhere with something useful in it."

"Don't go too far," Anders warned him, "I can't sense the whole city."

"I'll come back for you if I find something," Hawke promised, and set off down the street with Dog on his heels.

Varric went to spend what Anders imagined was quality time with his brother, while Fenris found a spot for himself to clean his weapons and armor. Anders went to see to the last of the mercenaries who had been injured in the darkspawn attack. The first Winter had ripped off his face when the taint took him. The second had chewed off her own fingers just like poor Nate's governess. Anders had done for them what a healer did best: he stopped the pain.

The third and final man was still clinging stubbornly to the pale mockery of life that was left him. The poor bastard was shitting blood, his skin inflamed and weeping, welts sprouting all across his face, but he was sane, or as sane as any ghoul could be. He still spoke, though with no particular grandiloquence or verbosity. He pleaded for life whenever Anders offered him death, and Anders didn't have the heart to force it on him.

Anders hated himself for it. The blighter, the literal blighter, was suffering. His body was falling apart; every muscle slowly slipping out of place until he was a mess of deformed bulges and slackened skin. He was sobbing when Anders came to check on him, whispering with the hivemind and the same Call that haunted Anders' nightmares. "Rip, rip, gnawing gnawing, eat them little maggot strips, don't want to eat them, don't want to listen, no no no."

"Hey there, Eli," Anders said, not surprised to find the man sitting alone by himself in a darkened alley. The rest of the Winters had given up on their old comrades the day they'd been injured. It was for the best. Anyone else who came near Eli was greeted with a wild shriek, and the man's mad scramble to distance himself from them. Anders, Eli could handle, when they were both of them blighters.

"Eli," Eli repeated, "Name... My name?" The ghoul dragged his nails down his face and burst a welt. Fetid liquid dripped down his skeletal fingers, but six months with the Wardens had won Anders a tolerance for gore that far surpassed the worst of what he'd seen as a healer.

"That's right, that's your name," Anders assured him, taking a seat next to the ghoul.

Eli scooted closer to him, his eyes thick with cataracts and blinking fiercely to focus on his face.
"Anders?"

"That's me," Anders said. "How are we today?"

"Dark and dripping deep inside," Eli rambled, his voice a gargling rasp. "Soft meat and marrow calling, melting... don't want to eat it," The ghoul twitched and hugged himself. "Don't need to eat it."


"Sidony," Eli repeated, his knuckles cracking far louder than knuckles should when he slammed his hands together, "Girl. My girl. Likes the dead things. Eli... Eli is a dead thing?"

"Close," Anders said, and Maker how he wished he'd made himself talk to Amell about why some ghouls fared better than others. "You've got the Taint. It's a slow death. I know you're in pain right now. I can give you a quick death if you want."

"No," Eli shuffled backwards, the same way he did every time Anders offered, his half-blind eyes twitching and sunken in their sockets, "No, no, no. No death. No pain. No light. Don't miss the light. Don't miss it. Dark is bad, but Eli is good. Anders is good. Grey. Grey like stone, guard against the dark."

"That's right," Anders said. "I'm a Grey Warden... What do you mean you're not in pain?" Maker's mercy, Anders was in pain just looking at the man. "You're looking pretty... not pretty, right now."


"You can't want to live like this, Eli," Anders said. "You're resisting right now, but what if this gets worse? What if you end up hurting someone?"

"No! Wouldn't hurt. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't gnaw: chew the tendons, suck the marrow, crunch the bones." Eli shivered and hugged himself tighter. "Just want to be. Just want to listen. Burrow deep in the song and hide in the rotten ribs. Do you... hear it? Quieter here... Too deep... The blood is too loud."

"You're right, it is," Anders agreed, though he wasn't sure what to blame. They'd past the point of darkspawn, and by extension Archdemons. The Call was muted here, overrode by the hollowing hum of red lyrium and the whispers of demons beyond the Veil. It was alarmingly thin, and yet another worry, "Maker, Eli, what am I supposed to do for you?"

"Eli... Eli can go away," The ghoul suggested, scrambling forward eagerly, "No killing. No eating. Anders is Grey, but Eli is Black. Can go away. Down in the dark with the dead."

"Anders?" Hawke's voice called out, and startled Eli back into the shadows. Anders glanced up to see the archer stalking towards him, his eyes a reflection of the red lyrium that pulsed in time to the beat of a heart all around them, "We found what looks like a temple. There are bound to be a few offerings and vaults in the district. Ready to set out?"

"I-uh," Anders glanced back into the alley. Eli had vanished. "... Sure." Anders stood up, and followed the man through the blackened city. He thanked the Maker the red lyrium was either not actually lyrium, or prepared in such a way that it wasn't in its raw form. Aside from the hollowing
sound, the substance didn't seem to hurt him.

"So..." Anders followed Hawke and his mabari through the streets, passed idle Winters and wandering workers. His thoughts turned to Sigrun, and he worried at his earring, "A temple, huh? To a Paragon, or...?"

"Bartrand doesn't think so," Hawke said. "He says it looks like a temple to a god of some kind, but we weren't going in without you."

"Smart," Anders grinned, "No reason to start the Sixth Blight early."

"How are you holding up?" Hawke asked.

"Peachy as a pie," Anders said. "Why?"

"You know, with how you had to put down the Winters," Hawke explained, daring a glance back at him. Anders swore he saw a hint of concern in his eyes, buried as deep as the thaig they were in.

"You said it," Anders shrugged, "Had to be done."

"Still," Hawke said.

"This isn't my first Harrowing," Anders felt a frown pull on the corners of his mouth. After Karl, there wasn't a man alive Anders couldn't kill, provided the man wanted death, or was asking for it. "I killed Tal'Vashoth with you, didn't I?"

"Doesn't mean you had to like it," Hawke said, but let it die. The streets took them to a district lined in pulsing lyrium pillars, strange effigies with gem-incrusted skulls and glowing orbs, inert golems, and dragonic statues with eyes that seemed to follow them. Whispers from the Fade echoed through the gossamer strands of the Veil, demons or spirits or wisps, and Anders caught himself bumping into Hawke on more than one occasion with how it distracted him.

They reached the temple Hawke had mentioned, a massive structure of onyx and marble in the shape of a dragon's head rearing up from the stone. A descent had to be made between the creature's jaws, its lulling tongue a carpet of red granite framed in magma that cast eerie shadows over the dragon's marble teeth. Fenris and Varric were waiting at the entrance, Bartrand pacing impatiently beside them.

"Oh good, reinforcements," Anders joked, nudging Hawke with his elbow and jutting his chin at Bartrand.

"He wants to be there to assess whatever we find," Hawke explained.

"Right," Anders drawled sarcastically. "More like he found the thaig, so he gets to find whatever's in it. Remind me how there's profit in this for you again?"

"We're splitting it three-ways," Hawke said.

Nearing their companions cut off their conversation. The temple might have been obscene in its opulence once; the eyes of its statues were cut from rubies and it was plain to see where there might have been offering bowls once, but it was falling apart. Seismic activity had ripped the temple in half. Lyrium, red and blue, sprouted up from various corridors and cut off travel where the stone wasn't crumbling. Eventually, they stumbled upon a vault, sealed shut.

It looked like it was opened with a key in the shape of a claw, and they doubled back to find it set
neatly atop a desk in what Anders imagined were the quarters of the High Priest of the temple. There was something terribly unnerving about the whole thaig, as if everything had been neatly put away, and its inhabitants had simply vanished. Aside the red lyrium and whatever seismic activity had demolished half the city, it was almost peaceful.

Set in the lock and twisted, the vault door swung open to reveal a massive chamber devoid of any furniture or treasures save for a pedestal in the center, atop which a lone idol rested. It beat like a heart, even from a distance, deep red and pulsing with the same hollowing sound that sang from the rest of the lyrium in the thaig. Anders came as close to it as he dared, and taking a cue from him, Hawke stayed at his side rather than approach the idol.

"You seeing what I'm seeing?" Varric asked, the dwarves and the lyrium-infused elf more comfortable approaching the dangerous substance.

"Is that lyrium?" Hawke asked; Dog whined at the sight, and hid behind Hawke.

"Definitely," Anders decided, "And not the good kind."

"It feels different," Fenris reached out and tapped the claws of his gauntlets on the idol before daring to pick it up and turn it over in his hands. "Hotter, stronger..." The idol depicted a woman, emaciated and looking to the sky, her arms wrapped around an equally emaciated man who clung to her as if trying to save himself from drowning or death. Tangled around them were veins of red lyrium, which glowed a little brighter for Fenris' touch, rippling with static that climbed up his markings and had him hastily abandoning it to the pedestal and backpedaling to stand beside Anders and Hawke.

"Yikes," Varric whistled, flipping the idol over so the two figures were face up again, "These are humans, right? Or maybe elves?"

"Why would the dwarves who used to live here worship humans or elves?" Bartrand asked.

"Who cares?" Varric shrugged, "It's pure lyrium, from the look of it. It's got to be worth a fortune."

"Be careful handling that," Anders cautioned, "We don't know what's wrong with the lyrium, or what exposure to it might do to any of us."

"It reacted to my markings..." Fenris mumbled, massaging at his arms through his vambraces.

"I'll have the workers put it in a case," Bartrand said, picking up the idol. The red lyrium pulsed against his palm, static rippling up his arm and following the path of his veins. The dwarf massaged at his temples as if fighting back a headache, and shook his head, "Excellent find."

"... I think I'm with Blondie," Varric decided, "I'll walk you back in case this thing makes you pass out."

"We'll take a look around and see if there's anything further in," Hawke said.

"You do that," Bartrand agreed.

There was only one path from the prayer chamber. A hallway led further into the temple, and they'd barely started towards it when Varric and Bartrand started shouting. Anders glanced over his shoulder in time to see the brothers fighting at the entrance to the chamber. An uppercut and a hard kick from Bartrand sent Varric sprawling, and before Anders could process what was happening the older dwarf bolted from the chamber to rip the key from the lock. Varric scrambled to his feet and ran for the door in time for it to close on his hand.
Blood as red as lyrium founted onto the door, and Varric collapsed. The dwarf hit his knees, screaming wordlessly and doubled over. Anders ran across the chamber and skidded to a halt when he reached Varric, and took in the damage. Andraste's sword, his hand was mutilated. Varric clutched his wrist with his left hand, the feeble tourniquet doing nothing to staunch the flow of blood from his right hand. He must have made a grab for the door at a slant, because only his pointer finger and thumb remained.

There was no reattaching them. The digits were gone, lost on the other side of the door, sealed shut from Bartrand's betrayal. Varric was still screaming when Anders knelt next to him, his every breath a tortured sob. The dwarf pressed his head against the door, smearing blood through his blonde hair, and wept, "Fuck-fuck-Maker-fucking-fuck-fuck-fuck!"

Hawke and Fenris jogged over to join them; Fenris took in Varric’s mangled hand and cursed in Tevene before he fell to pacing. Hawke ran both hands through his hair, and snarled, "What the fuck just happened?"

Varric's answer was a closed-mouthed scream, and a bang of his head on the door. Anders grabbed the dwarf's shoulder and squeezed to win his attention, "Varric, I'm going to put you to sleep so I can heal this, alright?"

Varric hissed, spit spraying from between his grit teeth and tears still streaming down his face when he nodded. Anders wove a veil of sleep and amplified it to combat the dwarf's natural resistant to magic. Varric slumped against the door when Anders cast the spell, both hands falling slack. "Hawke, help me prop him against the door," Anders ordered.

Hawke rearranged Varric so he sat with his back against the door and his hands in his lap, and swore, "What the fuck."

"I don't know," Anders said, peeling the dwarf's torn glove off his mutilated hand.

"What the fuck," Hawke said at the sight.

Varric's hand was a bloody mess. A nub remained of his middle finger, nothing of his ring finger, and his pinky had been cut off past the knuckle. Anders rummaged through his satchel, and dug out a proper tourniquet to tie around Varric's arm. Anders wound it as tight as he dared, and glanced up at the archer, "Hold this for me."

"What the fuck," Hawke muttered, kneeling to hold the tourniquet in place while Anders found a file to shave down the few bits of jutting bone.

"Venhedis," Fenris snarled. "That dwarf has trapped us here. You were a fool to trust him."

Trapped. Anders froze as the word settled in. They were trapped: locked away, abandoned, forgotten, doomed to darkness. Lost to light and life and even the Call of the Archdemon this far beneath the Deep Roads. They were going to starve to death. Except Anders couldn't starve to death. The Taint wouldn't let him. It would hold him until he was little better than Eli, a ghoul in a gilded cage, imprisoned forever in this ancient temple.

"Anders!" Hawke shouted, giving his shoulder a violent shake.

"What-what?" Anders jerked, and looked down at Varric's hand. Thank the Maker he hadn't sawed mindlessly away at the poor man's hand. He'd simply stopped filing. "Sorry-I've got it."

Anders finished shortening the bones jutting from Varric's severed fingers, and summoned Justice to close the wounds. The regenerative magic took effect quickly, leaving behind little more than a white
scar where the skin knit together. Anders washed away the blood with conjured water, and cleaned what was left of Varric's glove the same way before sliding it back onto the dwarf's hand.

Hawke unwound the tourniquet, and Anders pulled back the veil of sleep he'd cast on Varric. The dwarf woke with a jolt. "Bartrand, you bastard-!" Varric gasped, and cut himself off when he saw them. He moved as if to bury his face in his hands, when the sight of his ripped glove stopped him. "... Damnit. Damnit, damnit, damnit! I swear I will find that son of a bitch - sorry mother - and I will kill him! Damnit, Bartrand!"

"What happened?" Hawke asked.

"He screwed us all over for a lousy idol!" Varric snarled, "Started ranting about how he was the head of the house and shouldn't have to split anything with us, and attacked me when I tried to talk him down. ... Damnit, how am I supposed to hold Bianca now?"

"We'll kill the bastard," Hawke said, "There has to be another way out of this temple."

"A back entrance, surely," Fenris agreed.

"Damnit," Varric muttered, flexing the two fingers still left on his right hand, "Writing... I can still write, it'll just be more pressure on my thumb... Damnit, it's not enough to brace against the stock, I need those fingers to support Bianca through the recoil and balance out the weight. Fuck. Damnit Bartrand."

"We'll get you a prosthetic," Anders said. "I'm not the best at making them, but we can have someone in Kirkwall carve a few wooden fingers and I can make ... it's sort of like a glove. You can wear it under your actual glove. It should be fine for supporting your crossbow if I put in a few wires."

"Yeah..." Varric sucked in a deep breath, "Yeah, okay... Good idea, Blondie. Fuck... okay, let's get the fuck out of here." Varric climbed to his feet and flexed his hand again, "Shit, I can still feel them. That's fucking weird. When does that stop?"

"It'll get easier," Anders promised.

Hawke gave the door an ineffectual yank, and Anders could blame him for trying. When the door didn't budge, the four of them made their way into the hallway that led deeper into the temple, checking what side rooms and passages weren't blocked off with rubble or lyrium for an exit that Anders had to believe existed.

"So Blondie," Varric said, flexing his remaining fingers, "You sure I'll stop feeling them? I mean, you deal with this kind of shit a lot, right?"

"Sort of," Anders said, "I mean, I get a lot of patients in from the Bone Pits who've lost a finger or two. It wasn't a common injury in the Circle, so I don't have as much experience with it as I could, but..." Maker, no. Don't think about him. Don't think about him scratching at that damn blindfold, that soft smile and sheepish shrug, 'It's nothing, Anders. They just itch sometimes.' "I know it happens."

"It's fucking weird," Varric muttered, "... Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Hawke asked. Dog started barking, and there was no chance of Anders hearing anything, but he felt it. The Veil was thinned, and Anders didn't doubt the abundance of lyrium, red and blue, had something to do with it. It warped, the further into the temple they traveled, and he could feel demons pressing eagerly upon it.
"This place is cursed," Fenris warned.

"The Veil is thin," Anders corrected him. "We might run into demons down here. Be careful."

Not a dozen steps further, and the demons were on them, though the attack came as no surprise. The mabari was half-mad, slathering and scrabbling at the door to one of the temple's rooms before Hawke called it back just in time for the door to melt under a rage demon's assault. Anders called on a breath of winter, and the magma turned to stone at his spell. Fenris shattered the creature, and then they were a multitude.

For the most part, they were shades. Barely corporeal beings of shadow, torn asunder by Fenris' great sword or Anders' magic. Their mere presence was draining, and if not for an aura of aptitude from Justice, they would have been quickly overwhelmed. Anders discharged a raw burst of mana whenever he saw a new shade attempting to cross, but the temple was invested. Dog was as useful as Fenris, but Hawke's arrows went straight through the creatures unless they hit dead center, and Varric was in no position to aim.

The dwarf tried, and it was a disaster. The first bolt he loosed caused a kickback his missing fingers couldn't support, and the crossbow jerked. The bolt went sailing, and embeded itself in Fenris' calf. Fenris' leg gave out underneath him, and the shades he was fighting dove on him. The air burned with the scent of lyrium as the elf struggled to fight back, but the markings weren't nearly enough. Hawke abandoned his bow to rush the shades with a pair of daggers, and cut through them in bursts of dust and shadow on his way to Fenris.

Anders couldn't help them. Varric was sitting bait, and the shades seemed to recognize the dwarf had no means of defending himself, especially when there wasn't enough substance to them to activate any of his caltrops or elemental mines. Anders burned through the half dozen that surged him with lightning and ice, and dodged round the minefield to hold a spot beside the dwarf until the last of the shades were cleared. The aftermath was a mess.

Fenris was still on the ground, and all of them were exhausted. The shades had drained through Justice's aura, and Anders had expended too much mana maintaining it. He still had enough to heal Fenris, and so made his way across the hallway to kneel beside the wounded elf. The bolted had pierced through the back of his greaves, where only leather protected him, and Anders winced at how deep it went.

Fenris took off his helmet with a curse; his hair was heavy with sweat, and his face was flushed, and when he spoke it came paired with a spray of spittle, "You will not put me to sleep with your magic, mage."

"Right," Anders rolled his eyes. So much for all the progress they'd made, "Because I'm sure you want to be awake when I rip a crossbolt out of your leg."

"I can weather it," Fenris said.

"Fuck, Brood-Fenris, I'm so sorry," Varric said, Bianca dangling from his left hand. "I swear-I never miss like that-"

"Kevesh," Fenris interrupted him, "It is done. Give me something to bite down on."

Hawke reached for his belt and Varric for his ripped glove. The dwarf was quicker, and Fenris shoved the mangled bit of leather between his teeth with a scowl Anders was sure he didn't deserve. He ignored it, and set about unclasping the man's greave. He peeled the ruined leather away from the entry wound and set the bloody silverite aside.
The markings were everywhere, lyrium brands weaving patterns down Fenris' calf all the way to his foot and tapering off in his toes. They still sang: a song that was soothing when all around them was the backwards hum of red lyrium. Anders drew his blade for a small incision to widen the point of entry, and followed the shaft with his finger, warm blood and muscle pulsing against his finger until it connected with bone, and Anders swore.

"Fenris, you need to be unconscious for this," Anders said.

Fenris ripped Varric's glove from his mouth, and sneered at him, "Do not tell me what I need, mage. I have endured pain the likes of which you cannot imagine. Pull out the bolt and let us be done with this."

"The bolt is imbedded in bone," Anders told him, "I'm going to have to yank it out."

"Then yank it out," Fenris said, stuffing the glove back into his mouth and ending the conversation.

More machismo bullshit. The dumb bastard was going to be unconscious in a minute either way with how much this was going to hurt. Anders braced one hand against Fenris' leg to hold him steady, and grabbed the other around the shaft. The first yank got him nowhere, nor did the second, but the third came paired with a burst of strength from Justice that helped him wrench the bolt from bone. Fenris screamed through the leather, but to Anders' surprise stayed conscious and didn't collapse.

That probably had something to do with Hawke holding the elf upright, but it was impressive all the same. Anders set the bloody bolt aside, and benevolent energies from his spirit helped mend the split in Fenris' bone, muscle, and flesh. A white scar lingered against Fenris' dusky skin, out of place amidst the deliberate elegance of his marking, but considering how Fenris hated them, Anders wouldn't have been surprised if he preferred the scar. Anders handed the elf back his greave, and Fenris spat out the glove borrowed from Varric. His teeth had indented it, and left a crescent slick with spit in the leather.

Varric retrieved it, along with the bloodied bolt. They couldn't afford to waste resources when there was no telling how long they'd be trapped down here. Anders forced the thought from his mind, and picked himself up on his staff. He was exhausted, but he didn't dare call for a break. He wanted out of here. He could rest when they were safely back in the city, underground or in Kirkwall, Anders didn't care at this point. Anywhere but this temple.

Hawke gathered up his arrows, and Varric his scattered mines and caltrops, and they continued. There were more shades, though they'd learned their lesson fighting them. Varric and Hawke kept to their daggers, and Fenris and Dog took point. Anders did what he could with his magic, which wasn't much at this point, but it was something. Healing bone was something only a spirit healer could manage, and it still wasn't recommended with how draining it was.

They made their descent into the undercroft, and stumbled upon what looked like possessed stone, almost reminiscent of sylvans. They were vaguely humanoid in their shape, or perhaps dwarven, with clear heads, and ribcages of pulsing arcane magic that held them together. Lyrium was everywhere, red veins bursting up from the ground and crawling up the walls, and the stone creatures were feeding on it. They clung to the veins, siphoning the color from them, and only stopped at their intrusion.

The creatures attacked them, and the most unnerving thing about it all was that they were soundless. They didn't scream or laugh like demons or growl or gargle like darkspawn. They just moved, their stone feet like pebbles pattering across the ground, and barely audible above Anders' heartbeat in his ears at being surrounded by so much lyrium. Arrows bounced off rock, but the creatures were slow moving, and it was easy enough for daggers to cut through the threads of arcane magic that seemed
to hold them together.

"Bloody flames," Varric muttered when the last of them collapsed in a tiny avalanche under their melee party's onslaught. "What were those things?"

"Magic," Fenris said.

"Rocks," Hawke said.

"Magic rocks," Varric deduced, "Great."

Anders was sure they kept talking, but he didn't hear any of it. Maker, this was it. This was the only way out of this blighted place, and it was covered in lyrium. The rest of them might be able to push through the nausea, the fatigue, the deafness and dementia, but Anders was doomed. He was mage. There was no going forward for him. He was trapped. Trapped in this tiny temple of lyrium for the rest of his natural and unnatural life.

He wasn't going to die here. He wasn't going to die ever. He was going to live as a ghoul, gnawing off his own fingers while his imprisonment prevented Justice from ever fulfilling his purpose and the poor spirit went mad and it was all Anders' fault because he didn't have the good sense to turn Bethany away when she offered to be his aide because he was so damned desperate for companionship even knowing it only ever hurt the ones he cared about and now he was bound to Hawke and his debt and this damned temple.

Hawke was talking to him. Anders could tell. The man's mouth was moving, but the words were nonsense. All Anders could hear was the rush of his pulse in his ears and the whisper of demons from across the Veil, pulling at his fear and feeding from it, and Maker if he wasn't already possessed he would be now. It wouldn't take much. A hand across the Veil to take it all away, to put the breath back in his lungs, to offer him that blissful oblivion that waited in the back of his mind.

Then all at once, Anders felt it. Like arms encircling his waist, pulling him away from the lyrium hollowing him from the inside out, breathing life into his lungs and tearing down the bars to his cell, illuminating that insufferable dark in a burst of blinding blue light that faded to black, and peace.
Down in the Dark with the Dead

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. This is another chapter written ill, so I hope it's not too terrible. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 11 Solis Sometime
Primeval Thaig
Anders was right to be cautious. The lyrium was wrong. It sang sick music, and settled like an oily film on the inside of his skull, wreathing and twisting just beneath the skin. If not for the comfort of Karl's ring - a gift so generous Justice had no words for it - it would have been a torment. Anders' companion and the lyrium beneath his skin was another mercy, though the reception he gave was no better than their first meeting.

"Kaffas!" Fenris snarled, "Again? As if we did not have enough problems down here without the mage losing control of himself."

The mabari was barking, the beast as averse to his presence as Barkspawn had been. Hawke silenced it with a hiss, but he'd put a great deal more distance between them than he had between himself and Anders.

"Hey Blue..." Varric said, taking a tentative step forward, "How's it going?"

"Let go of Anders," Hawke ordered. "You said yourself it's not safe for him for you to take control like this."

"We have learned otherwise," Justice said, with a modicum of contempt for the mortal's implication that he had done anything Anders did not wish. "You have been trapped in this foul place against your will, and Anders cannot continue in the face of lyrium. I believe I might be more resistant to its effects."

"Great idea, Blue," Varric said. He seemed reasonable, and he had suffered the most with the injustice his brother had thrust upon them. "Right, Hawke? Weren't you just saying we'd have to go find another way around otherwise? Which is a great idea on paper, but we're kind of at the 'been there, done that' point with this temple."

Fenris scoffed, "We would do better to leave him at this rate."

"We're not leaving him," Hawke said. "... you're sure you can be near lyrium? Anders said it would kill him."

"It would," Justice had no doubt. The substance was dangerous to mortal bodies, but they were something slightly more than that. The lyrium that bled through the cracks in Anders' veins when he was forward might very well negate the red lyrium, but Justice wasn't completely certain. He searched for Anders, in the back of their mind, and found him curled up with memories of his mother, of Compassion, of Amell and Karl. His mortal didn't waver when he neared a vein of
lyrium, nor could Justice sense any discomfort in their form. "We are well. Come, we should not linger in this wretched place."

Wretched it was. There was nothing sacrosanct about the temple; the lyrium had consumed it, turned into a desecrated and profane thing, assuming it had not been constructed as such. The shoals of dust and the memories that lay within them had been eroded by the lyrium, and whatever had tainted it. It was a dark place, empty, void, and Justice would be glad to have Anders gone from it.

He made a quick descent through the undercroft, Vigilance propped beneath his arm. Justice preferred the sword and shield Kristoff had utilized, but Vigilance served. The dragonbone was sturdy, even if it lacked a blade, and could crack a darkspawn's skull with enough application of force. That, and it served as a perfect channel for Anders' magic. Healing escaped him, but the raw pull of the Fade had always been there at Justice's command.

"Blue!" Varric called after him. "Blue, wait up!"

Justice glanced over his shoulder, and found the mortals lagging several paces behind. Curious. He was not accustomed to overtaking his companions, but then he had only ever fought beside Grey Wardens, and all mortals were unique. "We should not tarry," Justice said.

"Okay, but-" Varric wheezed.

"Are your lungs injured?" Justice asked.

"Sure, I'll take it," Varric huffed. "Ancestors, do we have to sprint? Hawke, roll me the rest of the way will you?"

"I don't know how long Anders... or Justice, or whatever can be down here," Hawke said, "If he needs to sprint, let him sprint."

"Spirits on their own are not affected by lyrium," Fenris said. "Many are kept in the Imperium as slaves for the task of transporting and working with it."

"Then they are no longer spirits," Justice fought back his horror at the revelation, and wished Anders were here to help explain how such an atrocity could ever be permitted. "Bound against their will, they would be corrupted into demons."

"... None are quite as animate as you." Fenris said. "But they are as you say."

Amell's grimoire felt heavy at his hip. It was a disturbing thought that such spell tomes might contain spirits elsewhere, enslaved to the will of another. "And you were one such slave, before you freed yourself," Justice knew from the many conversations he'd overheard when he deigned to listen to Anders speaking with his companions."... An inspiring tale. Perhaps there is hope for my brethren in this Imperium of yours."

"It is no Imperium of mine," Fenris snapped, "And I am no spirit."

"Is slavery not the same across all races?" Justice asked, "To be stripped of a sense of self, and reduced to a mechanical exercise?"

Fenris had no answer for him. Justice supposed the end in discourse meant he agreed, but couldn't say for certain, and Anders wasn't present to help him decipher the behavior of the mortals around him. He was still tangled up in his memories, in the closest semblance of peace the world had to offer him, and it was far too great a risk to turn his attention back to the mortal world when they walked between walls of red.
"Blue," Varric huffed, "Blue, you're going a little fast again."

Justice stopped, frustration making his muscles tense. "This is the pace that is set on a march. Anders had no trouble maintaining it before our joining."

"Okay," Varric wheezed, while the mabari nudging the dwarf along, "Sure, but- Blondie? Warden. Us? Not Wardens. Just-shit, come on, don't leave me here."

"No one's leaving you." Hawke said firmly.

"It is not my intent to abandon any of you," Justice said. "But we should make haste. Veil is thin here, and proximity to lyrium places you in jeopardy."

Justice made an effort to set a slower pace, tapping an impatient foot on the floor beneath him when he was made to wait. It was a bright red sand, not unlike that which shored the beaches outside Kirkwall and Anders so loved to feel between his toes. Justice dug his heel into the ground and watched the way the grains shifted before resuming his march.

"So you think he's a spirit now?" Hawke asked.

"He is dangerous," Fenris said. "Naught else matters."

"You guys just gonna do this with him standing right here?" Varric asked.

"I am no danger to any of you," Justice said.

"So you claim," Fenris said, "The temple will have ended, just there. Wherever we are is beyond. Catacombs beneath the city, perhaps?"

"They'll lead back out somewhere, then," Hawke said.

"I sense magic ahead," Justice warned them. The passageway made a sudden descent, lyrium veins coiling through the walls like hand railings, and the sand stopped to give way to a set of properly carved steps. The dichotomy of volcano and city would have been a thing of beauty if not for the lyrium corrupting it, Justice thought with a tinge of melancholy.

The hallway opened up onto a dais with an altar set at its center. All around were pillars of red lyrium, drained to a dull pink, and far less dangerous than the interior of the temple. Their song was little more than a whisper, the pulse of the lyrium weak and fluttering. Even knowing the music sang wrong, hollowing the soul and sickening the mind, there was something heart-wrenching in its death.

The creatures feeding from it attacked at their approach. There was something of the Fade in them, humming their core and illuminating the skeleton of a mortal. It was a curious construct, one Justice had never seen dreamed of in the Fade nor encountered in the mortal world. Its like was absent from Kristoff and Anders' memories, and Justice knew nothing of the magic that might work best against it.

He settled on a charge, vaulting the steps from the dais to knock the head from the first construct of rock with a hard blow from Vigilance. Dragonbone won out over rock, and the head was severed. It flew across the chamber, arcane magic in the creature dying out. Three that had been rushing the stairs changed course, and focused on him instead. A burst of energies drawn from across the Veil staggered them, and another sweep of Vigilance cleared through the ribcage of one, and left it little more than a pile of rubble.

The two constructs approached him at separate angles, whirling what looked like small boulders
tethered by strands of arcane magic. The makeshift maces spun at a blur, and the first that struck out at him shattered against Vigilance, and Justice's iron grip, but the second collided with his side, and sent him crashing back into the wall behind him. The blow had broken three of Anders' ribs, even through the leather of his armor, and Justice felt the resultant rasp of breath on his first inhale.

Hawke was down the stairs after him first, while the others looked to be fighting with their own cluster of constructs. He cut down the arcane tethers holding one construct together with his daggers, and it crumbled into pebbles and dust, but the second whirled on him. The mace swung out, and Hawke dodged what was like to have been his death without Anders' present to heal him, but his arm connected with a lyrium vein on the jump back. He wrenched away, and promptly collapsed, retching violently.

The mabari was down the steps after him, leaping onto the construct and latching its teeth onto the spine that showed between the various bits of rock that made up its form. It wrenched once and hard, and the bone snapped beneath its massive jaws. The construct collapsed, and the mabari backed up to hover in front of Hawke, snarling and slathering at every bit of rubble, animate or not. Justice climbed to his feet, regenerating as quickly as he always had since joining with Anders.

Justice couldn't heal, but Anders had a natural inclination. He was born to heal, and infused with more mana than a mortal could bear, it was what his magic did whether Justice willed it or not. His form regenerated naturally when Justice was forward, the excessive of lyrium that burned in his veins closing wounds left from arrows, swords, maces, no matter how deep their enemies drove them. The potential wasn't limitless, but it felt as much.

Justice jogged back up the stairs, a burst of energy from the fade knocking back the constructs swarming Varric. The dwarf's minefield had a limited effect. The caltrops did nothing, but the elemental mines could blow off a leg, which only lasted as long as it took the constructs to reform, their arms or maces sliding over tendrils of arcane magic to reshape at their feet, which carried them over more rubble that seemed magnetized to their forms.

Fenris fared better for the distance the blast of energy afforded him, and cut through two constructs in quick succession. Justice crossed the battlefield and swung Vigilance through the neck of the nearest construct. The weaker bone cracked against that of a dragon, shattering at the spine in a ripple of white dust and arcane magic that diffused over the runework on the shaft. Justice carried through with the motion as the creature fell apart, falling on one construct after the next until all that remained where bones and rocks.

"I'll just call that bunch 'enemies' and footnote it later..." Varric decided, punting a skull across the room. He looked down at his mangled hand, a dagger clutched in his left, and sighed. "Where's Hawke?"

"He came in contact with the lyrium," Justice said.

"Fasta vass!" Fenris snarled, bolting down the stairs with Varric on his heels. Justice followed them at no particular haste. He was no healer. There was nothing he could do for the mortal, and he was led to believe the contact would not be fatal to a non-mage.

Hawke seemed to be faring well enough. The archer had rummaged through the many pouches on his belt and retrieved a poultice. Thus far, he had managed to smear half of it on a roll of gauze with one hand, teeth, and willpower. He was in the process of wrapping it around his injured arm, where the skin was visibly blistered. He pinched it down when he finished, and an order of "Bite!" at his mabari cut off the remaining half of the bandage.

Hawke rolled it up and stashed it away along with what remained of the poultice, and blinked at their
approach. One of his pupils was dilated, the other shrunken, and his skin had visibly blanched. "... Where are we?"

"Shit," Varric swore.

"The Deep Roads, on your ill-fated venture," Fenris said.

"What are those?" Hawke jutted his chin towards the corpse of one of the constructs.

"Magic rocks," Varric sighed, shuffling over to fall down into a semblance of a sitting position next to Hawke, and far from the puddle of vomit he'd left.

"Demons?" Hawke guessed, retrieving a kerchief for himself to clean off his face and his beard before stuffing it back into his pouch.

"They are something else," Justice said. "I would sense any of my kin that lingered within."

"... Where's the rest of the expedition?" Hawke asked.

"Bartrand screwed us," Varric lifted his right hand, and wiggled his two remaining fingers.

"I'll kill the bastard," Hawke snarled at the sight, stumbling to his feet with a helping hand on his mabari's head.

"That's my Killer," Varric grinned. "That's what you said the first time, too. You came into contact with a bit of lyrium. Memories are gonna be jumbled for a bit. We should probably take a rest for now. I'm already sitting, but since you're up, you wanna go get my traps, just up the stairs there?"

"Right," Hawke stumbled towards the stairs and stopped short to frown at Justice. There was something significant in the expression, Justice had no doubt. "... Why are you glowing?"

"Just get the traps, Killer," Varric called from the floor, picking pebbles out of his boots, "Would be a pain in the ass to try to explain the past few couple of days. Just chalk it up to weird shit and wait for it to come back to you."

"Weird shit," Hawke mumbled, continuing up the stairs, "Great."

Fenris found a spot for himself, and unhooked his helmet. He unslung his pack and retrieved a rag and a bottle of oil to tend to his weapon, and Justice took a spot what he felt was equidistance from both mortals. He rather missed the ritual of having a blade to care for; Kristoff's sword had been rusted beyond repair, but the Commander had provided him with a replacement.

It had been a fine blade: crafted from metal that fell from the heavens, with lyrium veins glistening down its length. It had been a marvelous gift, the Commander's old longsword, and for a brief time Justice had felt a kinship to it and the glacial enchantments that seemed to give off the same dusting of blue as he did. Caring for it had been soothing in its simplicity, but it along with Anders' ring of study had been one of the many things he'd sacrificed for Amaranthine.

He didn't regret the loss, but it was a strange thing to come to treasure possessions, when in the Fade there were no such things. There were manifestations of thought born from the memories of mortals, which did not outlive the spirit that created them. Yet in the mortal world objects laid witness to beings long dead with fingerprints on top of fingerprints. His sword had sang with memory of stardust, and the calloused hands of the blacksmith who forged it. Memories he would never hear again.
It was beautiful, yet tragic how easily such possessions could be lost. Justice wrung his fingers on his staff, the chaff of the woolen lining on Anders' palms a comforting distraction from the many overwhelming sensations in the mortal world. The wool had come from an ewe in a fertile land with many farmsteads, and a giant lake, sheared by a boy who longed to be his father, cleaned and scoured by a woman who resented her mother, and spun and woven by man with no love for his son.

Time might have been a meaningless construct in the Fade, but in the mortal world, Justice was slowly coming to realize it bittered. Hawke returned with Varric's traps carefully arranged in his arms, and sat down to hand them over to the dwarf. The mortals resumed tending to their weapons and armaments, Fenris pausing in cleaning off his armor to raise an eyebrow at Hawke. "You are taking your memory loss rather well."

"You want me to take it worse?" Hawke asked.

"Merely an observation," Fenris said.

"He's right though, Killer, you don't seem too distraught about the whole thing," Varric agreed.

"I get enough maudlin at home," Hawke said, and frowned. "I think..."

"Oh boy," Varric whistled, "Memories jumbled that far back? What's your full name?" Varric wiggled the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Too damn few," Hawke muttered.

Varric snorted, "Come on, Killer, I'm serious. Humor me here. Full name."

Hawke rolled his eyes, but acquiesced, "Garrett Florian Hawke."

"What did you join this expedition for?" Varric asked.

"Bethany," Hawke said.

"And who are the handsome gentlemen traveling with you, starting with yours truly?" Varric asked.

"Varric, the only thing I can't remember is this expedition," Hawke wrapped an arm around his mabari and pulled the beast against him. It went willingly, tongue lulling, a stark contrast to its reaction to both Justice and the rock constructs. "We need to get out of here - all this lyrium is making me sick - and we can't do that sitting here."

"Killer, I think touching all this lyrium made you sick," Varric chuckled.

"I agree," Justice said. "The lyrium here is muted-"

"The lyrium is stronger," Fenris interrupted. "I could feel it in my hand, burning like a coal against my palm and igniting the brands across my skin..."

"It sings for you because you sing back to it," Justice explained, "The Fade is in you, burning as a beacon, and it resonates with the lyrium and all things magic."

"Keep your distance creature," Fenris said.

"I have not moved since we took our reprieve," Justice tilted his head to one side, Anders hair spilling unhelpfully in front of his face. This could not continue. His host was in desperate need of some semblance of control over his life. The hair would serve to start. "And I am led to believe that..."
the lyrium in here is in fact less potent than that outside.”

“How do you figured, Blue?” Varric asked.

“It is not only that the veins here have been drained of their color by these constructs, but also that the excess of lyrium that bleeds from our veins is no longer as pronounced as when we first trespassed these halls,” Justice ran a hand through his hair, and shook out the dusting of lyrium the formed at the ethereal flames cracking through his skin.

“Magic dandruff,” Varric noted, “Gross.”

“It is lyrium powder,” Fenris said, “Danarius used to have the servants prepare it in lines for his guests. Though burnt, I suspect its value is diminished, if not nullified entirely.”

“No party like a Danarius party,” Varric snorted, “I bet this shit literally burns your nose hairs off.”

“Frequently,” Fenris said. “I would not recommend it.”

“Well damn, there goes that plan,” Varric swung his right hand across his chest, his thumb jutting out into nothing and his pointer finger sliding along it. He stared down at the hand his brother had rent in inglorious battle, and let it fall, picking up his left. He snapped a handful times, chuckling quietly, “Well-uh—… well damn there goes— two plans, I guess.”

“Do you not use a similar tactic to keep your mortal body from succumbing to lyrium poisoning?” Justice asked.

“My mortal body is none of your business,” Fenris said.

“Both of you shut it,” Hawke said, rolling forward onto his knees and back onto his feet in one fluid motion. “—… Justice?”

“You will have it,” Justice said.

“No, you—” Hawke frowned, “You, the spirit thing, Justice—”

“Alleged spirit thing,” Fenris muttered.

“-You’re not hurting Anders like this?” Hawke asked.

“Covered it, Killer,” Varric said. “Doesn’t hurt Blondie. Lyrium does. That’s why Blue’s out… Blue’s out, move out? I kind of like that; I mean it’s not like Blue’s ever here to stop and smell the embrium.”

“I have done this,” Justice recalled Anders lingering over the remains of the various herbs gathered for his clinic, a vial of red pollen between his fingers when he relaxed his mind, and sank into his own thoughts. Justice had manifested for a single inhale, the pollen rushing through Anders’ lungs and inflating veins choked thin with damp. Anders had laughed, and spoken for a long while in an emptiness not quite so empty in their clinic. “But I agree with your initial decision. We should move out.”

Justice struck out towards the exit far end of the altar room. The light dimmed as the lyrium’s glow dulled, and if not for the spirit fire that cracked through his veins the corridor would have been dark. The further into the passageway, the more the light fled from them, until all that lingered of it was his flames. The mabari whined, long and low in its throat, and Hawke called for a halt.
"We need a torch," Hawke said, stopping beside him with a hand to the hilt of his dagger. It was an effective against the constructs, but against darkspawn it would fair poorly. Strength and range were tantamount in such fights. "If the darkspawn catch us like this we're dead."

"Sure, Hawke, but how?" Varric asked. "We traded our torches for Blondie here. Freed up my leg for an extra dagger and yours for a few more bombs, Fenris-"

"I have a torch," Fenris assured him.

"Does this help?" Justice asked, summoning Veilfire to coat his free hand. The cavern lit up in emerald light, watery swaths of green dancing over stalagnites and stalactites. The spell rippled across the Veil, like the landing of a fly in a web, to the wakening of spiders.

"It helps," Hawke said.

"Ready yourselves," Justice cautioned, "More of the fiends abound in this place."

"Good to know," Varric said, spinning in place to look around the cavern.

"And when he is unable to hold the spell in combat?" Fenris demanded.

"... Well, at least we won't have to see those." Varric sighed, pointing up. The cavern had a high vaulted ceiling like that of a grand chantry, drained lyrium veins arched across like rafters, and constructs nestled in them like sleeping spiders. The ground quaked beneath their feet, and they descended.

It was no gentle descent, nor no gentle quake. The ground lurched and bucked, dust and pebbles rained from the ceiling, and the first construct to fall landed on its skull and immediately shattered it. Justice widened his stance, Vigilance clutched for balance, and Fenris did the same with his great sword. Varric lost his footing and was knocked off his feet. Hawke joined him, albeit willingly, kneeling over his whining mabari as the constructs rained down around them.

The first construct charged before the tremors stopped. It hit the ground in a splatter of rock and bone, and pulled itself back together with a ripple of arcane energy. It made itself a mace from the corpse of its fallen comrade, the pieces snapping up into place as the skeletal rock rolled over them. Whatever magic magnetized it to itself also held it to the ground, and gave it an unnatural advantage. There was no dodging nor fairly engaging it, and so Justice turned his palm to the beast and a blast of raw energies from the Fade knocked it back

"Is the lyrium corrupting these things, or are they corrupting the lyrium?" Varric asked over the rumblings of the earth.

"You want to do this now?" Hawke demanded.

"I want to get the story straight!" Varric said.

"Why not both?" Fenris asked.

"... These creatures were not always thus." Justice tilted his head to listen to the echo whispering through the dust as the next construct came for them, and was thrown back by his magic. "They were forgotten by their people. Abandoned. Locked away. Their cries for justice went unheard, and so they stopped crying. Their silence is a cry in and of itself. We would do well to end such suffering."

The quake stopped, and the battle was joined. Justice lost himself to it, the flowing movements of his
body, the slight breeze it conjured in his hair, strain in his muscles, the Veil warping and snapping every time he pushed through it for the energies that lay beyond. As much as he appreciated Anders efforts to show him the mortal world, this was the part of it he belonged in most.

"Enough!" Came a loud cry that resonated at the very core of his being, igniting passion, thoughts of hunger, memories of home. "You have proven your mettle. I would not see these creatures harmed without need."

Another construct pushed forward, past the bodies of its fellows. In place of the arcane, it seemed held together with magma-like veins, hardening and softening at every pulse of the ethereal heart between its ribcage. It twisted its skeletal head, as if to bask within the light of the Veilfire, and Justice felt warmth from it when it spoke. "Hello brother."

"Keep your distance, fiend," Justice snapped, with an involuntary memory of a time when he had been naive enough to trust in demons to remember something more than what was base in them.

"This thing is a demon?" Hawke asked at his side.

"I am only a visitor," The construct said, and said it with warmth. The surviving constructs pulled themselves together and rolled across the cavern to cluster around the one that spoke. "The profane have lingered in this place for ages beyond memory, feeding on the magic stones until the need is all that they know. I am not as they are, but they hear me. They will not assault you further without my permission."

"Yeah we kind of noticed the lyrium eating," Varric said. "Doesn't seem like it worked out too well long term."

"Do not converse with this creature," Fenris said, "Kill it."

"Justice?" Hawke asked.

"These creatures knew more than hunger once," Justice could hear as much in the shifting sands beneath his feet, in the dust that lingered in the air, in each ripple of the arcane that played across the Veil when they creatures breathed. "They yearned for freedom. They cried out for justice. They suffered in the absence of compassion. Any number of spirits could have answered them. This a demon, come to feed, and not to be trusted. Do not entreat with it."

"Do not be rash," The demon rolled backwards, and a handful of profane moved protectively before it. "We can come to an agreement. I would not see my feast end, and you would not see yourself trapped here. I can sense your desire, and I know you seek to leave this place. You will need my aide to do so, least you and up another lost soul, feasting on the magic rocks to survive, and as you can see there is little left."

"Call off your pets," Hawke ordered.

The demon's heart pulsed, magma flaring in its veins and the cooling to burn only in its eyes. The profane retreated. Hawke hissed a quiet 'Stay' at his mabari, and crossed the cavern to stand in front of the construct.

"Do not listen to this creature!" Justice snarled, recalling a memory of the Warden Commander before the Baroness from two different sets of eyes. "It will ensnare your mind, no matter how strong your resolve!"

"Just tell me your offer." Hawke ordered.
"They hunger," The demon said simply. "Leave us the one among you with the magic rocks stowed beneath their skin, and I will guide you out."

"What!?" Fenris exclaimed.

"Holy shit," Varric mumbled. "Now what?"

"Now I give it my answer," Hawke stepped into the demon's embrace, locked an arm around its spine, and snapped off its skull. An explosion of arcane energy sent the archer flying back.

"Ahh! Foolish!" The demon wailed, a shade ripping free of the broken form. Justice rushed it, a snap of spirit fire bursting from his finger tips to catch the shade in the chest. Magma leaked from its wounds as it struggled to manifest into a stronger form, and the profane charged them.

There were perhaps a dozen of the profane who had gathered about the demon, but they were not worth Justice's focus. The demon - hunger - was the true threat. Justice snapped the taut coils that formed in the Veil as the demon attempted to reform itself. A shade was little more than shadow, and spirit fire burned it back. A fully formed demon of hunger was something more, gaping jaws of pure magma, and this time no innocents would suffer for his hesitation to strike at something he might call kin.

Justice struck out with Vigilance, and as the crystal passed through shadow and shade, he called on Anders' mana. Amplified through the bones of an ancient dragon, it burst forth in a burst of sapphire. Raw and unrestrained, it consumed the demon from within like lightning in its veins, illuminating the nothingness that passed for its soul. The demon ripped apart and imploded, its energy sucked through the Veil, and dispersed into the cries of a hundred wisps scattered through the Fade.

Vindicated in its demise, Justice turned back to his companions. The light had followed him, emerald and sapphire radiating through the cavern where he stood alone. A fair distance off, a single torch of dripping orange marked the others. Varric held it, while Hawke and Fenris and the mabari fought in his defense, the dwarf too mangled by his brother's betrayal to serve as the fighter he once had. Justice rejoined them, the profane whittled down to seven, and took out one with a hard crack of his staff through its spine.

Six. Fenris spun, a haze of red sand and dust about his feet as they danced across the battlefield, and his sword connected with a construct. Five. The mabari dove past his back, tackling a profane and latching onto its spine to rip out what served for its jugular. Four. Hawke dodged round a whirling mace to drive his dagger into the back of the same profane's skull. Three. Staves came up, blades came down, claws latched, and then there were none. The cavern echoed with panted breath, crackling torchlight, and the shuffle of feet through sand in the aftermath.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Varric sighed, kneeling to dig a hole in the loose sand to plant his torch.

"You're barely a day past thirty," Hawke said, taking a seat on what was once the back of a profane, but now served as little more than a small boulder to drink from his canteen.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Varric said again, sitting down when the light had lowered and reaching for his own canteen. He unscrewed it, and tipped it back to his lips, to be met with nothing.

"Damnit... spot me anything, Hawke?"

"Was going to water Dog..." Hawke sighed, but handed over his canteen all the same.

"Perhaps we could simply eat the dog," Fenris suggested. "I cannot imagine how else we are to
survive down here, with no supplies."

"You're not eating my dog," Hawke scowled, grabbing the mabari about the chest and dragging it to his side.

"It was a jest," Fenris explained, crossing the battlefield to stop at the skull of the hunger demon, when it had still possessed a profane. He unshouldered his pack, and retrieved a bit of twine to loop through the sockets and tie the skull to his belt.

"Trophy?" Hawke asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I was thinking I might shore up the sockets and make it into a wine glass, assuming we ever escape this place," Fenris explained. "For irony's sake."

"It did want to eat you," Varric mused.

"You're welcome," Hawke snorted.

"Anders can refill your canteens," Justice said, "Once I am certain it is safe and he will encounter no more lyrium. In times of desperation, the Wardens would sustain themselves on deepstalkers, cave beetles, nugs, and various fungi when expeditions lasted longer than supplies."

"Good to know, Blue," Varric said. "So, Hawke, how's your head?"

"Still on my shoulders," Hawke said. "... The rest is coming around. We have more important things to worry about."

"Like how we are to escape this place without our friend to lead us," Fenris joked, bouncing the skull in his hand. He took a seat beside them, and took off his helmet to drink from his own canteen.

"Blue?" Varric prompted him, "You want to sit?"

"I have no wish to linger here," Justice said. "Anders is a Grey Warden. The corruption in his veins gives him an endurance beyond that of most mortals. His body does not yet require rest."

"It couldn't hurt though, could it?" Varric asked. "Come on, you're making me tired standing up all ram rod like that. Humor me."

"I would fail to amuse you if I made the attempt," Justice frowned, "Levity is a difficult concept for me."

"No-" Varric groaned, "I mean sit down. Please."

Justice sat, draping Anders' staff over his crossed legs. The resting position made him acutely aware of the various aches and pains Anders' body suffered. There was naught Justice could do for him now, but Anders would be more than capable of caring for himself once they were free of the lyrium. Justice turned his attention away from his companions' conversation to focus inward. Anders was lost to a memory of autumn, lying atop his Commander's chest as they shared a hammock and words not meant for him. Justice left him to it and stood. "Come, we tarry too long."

Hawke stood with him, as did Fenris, though Varric took more time that Justice felt necessary even with his injury righting himself and retrieving the torch. They continued through the passageway, until they came upon a massive door, clutched tight in the onyx grasp of a dragon's claws. The door called for the same lock that had resulted in their betrayal, but it was broken, shattered down the center with the pieces cobbbling the floor at their feet. "Great." Hawke muttered. "Can't end worse
"Hey!" Varric exclaimed, "There you go, Killer. Coming back to you finally?"

"Unfortunately," Hawke said.

"No this is bound to go better," Varric decided, "Look at the detail on the door. It looks like a vault. I bet whatever's in here will be worth way more than Bartrand's stupid idol."

"Have a caution," Justice said, "I sense magic within."

"Of course," Fenris grunted.

"Guess I spoke too soon," Varric sighed.

Justice stepped over one shattered panel depicting half a rearing dragon, and stepped into the vault. The others followed him, by the thud of leather and silverite on onyx that reached his ears. Within the vault, massive pillars carved to look as though they were decorated with dragon scales lined the room. There were no lyrium veins cleaving to the walls or breaking through the ceiling or the floor, though the room looked to have suffered from some kind of seismic activity all the same. Massive boulders and rocks were scattered all around the floor, and lined in the walls were rows upon rows of reliquaries. All of them were filled with various idols, plaques, tomes, and other pieces of dwarven lore that sang in their antiquity.

"Would you look at that," Varric whistled.

"Don't touch anything red," Hawke cautioned.

"No shit," Varric snorted.

They passed through the vault, when they stumbled upon the skeleton at its center. The creature's eyes alit with flame at their encroachment, and the skeleton soared into the air with a furious pulse of arcane magic that knocked them all back. The rocks and boulders scattered through the vault raised from the ground, and leapt to take shape around the skeleton, cracking open to reveal bright, blinding geodes of red lyrium. "Oh that can't be good," Varric sighed.

The skeleton was set too high in the air for Hawke or Fenris to reach. Justice gathered Anders' mana and let it amplify through his staff, releasing it in an explosion of energy meant to knock the skeleton to the ground. It washed harmlessly over whatever innate spellshield the creature possessed in a ripple of violet, and did nothing. "Oh that's bad," Varric said. The construct finished forming, a creature of such immense size it dwarfed the vault, and stood hunchbacked against the ceiling. Energy rippled, coiling and snapping along ethereal veins between the rocks, throbbing ever brighter in the red lyrium nodes that made up the creature. "Oh that's definitely bad." Varric whined.

"Where's the other exit?" Hawke asked.

"There!" Fenris pointed across the chamber, where a much smaller door made from a dark metal and lined in runes served as a back exit. The five of them ran for it, kicking up the red sand scattered across the floor of the vault, but didn't reach it before the profane exploded with eldritch magics. Arcane energy amplified through the raw lyrium, and burned up every exposed part of the vault, from the more fragile pieces in the reliquaries, to their very skin before they managed to throw themselves down behind the nearest pillar. The spell was deafening, like that of a dragon's roar, and though the mortals around him spoke, Justice heard nothing, and knew nothing of complex magic to negate the construct's channel.
The ground beneath them trembled, and Justice didn't know enough of the mortal world to accredit it to the profane's magic, or another quake. It grew in intensity, thrusting the five of them together and knocking them against the pillar. Fissures split along the ground, cascading up the walls in jagged rivers to crack across the ceiling. Pebbles rained down throughout the vault, and immediately burnt to dust under the profane's onslaught. The violent earthquake blurred vision, tore apart the vault, and ultimately broke it. The ceiling shattered, a massive slab at the center and smaller chunks breaking apart further in. The spell ceased, though the quake continued, and sound remained a high pitched hum caught in Justice's ears.

It persisted. Hawke crouched with one arm wrapped around his mabari in his lap, the other locked around Varric. Fenris' gauntlets were locked about Justice's bicep and Varric's hand, while Justice braced himself against the wall, an arm for both Hawke and Fenris. The lyrium engraved in the elf's skin pulled at him, even through the leather and silverite of his armor. Justice could feel its song tingling in his teeth, warming his veins, wrapping tight around his spine, even if he couldn't hear it for how the profane had deafened him. The combination of the song, and the world around him breaking apart, was one of the most comforting experiences Justice had yet had in the mortal world. It felt like the Fade, a reforming of reality, and when it ended he stood delighted to see what had become of the world around them.

The profane had been crushed by the slab, and no magic called to Justice from within its tomb. The lyrium had dulled with its death, though it still pulsed as all lyrium did to the time of some ethereal heart. The room had been split down the center, creating a parallelism beautiful in its imperfection. Justice walked the length of the fissure while Varric and the others crawled out from behind the pillar. "... That's it?" Hawke asked, setting a foot on the slab of ceiling.

"It seems you have won the day," Fenris snorted, "Well done."

"I'm going to have to embellish on this part a bit," Varric decided, "Something about you taking it out with an arrow through the heart after several grueling hours of battle."

"That would be a dishonest retelling," Justice said, running his gloved fingers over the rivets the tremors had left in the wall. A natural earthquake was different from a mage's spell. Where a mage's spell focused on a specific location, a natural earthquake was aimless: raw and visceral, tearing through everything and anything without direction. There was a beauty to the destruction, the chaos, the strength. Assuming he was guessing correctly at the nature of the tremors, "This was an earthquake, correct?"

"Honestly, Blue?" Varric shrugged, "I'm thinking maybe we have our little volcano to thank for this. I just hope wherever are, whatever blew out of it doesn't reach Kirkwall. Maker knows that city has enough smog and ash as it is. Or should I be invoking the Stone after this? Shit, I don't know. Let's load up on everything we can carry in this vault and get the fuck out of here."

The mortals busied themselves with the tasks. Justice accepted a few of the filled satchels and packs to carry, impatient to be off and away from the lyrium so that Anders could be himself again. The burdens seemed impractical, especially considering the many threats that lurked in the Deep Roads, but he understood the expedition had been launched for profit, and that Anders had entered into an agreement with Hawke over it, and didn't protest. He did, however, repeatedly practice shrugging the packs from his shoulders and dropping into a fighting stance to be sure they would be no hinder to Anders.

Then they were off, venturing out into the back exit to the vault, and following it out into the eternal dark of the deep. The exit led them out into caverns, some natural, some dwarven made, none of them providing them with a clear passage back to the city. Fenris claimed to know the way north, but
his sense of direction was of little aid to them when the caverns twisted so that starting north often meant ending up heading south, and being forced to double back. They took a rest in cavern floored with red sand, and lined with so many jagged outcroppings that could hold an ambush it made Justice nervous, even without sensing any darkspawn.

Neither darkspawn nor lyrium had hindered them in the confusing sprawl of passages and chambers, however, and Justice was inclined to believe they had faced the last of it. While the others spoke among themselves on their rest, Justice gathered Anders from a memory of apple pie. It had been stolen from the window sill of his old home, and eaten on the fence of the farmstead with the company of a cat. The warm Anderfels winters were not without wind that blew through the free hair of a boy no more than nine. Anders fell from the memory, as if falling backwards off the fence, and into his own body with a startled gasp.

"Andraste's holy knickerweasels," Anders swore, scowling up at the blackrock ceiling that welcomed him back to the land of the living.

"That you, Blondie?" Varric guessed.

"No, it's the Queen of Antiva, who do you think it is?" Anders snapped, dragging himself into some semblance of a sitting position to find everyone staring at him. They were in a cave of some sort. Big surprise there, really. "... Are we still trapped?"

"Not exactly," Varric drawled.

"Meaning yes," Anders groaned, shrugging out of a tangle of straps to satchels and packs he had no idea why he was carrying. "What's going on?"

"We're lost," Hawke explained.

"How are we lost?" Anders demanded, "What happened to our mystical elven guide over there?"

"I know which passages lead north," Fenris scowled at him, "How am I to tell which ones stay heading north?"

"Great," Anders muttered, stumbling to feet, "Just great."

"Where are you going?" Hawke called after him when he stormed away from the group.

"To take a piss!" Anders shot back, picking a random outcropping of rock and heading for it. He left the group's line of sight, and broke into a jog until he was halfway across the cavern, where two identical passages split off into Maker knew where because there were no maps for anything this deep underground. Anders picked a wall to bang his head against while he pissed, "Any time you want to come back would be great, Justice."

Unsurprisingly, his stubborn bastard of a spirit ignored him. Anders groaned, and stared at the identical passages, the word "lost" repeating over and over in his head until it was synonymous with 'trapped.' His chest tightened, but before Anders could give into it he felt a familiar pull at the core of his being.

Darkspawn. Of course it was darkspawn. Just one, no doubt a scout, about to stumble into the chamber and shriek bloody murder to bring its horde down on them. Anders fastened his trousers and drew on his mana, forming a lance of ice he clutched between his fingertips. "We're all going to die to here," Anders muttered, holding the lance over his shoulder and tensing to throw when a deformed creature scuttled into out into view, neither man nor darkspawn. It turned murky white eyes on him and blinked. "... Eli?"
"Eli," The ghoul repeated, voice rasping and body cracking. Its skinless lips split open to reveal a grin of broken teeth, and it moved on three limbs when it shuffled over to him. "Name... my name?"

"That's right," Anders said in a daze, letting the spell disperse, "That's your name... I'm Anders. Eli, what are you doing here?"

"Went away," Eli explained, "Anders-went away too?"

"Yes," Anders said, "I mean no. How did you find me?"

"Felt," Eli said, tilting his head so far to one side to look at him his neck cracked, and should have broken, "Found. Felt the Grey. Guard against the dark."

"Right. Right, okay, sure, it goes both ways," Anders rubbed his hands together to battle back the chill his spell had left with them, "Eli, listen, do you know how to get back to the thaig from here?" Eli chewed on his answer for so long Anders' heart started racing, but the ghoul ultimately bobbed its head. "Oh, sweet, fucking, Maker," Anders laughed, dragging his hands through his hair, "Eli, if you had lips, I would kiss you. Listen, I need you to take me back to the thaig, alright? Can you do that for me, Eli?"

"Back?" Eli glanced over his shoulder, "Go back? Back to chew, to gnaw, to rip... No, no no. Back, yes, can go back. Down in the dark with the dead?"

"Yeah," Anders said, "Down in the dark with the dead."
Hello everyone! Welcome back. The song in this chapter is an adaption of Lady in Black by Blackmore's Night. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:32 Dragon 11 Solis Sometime
Somewhere

Anders was insane. There were no two ways about it. He'd run back to the group at a slant in his haste, body pitching forward and fingers nearly skimming the ground to tell everyone that he'd found a way out. Hawke and the others had leapt to their feet, and Anders had led them back to the corner of the cavern where he'd found Eli, or Eli had found him. There in the dark, there'd been nothing. Nothing but the sickly white pallor of the light he'd conjured, and the stale scent of his piss drying on the blackrock.

"The mage is mad," Fenris had snorted, and Anders believed him.

There was no other explanation for it. Whether it was the red lyrium addling him, or whether existing solely inside his own mind had the potential to break it, or whether being lost and locked away was too much for him, Anders had obviously gone insane. There was no ghoul that he could sense once he was back in the company of his companions, and there was no way Eli would have been able to move fast enough for Anders to lose track of him so fast.

Which meant Eli had never been there in first place. Eli was just another hallucination, batting playfully at what was left of Anders' sanity as it unraveled like a ball of twine for a cat that didn't exist. Eli was just another Mr. Wiggums, only this time Karl wasn't here to smile and nod through Anders' mental breakdown. Anders prayed fervently for Justice to take his place so he didn't have to have it in front of his companions, but his spirit didn't listen.

Varric's sympathy hadn't helped. Anders didn't want it. He kept to the back of the group when they set out, trying to find their way through endless caverns and caves and back to the thaig. He knew a panic attack when he had one. The cold sweat, the constriction in his chest, the racing of his heart, a feeling almost like falling as he lost one sensation after the next, from hearing to sight to feeling, until the world around him was a murmured blur and time lost all meaning.

Anders only real thought was that he wanted Justice back. In the space behind his eyes, Anders didn't have to exist. Sensation dulled, and when he wasn't reliving his memories or watching the world around him, he was adrift in a blissful oblivion. It was the closest thing to dreaming he could still experience, and Maker, he needed it right now. He would have given anything to crawl into a hammock with Amell, to have his mother braid his hair, to lie in Compassion's arms, to sit and talk under the stairs with Karl.

Instead he walked. And walked. And walked, barely breathing, unable to focus, meeting any queries with blank stares until his companions ultimately gave up talking to him. Later, they gave up all together, and decided to make camp in a reasonably defensible cavern. Anders sat alone, hugging a
pile of treasure-packed satchels in his lap, feeling the occasional ripple of static run up his arms or coil around his spine that told him Justice was with him and cared, but refused to take control for whatever reason.

Varric fell straight to sleep, and Fenris took first watch. Hawke came and sat with him, and Anders was amazed he could hear the man at all when he deigned to speak. "You know it's the lyrium, right?" Hawke asked; he looked at him when he said it, his crimson eyes reflecting the fire, and however reassuring the words they were wasted. Hawke had no idea Anders had a history with hallucinations. Maker, until Karl had told him, even Anders didn't know he had a history with hallucinations.

"Sure," Anders said.

"You're not mad," Hawke said.

"You just don't know me," Anders snorted, dragging his hands through his hair, and the words tumbled out without his consent. "It's not like this is the first of my delusions." Hawke didn't say anything, which was very Hawke of him, and Anders glanced up at him through his hands. The archer was sitting in front of him, weapons and cuirass discarded, one leg drawn up with his arm draped over it as if this were just another fireside chat.

"Your spirit have anything to do with that?" Hawke guessed.

"Justice doesn't have anything to do with this," Anders scowled at him, "Maker, if anything, he's the only reason I wasn't chasing pink druffalo through Darktown the day after I arrived-" Anders cut himself off at the flare of spirit fire that broke out across his wrist with his first angry gesture. "-... Look, I-don't want to put all this on you. I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me going crazy-more crazy-and putting us at risk. I'll make sure everyone else sees what I see from now on before I say anything."

"I'm not worried about that," Hawke said. "Anders-... Look, are we friends? Because I don't know where we stand right now, but I'm not an idiot. I know you're the only one making a difference on this damn expedition, and you were the only one making a difference in that shithole of a city. I don't think you deserve any of the shit that's happened to you, and-..."

"And what?" Anders asked.

"And it's just the lyrium," Hawke finished. He had warm eyes, when they were actually looking his way. There was a slight crease to his brow, as if pained by the eye-contact, but he weathered it through the silence Anders let stretch. Hawke wasn't so bad. He cared enough to come and talk to him, to try to reassure him, but...

"I don't want to be crazy," Anders whispered, and almost hoped Hawke didn't hear him.

"You're not crazy," Hawke said firmly.

"Yes I am," Anders let slip a laugh that twisted into a whine while his hands twisted in his hair, "I'm crazy. It's not just that I saw Eli down here; it's that I believed it was possible. If it was just the hallucinations-... But it's not. After solitary-... Maker, I'll believe anything. You don't understand. I swore they'd never take my mind. I swore I'd kill myself first. But they did. They did and I'm crazy and I'm-I'm-" Tears strung at the corners of his eyes, and escaped to carve guilty lines down his cheeks and catch upon his stubble. Anders wiped off his jaw with one hand and cleared his throat. "I'm fine."
"It's just the lyrium," Hawke said with a certainty Anders didn't share. "I barely grazed it and I lost a week. With that much lyrium everywhere, I could barely hold onto my own name, and I'm not even a mage. By all rights, you should have died. You don't think it's possible the lyrium made you hallucinate a few things, even with your spirit controlling you?"

"His name is Justice," Anders said.

"Alright, you don't think it's possible the lyrium made you hallucinate a few things, even with Justice controlling you?" Hawke asked.

"Maker, I don't know," Anders dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "I don't know. I swear I talked to him."

"So maybe you talked to him," Hawke shrugged, "Maybe he fucked off. Maybe lyrium is magic. Maybe there are plenty of explanations that don't have to mean you're crazy."

"Maybe..." Anders shifted to hug himself and rub warmth into his arms, "I don't know. I can't think down here, in this blighted dark. I hate the bloody Deep Roads. I've always hated them."

"You were a Warden," Hawke reminded him, "You managed. How?"

*I had Amell,* Anders thought but didn't say. He tried for something like a smile instead, "Not your business."

"Fair," Hawke grinned, "I'm just saying, we could try to recreate whatever worked for you before."

Anders laughed, and sent himself into a coughing fit. "Thanks. I needed that... Who knows, you know?" Anders winked for his own sake, and the bewildered expression it put on Hawke's face, "I'll be fine as soon as we get out of here. Once we're back in the thaig it won't be so bad."

Anders hoped that was the case, and kept hoping it the three days they spent lost in the caverns far below the Vimmark Mountains. They had water. Anders could conjure it. A man could go up to three weeks with no food, but no matter how Anders tried to settle his mind, he kept thinking of the poor bastards they'd found trapped beneath the Vigil. Anders would be fine: one of the wild ghouls he and the Wardens had found outside the cells, but the others were doomed.

To hear Varric talk, and no one had a choice about hearing Varric talk, the man was basically the walking dead already. He spoke endlessly about everything from the blisters on his feet, to the phantom feeling in his fingers, to the ache in his stomach, to the crackle in his head. It would have been a pleasant distraction, but where Franke spoke of anything and everything pleasant, Varric spoke of anything and everything miserable, and by the end of the third day they were all feeling that way.

They ran into a pack of deepstalkers at the end of the third day. The result was an acid burn, a half-dozen scratches, and food that didn't keep. Hawke carved the corpses and Anders cooked them. They ate what they could and carried what they couldn't, and suffered the entire time. The deepstalker meat was murder on their stomachs, and everyone down to the dog spent half of the fourth day shitting out their insides.

The fifth day they lost three hours chasing a nug. Everyone screamed bloody murder at everyone else when it escaped, and didn't speak to each other for the next five hours. The sixth day a swarm of cave beetles fell on Anders and ripped out a chunk of his shoulder before he managed to set himself aflame. He didn't remember passing out afterwards, but Hawke carried him on his back until they made camp again. The seventh day Varric broke down in tears, Anders had another panic attack, and
Hawke and Fenris got into a shouting match over something Anders couldn't recall.

The eighth day they stumbled across a spider nest, and the resultant meat was gentler on their stomachs than the deepstalkers and more filling than the cave beetles. By a miracle of the Maker, a cavern connected to the spiders' nest, and led back towards the thaig. It was the end of the eighth day when they finally reemerged into the underground city, to find it as deserted as it had been when they'd arrived. Varric kissed the ground with tears in his eyes, and Anders was almost inclined to join him.

Somehow, they found themselves on the opposite side of the thaig, near what looked to be another entrance into the Deep Roads. The only difference between where they stood, and where the expedition had originally arrived, was that the great doors were sealed shut. Not far from the massive gates was a grand estate, the likes of which Varric guessed belonged to the ruling noble house. It was untouched, along with the rest of the thaig, as if Bartrand had simply taken the idol and ran.

It was there in the estate they found the name of the thaig, inscribed on a tablet set beside a staff. No one had any explanation for it. There was no reason for dwarves to have staves, when dwarves claimed no mages, yet it rested on a pedestal in the foyer of the estate, on clear display for the first visitors to the thaig. According to the tablet, the thaig was named for House Valdasine, and the staff was the only thing left when it was abandoned. It was inscribed with the same red lyrium that had made up the idol, and everyone was leery about touching it.

Varric ultimately took a tracing of the tablet, and they agreed to leave both the slab of metal and the staff it was set beside behind. There was no sign of the expedition in the city, and it was easy for them to find their original entrance, and follow it back to the surface. It was another week ahead of them, but it was a week they wouldn't spend lost. Varric was looking forward to stumbling across Bartand's corpse on the way back, but Anders couldn't help thinking Bartrand's wouldn't be the only corpse they would find.

Bodahn might have the rations for the Winters and the workers, but he didn't have the water. Hardtack, jerky, and dried fruits were far from hydrating, and made an adequate water supply all the more tantamount to their survival. Bodahn been counting on having a mage along, and Bartrand's betrayal had damned more than just the four of them. Worse still, he'd been counting on having a Warden along. Darkspawn weren't a concern in the thaig. It was too deep, but Anders had no doubt they'd encounter stragglers and scouting parties once they were back in the Deep Roads.

Fenris was sympathetic and Varric was furious when Anders made mention of the expedition's likely fate. Hawke told him not to borrow trouble, and focus on making it to the surface alive. It was sound advice, but Anders couldn't take it. He wondered and he worried about everyone from Eli to Bodahn to Sandal to Ralf to Miles. The Winters wouldn't be able to protect them from a darkspawn scouting party. Not without a Warden there to sense their approach.

The only thing that reassured him was the lack of darkspawn their group encountered on the journey back. Two days out from the thaig, and they were back in the Deep Roads, and Anders sensed nothing. A pack of nugs Dog had successfully wrangled marked their dinner, and it was easier to find optimism on a full stomach. They camped out at the Warden base camp the expedition had used when they'd made their descent, their spirits lighter for the progress.

The fire was conjured; there was no crackle to mark the flames when there was nothing for them to devour. It danced quietly atop the ashes in the firepit, and Anders entertained himself summoning two men from the flames to dance circles around it. The figures were formless, scarcely bigger than the size of his forearm, and having a grander time than the rest of them.

Fenris flicked a pebble through one, but Varric whistled, "Neat trick, Blondie."
"I try," Anders said.

"You use that for the kids?" Hawke asked.

"What kids?" Anders asked.

"The kids," Hawke said again, "You said you've got a friend who takes care of orphans."

The man had been listening after all. Anders grinned, "Close. They prefer animals." Anders pulled on a breath of mana, and gathered up scattered pebbles and dust to shape into a cat. Ripples of arcane magic formed into a crow, and the two summons fell into their natural state of chasing each other in circles around the camp fire.

Fenris scowled, and swatted the crow out of the air with a flare of lyrium over the back of his palm. "Why am I not surprised to learn you're so careless with your magic as to delude children into thinking it harmless?"

"I don't know, Fenris, why aren't you surprised?" Anders snapped, sending the cat crashing into him in an explosion of dust that left the elf coughing. "Maybe because it's actually harmless?"

Ignorant bloody blighter. Anders was the first to argue magic was meant to be used responsibly. He couldn't count how many bushes he'd refused to set on fire at Sigrun's beckon, but there was a difference between burning down a forest and a little light show to take kids' minds off the fact that they were living in a sewer. As far as Anders was concerned, the summons weren't any different from healing magic. The kids needed something to remember they were still kids, when half of them were already working or begging on street corners.

"Yes, I'm sure teaching children-" Fenris started when the dust cleared.

"Stop," Hawke said loudly. "Both of you."

Anders bristled, and shot the man a glare. He hadn't done anything other than defend himself. Hawke met it with a bewildered arch to one eyebrow, and Anders rolled his eyes. Bloody typical.

"Thank you," Varric said warily, using a sack of treasure as a pillow. "Maker's breath, aren't you two tired of fighting yet? We've been at each other's throats for a week. Shit, at least I think it's been a week. Not like we have sundials down here, or any crazy dwarven clocks."

"Varric, you're a dwarf," Hawke said.

"I'm a surface dwarf," Varric said, "It's different."

"Different in the sense that surface dwarves grow their beards on their chests?" Fenris guessed.

"Oh-ho!" Varric and Hawke laughed, while Anders made a determined effort not to do the same, "Broody tells a joke. I'll mark it on my calendar, right next to-what did we agree to call our annum, Blondie?"

"Genteelia, I think," Anders allowed himself a grin.

"I don't want to know," Hawke said.

"Different in the sense that we're a little less crazy, Broody," Varric explained. "I have no idea why in the blazes anyone would willingly live down here."

"Oh, come on, it's not so bad," Anders joked. "Clean the taint off the floor, hang a few pictures, and
it could be almost cozy."

"Compared to your current digs, Blondie, anything is cozy," Varric said.

"No, I think I'd prefer the sewers to the Deep Roads any day," Anders said, "I swear by Andraste and the Maker, I am never coming back down here again."

"Seconded," Hawke said.

"Thirded," Varric snorted.

"Fourthed." Fenris agreed.

"Well hey, if nothing else, at least it's brought us all closer together," Varric said.

"Closer to strangling each other, maybe," Anders snorted, not trusting himself to keep the conversation going without turning it around on someone with how frayed his nerves were after two weeks underground. "Do you have any other songs?"

"I've always got a song, Blondie," Varric said, digging through his coat pockets for the druffalo bones he kept in them. The slick instrument slid out from between his thumb and pointer finger to clatter on the stone, and Varric sighed. "... shit."

"... Perhaps you could use your left hand?" Fenris suggested.

"I can't keep a fast tempo with my left," Varric mumbled, retrieving the bones and staring at them for so long Anders felt guilty for asking. "... anyone wanna talk about Bartrand? My neck gets so tight when I think about him I could strum it like a lute."

"Lady Redeemer, no bones," Hawke said, "You mind, Varric?"

"No, no, go ahead, Killer," Varric said, stuffing the bones back into his coat pocket.

Hawke's voice was all smoke when he sang, low and deep in his throat and echoing through the cave. Anders would have enjoyed it more, but the damn dog joined in when Hawke started singing, howling in time with him on every drawn out note.

"She came to me one morning
One lonely day of mourning
Tears her face adorning
Andraste, Maker's bride

By light of flame she found me
For in the darkness I was walking
And the Void lay all around me
Without the Maker's light

She asked me sing his praise then
I said teach me the words then
To find my way to his side
Be it chant or song or hymn

And I begged her give me lyrics
To find that Golden City
So eager was my passion
To find meaning in this life
And so she taught me words that
Shaped the Chant of Light
So easy to begin
And yet weeks it took to end

Lady Redeemer of all men
Counseled me so wisely then
That I'd not walk alone again
But by the Maker's side

Oh, Maker, lend your hand outright
And let me rest here at your side
I'll sing your praise unending
You fill my heart with life."

"Not bad, Killer," Varric said. "Though I can't say I've ever heard Lady Redeemer as a duet before."

Hawke threw an arm around his mabari, and ruffled its head with an affectionate fist. "He always does that, any song."

"I can't imagine why," Fenris joked.

"Blondie, you want to heal that burn?" Varric joked.

Anders chuckled, but he was more concerned with the lyrics than the vocals, "Actually, do you mind if I ask you something? No judgment, just genuinely curious."

"Uh-oh," Varric said, shuffling to his feet and dragging his treasure pillow away from the fire, "I know where this is going, and I'm going to bed."

"As am I," Fenris declared, following him, "I'll take last watch."

"Oh for Maker's sake," Anders muttered; Hawke chuckled, to Anders' surprise, and even spared him a grin. The firelight played over his features, but if Anders was being honest, none of them looked like princes. Save for Fenris, who was spared by his race, two weeks of untamed facial hair had laid claim to their jaws. Their armor was crusted with blood and grime, and Maker, the smell. Anders made himself sick stagnating, but there was nothing to be done but grin and bear it, so he grinned back

"What is it?" Hawke asked.

"I just don't understand how a family of apostates could ever approve of the Chantry," Anders said. "The Maker, Andraste, that's grand, but the rest? I know you said the Chantry was there for you when your father passed but... It's none of my business."

"You're right, it's not," Hawke said.

Well. That was a productive conversation. Good job, Anders. Varric had the right idea going to bed. Anders pressed his palm to the floor to stand when Hawke sighed. "I wasn't around when my father died. My family needed help, and the Chantry was there to give it to them. There's more than just templars in the Chantry; we knew every bastard in Amaranthine and Lothereing, and knew when to run, but there's the Sisters, the Brothers, the Revered Mother, the Chanters..."
"Most of their services come free and when they don't, there's the Chanters' Board for work. The Brothers were always there to take confession, some of the Sisters served as healers and were there to deliver Beth and Carver and perform the rites for Father. They taught histories, the Chant, told stories... Sister Leliana always used to spend time with Beth. She gave singing and lute lessons... There are good people in the Chantry."

"What happened?" Anders asked. "With your father. Beth said he took ill?"

"Darkspawn," Hawke said. "Three years before the Blight started. He was working with the Blackstone Irregulars, and they had a job to clear out a pocket of the bastards. Sword caught him, just there," Hawke set a hand to his side, just beneath his ribs, "Nothing serious. Healed up clean, then the infection set in. Gangrene and sepsis hit him, and he was gone. Just like that."

"I'm sorry you didn't get to be with him when it happened," Anders said.

"My own fault," Hawke shrugged, "It's done. At least Carver can't complain Father doesn't spend enough time with him anymore... Your father?"

"Bastard," Anders snorted, shifting so he sat comfortably with his arms draped over his knees, "... You and Beth are so lucky to have any fond memories of the Chantry. My father was an Andrastian too, you know. He was an Anders, so not much choice there. When my magic manifested, he tried every Chantry-sanctioned remedy he could think of to 'cure' me. Stuffed my pillow full of embrium, put so many leeches on me to 'get the magic out of my blood' I was anemic for a year, and when all that failed, he drowned me."

"What?" Hawke sat up so quickly Anders laughed at him.

"What, you don't know?" Anders snorted, "You never read 'The Art of Parenting for the Good Andrastian'? If your child has magic, all you have to do is drown them. The magic dies before they do. He took me out to the river one day, to go fishing he said, and held me under the water until I passed out. I woke up to my mother pounding on my chest, breathing down my throat, screaming bloody murder and every prayer you could name.

"One of the Chantry Sisters, she helped. With all of it. Whatever it took to cure the curse. Couldn't have me bringing bad luck to the whole village. They tried for two years before they gave up and gave me to the templars, and that's all the Chantry's ever done for me or any mage. Beth... I don't know how she got away from all that."

"My father would never stand for that," Hawke said, with such a scowl it put a pleasant tingle in Anders' fingers.

"What was he like?" Anders asked.

"Strict," Hawke said. "High expectations. If you didn't meet them, you heard about it."

"You know you're the only person I've met with a mage parent you actually remember?" Anders asked, "If more mages were allowed to keep their families, people would learn not to fear them so much." Hawke made a sound of agreement, and Anders only realized he was smiling when he felt the pain of it in his cheeks. His face flushed when Hawke returned it, and Anders cleared his throat, patting the treasure he was leaning against, "So what are you going to buy when we get back to Kirkwall?"

"Drinks," Hawke said.

"I'm for it," Anders swallowed down the cloying taste of mana on his tongue, "Andraste's tits,
Justice, I think I've earned it."

"Cider for you?" Hawke guessed.

"No, no," Anders said hotly, scowling at the blue veins at his wrist, despite their lack of a glow, "If I can't get hung after all this, I may as well hang myself." A tangle of tension tied up between his shoulder blades, and Anders clenched his fist until his nails dug into the heel of his palm, but it didn't help him understand Justice any.

"I'm guessing Justice doesn't approve," Hawke said.

"I hate not being able to talk to him," Anders muttered, dragging his nails along his scalp. "He's there, but he's not, and I don't understand half of what he wants from me."

"Your talk with Merrill didn't help?" Hawke asked.

"I forgot to ask about drinking," Anders sighed.

"You'll live," Hawke said. "Good food should be good enough."

"I'm so tired of good enough," Anders shifted to lean back against his stack of satchels and packs, "... Never mind me. I'm not sitting in a cell. I should be smiling. You have first watch?"

"Sure," Hawke stood, and left him to nightmares of darkspawn.

Anders was tainted. No sane man would dream the things he dreamed. His noctivagant soul was part of a hivemind, consumed by the Call and dead to the Fade. His father held him down while darkspawn spewed bile into his open mouth. Cave beetles wearing the faces of children burrowed beneath his skin. Glowing slimes pushed up his fingernails to crawl beneath them and into his blood stream. If he wasn't mad, he was near enough.

Hawke crawled out of Dog's unhinged jaw, and Fenris burst from both their chests. Anders gnawed off Varric's fingers, and spat them into Isabela's mouth. She grew into a broodmother, birthing ghouls, and Amell among them. He stared at Anders with milky white eyes and whispered of dead things until Anders screamed himself awake.

A cold sweat and three bleary eyed glares were there to greet him. The night terrors were a constant. They were worse underground, and there was nothing for Anders to do but weather them. He suffered. His companions suffered. Everyone was miserable. All in all, it was everything Anders had come to expect from the Deep Roads.

The days bled together until they stumbled upon what remained of the expedition. There at the Warden base camp a handful of darkspawn roamed aimlessly in the company of ghouls. Genlocks picked apart the Winters' corpses for their weapons and armaments, hunched over and gargling to one another in sounds too close to words for comfort. Arrows ended most, where the dwarven-born-darkspawn resisted magic, but there were still the ghouls and what remained of the men they'd been.

The ghouls clustered around the shattered remnants of the cart, half-submerged in the blight and slowly being overgrown with rotting flesh. All of them were men, and Anders wasn't naive enough to think the women had managed to escape. He counted a half dozen workers, and just as many Winters: none of them Eli. No one else had spoken with Eli, and Anders was starting to doubt he'd ever existed in the first place.

Ralf had existed; Miles had existed, though the men were gone now. Miles had rotted from the inside out, his body emaciated, his every joint swollen and peppered with welts that oozed sallow pus down
his blackened skin. Ralf, Anders only recognized by his mutton chops, jutting out from his bloated face. He was long dead, his chest cavity hollowed out and eaten while Miles dragged what Anders guessed was his arm around the camp, sucking on the marrow like a pacifier.

An arrow ended him. Fenris' blade and Hawke's bow cleared out the rest, and Anders' magic burned the bodies. They made camp atop the expedition's grave, and Varric's stomach rumbled at the scent of burning meat. The poor dwarf made it a handful of steps away from the campfire before he was retching. Fenris swallowed frequently, a hand massaging his throat to keep the bile down, and Hawke had visibly paled.

Varric staggered back to the group, and threw himself down next to Hawke, lips glossed with spit and skin sleek with sweat. "Maker's breath, Blondie. You are one tough son of a bitch. This shit isn't making you sick?"

Anders shrugged, "You get used to it."

"Because that's comforting," Varric said.

"It's not really supposed to be."

And yet it was, if only because no life was better than life as a ghoul. They were two camps away from the surface, and Anders doubted they were like to encounter darkspawn again once they set off in the morning. A two day trip back to Kirkwall once they hit the surface, and the nightmare would finally be over. They'd be free of the blighted Deep Roads forever. Free of the dark. Free of the dead. Out, and up, back into the light with the life.

Chapter End Notes

This is an optional Apples and Apostates' Chapter of some of the events in this chapter told from Hawke's perspective should you wish to follow both in chronological order.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. This chapter feels... I don't know. I hope it's alright. Thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 1 Martinalis Late Morning
Kirkwall Chantry

A crow walked the rafters of the Kirkwall Chantry, its talons scuffing across the dusty wood and raining small motes down on the congregation. Hightown filled the pews, men and women dressed in their finest silks and velvets: dyed with red madder root and purple brasilwood. Lowtown filled the floor, men and women in plainer cottons and wools: dyed with blue woad and yellow marigolds. Darktown filled the corners, men and women in rags, dyed with nothing.

Chantry Sisters walked among them, carrying burners that filled the air with smoke and the cloying scent of incense. The whole of the congregation was already in mourning, and needed no encouragement, but the incense stung the eyes. The Grand Cleric's sermon was accompanied by a quiet chorus of sniffles and sobs, and tears and sweat washed away powder or dirt depending on the face. The air was stifling with the heat of a thousand candles and a thousand bodies, and so the crow paced, fluttering its wings to keep cool.

"We close this morning with a prayer from the Canticle of Trials, 1:14-16," The Grand Cleric announced.

"Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.

I am not alone. Even
As I stumble on the path
With my eyes closed, yet I see
The Light is here.

Draw your last breath, my friends,
Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky.
Rest at the Maker's ride hand,
And be forgiven."

The faithful repeated the hymn, and Grand Cleric reminded those gathered that the Chantry would be hosting plays throughout the day of Andraste's death, with the bonfires to begin at sunset. It went unspoken that the fires would be magic, conjured by the mages of the Gallows and enchanted to last throughout the night in lieu of kindling so that the smoke didn't suffocate the city. Brothers walked among the crowds with offering bowls, collecting tithe as the congregation dispersed.
The crow flitted from the rafters, and flew out the great twin doors of the Chantry, bypassing all. It soared through the city, feeling the sun warming its feathers and the wind blowing through them. It followed eddies and currents, aimless and free in the sky, far above the foundry smoke and the concerns of men who coughed and choked in the thick of it. It relished in the strain in its wings, the fresh air in its lungs, the racing of its heart, but a push on its mind reminded it to return to its roost, and so it made its decent into Darktown.

Anders landed in his clinic in an explosion of feathers. He arched his back, stretching his arms above his head and winning a loud pop from both his shoulders. Maker, but he'd missed flying. Three weeks underground was three weeks too long. The stone was alarmingly cold in August, and Anders danced across it to snatch his patchwork socks from the table and slide them over his bare feet. He shrugged out of his coat and shimmied back into his trousers, idly fantasizing a day when all of his clothes were enchanted to transform with him.

"So what was that?" Anders asked, "Not a fan of flying? I thought we were taking today off."

A ripple of blue ran up the inside of his left arm, and Anders chased it with his fingertips. "What? You want to practice?" Anders inhaled a breath of mana, and let it tingle through his veins. Sensation dulled in his left arm, and his veins glowed, and then cracked open with spirit fire. Anders watched Justice roll and stretch his fingers, and felt none of it. It was still a little surreal to see, but Justice seemed more comfortable with it than owning his entire body.

"It was bloody boiling in that Chantry," Anders mused, running his fingers up the inside of his forearm and over the slight bump in his wrist. Justice closed his fingers over his when Anders' reached his palm, and Anders grinned. "You want to try cold today? I can work with an ice spell, and you can see what you think. You should probably get used to it before winter rolls around."

Justice let go of his fingers, and Anders took it for agreement. He pulled on his mana, and let it shape into a thin film of frost on his fingertips. He ran them through the light dusting of hair on his forearm, tracing over the cracks of spirit fire and pressing on a few freckles. Justice's fingers twitched at the sensation, and Anders laughed. "Now picture that bone deep, and you've got winter in Ferelden. Wintermarch here with the wind in the mines can be just as brutal. Not looking forward to all the grippe we're going to have to heal."

The remark stirred an odd sense of malcontent in him, and Anders pinched the side of his hand, "What? Oh-come on, Justice, obviously I want to heal them if they're sick, I just meant it would be better if they weren't sick to begin with. Winter is hard on the refugees... Harder, I guess. Maker, I still can't believe Mark died while we were gone. I told the dumb blighter to stop drinking. I told him his stomach couldn't take it.

"And then there was Elissa's baby... crib death. She said he wasn't sleeping on his stomach... Maybe the foundry smoke? Lissa had just made him those swaddling clothes, too," Anders sighed at the ripple of reassurance he felt from Justice. Logically, he knew it wasn't his fault, but he hated watching his patients die around him. "I can't believe those bastards at the Chantry charged for the service. At least the Beshcals are alright. If something had happened to Thom because of that necklace I don't think I'd be able to forgive myself."

Anders let the ice fade from his fingers, and wiped what he could of the water from his forearm. He'd dry it properly later. Justice hated the rags in his clinic. So far, anything with an abrasive texture made his spirit recoil, alongside acrid scents and bitter tastes. "So what do you think? Winter seem like something you can handle?"

Justice gave him a thumbs up, and Anders laughed and wrung his hand down his forearm. "Now we just need to figure out how to let you use my mouth so we can actually talk to each other and Maker
there is just no way to talk about this sort of thing without making it sound dirty," Anders laughed. "I think hands are easy since that's the focal point of my magic without a staff, but there have to be other ways to summon you without completely trading places."

"Why aren't you for that, by the way? Merrill said it was safe, and I know Darktown isn't the most appealing place, but I bet you'd like sitting in the grass in the forest, or walking along the beach, or swimming..." Anders wasn't expecting an answer, and couldn't make sense of the tangle of emotion he felt from Justice in response, "Do you think you could tell me? I know, it's not like my life is at stake right now, but... look I-it... I couldn't do anything for Karl, but you should be able to experience all that."

A shiver ran up his spine, and static down his arms. Anders closed his eyes and forced his breathing to slow; he relaxed, and felt as if he fell. When his eyes opened again it wasn't at his command, and sapphire light danced across the walls of his clinic. "I am trying, Anders," Justice's voice echoed from him, and Anders settled comfortably behind his eyes while the spirit paced, wringing his hands. "But without a cause to focus on? Your world overwhelms me. These sessions avail me, but there are so many more sensations than I could ever anticipate in the mortal world.

"I do not trust Merrill," Justice continued, "She is not like your Commander. She is ignorant to the dangers of blood magic, and there is a pull about her that speaks of demons. It is not the same as your grimoire, where the demons were disassembled - I know you mourn the loss, but it disquieted me. They were stripped of purpose and enslaved and it is not a fate I would wish on any spirit or demon. The pull about Merrill is something more. It concerns me, and I am not certain she is correct in thinking these transitions do you no harm.

"I laid witness to Eli as you did, but I witnessed him through your eyes. I cannot say if he was a figment of your imagination, but I know the thought troubles you. Your world is not like the Fade. There, such a complex creation would be a thing to be exalted, and not a sign of an ailing mind. It is a strange thing to reconcile, but I am trying. I have no wish to be a burden on your mental health, and you saw Eli immediately after our transition. It does not seem unlikely to assume the two are correlated.

"I hope it is as Hawke claimed and the lyrium lies at fault, but I cannot be certain, and neither can you," Anders bristled, and Justice massaged his palm with his thumb. It was disorienting to watch, considering how many times Anders had done the same when attempting to soothe Justice when he said something that seemed to distress him. "You would forgo this fact for compassion's sake. It is admirable, but misguided.

"I aspire to justice, and so long as you act in pursuit of it through the Collective and our work with the refugees, I am content. You asked me of my desires once, and while there is much I long to experience of the mortal world, I am not Wisdom. You are more important than my curiosity, and I will not risk you to sate it.

"I have no qualms continuing with these sessions, but if you experience more visions as a result then we will cease this, and I will limit myself to defending you when the need arises." Anders fervently wished they were two bodies and not just two minds. It made arguing all but impossible, but Justice must have felt his frustration. "I will not be swayed on this, Anders. You claimed to want me for your spirit, and swore to care for my well-being. I would be remiss not to do the same.

"I know we agreed would be a day of leisure for you. Your preoccupation with alcoholic beverages has not escaped me, but I cannot consent to you imbibing. I have no wish to experience the mind altering effects of these drinks again. It disturbs me immensely, and if you are determined to do me favors, I would ask only that you refrain."
Justice stopped pacing. He stood in the center of his clinic, spirit fire cracking through his palms and running up his arms. It flared at his heart, and raced down the flat of his stomach, chasing sharp hips and glowing faintly through his trousers. It was like looking at another person when Justice looked down at himself, and yet it was so undeniably him Anders couldn't quite disassociate from it. He wondered how Justice felt, and could only guess he didn't care with how often spirits changed their forms in the Fade.

"You are thinking of me again," Justice noted, "... I wish I understood your question. I miss our talks. This is not the same."

Anders fell into himself; the whiplash staggered him, and Anders hit one knee. Blackened dust fell like foundry ash from his skin as the cracks in his veins sealed shut, and Anders shook the last of it from his hair. "What did Varric call it? Magic dandruff? I should buy a broom for these chats," Anders found his tunic and dusted himself off with it before pulling it over his head. "I know it's not the same, but I think we're doing alright.

"Look I-... I won't have anything to drink," Anders sighed, gathering up the rest of his clothes and his satchel. "I miss it, but I don't need it. I'm just going to go and light a few candles, and spend the rest of the day at the Hanged Man. I'll... just have some apple cider or something. You know they're doing the Walk of Spirits through Lowtown tonight. Can you imagine us going?" Anders laughed, locking up as he left his clinic.

"We wouldn't even need a costume," Anders mused, waving to the few groups of refugees he passed. "How do you feel about all that? People dressing as spirits and parading through town?" Anders couldn't discern a response, and guessed that meant indifferent or ambivalence, "Apparently it's pretty popular here. It's a Nevarran thing, I guess. Seems a bit better than everyone sitting around mourning till morning."

"Isabela's going as Desire. She's got the purple body paint and everything, and I think she's going all out with the tassels," Anders spent a few minutes lost in that image until a nudge from Justice brought him back to himself. "Alright, fair, I can see why that wouldn't appeal to you, but she's bloody gorgeous." Anders hopped onto the lift, and hoisted himself into Lowtown, "I bet Beth's got something like Compassion picked out. Hawke... maybe Duty?"

Anders had no idea. He hadn't spoken to anyone but Isabela since they'd gotten back to Kirkwall. The four of them had stumbled through the city gates in the dead of night, and while Hawke had gone home, Varric had put him and Fenris up at the Hanged Man for the night. Anders had needed the bath and the food and, Maker, the bed. He'd gotten a chance to talk to Isabela the next morning. The pirate was just back from exploring her lead on her relic with Merrill, to no avail.

Fortunately, the girls' quest hadn't gotten them lost in the Deep Roads for an entire month. The most that Anders could get out of Isabela was that whatever had happened involved a library in Cumberland, a goat, and a jar of bees. According to Merrill, only the goat was an accident, and Anders wasn't sure he wanted to hear the full story. Unsurprisingly, Merrill wasn't interested in the holiday. Anders had managed a minute before the two of them were arguing about spirits and their classifications before Isabela steered them back into calmer waters.

Bartrand hadn't returned to Kirkwall, despite Varric's hopes. For all intents and purposes, the head of the Tethras House had vanished, along with any surviving members of the expedition. Varric suspected he'd fled to Rivain, but wherever he'd gone, it wasn't back to his family estate. It left Varric the de facto head of his family, and merchant prince of Kirkwall, though considering what it cost him, the dwarf was in no mood to celebrate.

"Varric and Fenris aren't going. We were all planning on getting shit faced, but I guess I'm already
there living in the sewers," Anders joked, to what felt like a wave of contentment from Justice. Anders knew it meant Justice approved of his decision not to drink, but pretended it was his spirit laughing at his joke. "Probably for the best not to go, with Ser Aveline Valkilljoy as the new Guard Captain. I bet half the city will be in the brigs by the end of the night."

Anders had done a decent job of avoiding the guardswoman since he'd gotten back into the city, but the fiery redhead was part of Hawke's menagerie of misfits, and Anders didn't doubt she'd be present for Wicked Grace today. He pushed the thought away, and made his way to East Lowtown. A hex had been cleared for plays in honor of Andraste's death at the hands of the Tevinter Imperium, though Anders had no plans to watch them.

He'd read too much of The Search for the True Prophet to put too much stake in the Chantry's versions of Andraste. Lately, it felt like there was nothing Anders didn't doubt about the Chantry's teachings. The death of Andraste's sister, Haliserre, felt like an all too familiar tale. A fire had taken her, sudden and inexplicable, when the girls had been nearing puberty. What mage hadn't experienced something similar, whether it was a fire in a forest or a fire in a barn?

Why wouldn't the Chantry cover it up? They'd done the same to the Canticles of Shartan and the Canticles of Maferath. The Chantry was all too eager to forget forgiveness. To forget freedom. To forget that men, not mages, were the makers of Tevinter's oppression. To forget everything Andraste fought for and against. Anders stole a place for himself in line for the votive racks, and tapped his boot where his coin lay hidden. He had a few bits for candles, gifted from Varric when they'd returned to the city.

It was a bit a candle, and at this point Anders felt like he needed a silver. "I used to hate this part of All Soul's Day," Anders mumbled to himself, despite the looks it won him. He cared about Justice, not about strangers. "I used to think people celebrated it because they wanted to mourn. I thought it was as simple as choosing to be happy, as if anyone can actually choose how they feel. I didn't even realize I was lying to myself. I didn't care.

"The candles are symbolic," Anders continued. Most of the mourners around him ignored him; on another any other day, a man mumbling to himself would be sure sign of insanity, if not demonic possession, but on All Soul's Day the assumption was likely that he was talking to a dead man. Considering the last body Justice had possessed, it fit. "You like symbols, right? They probably remind you of home."

It was all the Fade was, after all, and a warm coiling in the pit of his stomach told him Justice agreed. "Well, it's a symbol of Andraste. She was burned at the stake in Minrathous. They call it the Second Sin, and say it's why the Maker turned from humanity again. When you light one for someone, you're turning the Maker's gaze on them. It's a prayer sort of like a torch, to help them find their way through the Void.

"I know you probably heard all about the Stone from Sigrun, and what the Dalish believe from Velanna or- fuck, Lyna. I forgot all about her. You liked her, didn't you? Do you want me to leave a candle for her?" Anders asked, and felt another flare of warmth in his chest in answer. "Alright. So that's... Lyna, Sigrun, Mother, Karl... Mark, Elissa's baby... Shit, Barkspawn. Is it ridiculous I'm thinking of lighting a candle for a dog?"

Anders couldn't discern the tangled knot of emotion he felt from Justice in answer. "Probably not. It was my fault." Maker, Amell had told him not to make his own spells. He'd given him a damn staff cleaved from the bones of an ancient dragon and inscribed with runes so powerful they were named in honor of dwarven paragons, and Anders still hadn't listened. Anders never listened, not until it was too late. "Sidona, Mhairi... Maker, what do I do for Velanna and Nate?"
Anders couldn't say if they were dead, but the thought haunted him as a very real possibility. Velanna would hate it. She wouldn't want some human tradition honoring her. Nathaniel would have appreciated it, though. "Ralf and Miles, too. How many bits is that? Eleven? Maybe twelve? Then there's... then there's Amell." Anders didn't need to think about it. Amell wouldn't want a candle. He hadn't believed in the Chant. Anders wasn't sure if he even believed in the Maker.

In the end, Anders lit twelve candles. One for Lyna, and the kind words she'd had for Justice. One for Sidona, and the kind words Anders hadn't had for her. One for Mark, and the senselessness of his death. One for Sigrun, and the sacrifice of hers. One for Elissa's baby, and the life he'd never live. One for his mother, and the life she had. One for Mhairi, and the apology Anders hadn't appreciated. One for Barkspawn, and the apology Anders owed him. One for Ralf, for dying too soon, and one for Miles, for dying too late. One for Karl, and everything that could have been, and one for just in case.

Anders spent the walk to the Hanged Man thinking of what All Soul's Day used to be: to Thedas and to Anders. A day for silence. It might have been fine before, when he had no one to mourn, but now he finally had a reason to break it. He'd heard the sermon. He'd lit his candles. The dead were dead, and Anders was looking forward to spending time with the living, but when he showed up in Varric's room no one else had a mood half as light as his.

Aveline's headband was gone, and her hair was wild, fallen about her face which was buried in her hands. Varric was standing by his casks, tankard in his left hand with circles beneath his eyes. Fenris was sitting with his arms folded over his chest, glaring holes into the table. Merrill was crying into Isabela's bosom while the pirate held her, a faraway look on her face.

"Who died?" Anders joked.

"Really, Blondie?" Varric sighed, "On All Soul's Day?"

"What, don't tell me someone actually died?" Anders asked, hesitating to take his seat. "Where's Hawke and Beth?"

Merrill wailed into Isabela's chest, and Anders felt his heart drop into his stomach. "Where's Hawke and Beth!?"

"Alive," Aveline said into her hands.

"For now," Fenris said.

"Don't talk like that!" Merrill pushed off Isabela to scowl at Fenris, the red veins like cobwebs in the whites of her eyes. "Creators... I can't imagine how terrified she must be. Surrounded by strangers. Watched all the time. She doesn't deserve that. Poor Bethany... she was such a sweet girl... poor Hawke..."

"What are you saying?" Anders demanded.

"Templars got Sunshine," Varric explained, voice hoarse and unreal to Anders' ears.

"No-that's not-" Anders choked on the taste of mana. "How?"

"Word got out," Aveline sighed, leaning back in her chair. "The Knight-Captain apprehended all of them. Bethany. Leandra. Even that tit, Gamlen. I kept the men on alert for Hawke, but the templars got to him first when he got home. 'A hanging offense for harboring apostates.' Maker, I've been pulling every string I can find, and it's barely enough to keep them from the actual gallows. I need your contacts, Varric."
"I already told you, everything my house has, Hawke has," Varric said, glaring into his tankard as if the ale were somehow to blame. "I got in touch with my guy in the Gallows and I'm greasing every wheel I can find. Shit, I haven't slept in two days. I'm doing everything I can, and it's costing me a fortune."

Anders felt sick; pain tingled in his finger tips, and bile welled in his throat, bobbing like a buoy every time he swallowed. Beneath that, a righteous fury boiled with the magic in his veins. His head swam with visions of molten silverite, rent limbs, and a river of blood. Anders pushed it down. Logically, he knew he couldn't storm the Gallows and bend the bars to Beth's cell to set her free, but the thought persisted. Maker, he could almost taste the copper on his tongue.

"Not here," Anders muttered under his breath, dragging his hands through his hair. His veins rippled with blue at his wrists, and Anders fisted his hands in his hair, "Beth isn't here; it won't help."

"Easy, there, Sparky, it's not the end of the world," Isabela said, "Have Justice think happy thoughts. Whipped cream, handcuffs... maybe not handcuffs."

"Happy?" Anders laughed, smacking a palm full of spirit fire down on the table, "What about Justice is happy? Justice is righteous. Justice is hard. Justice is not this!"

"Settle yourself, mage," Fenris sneered. "None of this helps Hawke."

"Hawke!?" Anders laughed, "What about Beth? Who's going to help her? Maybe you can petition the templars for mercy for him, but not for her! Beth is in the Gallows right now-"

"Where she and other mages belong," Fenris interrupted him.

Anders stood up in a burst of veilfire, the back of his legs hitting hard stone and sending the heavy chair crashing to the ground. "You know nothing! They will throw her to demons! A girl ruled by Fear made to stand against Pride while plagued by Despair! Have you any idea the demons that whisper 'cross the Veil to mages torn fresh from their homes? The spirits of Valor and Honor and Purpose that do battle on behalf of such somnambulant souls?

"They call it a Harrowing, for there is no other word! It a cowardly test the templars have devised, and force upon all mages, and it is neither good nor right! It is evil and unjust, and even a splinter of fear, a seed of doubt, will unmake the girl! The demon will devour her mind and the templars will destroy what is left of her! And should she survive, it will spare her nothing!

"The slightest insurrection, and the templars will take her mind! You condemn your master for the lyrium he wrought beneath your skin, but say nothing of the brands they press upon a mage's brow! You think the loss of your memories marks you? That you are unique in your suffering!? That mages do not fear the same loss of self everyday they spend as prisoners in the wretched Gallows!?!"

"Do not compare me to mages!" Fenris snarled, gripping the table so fiercely it splintered beneath his gauntlets. "I am not cursed with magic! I do not suffer the whisperings of demons! I did not willingly make myself into an abomination and lay ruin to my mind!"

"You would dare-!" The Fade echoed in Anders' voice; his pulse so thick with mana he could almost step into the Fade.

Isabela heaved his chair upright, and forced him down into it with a hard shove on his shoulders, "You're not putting out any fires with this pissing contest! Does anyone here have any real ideas? Hawke might die. Did you all forget that? I'm not happy about Beth either, but she's the only one we know for sure isn't going to hang for this."
"Hawke won't hang," Aveline said firmly.

"But it's the law, isn't it?" Merrill sniffled, "I should have been here. Poor Beth. She could have come to me. I would have hid her."

"You weren't the one Hawke trusted to look after his family, Kitten," Isabela said with a sneer tossed and caught in Aveline's direction.

"Don't you dare accuse me of having any part in this," Aveline snapped. "You have no idea what I've done for the Hawkes or what Hawke has done for me."

"Look, Aveline, no one's accusing you of anything, but maybe when Sunshine asked about the Circle-" Varric started.

"I never named her!" Aveline interrupted.

"What are you talking about?" Anders demanded.

"She was scared," Aveline said, "She wanted information. I asked around. Conditions at the Circle, visitation rights for families, rules of correspondence."

"You did what!?!" Anders half stood before Isabela wrenched him back down.

"I did what she asked!" Aveline said, "The mages there-"

"Are prisoners!" Anders snapped.

"Only the troublemakers!" Aveline shot back.

"And who is to say-" Anders started.

"Blondie, this isn't helping," Varric interrupted.

"Who cares if it's helping!?" Anders yelled, "She led the templars straight to them!"

"That's not fair," Merrill said, her voice still watery, "We don't know that, and if she did it wasn't on purpose."

"It doesn't matter!" Anders argued, "You don't ask around at the Circle! You don't tell the templars there's an apostate living in the city! You sure as shit don't spend time with that same apostate's family so everyone knows who you're asking for! Of all the ignorant, idiotic, thoughtless-

"She wanted to go!" Aveline shouted.

"Good for her," Fenris snorted. "Now she is kept safe from others as well as herself, and others are kept safe from her."

"You're lying," Anders said.

"You're not worth the air," Aveline said flatly. "She asked me for information on the Circle. She's tired of running. Of hiding. Of being afraid. I asked around. The Circle isn't what you say it is. With good behavior, visitation rights start-

"Good behavior?" Anders laughed. "Are you fucking serious!?"

"Bethany would never want to be in the Circle," Merrill said fervently, "Never."
"Look, what Sunshine wanted isn't important right now," Varric said. "If she wanted to go willingly someday, that would have been her choice, and we wouldn't be here right now. The fact is the templars found out first, and now everyone is fucked. Killer, Leandra, Uncle Greasy. The Gallows are one thing, but the gallows are another. We need them out. I'm doing what I can, but if it comes to the Coterie, and breaking them out, then we all need to be on board with getting them out of Kirkwall, and that's why we're here. Now are we all agreed or not?"

"Agreed," Fenris said, "I owe Hawke."

"Me too," Isabela said.

"He's my friend," Merrill said.

"Maker..." Aveline sighed, digging her knuckles into her forehead, "Yes. Yes, agreed. I can work with rotations, give us a window to get them out of the city."

"I have some friends," Anders said. "I'll see what I can find out."

The Collective couldn't find out nearly enough. They hadn't been any help with Quentin, and they weren't any help with Bethany. The apprentices were kept locked away, out of even Bancroft's reach, and Anders had yet to master the form of a rat to break his way into the Gallows. Maker, they hadn't even found the password for the Victim's Door. There was no getting Bethany's phylactery from them until she passed her Harrowing.

If she passed her Harrowing.
Hello everyone! Welcome back. Terribly sorry for the brief break. Hopefully we'll get back on track now. Also sorry for not responding to comments. I promise I read them, and that none of them are creepy. I really do live for them. Thank you for all your wonderful subscriptions, bookmarks, comments, and kudos, but most of all, thank you for reading!

9:32 Dragon 8 Martinalis Early Evening
Kirkwall Darktown

Rock wraiths. Ancient dwarven legends. Dwarves so corrupt the Stone rejected them, as Sigrun had so often feared for her fate. Those were what they'd faced in the Valdasine Thaig, and what the volcanic eruption had saved them from when Justice had still been controlling his body. Anders had been lost within himself, but he'd heard the tale from Varric. A creature so massive it dwarfed even ogres, radiating magic and energy.

A slab from the ceiling had slain it. The volcano that was to thank for their rescue lay in the eastern Vimmark Mountains, near Ostwick, and the explosion had rained ash on the city. Their Circle had responded by bringing their mages out in force to conjure a barrier over the entire city. It was the largest consolidated magical endeavor the Free Marches had seen in over a decade, and wouldn't you know it, it had saved thousands of lives.

No one cared. Not Fenris, not Meredith, not anyone. Mages were still magic, and magic was still a sign of the Maker's hatred, and anyone who bore it still suffered. Anders didn't think it was possible for him to hate Aveline anymore than he already did, but learning more about conditions at the Gallows made him livid. Bancroft's contact Jake told him everything he never wanted to know. Correspondence and visitation were allowed a year after a Harrowing. One letter a week, one visit a month, the former read and the latter supervised by templars.

There was nothing good in it. Nothing right. Nothing but oppression and injustice and the ever-lingering threat of Tranquility. Anders had experienced the templars' trust and leniency firsthand, and it wasn't something he would wish on his worst enemies. He thought of the sweet girl who mistook weeds for elfroot and blushed bright red all the way to her ears, and thought of her in the Circle, and felt torn between disgust, outrage, and heartache. Beth deserved better.

Anders hated that there was nothing he could do for her. The Victim's Door stood strong, all two-hundred and seventy-seven planks, guarding the phylactery of each and every apprentice who lived locked away in the darkest depths of the Gallows. Bancroft still hadn't made inroads with the raiders. Samson was still a ghost. The Coterie had extended their arrangement to another month before they were willing to open the tunnels. Everything had hit a wall at once.

Anders hated it. Justice hated it. It made them feel powerless. Purposeless. It was a dangerous way to feel, and they poured themselves into their work with the refugees to keep themselves focused. For the nonce, Anders climbed over one of many collapsed beams in the dilapidated mines beneath Kirkwall, the Beschals on his heels. They beat a cautious path through Darktown; the chokedamp was at its worst in summer, but complacency was the most dangerous thing a man could fall prey to.
in Kirkwall.

After near a year in the wretched city, Anders had learned like the rest of the refugees to follow the rats. There were in abundance, as always, and marked the safest passages, but Thom and Abigail were Lowtowners. They weren't used to the way the winds howled through the caverns in early autumn, the fetid stench of the sewers, the rush of roaches or other skittering vermin. Abigail bumped into his back, her eyes on the graffiti that covered the walls, illuminated by the flickering light of a campfire that carried the distinct scent of burning dung. "Poor darlings..." She mumbled.

"They get by," Anders said.

"Don't we all," Thom agreed, dodging a roach that bolted under foot. Anders stepped on it. "You should come by for dinner more often."

"Thanks, Thom," Anders said; it was easier than arguing.

"You said Evelina takes care of six children?" Abigail asked, "All by herself? Down here?"

"Pryce and Walter help," Anders said; there was no sense elaborating Pryce worked for smugglers and Walter begged on street corners.

"Begging?" Thom guessed, "They'll want to stick to East Lowtown, over in the foundry distinct. The guards don't patrol there, and no gangs ever keep it long, but it gets a lot of traffic in the morning."

"You can pass it on," Anders reached the ramshackle mess of rotten pine and blackrock that passed for a home and knocked on the rusted bronze plank that passed for a door. Sparks danced with roaches on the ground as it eased open, and a face full of pockmarks and spotty stubble poked out. "Hey Walter. You feel like letting me in?"

"Feel like going out," Walter muttered, his voice breaking between boy and man, "Begging's best in the evening. I don't see why we have to stay here for some-"

"Walter!" Evelina called from inside.

"Yeah, come in," Walter wrenched the door the rest of the way open; the shriek of metal on stone made both the Beschals wince.

There was still nothing by way of furniture, but the bedding that made up the far wall was fresh and the kids were fed. Six dirt-speckled faces peered up at the three of them from around Evelina's skirts, and while no one was in their Chantry-best, their hair was brushed, their eyes were wide, and their mouths were closed. "Anders," Evelina smiled, her eyes not lingering on him long before they fell to the Beschals, "This must be...?"

"Thom and Abby," Anders waved at the Marchers, who stepped forward to shake hands. Introductions were brief, and Anders found a spot for himself to sit alone and conjure cats and birds and all manner of creatures for the children to chase while the Beschals got to know them. Anders wasn't sure he could call it justice, but he supposed he could have rationalized it if he tried.

It was their responsibility as Wardens to see the evil the Blight had wrought undone, and the Blight had driven hundreds of refugees to Kirkwall's shores. It was for them to provide for them, but it still felt more like compassion than justice. Justice wasn't a child's laughter, or a would-be parent's smile. Justice was fire and fury and freedom. Anders tapped his fingers on his knee, trying and failing not to think of Beth, or the restless spirit inside him.
A tug on his sleeve distracted him. Anders glanced over at Nika, the youngest girl in Evelina's care. She was two big eyes and two big knees, and at present, one very large frown. "Big frown," Anders noted.

"Tell me a story," Nika ordered, settling down beside him.

"You don't want to play with everyone else?" Anders asked. Nika shook her head, and Anders spent a thoughtful moment chewing on his bottom lip, "A story..." Maker's breath, did he even know any children's stories? There was Andraste and the Wyvern, but Anders hated that story. He could still remember the Chantry Sister in Tallo telling him that story to keep him trusting in the Maker, and keep him from putting up a fight when his father drowned him. There was the Witchwood, but the templars had always used it to remind young mages they were too foolish to think for themselves. "How about the Doggle-Boon Behemoth?"

"What's a doggle-boon?" Nika asked.

"It's nothing," Anders grinned.

"It's a story about nothing?" Nika's frown deepened, "That's boring."

"It's a story about a monster made of nothing," Anders said.

"Like the darkspawn?" Nika guessed.

"Exactly like the darkspawn," Anders said; he'd heard it all of once, until he'd met Oghren. The dwarf had been determined to learn the poem for his son, and Anders had heard it muttered under his breath one too many times while they were drinking not to know it.

"Are there Wardens in the story?" Nika asked.

"There are Wardens in the story." Anders promised.

"I like Wardens," Nika grinned.

"I sure hope so," Anders mussed the girl's hair, and wracked his memory for the melody, "Alright let's see...

"Beware ye well, my son and belle,
Beware ye well the Calling.
For you will face, with time and grace,
Our failing and our falling.
My failing and my falling.

"We sought the beast at farthest east
And paid a bloody tithing.
So will I will that you would kill,
And end its fabled writhing.
And end my fabled writhing.

"A doggled-boon our hopes had strewn,
A bargain drained and straining.
So gird in steel and train your zeal,
And pray its will is waning.
And pray my will is waning."
"A bander snatched and hander matched,
No jabber whilst you're walking,
Do not be swayed to drop your blade,
When danger comes a-stalking.
When Mother comes a-stalking.

"Your eyes are green as its had been,
The doggle-boon behemoth.
Your heart is true and arrows too,
But can you two unsee wroth?
For I could not unsee wroth.

"For though you win, hold fast your twin,
There's danger celebrating.
Renew this day, and call callay,
But now begins the waiting.
As then began my waiting.

"Beware ye well, my son and belle,
The red, your will it leeches.
And wail you will for kin to kill,
Until your heart it reaches,
Unless my lesson teaches."

"So they killed it?" Nika asked eagerly, pulling her knees up to her chest, "They killed the doggle-boon? Or the darkspawn? Or...?"

"They killed it," Anders assured her.

"But they didn't win?" Nika frowned.

"Well... it's a darkspawn, sweets. They come with the Blight, and the Blights always come back," Anders shrugged.

"Always?" Nika pouted.

"At least until all the Archdemons are dead," Anders allotted, "But hey, there's only two left, and then the whole world is safe forever."

"Because of Wardens," Nika said.

"Because of Wardens," Anders said.

Nika scrambled across the floor at his agreement, and flung her arms as far as they could go about his chest. "What's this for?" Anders asked, patting her back with the hand that wasn't trapped between them.

"Saving the world," Nika said, and ran off to play.

Anders felt Justice's enthusiastic agreement in the memory of Amaranthine through two separate pairs of eyes. Even in retrospect, Anders couldn't decipher who they'd been before they'd joined. The memories were tangled, and he couldn't say which perspective was mage and which was spirit. It made him dizzy just to try, and so he didn't. The important thing was that they'd done it, and even if the Wardens hadn't thanked them for it... well, Nika was good enough.
The little girl, as it turned out, was also good enough for the Beschals. Anders wasn't surprised she stole their hearts, even with their original intent to adopt one of the boys. Walter was bitter and Cricket was wild; Pryce might have been perfect, but the boy had his sisters. He worked every odd and dangerous job Athenril gave him, all without complaint and all for a few bits, to provide for the girls. He'd never think to leave them, and couldn't stand to lose them.

Anders tried and failed not to think of Hawke, but the similarities were too strong. The man had done everything right, and it hadn't meant a damn. It was Tuesday again, and that meant Wicked Grace at the Hanged Man, but Anders wasn't sure it would be worth the trek without Beth. It wasn't much of one, after leading the Beschals and Nika out of Darktown and back to their home in Lowtown. The Hanged Man was less than a five minute walk away, but Anders hesitated all the same. What was even there for him now?

Varric. The man had become a fast friend, listening to his stories from his time as a Warden and giving him a weekly reprieve from the horrors of Kirkwall. The lunches Anders shared with him and Franke were one of the few things keeping him relatively sane in the wretched city. Merrill had promised to gather ginger root for the dwarf for tea to quell the phantom pains in his hands, but she didn't know how to prepare it with elfroot to make sure his blood didn't clot and infection didn't set in.

Anders turned the short trip to the Hanged Man long dragging his feet. There was always Bela, but Anders wasn't sure the gorgeous pirate was worth stomaching Fenris and Aveline. Add in the fact that he was still on uneven footing with Merrill, and tonight was bound to be miserable. Anders stopped outside the door to the Hanged Man and listened to the rambunctious revelry within with sinking spirits. He'd much rather spend the evening with his spirit, helping Justice learn a new sensation, but before he could make up his mind Merrill showed up and make it for him.

The tiny elf met him outside the tavern, two bright green eyes peering out from beneath a bundle of furs and scarves to fight back the autumn chill. "Anders! Oh dear, aren't your ears cold? You don't have a scarf. Everyone needs a scarf, especially in winter. I could make you one if you like. I made one for Beth. It was a lovely bit of red, but it was so hard to find the madder for it. You know you can only harvest it once a year and-I'm babbling. I'm sorry. How are you?"

"I'm good, Merrill, thanks," Anders lied, doing his best to ignore the discomfort roiling inside him. Justice had every right to be distressed, but Anders didn't know how to reassure him without talking. "Did you find the ginger for Varric?"

"Oh yes, I have it right here," Merrill said eagerly; she reached for her satchel and stopped, "I should probably wait until we get inside. It's all a mess in there. I can never keep it clean. Too many little things; it gets disorganized so easily."

"My satchel gets like that, too," Anders said.

"Oh, I doubt it gets as bad as mine," Merrill grinned, "I've seen your clinic. You keep everything so neat and organized. I don't know how you do it."

"Well if I didn't I'd never find what I need for my patients. Besides, satchels aren't shelves, they're more--... Maker," Anders sighed, cutting himself off at the sight Fenris cresting the steps that led to the Hanged Man. There was no mistaking the shock white hair and matching tattoos, glowing faintly through the heavy fur coat the elf had draped himself in.

"Hello Fenris!" Merrill waved at the elf's approach. "We were just talking about winter coming up, and how everyone should have a scarf. Your coat is lovely though, was it a gift from-"
The door to the Hanged Man swung open, and a patron came stumbling out on two left feet. The poor bastard made it two feet down the street before he doubled over and wretched.

"Charming," Fenris said flatly.

"And this is one of the nicer taverns around here," Anders quipped.

"They let you in," Fenris said, "It can't be that much nicer. Sour ale. Vomit. The smell of desperation..."

"Do you like anything?" Merrill asked, lips pursed.

"I like quiet," Fenris shouldered past them into the tavern.

"Remind me why we come here again?" Anders asked, unable to help the surge of affection at the sight of Merrill trading barbs with her fellow elf.

"Because of Hawke," Merrill said softly, eyes on her feet.

"... Maybe don't remind me," Anders sighed. "Ready?"

"For what?" Merrill blinked.

"Nothing, Merrill," Anders followed Fenris inside, Merrill on his heels for what was bound to be a long night. It wasn't as if Fenris was wrong. The Hanged Man was no Crown and Lion. There was no pine burning in the hearth, or rushes lining the floor. Catalpa wood filled the air with a bitter fragrance and an excess of smoke, and Anders' boots stuck to the planks with every step. The thought of Merrill and Fenris' bare feet on those same planks sent a shiver of sympathy up his spine.

Isabela was already in her chair, her boots kicked up onto the table, the spill of her dress leaving her thighs on display. Anders let his eyes wander over them with a vivid memory of his fingers denting deep brown skin, sweat trickling between them, the air heavy with the sound of skin on skin and laughter broken by moans. Isabela flashed him a grin for his stare, and patted the seat on her left.

"Well, you look gorgeous today," Anders couldn't help mentioning.

"Rude," Isabela huffed, dipping the tips of her fingers into her ale and flicking the droplets at him, "I always look gorgeous."

"Oh, absolutely," Merrill agreed.

"Careful, Kitten, I'll break your heart," Isabela grinned, snatching Merrill's arm as she walked by and dragging her into the seat on her right, "This one is wicked. Did I tell you the jar of bees was her idea?"

"Oh, it was nothing really," Merrill buried a hand in her hair, cheeks tinted pink, "It was just a thought. I didn't think you'd actually try it."

"You didn't tell me anything," Anders said, "Like why your relic would be in a library?"

"It wasn't just a library," Isabela huffed, "It was the library. You know, the Great Cumberland Library? It's right up there with the Archive of the Crows. They keep a lot of shit in those repositories. Do you want to hear the story or not?"

"I'm more interested in the relic you lost," Anders admitted. Anything worth the lives of two-hundred
slaves that interested a crime lord in the Felicisima Armada had to be more than a pretty bauble.

"Good luck, Blondie," Varric snorted, passing out drinks to him and Fenris, "I've been barking up that tree for months."

"How is it you don't know what it is?" Anders asked.

"It was in a box," Isabela said.

"And you didn't open it?" Anders asked, "You managed to resist the urge?"

"It was locked," Isabela huffed. "It was a locked box!"

"Hasn't stopped you before," Anders pointed out.

"What do you want me to say?" Isabela scowled at him.

"Nothing," Anders shrugged, "I just found it curious, that's all."

"Well you keep your curiosity over there, thank you very much," Isabela flicked another round of ale at him, "You had your go."

"I'm not arguing against another," Anders grinned.

"Well you'll have to make a better argument than that," Isabela snorted, "I-"

The door opening cut her off, and Aveline entered, her freckles and the shadows under her eyes the only color on her face. She was still in full Guard Captain armor, the emblem of Kirkwall emblazoned in gold on her breastplate, her helmet tucked under one arm she tossed to the table, where it rattled among cheese plates and other appetizers. "They're out," Aveline declared, falling heavily into her seat with the clink of metal on stone.

"Hawke?" Varric guessed.

"All three," Aveline said. "Maker, the favors I had to call in. If half the city didn't owe Hawke their lives, I think he'd have lost his. It took reminding the Knight-Captain he owed Hawke for saving his men, calling in favors from the Viscount's son, the Starkhaven prince, and even that tit Meeran for the Knight-Commander to realize Hawke was more trouble than he's worth. You'd think it wouldn't take a week to realize it, but... they're back. They're safe."

There was a collective hesitation, and a collective clatter as the four of them hit their feet. "Good luck," Aveline warned them. "I can't get two words out of him."

"It's Hawke," Varric said, swearing over his coat when buckling it proved a struggle. "Most days, you're lucky to get one word out of him." Merrill dodged around the table to buckle the dwarf's coat for him. "Thanks, Daisy," Varric sighed. "You staying here then, Aveline?"

"I need a drink after all that," Aveline said, picking up her helmet as they left Varric's room. "But I'm telling you, he's not talking to anyone."

"Well we should still go see him," Merrill said, "He's our friend. Is he okay? I mean, they didn't hurt him, did they?"

"... On second thought, maybe you should go see for yourselves," Aveline decided.

"Because that's not ominous or anything," Isabela huffed.
"He's alive," Aveline snapped, "That's good enough."

"Andraste's dimpled ass it is," Anders said, "How bad is it? Do I need my staff?"

"How would I know?" Aveline demanded, "He's a little roughed up. They all are."

"Better than dead," Fenris said.

"Because that's not an argument I've ever heard before," Anders snorted.

"Ladies, ladies, can we not?" Varric interrupted, pushing the two of them apart to head down the stairs. "Hawke first. Fight later."

"Good plan," Isabela said. "Minus the fighting. Unless Justice gets involved, of course. I need more Love and Lyrium material."

"A whole month trapped underground didn't give you enough?" Varric wondered. "Did I mention Blondie doesn't remember any of it? You could have a lot of fun with that."

"Stop," Fenris said.

"Yes, refrain," Anders said.

"Eighth of August, 9:32 Dragon, Blondie and Broody agreed on something," Varric said, waving goodbye to Aveline as the guardswoman made for the bar, and the rest of them made for the door and out into Lowtown. "I say we grab Hawke and drag him for drinks until he can't piss straight. I know what Aveline said, but she isn't exactly what I'd call persuasive."

"You can say that again," Isabela snorted.

"She isn't exactly what I'd call persuasive," Varric repeated obediently.

Hawke's hovel wasn't far from the Hanged Man. It was a hex over, and no less charming than the first time Anders had visited. Broken glass was strewn across the stoop, the stone stained with piss and beer. "PAY UP" was still graffitied across the door, though it was joined by scrawlings of "FILTHY SPELLBIND" and "DAMNED ROBES." Merrill hesitated on the steps, and twisted her scarf between her hands at the sight.

"Is it like this everywhere with humans?" Merrill asked.

"Everywhere the Chantry is, this is," Anders said.

"I don't think I like the Chantry very much," Merrill decided.

"You shouldn't, Kitten," Isabela said, "You're too sweet for it."

"The Maker abandoned us long ago," Fenris said. "You should stick to your own gods,"

"I think that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," Merrill mused.

"It's as like to stay that way," Fenris said.

"Fenris, are we friends?" Merrill asked.

"No," Fenris said.

"I know!" Varric snapped, and dragged his mangled hand through his hair, the empty fingers of his glove catching and bending on the golden strands. "Shit... Fuck, I'm sorry, Blondie."

"Hey, don't ever worry about it," Anders assured him. "It'll take a while to get used to it."

"Yeah," Varric sighed.

Isabela took his place and banged a fist against the door. It stayed stubbornly shut, and an awkward silence broken by awkward coughs filled the air.

"Maybe he's not home?" Merrill guessed, when the door swung open.

Hawke stood with a dagger drawn and clutched to his chest, and didn't lower it at the sight of them. He was more than just a little roughed up. The man's nose was broken, as though an ogre had pinched the bridge of it. Burst capillaries painted the left side of his face every shade of crimson and purple imaginable, and his bottom lip was split open. He sucked hard on the cut, and the sight of missing teeth made Anders' gums hurt.

"Maker's breath, Hawke," Varric said. "You-"

"No," Hawke interrupted, gesturing between Merrill and Anders with his free hand, "Not you two. I can't. I'm sorry. I can't put Mother through that again. I'll keeping paying your rent—but I can't—I'm sorry."

The door closed.

Merrill met it with sniffles. Fenris with a derisive snort. Isabela with a frustrated one. Varric with disbelief, and further knocks that went unanswered. Justice was furious. Anders felt the spirit roiling inside him, dashing up against his skull and skin and wearing down the shell they shared with a roar so full of feeling Anders could almost make out the words. Spirit fire shot through his veins like lightning, and "Atrocities!" followed it like a clap of thunder.

Anders dug the heels of his palms into his eyes and begged, "Not here." Someone took his hand, and led him down the steps and through the city. Distantly, Anders hoped it was someone he trusted, but he couldn't see. He couldn't hear. He could barely think. How were they ever to ask or expect Lirene and Cor's aid sheltering apostates when this was the fate of any who dared? When only princes, viscount's sons, and mercenary lords had the power to stand against the corrupt theocracy that ruled Thedas?

It was impossible. Better they surrender now to the anger that boiled in them both, and let it scald the flesh of every templar between them and Bethany. Better they let that same fire melt the bars to her cell, and see at least one innocent soul freed if there was no other way for them to fulfill their purpose. Better they do something, than suffer the strands of time winding tighter and tighter about their neck like a noose, until the Knight-Commander kicked their soapbox out from underneath them and they hung with the rest of the Gallows.

A hard smack brought Anders back to himself, and he found himself blinking into an old mirror, eyes like amber and a selfish soul that still remembered how to smile. "Careful, I'm into that," Anders quipped, rubbing away the sting Isabela had left in his cheek.

"This is bad, how, exactly?" Isabela joked, her expression twisting into something like a frown, "Are you alright, sweet thing?"
"Peachy," Anders lied, looking around to try to determine where Isabela had taken him. It looked to be an alley, though which or where he couldn't say. "Where are we?"

"Not going full-Justice on Hawke's doorstep," Isabela said, "I thought you had a handle on all this."

"I do," Anders scowled, "But you saw him! The templars beat him bloody just for being Beth's brother. Maker, I just... I don't know how I'm going to get any support for the mages' plight when helping us is a hanging offense."


"Justice doesn't let me drink anymore," Anders sighed.

"What, he'll let you get tit-faced but not shit-faced?" Isabela grinned. "Come on, you're way too worked up about this. One drink, you'll feel better."

"I can't," Anders ran his hands through his hair, and did a quick check to be certain no one had nicked anything from his satchel while he'd been busy losing time. "I promised him I wouldn't."

"Yawn," Isabela rolled her eyes, "He sounds like a slave driver."

"Don't call him that," Anders snapped. The words fell out before the taste of mana ever touched his throat, and Anders rolled the tension out of his shoulders while Isabela blinked at him. "Look, it's not like that. He's a spirit of Justice, okay? He's not a slave driver. He used to lecture me for owning a cat, for Maker's sake."

"It was a joke, Sparky," Isabela groaned, "You do still know what those are, right?"

"Sorry," Anders sighed, "Look, I'll be fine, I'm just not feeling up for Wicked Grace anymore."

Isabela flapped a hand at him, "Fine. Be boring. You know where to find us when you pull that stick out of your ass. Or you know," Isabela waggled her eyebrows at him, "Spirit."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Anders decided. He made the walk back to Darktown, his mood slipping out from under him. Maker, beaten and bloodied just for having a sister for a mage. There was no way Anders could ask Lirene or Cor to help him now. They already suffered raids from the guards and the templars, when there was no reason to suspect either of them for harboring apostates.

Anders spent the evenings walking the warrens Hawke had shown him, his thoughts turning back to the man at every twist in the caverns beneath the city. The poor blighter had been a mess. The guilt Anders felt at leaving him that way threatened to drown him, especially when it coupled with the thought of Leandra and Gamlen in a similar state. He'd been too angry to think of healing. The memory frightened him, and he couldn't blame Justice for it. It wasn't like him. He was a healer, not a fighter.

The thought wouldn't stick. He fought. He fought every day. Against templars, and darkspawn, and darkness, and disease. He wasn't the same man who sat numb in the Chantry after he'd called down his first firestorm on a band of bandits. Or maybe he was. Maybe that was the worst part of it. Maybe he'd always had the capacity for fury and the incapacity for guilt. Maker knew the templars had always angered him, he just hadn't had the means to do anything about it.

He had the means now. Anders made the trek back to Hawke's home late that night, when the streets were lit with stars, and knocked on the door. Hawke answered it the same way he had before: after
several minutes delay and with a knife in his hand.

"I told you not to come by here," Hawke said.

"This isn't my first Harrowing, remember?" Ander said, grateful Justice's outrage had subsided, and they could focus on what was important in the here and now. "You have to need healing after all of that."

"No," Hawke said.

"What do you mean, no?" Anders demanded, "Have you looked at your face?"

"Everyone's looked at my face," Hawke frowned, "What do you think is going to happen if these bruises are gone tomorrow? If Gamlen stops limping? If Mother stops crying? Everyone will know I know a healer, and that puts you in danger. That puts all of us in danger. I'm sorry, Anders... but you and I... I'm sorry."

The door shut.
Hello everyone, welcome back! I realize updates have slowed down a bit, but hopefully once I adjust to a few personal changes they'll pick back up. We've hit a few milestones, 17k Hits and 700 Kudos, and as always I wanted to say thank you for all your wonderful comments, subscriptions, bookmarks, and kudos, but most of all thank you for reading!

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9:32 Dragon 22 Martinalis Sometime
Somewhere

Maker, it was dark. Shadows skittered in the corners of his eyes, scrambling into nothingness whenever he turned to catch them in the act. Anders walked backwards, one foot after the other, watching the walls and the way the sickly green light from the Veilfire in his hand slithered across it until he bumped into one of his companions. He turned, the heel of his boot scraping through grime, and stared into the face of a darkspawn, skin peeled back from flesh to reveal a face full of gaping holes and twitching muscle.

Then he blinked, and it was Hawke again. "Anders?" The archer asked, blood and gristle in the cracks between his teeth one second and gone the next. "Anders?" Hawke asked again. The hand he set on Anders' shoulder was grounding, and for a moment the shadows stilled. "You still with us?"

"Yeah..." Anders ran a hand through his hair, the strands cold and damp after Maker knew how many hours down in the dark with the dead. "I'm here."

Somehow, he kept walking. The floor beneath his feet shifted between rock, and flesh, and blood, and shadow, and hands, crawling with claws up his legs and dragging him down by the sleeves of his pants until he hit his knees and forced everyone to halt. He could have resisted them, if not for the rock. It was the same. The same swath of white and black granite they'd passed when they'd set out, hours upon hours upon hours ago.

"It's the same," Anders twisted the words into an unholy litany while his tongue turned to rot in his mouth, "It's the same rock. It's the same, it's the same, it's the same."

Hawke caught him, all too-familiar hands on his shoulders, pushing him up from where he curled into his knees and forcing him upright to stare into the bleeding eyes of a ghost. Then his face cracked, and his nose broke, and suddenly he was less Amell, and more Hawke, "No it's not. Anders, it's not the same rock. It's alright."

"It's the same," Varric snarled, and kicked the rock so hard his toes fell off and scattered like mice into the dark recess of the Deep Roads, "Damnit! How many senses are you missing, Broody? Humor? Direction? What's next, are you blind and deaf too?"

"Don't test me, dwarf," Fenris shot back, but the lyrium was all wrong, red and glowing, cracking out through dusky skin and bleeding black. "You asked me the way north, this is north!"

"This is bullshit is what it is!" Varric screamed, his jaw falling slack and hanging low down his neck.
There was something familiar in the eyes he sprouted and the way his limbs stretched and rattled, but Anders couldn't focus on anything but the rock.

"It's the same," Anders sobbed, "It's the same, it's the same, it's the same!"

Hawke pushed his bangs back from his face, and forced his eyes up to meet his, red and reassuring in the infinite black, "Anders! Focus. It's not the same.-"

"The fuck it isn't!" Varric shouted.

"You're not helping!" Hawke yelled back over his shoulder. Dog started barking, but the echo that came back was a shriek's wail. No one seemed to notice or care.

"Because anyone but Blue's been any damn help down here!" Varric raved, dropping his laden satchels and ripping off his coat and the rest of his clothes, "Fuck Blondie! Fuck Broody! Fuck Bartrand! Fuck you! Fuck this fucking damp! It's in my fucking lungs and I can't fucking breathe and the walls are closing in on us and it's all your fucking fault! You said you could get us out of here, elf, and you led us past the same damn rock-!"

"Enough of the rock!" The lyrium came alive, bright and bold and beautiful, like rubies encrusted in Fenris' skin. "You care so much about the rock!?" The elf slammed a fist through the rock, and it shattered in an explosion of granite and dust. "There! Now it is not the same!"

"All of you, shut up!" Hawke shouted, "Fenris, sit the fuck down! Varric, put your damn clothes back on! Anders-"

"It's the same, it's the same, it's the same," Anders wept the words until he lost sense of them, and everyone around him. A hard pinch to the crook of his neck brought him back to Hawke.

"Look at me," Hawke ordered, and Anders obeyed, but Hawke's skin was blighted, blistering and rotten with festering sores and sunken sockets, and he was no more real than Eli. "You can do this. You're a Warden."

"He was a Warden-!" Varric started.

"Varric!" Hawke bellowed, and the very air seemed to shake with it. The archer snatched up a discarded glove and flung it at the dwarf's bare chest, "Put your damn clothes back on!"

"Fuck my clothes," Varric hit the ground, and pinched the heavy leather glove between the two remaining fingers on his right hand, "Fuck them. Fuck them. Fuck-" Varric dissolved into sobs. Fenris paced the length of the cavern, shattering every stalagmite he passed, and the barking mabari persisted.

"Anders. Focus. Please," Hawke begged, grabbing Anders' face in his hands, "I need your help."

Anders swallowed down the bile in his throat, and forced himself to meet the man's eyes. They rolled out from Hawke's sockets, and Anders screamed. Hawke's body fell apart, strips of skin peeling away and funneling endlessly into his gaping mouth as the darkness swallowed them both.

Anders jerked awake still screaming, every muscle tight. His cot was damp with sweat, the canvas soaked through and his quilt in a knot around his feet. His tunic was ruined. Anders had learned long ago to stop wearing it to bed, but he couldn't bring himself to undress before he fell asleep. Lately, he couldn't bring himself to do anything. He didn't have the energy. If not for his nightmares, Anders doubted he would even have the energy to get out of bed, but they jolted him awake, so awake he stayed.
If it could be called being awake. Anders ran a hand through his hair, unwashed for five nights now. The closest Anders came was running sweaty palms through the oily strands before tying it back. He stayed on the edge of his bed, unmoving and unmov ed, until the thud of a fist on his clinic door and the urgings of his spirit pushed him to his feet. He couldn't explain it, or even find the will to want to. It wasn't a cloud over his head, or a stone in his stomach; it was nothing.

A nothing so profound it felt like the Void had taken him. The darkspawn hivemind consumed his nights, twisted with his memories of the Deep Roads and every other waking horror that left him exhausted for his days. The Coterie was running him ragged; Harlan had extended their agreement to yet another month of healing before they opened up the tunnels. The fire Anders might have felt at the runaround a month ago had long since ceased to burn, and turned to cinders.

They were warm enough to keep him working with his patients, but rest was more energy than Anders had to spare. He missed lunches with Franke and Varric. He missed dinners with Thom and Abigail. He missed time with Evelina and the kids, with Lirene and Lissa, with Cor and the Dogs. He hated the halt of it all. The nothing. The look of pity on Selby's face when he told her about the Coterie's extension, and the look of utter indifference on Bela's when he missed yet another week of Wicked Grace.

Anders gathered up the ashes from his makeshift hearth, and sprinkled them haphazardly in the corners of his clinics like Evelina had suggested to keep out the vermin. There was no sense worrying about the rats. Anders hadn't made any process with the transformation, and he was beginning to doubt he ever would. There was always Bancroft, Jake, and Bardel once they were inside the Gallows, but Anders wanted to do more than escort a few frightened mages through the warrens.

He wanted to be in the thick of it. He wanted to break down the Victim's Door; he wanted to bend back the bars to the apprentice's cells; he wanted to tear the sunburst brand from a templar's hand and see that silver sword of mercy buried hilt deep in the bastards; he wanted justice. Maker, did Anders want him. The spirit was the only thing holding him together, and Anders was only holding him back. He hated it, but more than that he feared it.

Anders had no idea what his melancholy might be doing to Justice. He hated it. He hated himself for having it. He hated that he didn't know how to fight it. He hated that he didn't know how to fight at all. Neither of them did. They were fire and fury and righteousness, unrelenting and unrestrained. They weren't subterfuge and subtlety, and it showed. They didn't know how to fight this battle, and the thought that he might waste months if not years to the Coterie and Harlan's empty promises terrified him.

All the while, Bethany and every other mage in the Gallows suffered. Anders cared about his patients, but he cared about mages more. If his nightmares weren't of the Deep Roads, or of Amell, they were of his Harrowing. He thought of how he had Compassion there to save him, and how no spirit would be there to save Bethany. Justice was right. There were any number of demons that could latch onto the poor girl, from Despair to Fear to what little hints of Rage Anders had seen from her, and he couldn't imagine her holding her own against any of them with Pride bearing down on her.

Anders tried not to think about it, but there were few other places he could turn his thoughts of late. In the lull between patients, he'd find himself rubbing his hands raw in the wash, picking at his cuticles until his nails looked sunken, or running his hands through his hair until the strands he dislodged made webs on his fingers, thinking very determinedly of nothing. It was early evening when the company of a friend and Justice's persistence finally broke him from his doldrums.
Varric was coping. The dwarf's injury wasn't nearly as severe as Eylon's had been. He could still dress himself, down to the golden hoops that glittered on his ears, but Anders wasn't naive enough to think the amputation hadn't changed him. The dwarf was never without his gloves, and he'd taken to stuffing the missing fingers to compensate for the loss. They stood out against the rest, unerringly straight and stiff and utterly inept at supporting his crossbow or his quill. The dwarf had to learn to write all over again, as far as Anders knew he was meeting with limited success.

"Hey Blondie," Varric offered by way of greeting, pacing restless on the floor of his clinic with his thumbs stuffed into his belt. The three false fingers on his right hand tapped in unison against his hip. "Long time no chat; you mind if I sit?"

"That's a chair," Anders waved a hand towards one of the many crates encircling his table, and Varric sat. The poor blighter might have deserved a better friend, but if nothing else at least he couldn't ask for a better healer. "Can I get you anything? Water? How are the fingers?"

"Back in that thaig being used as darkspawn toothpicks, probably," Varric shrugged, "The tea's been working out so far. Tastes like shit though. I hate ginger. Tastes like... fuck, I don't know, that kind of ginger taste that makes the back of your throat swell up, you know what I mean?"

"I get like that with cinnamon," Anders found the lone metal cup to his name, and a breath of mana filled it with water. "Still like it though." They fumbled the cup in the hand off, and it slipped through Varric's fingers, water sloshing over the table and onto the dwarf's trousers.

The man leapt up with a curse, his mangled hand clenched into a fist, or a macabre parody of one. His thumb and pointer finger curled, but the three stuffed ones stayed mockingly straight. "Son of a bitch," Varric gave the crate a vindictive kick while he smacked at the strain on his trousers, but the wood was rotten, and the planked splintered and caught his boot. "Fucking flaming shit-ass damn-"

"Hey, it's fine," Anders righted the cup, the memory of Varric's Deep Road's breakdown fresh in his mind from his nightmare. The dwarf wasn't running through Darktown shrieking and streaking, but an amputation wasn't a wound that ever healed, and wasn't something to take lightly. Anders gestured to the foot Varric still had stuck in the crate, "Need a hand?"

"A few fingers, maybe," Varric chuckled reluctantly, and gave him a wave of allowance. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Blondie. I broke your-... chair thing."

"It was a shitty chair thing," Anders grinned, and freed the dwarf's boot. "I've got plenty. Pick another."

Varric picked a new crate, and Anders refilled the cup for him. He set it on the table rather than hand it off. "Left hand."

"I know," Varric sighed, "It's too bad Blue doesn't let you drink because I could seriously go for one right now."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Anders offered, and Maker save him, he didn't mean it. He didn't have the energy. A poultice for the pain, he could handle, but he didn't want this conversation. He wanted to crawl back to his cot and stay abed, away from the world and all its fruitless obligations.

"No, no," Varric spared him, and Anders hated the breath of relief he let out. "No. I'm not here about that. I'm not the only falling apart, Blondie, I'm just the only one doing it literally. I know, you're probably having the time of your life martyring yourself down here, but it's not too hot topside either. Broody crawled into a bottle and I haven't seen him since we found out about Sunshine, bribing the gangs to leave Daisy alone when she wanders Lowtown at night is bleeding me dry, and I think
Aveline is one more game of Wicked Grace away from arresting Rivaini for the fuck of it."

"So why are you telling me?" Anders asked, "Tell Hawke. Have him make everyone play nice."

"That's why I'm here," Varric said. "Shit, getting Killer to talk before Sunshine was like pulling teeth. Now? Forget it. I figured a little time, a few drinks, he'd be back up on his feet, but it's not happening. It's been two weeks now and every day he's down at the docks, staring out at the Gallows. His mother went to Aveline, Aveline went to me, and I'm going to you."

"Did you forget Hawke hates me?" Anders snorted, "He doesn't want any mages near his family, remember?"

"He doesn't hate you, Blondie, he's just scared shitless," Varric said, "Fuck, who wouldn't be after that? Look, I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important. We've tried everything, but Hawke won't talk to anyone. I know it went to shit fast, but you two had a bit of a thing for each other for a while there, and with how close you kept to him in the Deep Roads-... Do you think you could try? Just see if he'll come to Wicked Grace tonight or something."

Maker. Anders suffered a sigh so heavy it took his head down with it, and left him propping his forehead up on his fingers. "Varric, I'm not even coming to Wicked Grace tonight."

"Come on, Blondie, don't make me beg," Varric said. "When have I ever asked you for a favor?"

"There was that time you had me do your hair," Anders mused, and Varric chuckled. The humor fell on him like a shroud, and Anders didn't doubt he'd be buried in it someday. He thought of Hawke in the Deep Roads, and the man's insistence that he needed his help, and sighed. "Fine, fine. Is he at the docks now?"

"He's never anywhere else," Varric said.

"Anders to the rescue," Anders sighed to himself later, hunched down under his coat and dragging his feet down the crooked streets of Kirkwall on his way to the docks. That was the problem with people. Nothing came without a catch. There were never any favors, just debts to be repaid, and Anders' boots were full of nothing but his feet. He couldn't afford the tax social interaction was putting on him lately, and perhaps the worst of it was he knew it wasn't like him.

He loved people. He loved his patients. He loved talking. He talked too damn much. It was all anyone in the Circle had ever said of him, and while he might have been lazy in the past, he'd never lacked for energy the way he did the past few weeks. Just the walk to the docks was draining, as bad if not worse than the many expedition he'd suffered with the Wardens. If not for Justice's warmth in his chest and the comfort of their bond, Anders doubted he would have made it to the piers, but made it he did.

Hawke wasn't hard to find. The archer was at the far western docks, on one of the abandoned piers furthest out into the Waking Sea. The wood had long since rotted, logged with water and battered half to driftwood by the waves. Dog was with him, the mutt having fled to the guard the day the templars had taken Hawke captive. Aveline had cared for the mabari for the week it had taken Hawke and his family to be set free, but if the templars had gotten their hands on it, Anders didn't doubt they'd have beaten it along with the rest of Hawke's family for the sport of it.

The planks sagged and cracked as Anders' made his way across, a few outright snapping when he put too much pressure on them. There was nothing quiet in his approach, but Hawke didn't bother looking up. Anders supposed Dog's lacking of barking made it clear he wasn't a threat, but for some reason Anders suspected the man wouldn't have been moved for anything. If he'd spent the past two
weeks on the pier, it seemed clear he'd given into despair over the loss of his sister, and Anders couldn't blame him.

Anders took a seat beside him, and let his legs dangle over the edge. The air was heavy with the musky scent of rotting wood, the salt of the sea, and the whisper of Ferelden that clung always to Hawke. Anders glanced at him, but the archer kept his gaze fixed on the Gallows. His face was marginally better. The bruises had turned sallow, and the cut on his lip had scarred. The swelling in his left eye had gone down, and he was left with a smattering of red and orange and other sunset colors where the bruise had been.

Anders tried to think of something reassuring to say, but the words wouldn't come. He knew what the conditions in the Circle were like. The old fortress had been used to house slaves in the time of Tevinter, and no matter who ruled Kirkwall, the Gallows never changed. The name alone was proof the Chantry would rather see mages hang than waste the coin it took to provide them. Anders had been furious when Amell had told him the First Enchanter knew of the ritual to reverse possession, but that it was never used because it was too costly.

So mages were cast to demons, and the ones that fell to them were slaughtered, all because it was more economical than saving them. Too much lyrium. Too many mages. Too much risk. But it was possible. It could be undone. There was no rhyme or reason for Harrowings, or the inevitable fate of mages who failed them. Demons were lured and bound and mages were made to fight them when the meekest of them, mages like Bethany, might go their whole lives unnoticed by demons otherwise.

"How bad are they?" Hawke asked suddenly. Anders glanced at him, but his eyes were still on the Gallows. Red as they were, there was no fire left in them. "Harrowings. How bad are they?"

"... Do you really want me to answer that?" Anders asked.

"Yes," Hawke said.

"Bad," Anders said. "They take you in the middle of the night. Templars. Lots of them. You don't know what's going on, or where they're taking you... If you're going to be made Tranquil. Killed. Raped. They gag if you make noise so you don't wake the other apprentices, drag you if you won't walk, or carry you if you struggle. Then they bring you to the Harrowing chamber. In Kinloch... it's the only place you can see the sky.

"How's that for the Circle's idea of mercy? A little glimpse of moonslight through stained glass before the end. K-... a friend, wept so loud he never even heard the rules of his Harrowing before he woke up in the Fade. But... they tell you that you have to fight a demon. That they'll kill you if you fail. Then the First Enchanter takes your hand, and shoves it into a bowl of lyrium. It hurts. Andraste's knickerweasels, it hurts. It's like ice, so cold it burns, and when it hits your heart?

"Then you wake up, and you're in the Fade, and nothing makes sense. Spirits and demons and mages shape everything, and you can't tell one from the other. It's not just a battle. That would be too easy. They come and they talk to you and you think you can trust them, and the next thing you know a demon has a hand around your heart and fingers threaded through your thoughts. It's not easy. It's not gentle. It's bloody harrowing. ... I'm sorry, Hawke."

Hawke nodded. The man lost himself to the motion, pain laced through his expression in the draw of his brow and the quiver in his jaw. Anders watched him and thought inexplicably of his mother, and how she must have felt watching her only son handcuffed and carted off to prison. A farmer from Tallo would have no way of knowing what conditions in the Circle were like, but Anders knew she had wept. He'd seen the tears when she'd thrust the pillow into his hands, rivers turned fast to rapids.
in the few seconds they'd had together before the templars pulled them apart.

And now she was dead. Anders shifted to lean back on his elbows and watch the sky. Blues and violets bled together with a hint of red as the sun fled beneath the horizon, so far from the gold and emerald of the Fade. Maker, Anders missed it, and not just because Justice had lived it, and they were one. He missed it for himself. For Compassion. For being the only place he had any hope of seeing his mother again. For being the only place a mage could feel relatively safe and confident in his abilities, when no one was binding demons to your dreams and forcing you to fight them.

"How did you survive yours?" Hawke asked eventually, his voice hoarse but steady.

"I had help," Anders shrugged. "My spirit fought the demon with me."

"Justice?" Hawke guessed.

"No..." Anders felt the lump in his throat, and wondered how many more minutes of clear communication he had left in him. "A different spirit. A spirit of Compassion. She found me, when I was taken to the Circle. Spirits... they're virtues. Compassion is one of the weakest. Faith, Hope... Justice, they're the strong spirits. The things people rally behind. Compassion is just... something people clinging to whenever it's offered. It was what I needed at the time, I suppose.

"Beth... Maybe a spirit would help her, but it's rare for them to notice most mages. I'm a spirit healer. I draw them. Compassion already knew me. If a spirit were going to help Beth, it would have to be something like Valor or Justice. Harrowings.... they're bloody twisted. Spirits can sense it, and they're drawn to right the wrong they can feel there. Beth's lived her whole life on the run. She's a strong girl. A spirit of Fortitude might notice her. Or she might make it on her own. It's always Pride they make you fight, and Beth-... well she's not-...."

"She's not," Hawke agreed.

Beth wasn't proud. She didn't jut her chin and put her foot down when someone challenged her, she muttered and cast her eyes to the ground. She ran and hid. It was exactly what the templars wanted from mages, and exactly why they pitted them exclusively against Pride. The demon wouldn't have much of a foothold with her, but Anders couldn't explain that with his jaw shaking. He thought of his Harrowing, of what the demon had offered him, of Compassion's arms encircling him and pulling him away before he could sell his soul for a few seconds of freedom before the templars struck him down.

Anders inhaled for four seconds, held it for seven, and exhaled for eight. Four, seven, eight. Anders lived by the numbers. Taken together, they were one of the few things he could use to bring himself down from a panic attack. It wasn't foolproof. Nothing was. It was day by day and if the wound were still fresh Anders doubted any sort of breathing exercise could have saved him, but Justice might have. Anders felt his spirit's anger like a fire in his chest at the memory, battling back the memory of the lyrium and its icy coil, and relaxed in time to hear Hawke start talking.

"I was seven," Hawke said, voice still rough, "When Beth was born. I remember my parents arguing as Mother went into labor. Father wanted to go to the Chantry to beg for a midwife; Mother wanted him to stay. Twins, and she wanted to risk it rather than risk him, but Father wouldn't hear it. He left, and it wasn't as if she could chase him. 'For the children, Leandra,' I remember he said. I was too young to understand what it all meant, but I understand why you hate the Chantry. Mother did too, then.

"Father brought back a midwife. With the stress... when your magic manifested when we fought about the Chantry, that's not the first time I've seen something like that. Beth did it growing up;
Father did it then. He paced, lightning on his fingers and fire on his every exhale, telekinesis making everything in the damn house float. The births went fine. Maybe I just didn't realize how lucky we were, but...

"I remember the way the room smelled. Like shit, and piss, and blood. So much damn blood, all over the sheets and on the floor, and the midwife's hands. Mother was holding Carver and crying, and Father handed me Beth. She looked like shit. Still bloody, pink and wrinkled, squalling like a damn gull, but Father said, 'That's your little sister, Bethany. You're going to take care of her, and your little brother Carver, and your Mother. You hear me?"

"The way he said it, I knew I didn't have a choice. So I said, 'I hear you,' and Father left with the midwife. For all he and Mother knew, that was the last time they'd ever see each other, but the midwife didn't turn him in. Father came back that evening, and packed up everything that was important. Food. Clothes. Blankets. All of it, but Mother was in no condition to travel. They agreed then and there if the templars came, he'd take us and go.

"It was always like that. It changed on a bit. If Father was caught, we'd run with Mother. If Mother was too sick, we'd run with Father. Nothing was permanent. Nothing was important. Carver mattered. Beth mattered. That was it, but when I was seven, when I was eight, when I was nine, when I couldn't carry both, it was just Beth. You take Beth, and you go. That was what Father always said. I spent years playing hide and seek with her, pretending it was just a game, and then it happened.

"I was sixteen. Beth was nine. Carver was a shit. Always getting into fights. Always getting into trouble. Anything for a bit of attention from Father, no matter how negative. Spanked, switched, smacked, he'd settled for anything. He never understood why we couldn't draw any attention to ourselves, or that all the time Father spent with me was just to get me ready to take his place. No matter how many times Father took him by the ear, he never listened. He always fought with all the other boys, and Beth was always standing up for him.

"I was just back from Amaranthine when they ran in from the fields. I had a girl there. Maverlies. She had green eyes, and a gap between her front teeth that made her whistle. We were going to enlist under Howe together, but then Beth's magic manifested. She was crying, could barely get the words out, kept saying it was an accident, but I knew. She was a mage, and nothing else mattered. 'You take Beth, and you go.' So I did. We left that night.

"Gave it all up for her. Always did. Always swore I would. When Carver died... And now..." Hawke stopped, choked down what Anders swore was a sob, and didn't continue. Anders had no idea what he could say to comfort him that wouldn't be a lie, and so said nothing, and it felt an age before Hawke spoke again. "Aveline says correspondence starts after a year. Do you know--... do you know if they tell the families? If a mage fails their Harrowing?"

"They don't even tell the other apprentices," Anders said honestly, and cringed at the long, slow breath it drew from Hawke. "Families aren't even supposed to ask about mages that get taken to the Circle... I'm sorry, Hawke."

"Sorry doesn't help Beth," Hawke said. "... it was my fault."

"What?" Anders sat up and rolled over to face the man, "No it wasn't. It wasn't anyone's fault but the bloody templars. They're all a bunch of bastards, Hawke, you can't-"

"It was my fault," Hawke interrupted him. "I made you heal Gamlen. I didn't think. The other dockworkers. They saw him throw his back out. He made up some bullshit about Andraste's Ashes, but no one believed him... At least you're safe now... They think Beth is the Darktown Healer, and
it's all my fucking fault."

"That's-..." Anders faltered, unable to process the implications of Beth taking the fall for him. "It's still not your fault. I agreed to heal Gamlen. If anything it's my fault. I've been healing refugees since I stepped off the boat. Sooner or later, someone was going to have to pay for it. And Beth... Look, Hawke, I... have some friends. I haven't had much luck with them lately, but I might be able to get a letter to Beth, or at least find out if she's alive."

Hawke turned to stare at him, the whites of his eyes as red as the rest, "You'd do that for me?"

"I'd do it for Beth," Anders said.

"Thank you," Hawke said.

"You don't need to thank me," Anders said.

"I'm thanking you anyway," Hawke said.

"You're welcome."
Chapter Summary

Hey folks. Sorry for the delay on this chapter, and sorry in advance for the quality. Taking a break from writing for so long really messed with that. As always, thank you for the comments and kudos. They really make the story worth it. Thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon 5 Parvulis
Planasene Forest

The Free Marches were a far cry from Ferelden. The people were different, the foods were different, even the weather was different. It was Kingsway, and Kingsway, much like August and Solace and every other month in Ferelden, would have meant rain. In Ferelden, by now the skies would be grey, the roads would be littered with carts sunken into the sodden ground, and the cloying scent of autumn decay would be mingling with the stench of wet dog.

Maker, did Anders miss it.

The Free Marches were beautiful this time of year. The skies were clear, the ground was firm, and there was a light chill in the air that made every breath taste crisp and fresh. The weather warranted little more than a scarf, and Merrill had graciously knit him one to replace the one that had been stolen from him. While the elf had many talents, Maker bless her, knitting wasn't one of them. The scarf was coarse and uneven, the sides were unraveling, and it had been clumsily dyed with shades of yellow and orange that came together in such a way as to resemble cat barf.

Anders had been speechless when Merrill had proudly tied it about his neck, especially after seeing the exquisite paintings that littered her small home in the alienage. Thank the Maker, the girl had taken it for gratitude, and gone on to ramble about how Arianni, another Dalish in the alienage, was teaching her how to knit for a bit a lesson. As far as Anders was concerned, Merrill should have asked for her coin back. The scarf was a mess, but then so was Anders, so who was he to judge?

Weeks had gone by, and Anders still hadn't made any progress with either the Coterie or the Underground. He wasn't sleeping well, he wasn't eating well, and the less said of his hygiene the better. Hawke was counting on him, and Anders still hadn't managed to get any news of Beth, let alone get a letter to her. He couldn't transform into a rat to save his life, and apprentices in the Gallows weren't allowed windows, which meant there was nothing his crow form could do for Beth, just like there was nothing it could for Karl.

Anders told himself not to think about Karl, and much like everything Anders did in life, he failed at it. Walking through the Planasene forest in search of regents for his patients, all Anders could think about was the month he spent overturning every rock and bit of bark for some sign of Andraste's Grace. There was as much sign of it now as there had been then. From the canopy to the underbrush, everything was green without the slightest hint of white. Weeds, grass, herbs, all of it looked the same to Anders. If not for Merrill singing softly to herself at his side, Anders didn't doubt he'd have forgotten what elfroot looked like.

It was some sort of Dalish nursery rhyme, and Anders tried to focus on it instead of his failure with
"Heart shaped leaves with veins of green:  
Elfroot, to ease the pain.  
Flat capped and gray that grows in the clay:  
Blightcap, the hunter's bane.  
Spindly with thorns like a great demon's horns:  
Felandris, marking the veil.  
Loose leafed and tall with a high purple stall:  
Deathroot, to make the mind frail."

The verses were hummed under the little elf's breath as she made her way through the forest with him, occasionally plucking bits of elfroot or spindleweed for the wicker basket on her arm. Merrill might not have had Varric's voice, but her singing wasn't as disastrous as her knitting. Apparently Velanna's shrill shriek was a voice unique to her and not all Dalish women.

"Shame Beth isn't here to have heard that," Anders said. "Poor girl couldn't tell elfroot from dandelions."

"It's just a silly little song for children, really," Merrill said. "The Keeper used to sing it to me when I was little, after I was given to the clan at the Arlathvenn."

"Oh, of course," Anders snorted. "Feeble minds and demons horns, what child isn't comforted by that?"

"I was," Merrill said. "That song helped me remember different herbs that would help the clan. It's a Keeper's job to remember everything. Even the dangerous things. Even the things people want you to forget."

"Like blood magic?" Anders guessed. Merrill's silence seemed answer enough, so he continued. "How do you do it?"

"Well um..." The Dalish shrugged and rubbed at her sleeves, "I normally use my forearm. It's the easiest access point and with long sleeves."

"No," Anders pinched the bridge of his nose and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I mean, how do you deal with your clan casting you out over it? Don't you resent them for it?"

Merrill continued without answer, a vine rising from the forest floor to catch her foot and carry her over a moss-covered log. Anders stepped after her, bark breaking underfoot and filling the air with the scent of rot. The foliage around them leapt to life at the sound, crows and crackles taking wing in a panic all too reminiscent of how most folk reacted to blood mages and abominations. Anders couldn't help resenting the little blighters, and they weren't even people. He couldn't imagine Merrill not resenting her clan.

"Well?" Anders asked, easily cutting the little Dalish off in a few long strides. He plucked up the elfroot she had been reaching towards, and Merrill blinked wide emerald eyes at him, but Anders knew better. The innocent act was an act. Merrill had practiced and perfected it. As a mage, a Dalish, and a maleficar, she didn't have a choice. None of them did.

"You have pretty hands," Merrill said.

"I have pretty what?" Anders asked.

"Pretty hands," Merrill repeated, "Has no one ever told you?"
"Don't change the subject," Anders said.

"You do, though," Merrill reached out to take one such hand, and ignored the ripple of sapphire from his disgruntled spirit that came at the touch. "Your nails are worn down past the tips of your fingers, and your skin is ripped all around the edge, like you've worked them to the point of falling off."

"If that's your definite of pretty suddenly this scarf makes a lot more sense," Anders mumbled, shaking free of her grasp. "What do my hands have to do with your clan?"

"Everything," Merrill said. "Do you resent your patients just because your hands are raw?"

"Of course not, but that's different," Anders said.

"I don't think it is," Merrill shrugged, and stepped around him to continue their search for regents.

"Of course it is," Anders argued after her, "Your clan abandoned you. They don't need you. My patients need me. Kirkwall's mages need me. They need you too. Why not stand with us? With the Collective? They'd be grateful for your help."

"I am helping them," Merrill bounced the wicker basket on her arm, half full with a variety of herbs meant for his clinic.

"They need more than just salves to heal the bruises templars leave on them," Anders said, letting Justice's fire add an echo to his voice, "We could do so much more for them if we worked together. Once I can get access to the Coterie's tunnels, the Collective and I will be able to start smuggling mages out of the Gallows, but they'll need help on the outside. Someone to teach them how to survive. There are elves in there too, you know. With your help--"

"I said no!" Merrill whirled on him, a fire behind the emerald in her eyes that lit them all the colors of autumn and of death. It faded fast, and Merrill dropped her basket to pace a few yards away from him. Finding a log not so rotten as to crumble at her weight, she sat and buried her face in her hands. "Dread Wolf take them. Creators know my clan would."

"You clan would what?" Anders asked. Merrill sniffled into her hands in answer, and Anders retrieved the basket to take a tentative spot beside her. His mind turned while Merrill wept, and Anders didn't have it in him to feel guilty. The answer was right there in front of him. For at least half the mages in the Circle, the Dalish were the answer. He didn't need to risk the Dog Lords, or Lirene, or any of his patients when it came to elven mages. The Dalish would take them in, and they'd be safer there than in any alienage across Thedas. It was brilliant. If not for Merrill crying, Anders might have laughed. "Merrill, are you saying your clan would take in mages?"

"Well, why not?" Merrill laughed for him, though Anders couldn't account for the bitterness of it. "They already took in that half-blood. Creators, I can't believe the Keeper would do this."

"What half-blood?" Anders asked. "Do what?"

"Hawke... saved someone," Merrill scrubbed at her face and sat up. The whites of her eyes had been dyed a bright red by her tears and her skin was flushed, but her voice was steady enough.

"And this is ... bad?" Anders guessed.

"Yes," Merrill said. "I mean-- no, but it's not fair. Well, I suppose it is fair, but it doesn't feel fair--but... Do you remember I told you about Arianni? She's teaching me how to knit?"

"How could I forget?" Anders gave his hideous scarf a tug, and Merrill continued.
"She's... from my clan, or she was, before the Blight. She fell in love with a human," Merrill managed a grin as bitter as her laugh, "It's forbidden, you know. It doesn't matter how clever, or how beautiful, or how... exciting they are... We're the last of the elvhen. We have to perserve our culture. We have to."

"... Merrill?" Anders prompted when the silence stretched, and Merrill lost herself to thought.

"Sorry," Merrill sniffed. "She had a son with a human, so she had to leave the clan. She went to Kirkwall, but her son was a mage, and without a Keeper... Arianni went to the Circle, and her son ran away."

"Smart boy," Anders mused.

"He ran to his father, and his father sent him to this ex-templar. Thompson? Tamson?"

"Samson?" Anders supplied, and to his shock Merrill nodded. Somehow, Hawke had managed to find Samson without the Collective's resources and in less than half the time Anders had been searching for him. The things the man could do for mages if only he put in the effort.

"I think so. He helps runaway mages... sometimes. He works with pirates to free them - not good pirates like Isabela - and sometimes the pirates take the mages he sends captive instead. One poor girl... It's a shame you weren't there. Not that it's your fault, she just-..."

"... Gave into demons?" Anders guessed.

Merrill nodded and went on, "Arianni's son got taken captive, so she asked me for help, so I asked Hawke, and... We didn't have time to come get you. We killed the pirates, and Arianni's son didn't want to go to the Circle, so Hawke said he should go to the Dalish, but it doesn't work that way. He's a half-blood. The clan shouldn't have accepted him."

"But you don't resent them at all, right?" Anders couldn't help his sarcasm, but fortunately Merrill was too crestfallen to react to it.

"It's not fair," Merrill said, "Everything I've ever done has been for them."

"So?" Anders asked.

"So what?" Merrill asked.

"You never answered my question," Anders said. "How do you deal with it?"

Merrill shrugged, "How do you?"

"I don't have a clan, Merrill." Anders said.

"You did," Merrill said, "You had the Wardens."

"... I try not to think about it," Anders said.

"Does that work?" Merrill asked.

"No," Anders said, and won a shaky laugh from the little elf.

"It doesn't work for me either," Merrill said, retrieving the wicker basket from where Anders had set it beside them to bounce it restlessly against the log. "... I'll ask the Keeper if she'll take in the elven mages in the Circle."
"Merrill, that's-

"If you'll teach us how to shapeshift," Merrill interrupted him.

"If I what who?" Anders stopped short. The tears were gone from Merrill's eyes, and the fire was back, burning hot enough that Anders could almost feel himself sweating under her stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Your coat," Merrill reached to pluck a feather from his spaulders, and Anders smacked her hand away. "I recognized it as soon as I saw it. There are legends among my people of Keepers who use such magic. We hear them at every Arlathvenn. A clan in the Tirashan, or the Donarks, or the Arbor Wilds whose Keepers live as wolves, or crows, or bears. I didn't think the legends were true, but when I saw your coat, I asked my spirit, and he confirmed it."

"Your demon, you mean," Anders corrected her, a tension flaring up his spine that wasn't borne entirely of Justice.

"That magic isn't yours," Merrill continued as if she hadn't heard him, "It comes from the time of Arlathan. It belongs to the Dalish."

"That's funny, because I'm pretty sure it belongs me." Anders stood up and stepped back. He pulled Amell's grimoire from his satchel, flipped it open, and let the corners of the pages run against his fingers. "Hm, yep. My grimoire, my coat, my magic."

"Just because you come into possession of a thing doesn't make it yours." Merrill scowled, "Do you have any idea how much of our magic has been stolen by your mages? How much of our land has been lost to your countries? How much of our history has been destroyed by your religion? All we have left are stories, and you humans take even those when you write us out of them."

"You don't know what you're talking about. This," Anders shook his coat with his free hand, "Doesn't have anything to do with you, okay? A human mage taught me how to do this, not a Dalish."

"And who taught him?" Merrill asked.

"Another human," Anders said.

"And who taught them?" Merrill asked, "It's Dalish magic. It doesn't matter who uses it now, it matters who used it first."

"I think you've got that backwards," Anders said.

"Why do you even care?" Merrill demanded, "What does it matter if someone else knows how to use it?"

"Because I-you-it-..." Anders choked on his words, and couldn't even form them in his mind. All he could see was Amell. The two of them sitting back in Amell's quarters at the Vigil, their arms outstretched, blood running free from fresh cuts as Amell spoke of all the rules and regulations that accompanied blood magic.

This wasn't that, but it was close. It wasn't for anyone else. Amell had written it for him. Amell had taught him. What did it matter if some Dalish had come up with it? Amell had the soul of a Dalish... or something weird like that, and Amell had wanted Anders to have his grimoire. Not Velanna. Not Merrill. Anders.
"You humans are all the same," Merrill stood up and abandoned her basket, spindleweed, foxmint, and elfroot scattered across the forest floor with little distinction from weeds and rotten leaves despite hours of work. "You don't even care about the things you take from us, you just don't want us to have them."

"This doesn't have anything to do with you or the Dalish," Anders argued. "It's my magic. End of story."

"It's not your story to tell," Merrill said. "It's ours."

"Well good luck with that," Anders snorted.

Merrill left him to the forest, and Anders went back to gathering herbs alone. The little elf had been spending too much time around Varric. Their lives weren't stories. No one wrote them. No one read them. Anders didn't have an obligation to share his life with the Dalish or with anyone. Amell's grimoire belonged to him. Amell's magic belonged to him. His only obligation was to the mages of Thedas. If the Dalish didn't know how to shapeshift that was their own damn fault.

He wasn't being unreasonable. With Karl, it had been different. He'd cared about Karl. Without knowing how to shapeshift, it would have been impossible for Karl to escape the Circle. It had still been impossible in the end, but that was beside the point. Teaching one person to save their life was different from teaching an entire group of people who thought the world owed them something just for existing. If Merrill had wanted the magic to help him break into the Circle, it might have been different, but she didn't care about mages; she only cared about elves.

And not even all elves, only the Dalish. There were elves locked away in the Gallows right now that Merrill didn't give a damn about because their faces were bare. It shouldn't have mattered whether or not Anders was willing to teach the Dalish shapeshifting. Merrill should have wanted to help because it was the right thing to do. That was what Hawke had done for Feynriel. Hawke hadn't cared that the boy was half-elf, only that he was someone who needed saving. "Hawke... Hawke could talk to the Dalish for him. According to Merrill, bringing Feynriel to the Dalish had been Hawke's idea in the first place. There was no reason the Keeper might not be willing to invite other elves into the clan. It was common knowledge she and Merrill didn't see eye to eye, and this might be one more thing the two disagreed on. Delighted, Anders turned east to head back towards Kirkwall, when a spot of white stopped him in his tracks.

It was a mushroom. A bit of mold. A trick of the light. The tuft of a hare's tail. Anything but what Anders knew it was.

Andraste's Grace.

The small wildflower was nestled up beside the base of a tree, a splash of orange like a sunburst at its center and fading to white at the edge of the petals. Karl's favorite. The flower Anders had searched high and low for over a month, to no avail. Karl was dead. He'd never see the flower, as he'd never seen the forest, or the mountains, or the plains, or the swamps, or anything the world had to offer, because the world had nothing to offer a mage.

Anders crossed the distance between him and the flower on shaky legs, and fell more than knelt beside it. Andraste's Grace. The free and unmerited favor of the Maker, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings, all in one little flower. It was no wonder Karl had wanted it so. What mage didn't want to hear the Maker still loved them? That their magic wasn't a symbol of his hatred, but rather his blessing? No Sister or Brother or Templar would ever say as much, so where else were they to look but relics and symbols?
Anders twisted the stem about his finger, plucked it free from the ground, and then wondered why.
There was nothing to be done with it. No one to press it for, or give it to. Anders dropped it in his
basket with the herbs all the same, but the weight of it felt impossibly heavy, and forced him to stop
again before he'd walked more a few feet. Anders found himself a seat on the forest floor, and turned
the flower over in his hands, thinking on Merrill's praise of them.

Karl had said much the same, and all Anders could think was that they hadn't truly known him. So
few people did. The healer had the bloodiest hands. That went the saying. Whether it was meant for
the patients they lost, or the blood and sweat they gave for the ones they saved, healers were always
losing something or someone. Anders didn't know that it was true. Anders wasn't selfless. He didn't
give of himself for the greater good. Anders cared about Anders. It was Justice that had changed
him.

Justice had given him the fire to fight for the plight of mages. Justice wanted to tear down the walls
of the Gallows for Bethany, for Karl, for every mage that suffered or had suffered therein. Anders
was so bloody selfish he couldn't be bothered to teach a few hedge mages spells that would help
protect them and their clans from wayward templars all because he didn't want to share. That wasn't
the mark of a selfless man. It was the mark of one who couldn't let go of his past because he feared
taking hold of his future.

Karl would have wanted him to teach Merrill, and any other mage willing to learn, but Karl wouldn't
have understood. He didn't know what the magic meant to Anders, even when Anders had been
teaching it to him. It was a piece of Amell. A piece of the man that Anders had been willing to share
with Karl because of what Karl, or the idea of Karl, had meant to him. It was an idea Anders clung
to even as he couldn't admit to it because deep down, he knew he'd never obtain it.

No mage could.

The flower was beautiful, but the sunburst was an ever-tainted symbol for Anders now after he'd
seen it branded into Karl's forehead. There was no healing that wound. No washing that blood off
his hands. No matter how many flowers he picked. Anders found Karl's final letter in his satchel, the
one he'd saved for someday, and forced himself to open it. Every day was someday. Reading it
would never get any easier.

My Dearest A,

You are the only thing in my thoughts of late. You and our kiss. I had almost forgotten how
desperately I missed the touch of another human being, and after three years without, to have that
touch be yours, I might have died and gone to the Maker's side. I hope you will forgive me if I come
across as overzealous. Isolation can do things to a man, as you well know, but you saved me from
that fate, as I have every confidence you will save me from the Circle.

I am desperate for freedom, ever more so now that I have a hope to share that freedom with you. I
regret to say that my desperation has yet to translate into any outstanding magical ability. You give
yourself far too little credit, my friend. I fear the magic of physical transformation is beyond me, and I
am doomed to be a graying old man for the rest of my life. Fortunately, that doesn't seem to matter to
you.

I was thinking of what you said, of being willing to teach me of life outside the Circle, and trying to
fathom the scope of what that entails. I have no life skills. I have no idea how to cook, how to mend
clothes, how to manage coin, how to ride a horse, how to survive without lining up for meals served
by Tranquil three times a day. I know nothing of the way of the world, and while that terrifies me,
part of me finds it exhilarating. To think that in just a few short days
The letter ended there. There was no final sentence scrawled dramatically at the bottom of the
parchment that read, "The templars have come for me!" or "They're breaking down the door!" or
something whimsical like, "We'll be together." or "I'll be holding you." It just ended. With no
resolution. No closure. Nothing to lessen the pain of Karl's death at Anders' own hands or offer some
form of comfort knowing Karl had in some way anticipated everything might not go according to
plan.

Instead Karl had had every faith in him. His tranquility had come as a surprise, his death as a
desperate last resort. Until the templars had taken him captive, Karl had every reason to believe
Anders would one day be walking through the Planasene Forest with him, and they'd stumble across
Andraste's Grace together. How many other mages had such hopes and dreams cut short by the
Chantry's brand? How many other mages didn't dare to hope or dream for fear of it? Anders had to
save them.

If that meant giving up what little of Amell Anders had left then...

He'd ask Hawke.

Anders returned to his clinic to drop off his herbs and his things, and then went out in search of
Hawke. The archer was at his usual haunt of late: the rotting pier with the best view of the harbor,
and consequently the Gallows. Guilt weighed Anders every step across it, and seemed to bow the
boards beneath him. He'd come to beg a favor and he had nothing in return. No news of Beth. No
progress with the Collective or the Coterie. Just a flower plucked too soon and a letter left unwritten.

There was less of Amell in the man by the day, and not just by his broken nose. Hawke had lost his
fire the day he'd lost his sunshine. He glanced at Anders with no hope in his eyes, and in a way it
was comforting. The man expected nothing, it meant Anders couldn't disappoint him. He took a seat
beside the archer, and shared silence for a time before Hawke broke it. "How much did Beth tell you
about our father?"

"Just that he was devilishly handsome and ridiculously charming," Anders said with a shrug, "Oh,
and there might have been a little mention of how I reminded her of him. Can't imagine why."

"He was an ass," Hawke said.

"Ouch," Anders said.

"Just as stubborn as one too," Hawke continued without acknowledging him, "I told you he was
strict, and that's the short of it. He had high expectations for everyone, including himself. If he said
he was going to do something, he did it. Could take a week, month, year, but he'd do it." Hawke tore
his gaze from the pier, and fixed Anders with a look that was somehow as soft as it was intense, "I
know you're trying. Thank you."

"Well um..." Anders' throat dried up on him, and he had to take a moment to clear it, "You're
welcome." Hawke went back to staring out at the pier, and Anders forced himself to press on before
his guilt got the better of him. "So, while we're sharing, a little bird told me you played a pretty big
part in rescuing some poor bloke from the Circle?"

"Who, Fen... Fen... shit. That elf kid?" Hawke asked.

"Touching," Anders rolled his eyes. "I can tell he meant a lot to you for you to risk your neck like
that. Must be an old friend. Known him for years?"

"What of it?" Hawke asked.
"Why'd you do it?" Anders asked.

"What was I supposed to do, let some slaver sell him to Tevinter?" Hawke scowled.

"Well, yeah," Anders said, "That's what most people would have done in your shoes. Actually, speaking of shoes, I have this friend-nevermind. Later. Anyway, I thought you didn't want to get involved with mages and templars and all that? What changed your mind?"

"Merrill asked for my help," Hawke said simply. "She's a friend."

"Are we friends?" Anders asked, and held up a quick finger to forestall an answer, "Don't answer that. So, since we're friends, I was wondering if you might be willing to me a favor, as a friend. You remember how you came up with that brilliant little plan of sending Feynriel to the Dalish instead of the Circle? You know, on account of him being half-elf and all?

"Well I was wondering, just hear me out, if the Dalish might be willing to take in other mages. Only, and hear me out here, these mages are whole-blood. The Dalish would be twice as willing to accept them as a half-blood, wouldn't they? Right? It's brilliant. So I was thinking, since you're on such good term with them, you might be willing to ask their Keeper if they'd be willing. What do you think?"

Anders gnawed on his bottom lip, but he didn't have any time to ruminate on his request before Hawke shrugged. "Okay."

"Wait, really?" Anders asked "That's it? You're not going to argue or tell me that you can't risk getting involved or that it's not your problem or-"

"You want me to?"

"No no! No backsies," Anders snatched up one of the archer's hands and gave it a frantic shake, "We shook on it. Handshakes are sacred."

To his surprise, Hawke snorted. It wasn't quite a laugh. Anders doubted the man had it in him after what had happened to Bethany, but damned if it wasn't close. It brought a smile to Anders' face to know he'd given Hawke some kind of joy despite not giving him any kind of closure. Hawke returned it, and in the silence that followed, Anders could almost believe he wasn't lying when he said they were friends.

Anders returned to his clinic in high spirits. He was finally making progress. He might not have had a full underground started just yet, but he had the frameworks. He had a place for the elven mages to turn to once they were free, he had an inside man with the templars, he had an arrangement with the Coterie that would eventually grant him access to their tunnels, and he hadn't had to sacrifice any part of Amell to do it.

And it lasted all of the ten minutes it took him to walk back to Darktown and find his door smashed in, his clinic raided, and his grimoire stolen.
Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has helped support my husband and I recently. This particular chapter is dedicated to KyluxTrashCompactor. Please bare with me, as I haven't written since the last update, and the writing might be a little clunky as I get back into the swing of it. Thank you for all of your bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, and as always thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon 5 Parvulis Evening
Darktown

It was known to the refugees of Darktown that the emerald lantern marked the healer's clinic. The right combination of herbs could spark an emerald flame, and it was to this technicality any refugee would attest on the rare chance a wayward templar happened to stumble across the clinic. Rare because the refugees would keep watch, and warn their healer well in advance of any patrols. It still happened on occasion, and so the refugees were ever vigilant for sunbursts, for silver swords of mercy, for anything that marked the Circle or the Chantry's presence.

Apparently, that vigilance meant fuck all where Dalish mages were concerned.

A combination of man and spirit tore apart the already ramshackled clinic, to no avail. The grimoire was gone. Merrill had stolen it. There was no other explanation. Rolan and Eylon had broken the bindings, the demons had escaped, and there was nothing left to protect the tome. No whispers of death and damnation, no blood-curdling or mind-shattering screams. It was a tome, burnt and tattered, and the only threat its reader risked was a paper cut.

It was just a book.

Anders folded his hands above his head and took a deep breath, but the blend of sewage, mildew, and rot that was Darktown was far from soothing. It coated his nostrils and congealed into a snot so thick he couldn't breathe. He coughed, and coughed again, snot running down his throat and setting it aflame. It burned. He couldn't breathe. Maker, he couldn't breathe. Anders beat a closed fist against his chest, desperate for air, for one simple breath, choking sobs around the mucus in his nose and throat, and collapsed.

It was just a book.

He woke to sight of stalactites and the scent of shit. Different stalactites. Different shit. The ceiling was dripping with icicles of salt and slime, phosphorescent lichen lit the room a sickly green, and the irregular gurgle of Kirkwall's drainage system meant he was still in Darktown. Aside from that, Anders couldn't say, and with how many caverns sprawled beneath the city, he could have been minutes or miles from his clinic. He took a deep breath, and was rewarded with air that was crisp by Darktown's standards.

"Well, well, well," A ruddy face and a mess of gnarled red hair appeared in his line of vision. Cor "The Bastard" Blimey grinned down at him, "Look who joined the living."
"Cor," Anders said. One of the gang's new dens, then. They must have been doing well for themselves if they were expanding their territory.

"As I live and piss," The Dog Lord fell onto the cot beside him and slammed a hand down on Anders' chest. Fire shot through his veins, and Anders rolled over and vomited, only it wasn't vomit. It was black, and thick, and left a spider web of phlegm and mucus connecting his nose and mouth to Cor's boots. "... We're gonna pretend that didn't just happen, yeah?"

Anders' throat quivered, and one look at what had come out of him convinced him it should keep coming out. He vomited again, and left his head lulling off the side of the cot for fear of round three.

Cor grabbed a fistful of his bangs and lifted his head up, "You're better than this."

"Yeah?" Anders wiped off his mouth and resolved to ignore the resulting black on his sleeve.

"Yeah," Cor let go of his bangs, and Anders let his head go back to lulling. "Setting up your clinic 'sides a vent o' chokedamp and damn near getting yourself killed when it blows. Don't tell me you don't know better. How long you been in Kirkwall?"

Anders shrugged, "Time flies when you're having fun,"

"You know better," Cor said. "You're bloody lucky my dogs found you when they did. You got fucked six ways to Sunday."

"I think I'd feel a lot better if that were true," Anders said. Chokedamp. Anders tried for a laugh and it came out as a wheeze. He hadn't fallen to despair or despondency, to rage or remorse. He hadn't lost himself at all. He'd just passed out. It wasn't emotional. It wasn't spiritual. It wasn't anything.

It was just a book.

"You know your boy Franke made these for me?" Cor shook the sludge from his boot, "You ain't been by to see him since you got back from that shit show in the Deep Roads. Him nor Lirene. You're pissing your shit away down here with the Coterie. Come back to me, yeah? I'll be better this time."

"I bet you say that to all the healers," Anders' chest rattled with every breath like there was nothing left in him but his bones. Maker knew he ached straight through to them. Chokedamp. It was just the chokedamp.

"Only the pretty ones," Cor said. "Come on, what do you say? What's the Coterie got that old Cor can't get for you?"


"Well shit, I can get you a book, yeah? Got a whole stack by the privy."

"No, my book," Anders sat upright and took stock of the makeshift infirmary they were in. There wasn't much. The Dogs never had much. Cots were haphazardly strewn between stalagmites, and a small body of water collected in the center of the room. A stack of books beside it answered any questions Anders might have had about the privy. He stumbled towards it and splashed a handful of water in his face. "My grimoire. Someone stole it. I was trying to find it. That's probably why I didn't notice the chokedamp before I passed out."

"Well that's easy," Cor ripped a page from the top book and handed it to Anders to dry his face with. Kirkwall: The City of Chains. And the Dog Lords wiped their asses with it. Fitting it went both
ways, Anders supposed. "We find your book, you come back to us, yeah? What do you say?"

"I'm not a dog, Cor," Anders wiped off his face and tossed the page in the bucket beside the pool. There was no sense arguing it. Anders needed the caves. The Coterie controlled them. That was all there was to it. Anders shimmed through the stalagmites and made for the exit.

"Please," Cor followed him, "You've got the flees, the smell. You chase every cat you come across."

"Cor-"

"And you're loyal." Cor grabbed his shoulders, and turned him about to face the nearest occupied cot. All Anders could see of the patient was their leg, or what was left of it. A jagged gash oozed sallow pus and rot, and had been draining long enough to stain the stone beneath them. It was infected. Anders could tell by the sight, let alone the smell. It should have been amputated. Without a healer, the infection would spread to the blood, but the Dog Lords thought they had a healer. "You don't leave a man when he's down. You don't back down from a fight. You're tough. You're Fereldan."

"I'm an Anders,"

"Bullshit," Cor squeezed his shoulders, and called out, "Oi, Bree, guess who I found?"

The patient sat up. Anders knew the pockmarked face, the dirty blonde hair, the grin full of chipped and missing teeth, "Anders. I knew you'd come back to us."

"Arf," Anders sighed.

An hour later, and Anders was sitting around the fire with Cor, Bree, and a handful of other Dogs. It wasn't much. It was never much. The Dogs were always derelict, destitute, and diseased. They lived off skewered rats, makeshift furniture, and scavenged armor. They couldn't compete with the Coterie. They didn't have the resources.

"Look, Cor, it's not just the book-

"I know," The Dog Lord interrupted him. "I know, yeah? That little symbol of yours you had us sniffing around the city for when you got off the boat? A broken circle? Real subtle, that. You want the Coterie's lyrium tunnels, except you don't want to smuggle out lyrium. You want to smuggle out mage folk. You're mad as a mad dog."

"Cor."

"If you think you can do it alone. Let me guess, you work for the Coterie a month, and they give you access to the tunnels. How many months ago was that?"

"That's not-" Anders stopped himself, and tried to count. Maker... how many months ago was it? Four? Five?

Cor must have read his expression, because he rolled his eyes. "That's what I thought. The Coterie is never going to let you use their tunnels. You need a boat."

"A boat? To reach an island? Andraste's knickerweasels, why didn't I think of that! Oh wait, I did. Samson wants fifty silver a mage, the Redwaters won't risk it, and the Crimson Weavers want two sovereigns just to have the conversation, so thank you, Cor "The Genius" Blimey, for that valuable insight, but unless you can pull a boat out of your ass-"
"I have a boat," Cor interrupted him. Anders stared at him, slack-jawed, and a couple of the dogs snickered. "What? That's it? No, 'thank you, Cor 'The Genius' Blimey, for pulling a boat out of your ass for my ungrateful one?"

"How do you have a boat!?" Anders shoulders locked, his arms shook. Maker, he couldn't see straight. Cor had a boat. Months. Anders had wasted months. Karl-

"Easy," Cor grabbed him and sat him back down when Anders tried to stand. "It ain't mine, yeah? Belongs to the Undercuts. Their Captain ran south o' something. Now you heal him, you get to use his boat."

"That's-I-how-" It couldn't be that simple. Anders had been trying to find a way to get access to the Gallows for months, and it had been staring him right in the face since he got off the boat.

"Well?" Cor grinned expectantly.

"Thank you," Anders laughed. If not for the stain of his teeth and stench of his breath, Anders could have kissed him, "Thank you! Cor, thank you, I- don't- you're a bloody genius."

"Damn straight," Cor punched his shoulder, "So the Undercuts get you in, you get your mages out, and we get your mages."

"What?" Anders laughed again, but this time it was humorless. Of course there was a catch. There was always a catch. "Look, Cor, refugees are one thing, but mages are another."

"You can't hide the smell o' shit from a dog," Cor said, "And that right there? That's shit. They're refugees. You look me in the eye and tell me your Gallows ain't earned the name. You look me in the eye and tell me you mage folk aren't running from something worse than the Blight. You look me in the eye, man to man, and tell me Fereldan, a real Fereldan, would turn away a mage after what the Hero o' Fereldan done for all o' us."

Anders swallowed back his protests, and could swear they left a bitter taste on his tongue. This was Cor, for Maker's sake. The man had fed him, bed him, all but wed him as soon as he'd stepped off the boat. He was a racketeer, a thug, and a thief, but he was good on his word. He was good to his gang. Anders should have trusted him to mean well. "I know you mean well, but-"

"But what?" Cor interrupted him, "My dogs ain't good enough for your mages?"

"But I'm not going to free mages from templars just to have them rounded up by the guard."

"You see any guardsmen down here?" Cor swung his arms wide in every direction. Admittedly, the caverns of Darktown weren't oft tread by any but the downtrodden, but the Dog Lords didn't limit themselves to Darktown. Their territory spawned half of Lowtown, and the guards made more than the occasional arrest whenever the gangs wandered topside. "You and Vallen get on, yeah? She'll look the other way for you."

"Aveline?" Anders laughed, "Aveline hates me. She looks the other way for Hawke."

"Look, I'm not saying we kidnap 'em. I'm saying we free 'em. And freemen get a choice."

"Cor-"

"You keep saying my name, you're gonna wear it out." Cor dropped his smile. "That's the deal, Anders. You take it, or you leave it."
Anders wanted to leave it. Karl had the right of it. Most mages didn’t know life outside the tower. They jumped at the chance for any alternative, whether it was a gang or an open window. It wasn’t really a choice if they weren’t in the right frame of mind to see it as one. Amell had taught him that. Amell had taught him that a thousand times over. How many opportunities had he given Anders to leave, but go where?

They wouldn't know any better. They'd be offered a place instead of a prison, and what mage would say no to that? "The Collective comes first. Then the Dalish. Then you can ask," Anders said. "And if they say no, they get to leave. No strings."

"No strings," Cor spit into his hand, and held it out to shake. His phlegm was a shade of yellow to match his teeth and almost as disturbing as the black Anders had been vomiting hours prior.

"That is all kinds of unsanitary."

"We live in a sewer, Anders. Spit in your damn hand."

Anders spat in his hand.

"Good," Cor grabbed another rat off the fire, and Anders wrinkled his nose. The least he could do was wipe his hand off on his pants, but considering the condition of said pants, Anders supposed it was debatable whether it would help. "The Undercuts will do you right. Their Captain's Kanky Hammertoe. Ex-Carta. Don't ask about the name."

"What's with the name?"

"Got a toe the size of a hammer," Cor answered without pause, "That's what your healing. Been fine for years, but got so bad recently he can't walk. Paid the Gallows five sovereigns for the mages to tell him there was nothing they could do for a dwarf."

"And that didn't leave him cross with the mages?"

"Left him cross with Stannard," Cor snorted, "The way Kanky explained it, good healers in Kirkwall get the brand. Too much risk of possession-so."

"What?" Anders stood up so quickly a few of the Dogs looked over. "No. No that's not-spirit healers you mean? Spirit healers are being made tranquil?"

"I don't know what they call 'em," Cor said, "The good ones. The ones like you."

"Spirit healers," Anders repeated. "Spirit healers are being made tranquil? We have to go now. Right now."

"What are-"

"They will not take another mage as they took him!" Anders snarled; he felt his fury a storm. His skin split as if lined in lightning and spirit fire bled through the cracks. It cast the cavern in sapphire, a color so akin to the bright blue of Karl's eyes before they'd been dulled by the Chantry's brand. "We will not sit idly by as this grievous offense is wrought upon innocents. We are called to righteous task to strike a blow against our oppressors, and the hour of reckoning is too long coming in this foul and fetid City of Chains. I beg of you, brothers and sisters, stand with me and see justice done!"

The clatter of a ladle hitting stone brought Anders back to himself. One of the Dogs had dropped it along with their jaw. The tension was so thick it had all but manifested into its own person, taking up a spot behind Anders to breathe in his ear. It felt like an age before he realized the breath for his own.
He was panting, his arms still raised in some absurd call to arms to a room full of vagrants and vagabonds, all of them staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed at his abominable outburst.

"Yeah!" Someone in the back of the cavern shouted.

"For Fereldan!" Someone else screamed.

The cavern erupted. The Dogs were on their feet, cheering and whistling and jostling. Even Cor stood up to clap him on the shoulder. Anders felt like he was in shock. He'd just outted himself as an abomination in front of two dozen people, and no one had noticed. It didn't seem possible that no one had noticed. Maybe someone had noticed. Maybe they were already on their way to the Gallows. Maybe it didn't matter.

The templars were making spirit healers tranquil. The templars thought Bethany was the Darktown Healer. That was what mattered. That was all that mattered. Anders shook himself from his stupor and pulled Cor aside. "What dock? The Undercuts, what dock?"

"The west end, third pier," Cor said. "We really doing this now?"

"Meet me there," Anders said.

Anders left the cavern at a sprint, and let it carry him to the edge of Darktown where it opened up over the inlet of the Waking Sea. A man leapt, and a crow soared. An updraft from the ocean carried it up to the city and over Lowtown, where it circled the hexes until it spotted the small shipping company that marked the Collective's front. Anders hit the ground at a roll, and banged his fist against the door while the feathers of his transformation still fell, "Package delivery! Package delivery, damn it! Open the bloody-"

The door opened to Mistress Selby's frowning face. "Anders, I swear-"

Anders shoved past her to pace the length of the small office, "They're tranquilizing them! I can't believe it. Except I can believe it. The slightest offense, and they're tranquilizing them! Maker, this is all my fault. I never should have healed him. I never should have taught her. I never should have gotten involved with any of it-"

"Slow down, love," Selby caught his face in her hands. They were weathered and wrinkled with age, and somehow felt all the more soothing for it. Selby was old. His sister was old. Mages could grow old. If they fought for it, mages could grow old. "Who are they tranquilizing?"

"Spirit healers," Anders said.

"What?"

"They're tranquilizing spirit healers. They said they're at an increased risk of possession, which, okay, yes, but that doesn't mean-Ow!"

The pain of Selby digging her nails into his face grounded him, and finally made him aware of something other than himself. The circles under Selby's eyes were as grey as her hair, pinned up for bed and matched to her night frock, but there was no sign of exhaustion in her stare. Her eyes were hard, and fixed on his face. "Elsa is a spirit healer. My sister is a spirit healer. Anders-"

Anders took her hands in his when they started to shake, "Tell me where she is. Tell me exactly where in the Gallows and I'll get her. I'll get her tonight. We have a boat. We'll get her out. Where is Bancroft?"

Selby was shaking. She aged in his arms, a year, two years. Decades past in seconds, and Anders
caught her when she collapsed and eased her into the nearest chair. “Selby, where is Bancroft?”

“Not here,” Selby whispered, staring at her shaking hands, “He’s not here. He-he was going to try to help the Redwaters get more established, join them on a few raids, I don’t-”

“Oh Elsa,” Selby sniffed, “Oh no… oh no, oh no-”

“Stop it!” Anders pulled her hands away from her face, ignoring the mess of tears and snot that glued their hands together when he clasped them tight. “Stop it. So the templars will have her phylactery. So what? They’ve got mine, and I’m right here, aren’t I?”

Selby nodded, and Anders admired her for that, “Right. So. Tell me where she is. Tell me where she is, and I’ll get her out. I promise.”

“Aren’t I?”

Selby nodded, and Anders admired her for that, “Right. So. Tell me where she is. Tell me where she is, and I’ll get her out. I promise.”

“Okay,” Selby said.

“Okay,” Anders said.

It wasn’t going to be easy. Nothing ever was for Anders. Elsa was on the fifth floor in the east wing. She was a mage, which meant she wasn’t quite as locked away as the apprentices, but not nearly as free as the senior enchanters. The docks at the Gallows disembarked into the courtyard where the Tranquil set up their shops, and without access to the tunnels, there were no hidden passageways to sneak the mages through. They’d have to cross the courtyard between guard rotations, and without Bardel, Anders had no way of knowing what the rotations were.

He still had to try. He had to try for Elsa. He had to try for Bethany. He had to try for Hawke.

A crow flew from Lowtown to the western docks, and counting the distant piers like it might sticks for a nest, but before it could come across the third, it spotted a familiar sight of man and mabari on the furthest pier where no ships docked. It circled low, and landed among the long abandoned cargo
on the abandoned port, and a man stepped out from behind them.

"Hawke," Anders called out, moving across the rotten planks at as close to a run as he dared.

"What is it?" Hawke asked without taking his eyes off the sea.

"Beth," Anders said, "The templars—they're making Spirit Healers Tranquil."

"Beth isn't a spirit healer," Hawke said. "She was always good with telekinetic magic. Took after Father. Used to use it to play with her hair when she thought no one was looking..."

"They think she's the Darktown Healer, remember?" Anders wanted to shake him. Now wasn't the time for whimsical reminiscing. "What kind of healer do you think I am?"

"What are you saying?" Hawke asked.

"What do you think I'm saying? We have to get her out of there. Now. Tonight. I've got some friends. A boat. I'm going to the Gallows. I'll find a way to get her out, but I need you to be ready to get her away from here. I can't get her phylactery. They'll have it locked up. So I need you—"

"I'm coming with you," Hawke interrupted him. The archer stood as if ready for battle and stared at Anders so expectantly Anders might never have guessed the man had all but atrophied for the better part of a month.

"No you're not," Anders almost wanted to laugh. It was absurd. This whole thing was absurd. "Look, I don't have a plan. I don't know the guards rotations. I don't know where the apprentices are kept. I'm not prepared for this like I was last time."

"I'm coming with you," Hawke interrupted him. The archer stood as if ready for battle and stared at Anders so expectantly Anders might never have guessed the man had all but atrophied for the better part of a month.

"You weren't prepared last time," Hawke said flatly. "I'm coming with you. Dog, home."

Obediently, the mabari trotted off down the pier, and left Anders alone with Hawke. The mercenary met his stare and held it, and Anders hated how piercing it was when the man could actually be bothered to make the effort. He couldn't bring Hawke with him. If he was too late for Beth—... he couldn't put Hawke through that.

"I'm quiet, I keep to the shadows, and I can pick locks," Hawke said. "I'm coming with you."

"Hawke, if we're—... if Beth—..."

"I'm coming with you," Hawke said a third and final time. Anders didn't have time to argue. He nodded, and led the way towards the pier the Undercuts were docked at.

Two dwarves guarded the pier, their uniforms vaguely reminiscent of a mix between the Carta and the Coterie. Some of the Dogs had already arrived, and waved him through to the captain’s quarters where Captain Kanky Hammertoe was laid up.

"You must be Cor's boy," Kanky said. He was uninspiring, as far as dwarves went. He had a squared off face, but all his features were pinched in towards his nose, and gave him the look of a man who had just stepped in dog shit. Anders hoped the expression was just for the pain, but somehow he doubted it.

Kanky's toe was more anvil than hammer, as far as Anders was concerned. It was old break, combined with poor circulation, combined with alcoholism, combined with a handful of unfortunate warts and callouses. It was a mess, and far from an easy fix, but nothing Anders was going to let stop him.
"That's me," Anders agreed, rolling up his sleeves. Hawke took a place at his side, and handed over whatever instruments he asked for without comment. He wasn't quite the same assistant Bethany had been, but he was there, and he was quiet, and he did what Anders told him.

"Cor tell you my terms?" Kanky asked. Anders couldn't help the tension that gripped his stomach at the question. It wasn't the sort someone asked unless their terms were about to change.

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine, that sort of thing?" Anders asked.

"You fix my toe, you get my ship," Kanky said. "One-night only."

"So you're just going to use me and lose me, is that it?" Anders asked.

"One toe, one night," Kanky said. "That's the deal."

"I could break the other nine," Hawke muttered.

"Try it, Dog Lord, and my boys will break a lot worse than your toes," Kanky's sneer pinched his face in even further, if such a thing were possible.

"As if my heart wasn't enough," Anders said. "Fine. One night."

They were underway within the hour. The Waking Sea carried with it the chill of autumn, and Anders pulled Merill's scarf taut against his face to hold back the wind. The flame from the balefire that guided ships to Kirkwall's harbor seemed disembodied among the fog, the Gallows a distant shadow. He felt as ready to storm the island as he might the Black City itself. He hadn't prepared. He hadn't planned. Cor had oversold the Undercut's support. Kanky would bring them close enough to the Gallows for a rowboat, and no further. The more men Anders brought with, the less mages he could be bring back, so Anders and Hawke were going alone, and somehow he had to get them both through the Gallows and to the quarters of whatever spirit healers he could find without being spotted by templars.

He was mad as a mad dog, and so was Hawke for being fool enough to join him, but what choice did they have? The templars were making Spirit Healers Tranquil. They might have been making Bethany Tranquil. The brand could be pressed to her brow any moment for all Anders knew, and Hawke... Hawke had trusted him. He'd trusted that Anders would get word of her. Trusted that Anders would one day, someday, bring her home safe. Bringing her home Tranquil was anything but.

The archer leaned against the railing with him, silent since they'd left the captain's cabin. His eyes were fixed to the Gallow's flame, and he looked no different than he did down at the pier every day, save for the wind in his hair and the slight crease to his brow that spoke less of desolation and more of determination. Anders nudged him, and Hawke turned towards him. His eyes were far more trusting than Anders deserved.

"Back in there, with Kanky's toes?" Anders said, "That was pretty funny."

"I was serious," Hawke said.

"That's what made it funny." Anders said. "Look... when we get in there... We need to get to the fifth floor, on the east wing. If we can get there, there's a woman there who will help us the rest of the way. She'll know where the apprentices are kept."

"Alright," Hawke said.
"Look, a lot of this is going to be luck," Anders said. "I wasn't kidding when I said I wasn't prepared. If we're not careful and we get caught, they'll kill us, and anyone they so much as think was helping us,"

"Alright," Hawke said.

"And I can turn into a crow." Anders said.

"Alright," Hawke said.


"Well I'm not going to do it right now," Anders said.

"Alright,"

"I really can though."

"I said alright."

"You don't believe me."

"Anders-"

"No, that's fine. You don't have to."

"I believe you."

"Alright." Anders said.

"Alright." Hawke said.

The Undercuts cast anchor in the shadow of the Gallows, to the far east of the docks, and lowered them both in the rowboat. The Dogs that had joined them assured them they'd keep an eye on the Undercuts and make sure they wouldn't cast off without them, which was something, though Anders didn't doubt it was far less grandiose than they had anticipated after his rousing speech in Darktown.

He and Hawke rowed towards the docks as best they were able, but they weren't sailors. They didn't have Isabela. They didn't know how to keep the paddles quiet, how to disembark without all but falling off the pier, how to tie a stable knot to ensure the rowboat didn't drift away. It was sheer luck that got them to the Gallows without being caught, and as they watched the rowboat bob back out to sea, Anders supposed it would have to be sheer luck that got them out.
Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who has helped support my husband and I recently. This particular chapter is dedicated to LegoPrime. I'm still trying to figure out what's going on, who all these characters are, and how to write again, so keep bearing with me. Any advice or constructive criticism is welcome. Thank you for all of your comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, and as always thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon 5 Parvulis Night
Kirkwall Gallows

The Waking Sea was awash in silvery light, cast from the moons and stars, but it died upon the docks. The fog crept up in its stead, rolling into the Gallows with the wind and all its whispers. The Gallows were different at night. Not that Anders had ever been during the day, but night had a way of making shadows into things shadows ought not to be. Pillars turned to statute turned to templar.

Anders couldn't think past his heartbeat, fast and frantic and just beneath the skin, waiting for the pull of magic to sink it into the mind of another. He ran down the pier after Hawke, trying to tackle the docks one plank at a time, but there was no calming his thoughts. There was no talking his way out of this if they were caught. Blood magic was all he had. Calling on Justice was calling on disaster. The spirit wouldn't rest until the Gallows came crumbling down around them, and Anders couldn't risk it.

Anders felt himself a storm: his pulse roared like thunder in his ears, sweat ran like rain down his back, his memories flashed like lightning behind his eyes. This was desperate. This was death. The gates to the Gallows courtyard were as open as the gates to Amaranthine on the eve of Cassus, because no man was mad enough to storm them. He couldn't do this. Maker, he couldn't do this. This wasn't like with Karl. He hadn't flown across the Waking Sea, bird-brained and barely able to comprehend what he was doing until he was in the room with the man. He was walking straight into the very place he'd been dragged back to all his life, and walking blind. Anders was shaking, and it took him an age to realize Hawke was the one shaking him. No sooner had they stepped off the pier than Hawke took him by the arm and dragged him to cover.

The man's eyes were on him, a red so akin to blood Anders couldn't help but be comforted by it. "You with me, Anders?" Hawke asked.

Anders wondered how long he'd been asking.

"I'm with you," Anders agreed.

"You sure?" Hawke asked.

"I'm sure," Anders brushed the man's hands off him, only to have Hawke catch him by his jaw and force his eyes back when Anders tried to look away.

"You can't do that in there," Hawke, or whatever had possessed Hawke to make him capable of eye-
contact, said, "You can't break down."

"I-" Anders squared his shoulders, but couldn't hold the pose under the intensity of Hawke's stare, "I can't promise that."

The man... the mercenary, the capable and competent companion Anders had elected accompany him, drew his bow from off its sling on his back and strung it. The stillness of the night and the silence of the act was maddening; the red cedar bent easily under Hawke's skillful hands, and the twang of hemp snapping into place was all but gone with the wind. Anders couldn't do this.

"Be a crow," Hawke said.

"What?"

"Be a crow," Hawke said again. "You're not a mage. You're just a bird. I'm the only one here. I got desperate. Couldn't wait the year for visitation. Wanted to see my sister, so I stole a rowboat and got lucky with the fog. You're just some bird. No one cares about birds."

"I'm just a bird," Anders said.

"You're just a bird," Hawke agreed.

Anders took a deep breath, and a step back. "You might want to look away," Anders warned him.

"Why?" Hawke asked.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Anders said.

It itched. It always itched. Down pierced his skin, and burst black from his arms. His fingers seized, and unraveled into wings. His legs buckled beneath him as his skin sloughed and split apart, scales fusing their way down to his toes. His bones hollowed, stretched, snapped apart, and then snapped back into place. His spine cracked, and then collapsed. His jaw broke through his lips, and snapped shut into the beak of a crow, that ruffled its newly formed feathers and cocked its head at the human beside it.

The human paled. The crow ignored it, and flitted up onto the crates the man sat against. There were no other humans, nor elves, nor dwarves about, and it was a short flight through the gates to the Gallows. The crow circled twice overhead, and found a perch atop one of the many bronze statues that lined the courtyard. Some were bent and bowed and broken, more skeleton than man, donning naught in the way of dignity. Others were bold and brutal and barbarous, more armor than man, donning naught in the way of dignity. Men of metal without mettle.

They were remnants of an age long passed but ever present. The crow sat atop the statue, watching the smaller men of blood and flesh move patrol the courtyard below. They wore silver in place of bronze, but otherwise well emulated their predecessors. The crow waited out their passing, and cawed when the guard changed. The human that had accompanied the crow to the Gallows sprinted through the courtyard, up the stairs, and paused at the portcullis.

The crow abandoned its perch to fly into the Gallows proper. The guard had gone down the western corridor, so the crow flew east. The corridors were cramped and cavernous; the distance between each door marked the rooms much the same. A barred window was inlaid in each, with scarcely enough to room for the crow to perch, and even less to squeeze through. It flitted from one window to the next, finding on each mage within the markings of maturity.

Fledglings were further from the ground, though no further from predators. The crow turned down
the hall, in search of stairs for the human accompanying it, and squawked at the sight of silver.

"Shoo!" The templar snapped, flapping its gauntlets like ineffectual wings at the crow. "Get! How did you get in here? Get before you shit everywhere!"

The crow flew back down the corridor, cawing out one warning after the next, but the human that had been following it was nowhere to be seen. The crow landed where the corridors intersected, hopped to face one direction after the next, and saw nothing. Each corridor was identical, stone upon stone lined in sconce upon sconce. There was no color save for the dark auburn doors and occasionally tapestry. The crow squawked its frustration, and flew north on a whim.

It doubled back at the sound of a whistle, and stopped before a tapestry emblazoned with a sunburst. The crow recognized the symbol for a threat, and grabbed a loose thread to tug upon. The tapestry unraveled with each small tug, and the crow gave a squawk of delight that turned fast to alarm. A human hand emerged from behind the tapestry, and scooped it up to pull through to a hidden passageway. "What are you doing?" The crow's human whispered, red eyes reflecting enough of what little light lingered for the crow to see them clearly.

The crow thought of the symbol and the need to destroy it. It thought of coming winter and the threat it presented. It thought of men of silver and sword turned to molten metal, of corpses and carrion. It thought of the red the human carried in its eyes and the way the color dyed the dead. It thought-


Crows didn't need stairs. Humans did. They needed them to go up. Up to the fifth floor. East wing. Fifth floor. The crow hopped onto the human's shoulder, and stared into the pitch black of the passageway behind it. It cawed. The caw echoed. The crow flew out into the black, comforted by the steady thud of the human's footsteps behind it.

The passageway was a maze. It doubled back a dozen times over, and seemed to circle the entire Gallows. Time passed. In the passageway, light and sound were muted, broken only by the occasional conversation the tapestries hiding the entrances muffled. The crow stopped to listen to one, continuous of the click of its talons, but the words were lost on it. It recognized only the tone, for it was a tranquil one. Dead but not dead. Alive but not alive.

The crow stayed beside the tapestry long after the footfalls had faded. There was too little wind in the passageways to keep flying. Too little wind in the corridors. Too little wind in the Gallows. There was too little wind. The human that traveled with it picked it up again, whispered, "You're just a bird," and shoved it through the tapestry. There was still too little wind, but there were stairs. The crow squawked, and the human followed it out.

They made their way up, and up, and further up. The fifth floor awaited them, no different than the first, save that as they came across their first crossroads, a templar turned the same corner they did.

It seemed a routine patrol. The templar's sword was undrawn, his helmet undonned, his head and shoulders bowed as if by the weight of his thoughts. He had the coloring of a cardinal, in his hair, in his sash, in the tunic that shone beneath his armor, in the blood that ran from the cut on his cheek when Hawke leveled his arrow against the man's face. "Master Hawke," The templar's voice belied more familiarity than fear.

"Thrask," Hawke said.
"A pleasure to see you again, serah," Thrask said.

"You didn't see me," Hawke said, drawing the arrow further back so the metal no longer pressed against Thrask's skin. He seemed in more pain from the exchange than the templar, and the crow couldn't fathom the cause. The templar was a threat. Templars were always a threat, and the only thing to be done with a threat was to harry it until it died or fled.

"No, I didn't," Thrask agreed, glancing to the arrowhead. It seemed too long a look for a man's whose life hinged on not seeing. "But all the same, there is a conversation I would have with you, were you here. I wonder if you would indulge me."

"... Why?" Hawke said. The crow screamed and landed on the Hawke's shoulder, pecking at whatever exposed flesh it could find. "Shut it."

"Because I know you to be a person of good character and..." Thrask cocked an eyebrow at the irate crow on Hawke's shoulder, "Unusual ability. And I require your aid in a delicate task, as I suspect you may need mine."

Hawke lowered his bow. The crow screamed again. It thrashed and lost feathers beating its wings on the human's shoulder. It bit between each screech at whatever flesh was closest, and dug its talons in when Hawke tried to pry it off.

"You may wish to quiet your bird, serah," Thrask suggested.

"Enough!" Hawke fisted a hand around the crow's beak to quiet its screams. "His daughter is a mage. Shut it already."

The crow calmed enough to cease its onslaught, and sat restless on the human's shoulder. Thrask quite admirably ignored the exchange, and gestured back the way he'd come. He led them to a nondescript room, and shut the door behind them. They were a mage's quarters, albeit in disuse by the dust, and seemed as safe a place as any to speak.

Alone, Thrask finally eyed the bird on Hawke's shoulder. "Meredith has created as much dissent as obedience, but I must admit, I have never seen such a clever attempt to circumvent the rules of correspondence as smuggling in a messenger crow. You continue to impress, Serah."

"Right," Hawke said.

"Arianni tells me you sought a better path than the Circle for her son Feynriel." Thrask continued. "You did more for him than I for my own daughter. If I had been so strong for Olivia... but she is at peace now, and I cannot forget the kindness you have done me, keeping her secret. I would keep yours in turn. Forget your bird. I will be your messenger, and take you to your sister, if you would be willing to show mages a kindness once more."

"What kind of kindness?" Hawke asked.

"There is a group of apostates," Thrask said, "Mages of the former circle at Starkhaven. It burned to the ground, and their templars sent for us to relocate the survivors. Some escaped."

"Not my business," Hawke said.

"The lives of many innocents are at stake here, Serah," Thrask said. "These mages, their phylacteries were burned, and they escaped before our First Enchanter could make them anew. It has been nearly impossible to track them, and they have shown that they attack templars on sight."
"Why are you pestering me for?" Hawke demanded, "This is templar business, and I've no business with templars."

"Your sister is a mage, Master Hawke," Thrask said. "I suspect you will have business with templars all your life."

"The only business I have right now is seeing my sister. I helped you even after the beating you gave my family," Hawke tensed, and unsettled the crow where it stood on his shoulder, "Gave my mother. You owe me."

"And it is the Maker's saving grace I know it, and it was I who found you wandering the Gallows and not another, like Ser Karras. You will recall him, I have no doubt. Knight-lieutenant. Great crony of Meredith. The man who would have left your uncle lame had I not stopped him."

"You don't get a reward for not beating Gamlen to death," Hawke said, "Not with how many people in this city want him dead."

"I am not asking for one. I am simply reminding you that under Meredith there are less templars sympathetic to the mages' plight with every passing day, and Ser Karras is not one of them. He has been assigned to these apostates from Starkhaven, and as he sees it they are hiding from pursuit. When he finds them, he will murder the lot, and Meredith will consider it justified. I am on your side, Serah. When Guard Captain Vallen begged your freedom I stood with her. Stand with me now."

"Why would he find them?" Hawke asked.

"Because there have been sightings along the Wounded Coast," Thrask said, "And there are only so many caverns. Please, speak with the group. Convince them to return and surrender peacefully before my fellow templars do otherwise. They are better off alive and in the Circle than free and dead, and if Ser Karras finds them first... it will be a blood bath. I know it."

"How do I know they're better off in the Circle?" Hawke asked. "People talk. Spirit-healers and harrowed mages are being made Tranquil. Templars who don't agree are killed in some new initiation ritual. They could be better off dead."

"I refuse to believe that. I have sacrificed my station to speak on behalf of mages, and there are others who have done the same. The Circle is not what it should or could be, but we cannot give up on it. There is no such initiation ritual, I assure you, nor are harrowed mages being made Tranquil with any blessing from Meredith. She is not quite the monster she is made out to be... although..."

"Out with it," Hawke said.

"There have been incidents. Harrowed mages who have allegedly... volunteered for Tranquility. They are being investigate, but we digress," Thrask gestured to the door, "My patrol lasts another quarter hour. Come with me. I will take you to your sister, and exchange any letters you wish. I ask only that you do me and the missing mages this favor."

"I need a minute." Hawke said, and when Thrask deigned not to move, continued, "Alone. With my... thoughts."

"A minute may be all you have," Thrask said. "I will wait outside."

The templar departed, and the crow came apart in a series of clicks and clacks as its spine unraveled. Its beak broke and swung limp at its neck before snapping back into the shape of a jaw, while the rest of its human face seemed to melt into place. Skeletal hands fast followed by flesh clawed free of its wings, and its talons fused into feet. The only remnants of its existence were the feathers that
adorned Anders' pauldrons. Anders stood up, and Hawke stepped back.

"Maker's breath," Hawke turned away from him to cover his mouth. He bent at the waist and swallowed what Anders could only guess was vomit, his pallor noticeably green.

"We are not going to hunt apostates for him," Anders hissed; he'd warned the man. If Hawke was going to be sick he could do it on his own time, and not when the cause was at stake. Thrask wasn't Bardel. Anders didn't know him. He didn't have any history with him. Hawke did, but Hawke was here for one mage, not all of them. Anders was, and no matter what it cost him, Anders had to remember that.

"She's my sister, Anders," Hawke whispered.

"I won't doom a dozen mages to save one," Anders whispered back; with each breath, he tasted mana, and breathed deeper.

"It's Beth, Anders." Hawke recovered enough to stand upright, "For Maker's sake, Anders, it's Beth."

"Don't you think I know that?" Anders asked. "Look, we stick to the plan-"

"We don't have a plan," Hawke hissed. "It's a good deal. I'm taking it. You with me or not?"

"We are not," Justice said for him.

"No one asked you," Hawke said.

"I am Anders," Justice said. "Anything you ask of him, you ask of us. We cannot agree to this."

"Anders, please," Hawke grabbed him by his shoulders, but couldn't quite settle on his grip. His hands squeezed, shifted, squeezed again, in a dance of desperation. "I need you."

"I can't," Anders said, "You heard him. Harrowed mages are being made Tranquil, and the Knight-Commander knows. First it was Libertarians, now it's spirit-healers, and they're covering it up. Saying they volunteered. Saying Karl volunteered. They can't keep getting away with this. We have to do something. We have to get them out, and we have to get them out now. How many lives is Beth worth?"

"All of them!" Hawke let go of him and scratched furiously at his scalp. "Look, this? Thrask? This is more than we set out with. He's a good man. He can help you, but not for nothing."

"Not for this," Anders said, "I won't send mages back to the Circle."

"We can't save them, Anders," Hawke said. "There's two of us. We can save Beth. Find out where in the tower she is, and come back another day with a real plan."

Hawke was right. Damn him, he was right. They'd panicked. They'd come out here with nothing but gal and gumption. There was no one to rescue because no one knew they were being rescued. The Undercuts wouldn't even give them more than a rowboat, so even if they broke down the doors to every cell they came across, they wouldn't be able to row out more than a handful. They needed the Coteries's tunnels, Bardel and Bancroft to get past the Victim's Door for the phylacteries, and they needed the Dogs to help the mages recover from their time in the Circle.

".....There's a templar," Anders said, "Alrik. I have it on good authority he's behind the mages behind made Tranquil. Tell Thrask to watch him. And the Starkhaven mages-... we don't send them
back here. If we find them, we help them escape. We get them to Ostwick, or Ferelden, or anywhere but here."

"Fine," Hawke said.

"What?" Anders said.

"Fine," Hawke said. "Done. You good? That was our minute."

"I'm good," Anders said.

Hawke looked away from his transformation. The crow bounded back onto his shoulder, and Hawke opened the door. Thrask was awaiting them outside. The templar had been leaning against the wall, for all intents and purposes at ease, no doubt due to the fact that he seemed to be the only templar assigned to the floor. "Free and free," Hawke said. "Not free and dead, not alive and in the Circle. Free and free. I handle it how I handle it, no questions. Beth sends her letters. Once a week. And Alrik stays away from her."

"Alrik?" Thrask asked. "What does... yes, fine. Agreed, but if any wish to return to the Circle, you must accompany them. Ser Karras would not spare them otherwise."

"Fine," Hawke said.

"She is in the west wing, with the other first years," Thrask said. "We'll have to stop to get the keys-"

"I can pick the lock," Hawke said.

"Fair enough," Thrask said. "Stay close and quiet."

The templar led to the opposite end of the Gallows, and all the while the crow counted the cells they left behind. Within one was a mage named Elsa who specialized in spirit healing. The crow didn't know her spirit. Whether it was Justice, or Compassion, or Faith. It hoped that it was Hope. With the time it would take the crow to come back, Hope was all she had.

Bethany's cell was a cell like any other. Hawke drew a rake and a wrench from a pouch on his belt, and the crow watched in avid fascination as he tapped, twisted, and turned them until the lock gave with a click. There was no ward. There was no need for one. No mage could replicate what the rogue had done so effortlessly with the limited skills the Circle availed them.

"Beth?" Hawke knocked twice before he opened the door. The room was painfully small and painfully familiar. It boasted a bed, desk, and wardrobe, and little else. A window large enough to throw oneself from was open and faced seaward, and hopefully proved no threat to the mage who lived within. Beth was asleep, and Hawke sat on the bed beside her to shake her awake while the crow found a perch on her bedpost.

"Beth, wake up," Hawke said.

"Garrett?" Bethany grabbed Hawke's hands and squeezed as if to test if they were real. Her eyes were bright, and the shadows beneath them seemed borne from lack of sleep over sorrow. She found her smile easily enough, and her magic along with it. She lit the candle on her nightstand with a breath of magic, and did it without fear or hesitation. She bore no bruises, and seemed no worse for wear when she hugged her brother with strength and enthusiasm. "Garrett, what are you doing here? Thrask...? Visitation doesn't start for another year."

Hawke said nothing. He pulled Bethany into his arms, and seemed to come apart, as if the strength
fled from all but his arms. He clung to Bethany like a drowning man to flotsam, shaking with each rickety breath as though it might be his last. He spoke, but the words were choked, and the crow couldn't decipher them.

"I'm okay," Bethany whispered. "I'm okay. I'm doing fine. It's okay."

"I can spare five minutes," Thrask said, and closed the door for them.

"I'm fine. Look, see?" Bethany took one of Hawke's hands, and used it to push back her bangs. Nothing marred her forehead. "Everything is fine. This isn't the end we thought it was."

"Thought-" Hawke managed.

"I know," Bethany squeezed Hawke's hands again, though this time it seemed as if to prove to him that she was real, "I know, we all did, but I'm fine. I'm safe. I'm Harrowed."

"You're what?"

"I'm Harrowed," Bethany said again, "The templars made a point of putting me through the Harrowing as soon as I arrived. They thought I was at risk of possession or running away like Father, but it's over. I'm glad it's over. It was... but let's not talk about that. I'm fine, and you don't need to worry about me."

"Always going to worry about you," Hawke said, "Came to save you."

"I know, but don't," Bethany said, "The Circle isn't what we thought it was. They're good to me here. The First Enchanter looks out for us. We help each other, and the templars are mostly polite if you don't cause trouble. They're not all monsters, if you can believe it."

"It's just us, Beth. Whatever they've done to you-"

"They haven't done anything to me," Bethany said. "They're just doing their jobs. They ask me questions about what you do, but that's all."

"If they hurt you-"

"They don't take threats well. And it doesn't matter. They're just questions, and I've stored quite a bewildering weave of answers. Everyone knows you're with the Red Irons, but I won't help them prove it. You should quit, you know. You're too good for Meeran, and now we don't need the money."

"Beth-"

"I'm fine. Really. I've even started mentoring apprentices. I get to spend time with the children, teach them basic spells, and one of them, Ella, has taken a shine to me. She's always asking questions, never afraid to learn... I would have given anything to be like that are her age.

"You can't imagine it, Garrett! This whole time we were so concerned with being free, we never stopped to think about what that meant. Running, being afraid, always looking over our shoulders, giving up our lives... that wasn't freedom. This is freedom. I'm happy, Garrett. I'm so happy. Please don't worry about me."

"You sure?" Hawke asked. "I can get you out. Anders-"

"I'm fine," Bethany interrupted him, "This is the best thing that could have happened to us. I've been
so worried about Mother... all she used to do was sit in that rathole and think about Carver, let it eat her up, and now me? I tried to get her to look for work, or reconnect with childhood friends, but she said it was too pathetic. But now you can tell her I'm fine, and maybe with the estate, she can have the life she always wanted. You can have the life you never got to have because of me. I get to stop running. And Gamlen... Gamlen's a tit."

Hawke chuckled, and Anders finally broke. The crow exploded, and Bethany screamed. Thrask rushed back inside, but Anders was scarcely aware of him. "You're fine!?" Anders demanded, "You're a prisoner for the rest of your life, but you're fine? You can never see your family or have one of your own, but you're fine? You never get to breathe fresh air, to feel wind, or rain, or snow, to smell the earth after rain or flowers in bloom, but you're fine!? You're not fine! You're a bloody coward!"

"Anders!-"Hawke stood up.

"Aveline told us," Anders continued, "I didn't want to believe her, but it's true, isn't it? You wanted to join the Circle. You asked for this. You gave up. Threw your life away."

"I accept what I am and act accordingly," Bethany said. Andraste's saving grace, she didn't even hesitate. "I can pretend to be miserable if you want, but I'm not."

"Because you don't understand the stakes!" Anders shouted.

"Well it's a good thing you're here to carry the burden." Bethany sneered.

"Your father carried that burden. Your brother carried that burden. They spent their lives fighting to keep you free. You said so yourself. How can you turn your back on that?"

"This is my life, Anders," Bethany said.

"Until the templars decide otherwise," Anders said."Until you speak against them, or fall in love, or-"

"I'm not Karl!" Bethany cut him off. "Do you have any idea what a hard decision this was for me? How long I've lived in fear of the Circle? You have no idea the courage it took me to change my mind. I hope one day you change yours."

"You're wrong," Anders said, "You're so wrong."

"Master Hawke," Thrask said in the stillness that followed. "Is everything alright?"

"Fine," Hawke said. "Five minutes up?"

"So it is, but... how did your friend..."

"Not your business." Hawke said, and gave Bethany's hands a final squeeze, "I'll write you."

"Finally learn your letters?" Bethany's grin was watery, but Anders didn't have it in him to sympathize. She'd brought it on herself.

"Most of them," Hawke said. "Write me."

"Correspondence-" Bethany started.

"We'll make an exception," Thrask assured her.
"Give my love to Mother," Bethany hugged her brother, and the two parted. To his credit, or what little credit Anders was willing to give a templar, Thrask didn't ask again after Anders' sudden appearance. He led them in silence back to the east wing, and failed to notice or in the very least comment when Anders ceased to follow and a crow took his place.

The crow had no need of stairs when any window would bring it back to the docks. It left Hawke's shoulder, and flew through the east wing's fifth floor. It perched on each small window on each cell door and peered within, searching for signs of a mage who's name it couldn't speak and who's face it couldn't place. It thought of the one who had sent it, a woman all in grey from her pallor, to her hair, to her eyes, and after an age seemed to stumble upon a mage who matched her, or what remained of one.

Her eyes were grey. Her pallor much the same. Her hair the sort of blonde that turned to ash with age, and the sunburst scar was fresh upon her brow. It was the dead of night, but by the circles under her eyes, she'd not slept in days. She seemed preoccupied with organizing a set of scrolls, and stopped only briefly to regard herself in the mirror that lay on her desk. Her reflection took in first her eyes, and then the sunburst on her forehead, and then dropped the mirror in the wastebasket.

Bethany didn't understand the stakes.

She didn't understand them at all.
Act of Mercy

Chapter Summary

Thank you for reading. Any advice or constructive criticism is welcome, and comments are greatly appreciated. Thank you for all of your comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, and as always thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon 6 Parvulis Early Morn
Kirkwall Docks – Collective Packaging House

The room had never felt smaller. Crates and barrels were stacked to the ceiling and made a maze of the packaging house. It dead-ended into Selby's desk, where the woman spent most of her day working tirelessly to manage the front and the Collective it protected. It was a good front. Bundle something up in parchment, put on a servant's garb, and you could go anywhere with anything. Even the Gallows. It was how they smuggled in letters, leaves, flowers, seashells... little whispers of the world beyond its walls.

It was cruel.

It made no difference, and Anders knew it. He had known since he stepped off the boat. Mages were locked in their cells and denied appearances at court. Others were made Tranquil for slightest of crimes, whether or not they were Harrowed. Their families met with their own version of the gallows if they tried to stop it. Half of Kirkwall was blind to it, and the other half knew better than to see it. Anders wasn't just sensitive to it. It was real and it was happening and Elsa was just the start. He'd known better than to promise to save her.

Anders was cruel.

Kirkwall had been called the City of Chains for over a thousand years. Smuggling in one letter or smuggling out one mage wasn't going to change that. All they were doing was building up false hope, and even that was for naught when the templars were tranquilizing the mages who might have called on such spirits. It made no sense. Healers were how the Gallows made their coin.... Healers and tranquil. Their labor was free and their stalls had lined the Gallows' courtyard, filled with their bloody wares, and one for the other might have been a wash as far as Stannard was concerned.

Kirkwall was cruel.

Or maybe it was just Elsa. Maybe she was the only spirit healer the Gallows had, and that was what Kanky had meant. Maybe Cor had been confused. Maybe Elsa had gotten tired of waiting for her sister to rescue her. Maybe she really had volunteered for Tranquility. It wasn't unheard of in Ferelden, so why couldn't it happen in Kirkwall? Maybe the Chantry had gotten to her like Keili, or she had given up like Owain. Maybe Anders had wasted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity on some ill-conceived plan to rescue mages beyond rescuing.

Life was cruel.

Selby had fallen asleep at her desk. They'd yet to speak of it. They'd yet to speak of anything. They'd come back to the packaging house, and they'd come back without Elsa. There was nothing to be
said. Selby's tears had been ugly. The woman wept like a demon of despair had settled in her chest and coiled tight around her lungs, wailing with every breath. Hawke had sat with her, without comment or complaint. He was better suited. Hawke, of all people, was better suited to comfort the poor woman. Anders was elsewhere with his thoughts.

Beth-

Anders slammed a hand into the nearest crate and felt nothing when it splintered apart beneath his fist. Selby shifted, and Anders tried to tell himself to calm down. Beth had taken an arrow of mage-bane for the Collective. She’d spent months healing the refugees of darktown. She’d even summoned a spirit for an abomination, for Maker’s sake. “I’m not Karl,” Beth had said, her face scrunched and scowling at his offer of freedom.

Beth wasn’t cruel, Beth was a bloody idiot.

Anders looked to Hawke, and thought of the coin, the time, the life the man had wasted to give his sister one she’d thrown away. “We should move on,” Anders said to him. He left the packaging house without waiting to see if Hawke followed his advice.

The sunrise bled across the bay, painting it in all the colors of mourning as though it felt for him. It was done. Beth was with the Circle, but the Starkhaven mages didn’t have to be. Anders didn’t need the Undercuts, the Dogs, the Coterie, or any of Kirkwall’s gangs to see them free. He had Justice, and for once, he’d see it served. Let the templars try to stop him.

He could be at the Wounded Coast before the sun finished its climb across the sky and see the Starkhaven mages to Ostwick or Cumberland or the bloody Black City for all they would care. Anywhere was better than the Circle, and any mage worth their magic knew it. Anders started down the docks towards the coast. It meant heading east, which meant passing the Qunari Compound.

It had been a bazaar once, for sailors and fishermen and all else the tide brought in. The banners still flew, soot and shit-stained, but welcomed no ships. There was no need, with Stannard forcing trade through the Gallows. Shipmasters could still make berth at the docks, but the sunken ship in the harbor was a testament to what happened to those who tried to skirt the templar’s levies without Kanky’s knowhow.

The qunari had occupied the docks for near a year now, and it had worked out in Stannard’s favor. The Knight-Commander should have joined the Undercuts, to hear Varric tell it. There was a small cost for everything. A small cost to unload goods. A small cost to store them. A small cost to ferry them back to Kirkwall’s mainland. A smaller cost to pay the dockworkers like Gamlen to unload the goods all over again, and the smallest cost to pay the elves who ferried goods up to the Lowtown bazaar.

It was a short walk from the docks to Lowtown, but fewer elves made it every day. The qunari opened their gates to them, and unlike Isabela and every other sane person in Thedas, the elves ran in instead of away. Anders couldn’t fathom it - waking up one day and deciding what he really needed was someone else telling him everything he should think. The Qun made the Circle of Magi look like a pleasant vacation.

If that had been Bethany’s only alternative, Anders could have forgiven her, but it wasn’t. She didn’t have to join the Circle and become a cog in Stannard’s wheel. Performing lightshows for nobles on First Day, healing reflux after Satinalia, supervising the new Tranquil Stannard seemed to make every day.

If Fereldans were having trouble finding work now, it was only going to get worse. Tranquil didn’t
need rest. They didn’t need pay. It cost Stannard nothing to control trade in Kirkwall and gained her everything. Maybe that was why she kept making good mages Tranquil. Maybe that was why she was in no hurry to see the qunari on their way. No one would blame her. They’d blame the qunari. And once they made one allowance, they’d only make more.

The templars were already raiding the Lowtown. How long before they started raiding Hightown? Any excuse would work. They had to stop the spread of the Qun. They had to keep the people safe from the qunari. Was anywhere in Kirkwall free of them? Anders didn’t want to think about it. What was it Hawke was always saying? ‘Don’t borrow trouble’? But how could Anders help it when there was so much to go around?

Anders kept his eyes on the bay as he passed the compound. He couldn’t stand to catch a glimpse of one of the qunari mages, their lips sewn shut, their wrists bound… not now. The red rusted spikes that lined the docks and the fetid waves that lapped over them and into Darktown were a reprieve in comparison.

A sound behind him drew Anders’ attention. He looked over his shoulder to see Hawke jogging to catch up with him, black-fletched arrows clattering in his quiver as it bounced against his thigh. He looked fierce when he moved with purpose, but Anders wasn’t of a mind to appreciate it. He could just imagine what Hawke had to say, and he didn’t want to hear it.

He kept walking for as many paces as he was able before Hawke overtook him and turned him about with a hand on his upper arm. Hawke’s eyes were uncharacteristically soft, as red and as warm as the sunrise. Anders hated it. He’d done nothing to warrant the look and nothing had happened to warrant Hawke wearing it. Hawke’s relief was Anders’ rage.

“Where are you going?” Hawke asked.

“Where do you think?” Anders shot back, staring at the hand Hawke had on his arm.

“Wouldn’t ask if I knew.” Hawke let go of him, but hesitated pulling his hand away. Anders didn’t know what to make of it.

“The Starkhaven mages aren’t going to rescue themselves,” Anders shouldn’t have had to explain. This wasn’t a conversation to have in public. The docks were sparse, but he couldn’t get comfortable. “You heard Thrask.”

“What’s your plan?” Hawke asked.

“To… rescue them?” Anders frowned.

“How are you going to find them?” Hawke asked.

“I’ll look.” Anders said, but the questions continued.

“What are you going to do when you find them?” Hawked asked.

“Help them,” Anders said.

“How?” Hawke persisted. “Do you know how many caverns are along the Wounded Coast? Which ones Karras has checked already? What about the guard? Are they patrolling the coast today? Is Karras? Civilians? Which routes do the merchant guild use?”

Maker save him. Hawke couldn’t have picked a more inopportune time to develop a vocabulary. The questions felt more like an interrogation, and Anders didn’t have the patience. More importantly, he
didn’t have the answers.

“I have no time to argue with you,” Anders turned back around and kept walking. He didn’t make it far before Hawke overtook him again and pulled him into an ally, where his hands stayed firmly on Anders’ upper arms.

“Then don’t,” Hawke kept hold of him. It would have been a simple thing to break free of his hold, but Hawke squeezed his arms when he tensed. If Anders didn’t know better, he might have thought it a substitute for an embrace. “Don’t bullshit me, Anders.”

“What do you want, Hawke?” Anders asked.

“I want you to give this some thought.” Hawke let go of his arms when Anders made it clear he wasn’t trying to escape.

“I’ve spent enough time thinking and too little time acting.” It was already Parvulis. In three months, he’d have been in Kirkwall a year. Anders had come with nothing but the clothes on his back and somehow ended up with less. His grimoire was gone. Karl was dead. His clothes were rags, cobbled together with leather, and wool, and feathers for transformation magic that had served nothing and no one. “Do you know how long I’ve been in Kirkwall, trying to make a difference?”

“And you thought it would be easy?” Hawked snorted.

“You don’t know what it’s like for me,” Anders said hotly. “For Justice. In the Fade, there is no time. We sat idle too long waiting for the right moment to strike and now-…” Silence stretched. Hawke stood still, thumbs looped into his belt, the picture of patience Anders lacked. “Are you really going to make me say it?”

“What do you think happened back there?” Hawke waved a hand at the Gallows, no anger, all confusion. “My sister –”

“Is in the Circle!” Anders all but screamed. Maker, it was like he forgot.

“Not your choice,” Hawke said. “Not mine. Brooding isn’t going to change it. Doesn’t need to change it. She’s happy. She’s safe. ‘The plight of every mage is my burden.’ That’s what you always say, isn’t it? Or does that stop at the Circle doors?”

“It stops when the mages are free.” Anders said, grateful for the echo Justice gave him.

“And their families?” At Anders blank stare, Hawke put one hand on Anders’ shoulder and the other on his heart, as if to make it clear he spoke from it “Do you have any idea what you’ve done for us? Beth’s alive. She can write to me. To mother. To Gamlin for all she gives a damn.”

“And that’s enough for you?” Anders asked incredulously. “You seriously think just because she passed her Harrowing she’s out of danger? That the Circle will protect her?”

“If they don’t, you will,” Hawke said with such conviction Anders felt torn. Not between Anders and Justice, but between shame and fury he and his spirit shared in equal parts. Hawke shouldn’t have trusted him. He shouldn’t have been grateful to have his sister in the Circle. Anders had failed him. Anders was furious he wasn’t furious and ashamed he wasn’t shamed. “Anders, you’ve done enough for Beth. You’ve done enough for me.”

“I don’t deserve your thanks.” Hawke hadn’t offered it, but it was there, unspoken in the warmth behind his eyes, in the hand upon his shoulder, in the compassion in his tone. Anders looked away from him – unable to meet his eyes.
“My advice, then,” Hawke let go of his shoulder, “You want to save the Starkhaven mages, you need a plan.”

“What, and you’re going to help me come up with one?” Anders scoffed.

“I don’t do anything sight unseen,” Hawke held up a fist, and started ticking down the steps on his fingers, “I get the official report from Thrask, layout of the coast and cave network, the standard sweep run by the templars when mages go rogue along it. Patrol routes from Aveline, the guild’s routes from Varric. We go when it fits, where it fits, small group, outfitted as guardsmen.”

“Because Aveline’s term as captain has been so mage friendly,” Anders rolled his eyes, “I’m sure she’d be delighted to help us impersonate the guard.”

“Not asking her,” Hawke said simply, “Kept a whole set of uniforms from a group of pretenders that were ‘taxing’ some of the Hightown nobles. We bring Varric to bullshit anyone we pass, and double back through the Planasene Forest when we find the mages. Karass can follow the coast all the way to Ostwick while the mages get a boat at Cumberland or keep north along the Imperial Highway to Nevarra.”

It … wasn’t a terrible plan. Hawke had come up with it on the spot, like it was nothing. For some reason, it was reassuring. Anders let himself breathe. If he convinced no one else in Thedas, at least he had Hawke at his side. The same man who had walked out on him the day they’d met at the mere mention of confronting templars stood before him brazenly prepared to defy them. Maybe now that Hawke wasn’t worried about Bethany, he would be free worry about the rest of the mages.

Or maybe he just felt obligated to repay him. Anders couldn’t get the measure of the man, but a good plan was a good plan. “Did you learn strategy at Ostagar?”

Hawke snorted. “Soldiers who learned strategy at Ostagar died at Ostagar.”

“Where then?” Anders asked.

“You want to pester me or you want to save your mages?” Hawke shot back.

And there was the Hawke Anders remembered. “And here I thought we were having a moment,” Anders joked.

“We-I-…” Hawke choked on his words, a hand in his hair blocked his face from view, “I have a condition.”

“The one where you open your mouth and you’re an asshole?” Anders recalled.

“That one,” Hawke agreed, “Look it’s… I’m not proud of my past.”

“And I’m a shining example of someone who is?” Anders laughed.

Hawke apparently decided the question was rhetorical and deigned not to answer him, “Come with me to The Hang Man. Talk to Varric. You still want to know, you can ask me anything then.”

“Anything?” Anders raised an eyebrow at him, “Be careful what you offer.”

Hawke smiled. Sort of. Anders would count the twitch at the corner of his lips for a smile. They left the docks in what Anders was willing to call a companionable silence. The clatter of Hawke’s arrows in their quiver was almost soothing in its rhythm. Anders bumped into him, distracted by it, and Hawke spared him a glance, but didn’t flinch or snap.
Progress. Perspective. It was a good plan. Hawke, on occasion, could be a good man. If Anders never got access to the Coterie’s tunnels, if he never found a ship, if the rest of his efforts with the Collective, the Coterie, and the Dogs were all for naught, at least he could save the Starkhaven mages. He had to save the Starkhaven’s mages.

It was a steep climb from the docks to The Hanged Man that took them past Kirkwall’s elaborate pulley system. A ramshackled mess of hickory, oak, and walnut warped together to form a railway bolted into the sandstone stairs. A single cart at the bottom awaited goods to transport to Lowtown and beyond. It was pulled by a massive rusted chain that connected to an equally massive wheel, wedged between the Hanged Man and the residential district where Hawke lived.

Anders wondered how many more years were left in it until it snapped. He wondered the same of himself. They passed the alienage on their way to Lowtown and Anders tried and failed not to think of Merrill and the theft of his grimoire. It had to be her. It was too convenient. There was no other explanation. Cor had offered to get it back for him, and after all, the Dogs had stolen the Warden’s maps. It wouldn’t be hard to steal back his grimoire. He didn’t need to panic. He needed to plan.

A chorus of ‘Hawke’ when they entered the Hanged Man broke Anders out of his reverie. The patrons cheered and raised their cups at the man’s entrance. Half of them were Red Iron, by their garb, but even Norah and Corff joined in, so Anders supposed the man must have been missed by more than just Varric and their motley crew. Anders dodged around the crowd that came to envelope Hawke and waited for him by one of the hearths.

It reminded him a bit of the Circle, when everyone had known his name, save that The Hanged Man kept no false pretenses of civility. Part of the floor was missing by the hearth; the planks had been torn up to show the sandstone beneath. It was stained with a trail of blood that led all the way to the spittoon in the corner. Curiosity got the better of him, and Anders glanced in it. Blood had bronzed it, and a disturbing number of teeth lined the rim. Anders gave it a kick, and the teeth slid into the spittoon with a ‘plink.’

“Make a wish,” Anders mumbled to himself.

“You wish away your days you’ll waste the ones you have,” Hawke said. Anders didn’t know why he was surprised the man had snuck up on him. “Let’s go.”

Varric was in his room, meeting with a female dwarf when Hawke let them in. It seemed a bit rude to interrupt, but the thought didn’t seem to cross Hawke’s mind. The man poured himself a drink from the pitcher on the table and took a seat in one of the sunken stone chairs without comment.

“A hundred sovereigns, Raella?” Varric was saying to his guest, “I just got back from an expedition, and you want me to fund another one? What in the blazes for?”

“For the interest, of course,” Raella said. She must have been important. Anders could tell by the lack of dirt. That, and her dress was lined in gemstones and quite literally framed in her gold, fluorspar sewn into every seam and hem.

“Count me out this time,” Anders interjected, taking a seat next to Hawke.

“I’d go again, for the right coin,” Hawke said, pouring Anders a drink of his own.

“Are you mad?” Anders asked.

“How are you repaying this, exactly?” Varric continued as if neither he nor Hawke were there. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m sympathetic, but it’s my understanding the first expedition went missing,
and that was with Darion Olmech leading them. How are you planning on finding Amgarrak Thaig without him?"

“The official purpose of the expedition is the rescue of Lord Brogan.” Raella frowned, her eyes flicking over to the two of them. Anders grinned back at her, and her frown deepened.

“Who, officially, was declared dead by Lord Answer,” Varric countered. “There were three days of mourning. I sent flowers.”

“Jerrik doesn’t believe him to be dead. You of all people know the opportunity afforded by the Blight. I can only imagine how much return you gained on your investment with what you discovered at the Valdasine Thaig.”

“Less than you’d think,” Varric rubbed the fingers of his left hand over the stuffed glove on his right. Anders still needed to get the man a prosthetic.

“Neither of us are mourning Bartrand, Varric,” Raella rolled her eyes, evidently ignorant to Varric’s injury. “Help my family, so Jerrik doesn’t have to mourn Brogan. Jerrik will personally repay the loan, with five percent interest, over the next fifteen years.”

“If he survives.” Hawke interjected.

“He has recruited the assistance of the Warden-Commander of Ferelden and one of the Glavonak explosive engineers,” Raella frowned at him. “His survival is assured.”

Anders heart skipped a beat, and he spat out the drink he’d been in the middle of taking.


“They’re not coming here, Blondie,” Varric assured him. “And we’re not going down there.”

“Good,” Anders took another drink and tried to relax, “Those bastards made me get rid of my cat. Poor Ser Pounce-a-Lot…”

“You had a cat named Ser Pounce-a-Lot?” Hawke asked.

“He was a gift. A noble beast. The blighted Warden-Commander said he made me too soft,” Anders couldn’t imagine Leonie protecting anyone. More Wardens had died under her charge than lived. Whoever Jerrik was, he was likely better off without her. “I had to give him to a friend in Amaranthine.”

“Will you fund the expedition or not?” Raella demanded.

“Fifteen percent interest, over the next ten years,” Varric said. “For the risk.”

“Agreed. House Dace will sign as soon as you have the contract written.” Raella saw herself out.

“Now if only I could still write,” Varric sighed, taking off his glove to rub at the nubs on his hand.

“They’ve healed enough by now that we should be able to work on getting you that prosthetic,” Anders reached across the table to take Varric’s hand and assess the injury. The wounds were a pretty pink, a shade darker than Varric’s skin, and Varric didn’t wince at any pressure put upon them. “I’ll have Franke make a mock-up in leather for you to test.”

“Thanks Blondie. Hawke,” Varric gave them both a nod, “And thanks for your help with Raella.
Bartrand’s ex fiancée, if you can believe it. She’s not too fond of humans, and a quick deal is the best deal. Anyway, what can I do for you?”

“Group of apostates along the Wounded Coast,” Hawke explained, which Anders really didn’t consider much of an explanation. Hawke had never told him much of the jobs they’d worked together in advance either, so he wondered why he thought Hawke would be any different with Varric. “Need the guild routes, to move them out without being seen. Need you with, in case we are.”

“Bringing me along for the bullshit and not Bianca?” Varric said. “Fine by me. The story should be easy enough, I suppose…” He stood up to pace, rubbing his chin with the two fingers he had left on his right hand, “Let’s see we’ve got… Lieutenant Florian, from Ferelden… sent to root out rebel mages at the Knight-Commander’s personal invitation! But the guild routes? I’m still cleaning up after Bartrand. A business is like a puppy. Take your eyes off it for one second and there’s shit all over your floor. I’ll look, but you need to give me a week.”

“Make it a day,” Hawke countered before Anders could protest.

“Hawke, you wound me.” Varric sighed. “Alright, but I’ll have to start looking into it now. So unless you’re sticking around to help-”

They left quickly and were half-way to Hightown before it occurred to Anders Hawke intended to go straight to the guard. He caught Hawke’s arm to stop him. “It’s probably better I’m not there when you talk to Aveline,” Anders said.

“Right.” Hawke said, eyes fixed on Anders’ hand on his arm. There were dark circles under them, and Anders realized they’d gone over a day without sleep. Hawke wasn’t a Warden. He was probably exhausted.

“Do you want to pick this up tomorrow?” Anders offered.

“Thought you were in a hurry,” Hawke said.

“I am but… not at your expense.” With everything that had happened to Hawke of late, Anders didn't want anything to be at the man's expense ever again.

“I’m fine.”

“I need better than fine,” Anders said seriously. “This has to go right, Hawke.”

“It will.” Hawke caught his hand, and actually squeezed it before taking it off his arm.

“You can’t promise me that.” Anders said, and he meant it. He wasn’t getting his hopes up again. “They could be dead already for all we know.”

Hawke had nothing reassuring to say to him. There was nothing reassuring to be said. He scratched at his scalp to wake himself up, took a quick assessment of where they’d stopped. He sat on the stairs that led to the higher hexes, towards Hightown. Anders cleared away a bit of bird shit with his boot and sat with him.

“I’d pick elsewhere to nap if I were you,” Anders joked.

“Ash Warriors,” Hawke said.

“What?”
“Earlier,” Hawke explained. “You said you wanted to know where I learned strategy. That’s where.”

“That’s… not really the answer I expected,” Anders looked the man over, trying to picture him as one of Fereldan’s Ash Warriors. They were a group of mercenaries with mabari in place of family, who fought like dwarves for the Chantry’s beck and call. Anders could see some of it. Hawke had the piety down, the love for dwarves and mabari. The rest? “Don’t Ash Warriors … not have any family?”

“I deserted.” Hawke explained. “… it was complicated. I left home, back in Lothering, after we moved there to join a group of mercenaries. The Crimson Oars. My family needed the coin. Maybe they needed me more… but I sent back a stipend. Father understood. Mother didn’t.

I killed someone for the first time and found out I was good at it. There’s nothing like it— I kept on, kept at it, and one day I killed the wrong person. I glassed him. It was just a bar fight. The cup shattered… went straight through his eye. Split it right down the center. There’s a liquid…” Hawke touched the corner of his eye, “Like water. Like he was crying. Shot arrows that didn’t kill a man as quick.

“They put me on the gallows for it the next day. Oars left,” Hawke shrugged, “Wasn’t their fight. The guard had to muzzle Dog to get the noose around my neck. He maimed five of them, trying to reach me. I think that’s why they decided to give me a choice. Gallows or Ash Warriors. Chose life.

“They erase everything when you join. Crimes. Records. Everything. You don’t get a stipend; you can’t write to family; you just fight. Bandits. Slavers. Whatever. Wherever. I managed a few letters anyway, when I could, but I was with them for years before Carver found me. He sent a letter to one of the inns we were staying at, and I got it before we left.

“He told me Father’d died. That he was begging at the Chantry. That he didn’t know what to do… He must have sent dozens before I got one. I deserted that night. Went back to Lothering and started hunting to support them, but Mother never forgave me for leaving. When I took Carver with me to Ostagar, she told me not to come back this time.

“My company’s sergeant died on our first skirmish in the wilds. I took his post, and that was it. We had three skirmishes, before the last, and by then if you didn’t know what you were doing you were dead. Our captain knew enough to know better when the beacon lit and the reinforcements didn’t come. I had to drag Carver off the field when we were routed…”

“That’s…” Anders started, stopped, and tried again. “I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry. I know nothing I say will change it, but you were lucky to have them as long as you did.”

“Not what you expected?” Hawke asked.

Anders thought back to the day they’d met and wanted to laugh. “Not even close. You know, you’ve been fighting darkspawn longer than I have,” Anders joked. “Have you ever considered joining the Grey Wardens?”

Hawke laughed. The bark suited him. Anders smiled, and was surprised he enjoyed the silence they shared.

“…Am I like him?” Hawke asked suddenly.

“Like who?”

“My cousin,” Hawke elaborated. “Am I like him?”
Anders swallowed a stone. It settled in his stomach, cold, heavy, impassable. Hawke was staring at him. His eyes were the same blood red, though they were lined with the shadows a different life. Not darker or lighter, just different. “You’ve been talking to Varric.”

“Not an answer,” Hawke said.

“You look like him,” Anders managed, somehow. “A lot like him… but it’s not the same. I don’t want to put all that on you. You’re not him and I’m not the man I was a year ago. You’re steadfast, and loyal, and I know even if you don’t agree with me, you’ll be honest.”

“You deserve it.” Hawke said sincerely.

“I don’t know what I deserve,” Anders stood up, and held out a hand for Hawke to do the same. “But you’ve seen who I am, and you’re still here.”
The Revolutionists

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. Any advice or constructive criticism is welcome, and comments are greatly appreciated. Thank you for all of your comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, and as always thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon Umbralis 7 Evening

Kirkwall – Darktown

The sewers had flooded, winter storms bleeding sleet into Darktown. Anders’ boots broke through a thin film of ice with every step. The hot sewage beneath churned in his wake, a sour stench like wilted lettuce following him through Kirkwall’s underbelly. He wrapped his scarf tighter about his nose and mouth, near to suffocating, but he could still taste it.

The water rippled at his passing, cascading out over the edge of the chasm and staining the blackrock a putrid brown. At least he was finally making waves in Kirkwall, Anders thought bemusedly. The desultory waterfall was the only sound apart from his footfalls squelching through the muck. The sewers themselves were abandoned. The floods forced everything from rats to refugees out into Lowtown, where Fereldans clashed with Marchers, and a handful were arrested for rioting, others for loitering, until the prisons were full up.

With refugees. Not rats. Anders didn’t doubt Aveline would have tried if she had any cells small enough.

It soured the soul to see. Some of the refugees even welcomed imprisonment as a reprieve from destitution. Prisoners were fed. Prisoners were sheltered. Citizens were left to freeze in their freedom.

“One fight at a time,” Anders said to himself, rolling his fingers along his staff when his veins split with veilfire beneath his gloves. He learned to love the feeling; the heat from the flame, his skin pulled taut, the precipice of the change, the edge of abandon. The anger kept them going, but if it went unchecked it wouldn’t necessarily keep them alive. “We can’t right every wrong.”

The flames subsided, which was for the best considering Anders had no intentions of storming the Viscount’s Keep anytime soon. The Gallows, maybe. Anders had a meeting with the Collective and if nothing else, the floods afforded them privacy. Anders treked through Darktown until he reached a non-descript door cut into the blackrock, a broken circle smeared in blood barely visible against the rust. He knocked thrice, and the door opened outward, a wave of sludge cascading over his boots.

“Nothing like the red-carpet welcome,” Anders grinned at the shivering mage who’d opened it.

“Anders. S-S-S— My apologies,” Alain stuttered, shifting from foot to foot in the muck. The poor fellow reminded Anders of a rabbit. He was two big eyes and two big ears, and he jumped at anything and everything. “They’re almost f-f-f— almost done.”

Anders’ eyes had to adjust to the number of mages clustered within, haloed by their magic and his affinity for it. It pulsed, dark and familiar, like the last gasp of a dying man or the first of a risen one,
save for Alain. Unlike the rest of the Starkhaven mages, he wasn’t a maleficar. Also unlike the rest of
the Starkhaven mages, his magic barely pulsed at all. He would have been lucky to light a lantern,
which was probably why the door was marked with blood instead.

Anders slipped in around him, and Alain shut the door behind him. It might have been a wine cellar
at one point, but it had long since been abandoned. The back ceiling had collapsed and left no other
point of entry point. The racks that lined the walls had been stripped apart by termites, rotten cork
and shattered glass the only remnants of the wine bottles that had once filled them. A collection of
waterlogged barrels straining against their metal hoops made up the only furniture.

The remaining Starkhaven mages were circled around a spelltome set on one such barrel in the center
of the room. Their hands were clasped, but their palms must have been slit, because they were
dripping blood. Each drop melted through the ice, and seemed to take shape in the water, wriggling
and rippling like frenzied leeches at their feet. The trio was chanting, their voices hushed and
entreating. “The blood feeds. The blood nourishes. In blood, the call is heard. In blood, the deal is
made.”

Even ankle-deep in the frozen mire, Alain was sweating. Anders nudged him with his elbow,
“Nothing like a spot of iconoclasm to end the day,” Anders whispered cheerily.

“I s-s-still don’t understand why we’re doing this,” Alain whispered back.

“Practicing for dinner parties.” Anders quipped.

Alain managed a rickety smile that quickly twitched apart into a frown, “I’m s-s-s-… I mean it.”

“What’s not to understand?” Anders asked. “Once we make enough of these spelltomes, the diffused
magic will let us distribute energy across all of Darktown. I can augment them with regenerative
properties, and the Collective can start relying on them for our rescue operations. We can finally start
freeing mages from the Gallows. We’ll run them straight through the lyrium tunnels, the warrens, and
out of Kirkwall with a haste no normal mage could channel.”

It was bloody brilliant. Anders had made more progress in the past three weeks than he had in the
past three months. Hawke had helped him rescue the Starkhaven apostates right out from under the
templars’ noses, and no one had been the wiser. Anders only wished they’d been able to rescue
more. There were only four left, by the time Anders and Hawke had found them. The others had
died or been captured fighting templars along the coast.

Still, Anders hadn’t needed to risk the Dalish, or the Dogs, or anyone getting them out of Kirkwall
because they hadn’t wanted to leave. They’d joined the Collective, phylactery-free, and set straight to
the task of helping Anders free as many of their fellows from the Gallows as they could. The
spelltomes were just the start. It made Justice a little uncomfortable, but it was worth it. At least
bound, the demons could find new purpose. Just purpose. Their leader had made a convincing
argument, as far as Anders’ was concerned. It wasn’t like they were entreating with the demons, and
what better victory was there over something that couldn’t die than to ensure the rest of its life was
lived nobly?

“But the blood magic…” Alain protested, looking at the ritual from behind his hand as a man might
the sun, as if it would burn or blind him if looked too hard. “Couldn’t we do the same rituals with l-l-
lyrium?”

“And how do you propose we get it?” Anders demanded. Fire cut across his veins, warmer than any
scarf in the frozen depths of Darktown. “The templars have everything! For a thousand years,
they’ve had the knights, the lyrium, the bloody Maker on their side. For a thousand years, we’ve
bowed to them. It has to change."

“Like this?” Alain gestured to the ritual, and Anders tried to calm down enough for the flames to recede. Alain reminded Anders of himself, over a year ago. Maker, how had Amell put up with him? “Blood magic isn’t a power the templars keep from us for spite. It’s evil.”

“It’s a tool,” Anders countered, “Same as a bow or a sword. Would you cut off a child’s hands to ensure he never wields one in anger?”

“Depending on the c-c-child.” Alain mumbled.

Anders ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. Alain should have understood their plight. He was a mage. They had to use whatever they could against the templars or risk losing everything they had. Then again, at least Alain was here. Twitching, jumping, and flinching, but he was here. Anders told himself to let it go.

The ritual ended. Anders excused himself to heal casting cuts and exchange greetings. There was nothing evil in any of the maleficarum. Terrie and Grace were sisters who looked as if they were always on the run from templars, a constant tinge of pink under their tawny skin. They were also twins, identical save for the tattoos they’d picked for each other. Willful and impulsive, they’d stolen a grimoire of glyphs and hexes as apprentices and tattooed their favorites on each other’s faces. Terrie had a glyph of repulsion on her cheek and could never pick up anything without dropping it. Grace had an hex of affliction on hers and was always too hot or too cold.

Grace was also married, unofficially, to Decimus. Unofficially, Anders knew, because no Chantry priest would ever officiate a mage’s wedding. They didn’t even have wedding rings. How would they pay for them? Anders wished there was something he could do for them, but that wasn’t why they were gathered. One fight at a time, Anders.

Decimus greeted him with a hug, as he always did. The ex-Senior Enchanter had been the head of a subgroup of Starkhaven’s Libertarian Fraternity until it burned to the ground, and he had more connections than Anders could count. It meant he was a known face, albeit a paling one from his time in Darktown. Against his greying hair and ice blue eyes, the old necromancer almost looked like he’d summoned himself.

“Anders,” Decimus smiled. There was something slow and unnatural about his smile, as if he was always learning the expression for the first time. It was creepy, but creepy wasn’t always a bad thing.

Anders smiled back, and nodded to the spelltome, “Dec. Is that the last one?”

“So it is,” Decimus picked it up and held it out to him. It was a simple thing, ram leather with an iron lock, nothing embossed on its cover. Anders braced himself for a scream when he took it, but none came.

“No screams?” Anders turned the book over in his hands. There were no screams, no whispers, no hint of the demons Decimus had bound. Strange. Maybe his magic was stronger than Amell’s had been. “What did you bind, a demon of silence?”

“What need have we for such parlor tricks? We don’t want to be drawing attention to ourselves, now do we?” Decimus plucked the tome back. Anders felt the Fade well in him as he ran his fingers over the lock, “Sword of the Maker, Tears of the Fade.” Decimus whispered and let loose a small burst of flame. The lock fell open, and the tome was otherwise unscathed.

If only Amell’s grimoire had been made with the same magic.
“I studied the magic behind the Victim’s Door for years,” Decimus explained, waving him over to a waterlogged barrel to sit. The bottom had bloated in the flood and creaked precariously when Anders perched on it. The rest of the mages found their own barrels or chose to stand. “This way, we prime the lock with a pass phrase and unlock it with a spell. When we’re done, we close the book. Attempting to open it any other way will burn it from the inside out.

“We scattered the other five throughout Darktown. They should provide more than enough mana for any encounters with the templars. A tempest atop a blizzard, a firestorm atop an earthquake… I dare say even Alain could manage a fireball.”

At his name, Alain jumped. “You said I wouldn’t have to f-f-f-… kill anyone.”

“The time comes you may not have the choice,” Decimus set down the tome, and stood up to pace around the wine cellar, tugging his beard into a point. “Do you remember the fire in Starkhaven, Alain?”

Alain looked down at the mention. “I r-r-r-… I do.”

“We chose to leave, Alain,” Terrie chimed in, “All of us together. Decimus risked everything to go back through the flames and destroy our phylacteries. Not just for us four, but for everyone. We can’t leave them in the Circle just because we were lucky enough to meet Anders.”

Decimus stopped beside Alain, “Who are we?”

“The Resolutionists,” Alain told his hands.

“This is the resolution,” Decimus said firmly.

“No one’s asking you to kill anyone,” Anders tried to reassure Alain. He could tell the poor fellow was uncomfortable, and no one was ever bullied into being a hero. Well, no one except Anders, but he was probably the exception. “If it comes to it, that’s what Decimus and I are here for.”

Alain started, “But you’re a healer.”

“Sometimes, the best way to heal is to make sure no one gets hurt,” Anders explained. “Better the death of one templar than so many innocents. In any case, we’re not here to fight templars, we’re here to free mages, and that’s why we need the tomes.”

“So we’re ready then?” Grace asked. “We can save Innley and the others?”

“We’re ready,” The words alone made Anders feel vindicated for how long he’d waited to speak them. The rest of the Starkhaven mages would have their phylacteries in the Gallows to destroy with their recent recapture. The Coterie had finally relinquished their hold on the lyrium tunnels. The Redwaters had finally provided promise of passage. All they’d needed was a little push, so Decimus... pushed.

Anders and Decimus had met with Lilley, who’d taken them to see Brekker, who’d taken them to see Harlan, who ultimately had the final call with the Coterie. The argument had given Harlan a bit of a headache, but he agreed that they could start using the lyrium tunnels once a month. Then they’d met with Hawke, who introduced them to Samson, who introduced them to Captain Leech of the Redwaters. He’d twitched a bit at first, but ultimately consented to providing safe passage for any mages they brought him.

Decimus was … persuasive. Anders didn’t know if he had it in him to be persuasive. Using blood magic in a fight was one thing, but using it to change a man's mind was another. It turned a man from
his true purpose, but if his purpose wasn’t true, what other choice did they have? It had been Anders’ only thought at the time. He’d entreated on the Collective’s behalf long enough. The Coterie had no intention of honoring their arrangement, and inaction had become an action unto itself. One Anders couldn’t abide. He had an obligation to see the mages free, whatever the cost. Amell had done it. Decimus had done it. Their causes were just. The ends would justify their means.

“Alain will keep watch at the entrance to the tunnels,” Anders continued, “Grace and Terrie will take them to the Gallows. Bardel will leave the mages’ rooms unlocked. Innley and the others will meet you at the Gates and Bardel and Bancroft will destroy their new phylacteries. Once you get my signal, move. We’ll leave the tomes open, and you can channel a haste on the way back to get them out before anyone notices they’re gone.”

“And what of me?” Decimus gathered up Grace’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “I’ll not sit idly by while my wife is endangered.”

“I’ll need you back here, at the entrance, to help Alain,” Anders said, watching Decimus and Grace's exchange and wanting to believe it would last. That it was possible for a mage to find and keep love, but that wasn’t their world. Yet. “We’ll need to get them to the docks through the warrens and to the Redwaters unnoticed, but if there’s trouble before we get back, you’re the best one to handle it.”

“These templars strike first and think after, love,” Grace said, returning Decimus' kiss. “Do not give them the chance. They will be easier to kill than control if they show.”

“If they trouble us, the dead themselves will meet the call,” Decimus promised.

“Anders, what is your signal?” Terrie asked.

Anders grinned. “A little bird will tell you.”

A crow flew from Darktown and out into the channel that cut Kirkwall in two, navigating the wind and sleet that fell from the sky with ease. Two colossal bronze statues flanked the channel, collared and leashed to the Gallows by a massive chain. The crow followed an updraft along the cliff face, where dragons carved into the blackrock watched it soar with the jealous eyes. They were trapped within the rock, like the rest of the crow’s murder was trapped within the cage across the sea.

The crow followed the chains across the Waking Sea until it reached the Gallows. The courtyard was lined with the same familiar bronze statues - some not quite monsters, some not quite men. The crow found a perch atop one with the symbol of a sunburst on it and befouled it, only to be shooed away by a predator. “Get! Shoo! Maker’s breath, right on the helmet. Augh… I’ll have a Tranquil clean it later.”

The crow squawked and flew away. Framing the stairs, wrought-iron spikes held blood red banners that flapped in the wind without taking flight. Below them, two statues were bowed so low on their knees they were almost on their stomachs. Each reached a hand towards the other but had no way to span the distance. The crow perched on the palm of one and watched the comings and goings of predators in the early evening twilight until the courtyard was empty.

Leaving its perch, the crow flew through the gallows, squalling defiance until a storm drain rattled. Two members of its murder climbed out from the drain and hurried across the courtyard to the western portcullis. There was something important behind it, the crow knew, but it was closed. The crow hopped onto the grating and cawed. The caw echoed down the hall. The crow cawed again, and the caw echoed again.
“Where are they?” One of the humans whispered. Terrie. That was the sound for it.

“This could be a trap.” The other muttered. Grace. “We should have brought Decimus.”

The crow squawked at them and hopped through the lattice. It toddled down the hall and was almost trampled when a half dozen humans came running around a corner, chased by a predator. The reflective man of metal had a silver sword of mercy emblazoned on its chest-piece, the sunburst skirt it wore beneath as red as the blood it intended to spill. Templar.

It was a threat to be destroyed. To be shredded, stripped, slain. To have the pieces of it scattered for carnage and carrion. The crow would tear it apart, entrails ripped from -… Bardel. It was Bardel. The crow was the only threat about.

“Quickly now,” Bardel stopped at the portcullis and ushered one of the mages forward, oblivious to the furious crow at his feet. “Innley, quickly.”

Innley was a small thing, more prey than predator, all but lost under a robe embroidered with blue poppies. The Fade swelled in him, and his hands emerged from his sleeves sheathed in sapphire. It surged over the portcullis like a wave and lifted it in its gateway. The mages ran through, to freedom, and the crow flew away.

Nothing went wrong. The mages made it through the lyrium tunnels safely. Alain and Decimus met with no trouble in Darktown. Anders and Decimus saw them through the warrens to the Redwaters. The Redwaters saw them away. Anders sat in his coat on the docks with Decimus, watching the ship sail out of the harbor in a daze. The biggest risk they’d encountered was Anders, and his own inability to control his anger at the sight of templars. He’d have to work on that… somehow.

Decimus gave his shoulder a pat and stood, “I should head back before I’m recognized.”

“I’ll walk you back,” Anders said. He had to pick up his things from where he’d locked them in his clinic anyway. He followed Decimus down the stairs, and through a back alley that led to a storm drain. He cast a final look over his shoulder at the bay as they descended, “Here’s hoping they don’t end up in Llomerryn in nothing but their small clothes,”

“Their captain will keep his word as long as I’m around.” Decimus assured him, dropping into the sewers with a small splash.

“And how long will that be, exactly?” Anders asked, dreading the thought of what the Collective would do without Decimus as much as he was dreading the thought walking back through Darktown barefoot. He really needed to enchant the rest of his clothes to match his coat. Anders jumped off the ladder and stepped on something soft that felt like it burst beneath his toes.

Best not to think about it. Anders shook his foot without looking down at it. “Not that I’m not grateful, but we need to be ready.”

“As long as it takes to get the rest of the Starkhaven mages out of the Gallows, I suppose,” Decimus shrugged. “You know this only worked because of the overcrowding. If all six of them hadn’t shared the same cell, Innley would be the only free mage tonight. We need the First Enchanter’s support.”

“This again,” Anders rolled his eyes. “Fereldan’s First Enchanter never did anything for the mages there. You know he used to set traps, leave out books on blood magic and try to trick mages into reading them so he could have an excuse make them Tranquil?”

“Orsino may yet surprise you,” Decimus put an arm around his shoulder, and whispered into his ear as if there were anyone around in the flooded sewers to overhear them. “I have a friend in the city
who informs me Orsino has been supplying him with some fascinating paraphernalia."

Anders snorted, “I’ll keep that in mind the next time I get an itch.”

“Books, my dear boy, books,” Decimus laughed, “The very same your old First Enchanter used against you, Orsino supplies for research. All we need do is ask, and my friend could put us in touch with him. He may even know where to find that grimoire you’ve been looking for.”

Anders shook his head. He already knew where to find his grimoire. Getting it was the difficult part, “Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“And when your contacts on the inside are caught?” Decimus made it sound more like an inevitability than a possibility. “Who will you turn to then? When the guards are double posted? When the Loyalists are made to watch the Libertarians, and those who want freedom are roomed with those who spurn it?”

All good points. None of them any Anders wanted to hear. He couldn’t stand the thought of working with the First Enchanter of any Circle. He’d lived in a Circle for most of his life. He knew exactly what it took to move up in one. The Senior Enchanters in Ferelden had been everything Anders hated. Mages who turned on their own kind to serve the templars. Orsino couldn’t be any different if he let it get this bad.

“We’ll get there when we get there,” Anders shrugged out from under Decimus’ shoulder. He’d worry about it later. Today was a victory. “I’ll see you, Dec.”

“Take care, Anders,"

Anders checked on his things in his clinic, but the lock Hawke had gifted him had held. Anders dressed and whistled his way to the Hanged Man. There was only a half-hour left before curfew when the guards would start rounding up anyone still out on the streets. Citizens were already streaming out of the Hanged Man, and Anders felt like a fish swimming upstream trying to get through. He wanted the chance to see Hawke before the day was out. The fact that Merrill would probably be gone by now was just a plus.

No such luck. The elf was standing outside the moat of broken glass and refuse that surrounded the Hanged Man, barefoot in the snow, and trading words with Varric.

“Daisy, for my sake, please don’t cut through any alleys on your way home tonight,” Varric begged.

“Nothing ever happens. I’m perfectly safe, Varric.” Merrill assured him. She left with a wave, and a smile in Anders’ direction he didn’t return.

“That nothing is costing me a fortune,” Varric muttered when Merrill was out of ear shot. Anders resolved to ignore it. He started for the door, but Varric caught him by the edge of his coat before he made it inside. “Blondie, hold back a second.”

“Anders at your service,” Anders said, trying for an innocent expression. He wasn’t going to let anything ruin today.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about why the Dog Lords have taken a sudden interest in Daisy, would you?” Varric had an impressively enigmatic look on his face, but Anders knew it wasn’t a question.

He shrugged anyway, “Beats me.”
“Uh huh,” Varric let go of his coat. “Well if you did, I sure wish you’d tell me, because it’s getting pretty expensive to cover your tab and bribe the Coterie to walk Daisy home every night.”

Anders shrugged, “Wish I could help.”

“Funny, I was about to say the same thing,” Varric said.

Varric couldn’t help him. The rotund dwarf wasn’t exactly stealthy, and Merrill lived on the fifth floor in the alienage, which was five floors too many for Varric. Unless Varric suddenly turned into a mage and learned transformation magic, there was no way he would make that trip willingly. So unless he intended to talk Merrill into giving Anders’ grimoire back -….

Maybe he could talk Merrill into giving Anders’ grimoire back. “I—lost something.” Anders said cautiously.

“Go on,” Varric said.

Anders went on, “A grimoire. The Dogs promised to find it for me. It’s possible someone might have found it and it’s possible they don’t understand that it doesn’t belong to them.”

“Mhm,” Varric rubbed at his beardless chin with his thumb, “And how much is this grimoire worth?”

“Everything,” Anders heard the echo in his voice, and clenched and unclenched his fists to calm down. One fight at a time. “It was Amell’s. You can’t buy me off, Varric. If it means I can’t drink here—”

“Easy, Blue,” Varric held up both hands. “I mean seriously. How much is it worth? Did it ever occur to you that someone else might be interested in the Darktown Healer’s grimoire? Like, oh, I don’t know, literally every thief in Kirkwall?”

“Of course it occurred to me,” Anders scowled. “I’ve tried every fence in Kirkwall and no one has tried to sell it. Which means whoever has it still has it.”

“Every fence?” Varric sounded dubiously, “Even the Black Emporium?”

Anders had never heard the name before, but it didn’t mean anything. His grimoire had gone missing the same day as his fight with Merrill. It couldn’t have been anyone else. He scrambled after his anger like a cat after a string of yarn, “No, but—”

“Call off the Dogs, Blondie.” Varric said. “Consider it my belated Satinalia present. Ask Hawke about the Emporium. He has the invitation, not me. He’ll take you there, and if you still can’t find your grimoire, I’ll talk to Daisy for you.”

It wouldn’t hurt anything to try. “How am I supposed to argue with that?” Anders sighed.

“You’re not,” Varric pushed him towards the door. “Come on, get something to eat before curfew.”

“I thought you were cutting me off?” Anders asked.

“I considered it,” Varric allotted, “But I’m afraid you wouldn’t eat if I didn’t feed you. So here we are, a dwarf and a human walking into a bar—”

“You’re lucky you’re so short. That hurt like mad.” Anders quipped.

Varric elbowed him. “You could have just stopped me, Blondie.”
“Why waste a perfectly good set up?” Anders grinned. He disentangled himself from Varric’s company with a promise to talk to the Dogs first thing in the morning and searched the crowd for Hawke. The only patrons left in the Hanged Man were the sots and the tenants, and he supposed Isabela counted for a bit of both. Anders found her by the hearth before he found Hawke, and she wasn’t sitting in a chair so much as the lap of the person in it.

She was twisting a bit of the fellow’s hair about her finger, so shockingly white it shamed the snow outside. The hand that held her by the small of her back was marked by tattoos a matching shade. Fenris. Ew.

Hawke was at the next table over, seated with a fellow in full silverite armor lined with gold filigree who was just begging to be mugged. His hair was an ochre color, like the rust that ate up half of Kirkwall, slicked back with wax or fat that only nobility could afford. Anders hesitated, but Hawke waved him over when he spotted him, so he supposed it was safe.

“Sebastian,” Hawke explained with a raised mug in the noble’s direction. “He’s a brother in the Chantry. Sort of.”

“I’ve never seen someone from the Chantry come to Lowtown,” Anders spun a chair over to the table, curiosity overtaking caution. “Can you officiate weddings?”

“Little fast,” Hawke mumbled into his mug. Anders grinned and kicked him under the table.

“I… could, yes,” Sebastian said slowly. “But I have left the Chantry, and would have to return to officiate anything, so I am afraid I cannot. It was good to see you again, serah Hawke, but I must go if I am to reach Ostwick by Cassus. Good day, serah-…?”

“Anders,” Anders supplied.

Sebastian spared them both a small bow and left. Anders poured himself a drink from the pitcher on the table. It was cider and safe, as always of late. “He seemed decent,” Anders allotted, stealing a slice of bread off Hawke’s plate.

“Who are you marrying?” Hawke asked.

“Some friends,” Anders said.

“Mage friends?” Hawke guessed.

“So Fenris and Isabela, huh?” Anders dodged the question, “When did that start happening?”

Hawke shrugged, “Didn’t ask. Didn’t care. Not-“

“Your business?” Anders cut him off with a grin. He waved what was left of his stolen slice of bread at Hawke’s bowl. “What’s that?”


“Thought I’d save myself the coin,” Anders took a bite of the stew. It was more carrot and potato than it was lamb, not that Anders was complaining.

“You’re late a lot,” Hawke said.

“Miss me?” Anders asked around a mouthful of stew.

“Sometimes.” Hawke kept his eyes on him, and Anders couldn’t tell if it was a joke. His mouth was
empty but he swallowed anyway. “When you bathe. You smell like shit. Why are you still in the sewers?”

“The view, obviously,” Anders joked. So much for flirting. “Where else would I be? Can you imagine me crawling out of the sewers and into Hightown? They’d chase me out with pitch forks and torches without ever knowing I was a mage.”

“The Rose would put you up. You could heal the girls,” Hawke suggested, undeterred. “You could stay here, have Varric get you a room.”

“I’m where I’m needed,” Anders waved him off.

“You’re needed in a bath,” Hawke muttered.

Anders pretended he didn’t hear him. “So Varric mentioned this place. The Black Emporium? He said you could take me there. There might be a grimoire there I need to get back. I was hoping you could get it for me, for an IOU.”

“No,” Hawke said.

“Why no?” Anders asked. Hawke’s eyebrows furrowed and Anders half-expected his ‘condition’ to take over when he opened his mouth, but he closed it and took a drink instead. “Why no?” Anders asked again.

“I don’t have the coin for anything there,” Hawke told his drink.

“You don’t even know how much it’ll cost,” Anders protested. Hawke had the coin. Anders knew he had the coin. Varric had already funded a hundred sovereign expedition with the coin.

“Doesn’t matter,” Hawke said.

“Well then just take me and I’ll figure out how to pay for it later.” Anders insisted.

“Alright,” Hawke relented with no explanation. Maker, talking to Hawke was like pulling teeth sometimes, and Hawke was already missing a few. Anders ate. Hawke watched him and took the occasional drink. “How’d it go? Your thing?”

Anders shot him a grin, “No one’s dead yet.”

“Keep it that way.” Hawke said.

“Well that’s the plan,” Anders finished his stew, and leaned on the table so he could better whisper without being overheard. “We got six today.”

“But not Beth,” Hawke didn’t whisper. “Don’t get her hurt, Anders.”

“Why would you even say that?” Anders asked, ”I would never mean to-“

“You didn’t mean to last time,” Hawke cut him off. “What happens in the Circle now that there’s been an escape?”

… Templars cracked down. Mages lost privileges. Other people suffered the consequences of Anders’ actions. “She’ll be fine.” Anders said instead.

“How do you know?” Hawke asked.
“I’ll make sure,” Anders promised. A stupid promise. Beth didn’t want to escape the Circle. What else could Anders do for her? Hawke was staring at him and Anders knew his answer wasn’t good enough for him. It wasn’t even good enough for Anders. “I’ll… write to the First Enchanter. He can make sure she stays safe.”

Hawke seemed to think that was good enough. He gave him a clipped nod and stood. Anders made to follow him, but a hand on his shoulder forced him back into his chair. “Stay here tonight,” Hawke ordered, emptying a handful of coppers from his pocket onto the table. “Take a bath. Sleep in a bed.”

Anders caught his arm, torn between gratitude and frustration. He wanted to like Hawke, but the man made it so hard sometimes, “You can pay for my room but not my grimoire?”

“Can’t afford what you want,” Hawke said. “Can afford what you need.”
Chapter Summary

The letters we sent and the ones that we didn’t.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little short. If I tried for the full 5k I think it would take another week. Any advice or constructive criticism is welcome, and comments are greatly appreciated. Thank you for all of your comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, and as always thank you for reading.

9:32 Dragon The Month of Cassus
Letters Delivered to the Collective of Kirkwall, Burnt After Reading
Letters Delivered to the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino, Burnt After Reading

To the Collective of Kirkwall
Delivered

To the Individual Going by ‘A’,

Please consider this a letter sent in good faith, as you must understand the consequences of its discovery. I was advised through a colleague of mine who was advised through a colleague of yours that you had expressed an interest in speaking with me. I hope we can agree it is a bit simpler if I contact you directly. As we do not know each other: an introduction.

I have known what I am and been where I am since I was a child. I am in no way remarkable. I am not the best scholar nor the most proficient in our shared craft. For many a year, I was unnoticed and preferred it as such. I came to realize early those of us who are noticed are not noticed long. I lived my life to see the sun rise in the morning and set in the evening with no concern for the in between.

That was no life. It took a friend ending theirs for me to understand. Maud, if you would know her name. She had a mother and a father who loved her, an older sister with a beautiful singing voice, and a dog who would sleep by her feet. She received letters often from home, but they served only to remind her of the life she had lost. The restrictions on correspondence started when she took her own life, as if the letters were to blame and mere ink on parchment could birth such tragedy.

My friend was the first, but she wasn’t the last. It spread like a sickness, and we lost at least one soul to suicide each year. The others who share this space with us, those with the order, would snigger when they thought no one was listening. “One less to worry about,” I would hear them say, when it was their abuses that drove us to desperation in the first place. We needed a change, so I stepped up when no other would.

I have been this present version of myself for four years now. It is my life’s mission to bring hope to my people and make our days worth living. Life must always be preferable to death. I understand
you have a similar goal. I am still unremarkable, but I am a voice if you need one. You may trust me to always put my brothers and sisters before myself, and you may trust that I count you as one of them.

That said, what is it you hope to gain from our correspondence?

Speak plainly, but not too plainly.

For this letter and all that follow I would ask that you burn after reading.

O,

A Letter Crumpled on the Floor of a Clinic in Darktown.
Never Sent

What about Karl? Were you a voice for him? He trusted you. He wrote all about how you fought for him. For mages. How you pushed for more privileges, how you voted to split from the Chantry in Cumberland, and for what? You were supposed to keep him safe. He was a senior enchanter. All it took was open support of the Libertarians, a conversation in the library, handful of letters, and then…

The First Enchanter is supposed to be consulted on any disciplinary measures taken by the templars. You should have had the final say. You should have kept him safe. Where were you when they locked him in solitary? Where were you when Alrik was torturing him?

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN THEY SEALED HIS SOUL BEHIND A BRAND OF LYRIUM AND THE CHAINS OF TRANQUILITY?

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN ELSA SUFFERED THE SAME FATE? WHAT TRANSGRESSIONS WERE THEY MADE TO ANSWER FOR? WHAT CRIME WARRANTED THIS MAGICAL CASTRATION? YOU HAVE FAILED IN YOUR CHARGE OF PROTECTING OUR BRETHREN. YOU ARE INEFFECTUAL AT BEST OR COMPLICIT AT WORST. THE CIRCLE HAS NO NEED OF YOU. ANDERS HAS NO NEED OF YOU

(The rest of this letter is illegible)

To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino
Delivered

O,

I appreciate the letter, but I’m afraid we’re fresh out of faith. I need more than that.

I need information. I heard you recently lost six of our brothers and sisters. I have friends in your care, and I need to know about the conditions they’re facing as a result. Assurances they will not be held accountable for the actions of others if any more are lost, and more will be lost.

I have never known someone in your position to have the same goal as someone in mine. I’m honestly surprised you wrote me. The change that our people need cannot come from within. Not when within they face things worse than death. I’m sorry about your friend, but I’ve lost many under your care to things worse than suicide. Your mission may be to bring hope to our people, but mine is to bring our people to hope.
I’ve heard your story too many times. Trying to make life bearable around the order and the rules, trying to forget you’re nothing more than a slave. It never works. The order doesn’t see us as people, and the grievous injustices they’ve inflicted have gone unquestioned for too long. If they cannot be made to answer for their crimes then we cannot be made to suffer them. We must be free of their abuses.

I cannot sit idle in the hopes that change will come of its own accord or wait for another to make it so. I hope you can see that and help it come to pass. This should be your fight too.

I have nothing to offer in exchange for your support. My cause is just. If that is not enough so be it.

The less you know of me the better. Not to play who has the biggest risk, but I think I’d win. Mine’s pretty big. There are hounds in the city, and I’d rather they not sniff me out.

A,

To the Collective of Kirkwall
Delivered

A,

We are all of us the heroes of our own stories. You are not the only one who believes their cause a righteous one. I have heard those same words from the one who commands the ‘hounds’ of which you speak.

Perhaps it would help your cause to know more about her. She had a sister once. A sister like us. She lost her to Fear, and that Fear destroyed not just her family but her entire village. It inspired her to be who she is today. She will stop at nothing to ensure that such an abomination never again comes to pass, and who is to say her motive is wrong?

So you see justice is an interesting concept. It can drive a man to perform the noblest deeds as well as the worst atrocities. Just as you cannot trust in faith, I cannot trust in justice, and so perhaps we should trust in each other. The best alliances are often found in the most unlikely of places. Someone like you provides someone like me with… alternatives for our people in difficult times.

As to the six individuals you mentioned – that was quite a tragic affair. Mass self-immolation. It’s more common than some would think and less common than some would like. Aside from the few individuals charged with the task of cleaning the scorch marks off the walls, no one was the worse for wear. You need not worry about your friends.

We have taken precautions to ensure it does not happen again on so grand a scale, but no system is infallible. I do not doubt we will lose one or two every so often, despite our best efforts. While I may be uniquely qualified to identify at risk individuals, I am not always successful in deterring them when their hearts and minds are set.

One young girl comes to mind. It is unlikely she will pass a certain test you may be familiar with, and I suspect she knows it. It’s unfortunate, but no one would be surprised if she didn’t make it to the test. She’s always knitting at her window and never misses a sunset. The third floor is a long drop to the rocks below, and I worry.

Her test is in one week.

O,
To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino  
*Delivered*

O,

If that’s the lead bitch’s goal, she’s failing miserably, but I don’t know how that helps me. A sad backstory won’t sway her hounds to mercy when they’re running lose in the city. So her convictions are sincere. I sincerely believe she should be convicted. She’s let one bad experience color her whole world, and her treatment of our people, to the point where mass self-immolation isn’t even questioned. That’s insane.

Andraste’s knickerweasels. Really? Mass self-immolation. I never would have thought of that. That’s pretty clever. Tragic. Dreadful. Etc. Etc. The rocks are another a terrible way to go. I heard about the girl and the fact that you lost her, despite all your precautions. I hope no one blames you. You did everything you could for her, and I promise she knows it, wherever she is.

I shouldn’t have doubted you. We’re on the same side, although I don’t know how I feel about being an alternative. It makes me feel a bit like a side-dish. I’m pretty sure I should be the main course, but I understand wanting to take it slow for now. I suppose I should warn you: I am pretty needy.

Are you worried someone else might follow in her footsteps?

A,

To the Collective of Kirkwall  
*Delivered*

A,

Understanding our past can help us predict our future. I am sure the information will be of use to you in due time.

As to the girl, she will be missed. With the storms of late, it was no real surprise we were unable to recovery the body. I hope you will pass along my condolences to her family.

Your concern is appreciated, but unnecessary. I am glad we could reach an accord that favors us both, and I suppose I shall have to work on my analogies. I did warn you I was unremarkable, and I am fast finding your wit outpaces mine. You will simply have to assume my amusement.

There is one more fellow who comes to mind. Dnniks Mopupn. You will forgive the code, but one cannot too be cautious, especially with an individual who is the subject of a great deal of scrutiny of late. He is to be brought up on charges of conspiracy. The paperwork was filed today, and I suspect he knows it. I think he would rather go out on his own terms than face ours.

He does not have much time.

O,

A Cypher Decrypted and Crumpled on the Floor of a Darktown Clinic  
*Never Sent*

Dnniks Mopupn… Npom Skinnd? No
Maker’s bloody balls. Why couldn’t he just write a name?

Maybe it’s an anagram

1D, 3N, II, 1K, 1S, 1M, 1O, 1U, 2P

Donn Pumpkins? Nudniks… Nopp? Munnion DKPP?

Damnit

Underlined… Under… Dnniks… dicks...

Ask Varric

D N N I K S M O P U P N
U N D E R L I N E D U N
J A K E T H E B L R V A

Jaketh Eblrva? Orlesian cypher my ass

D N N I K S M O P U P N
U N D E R L I N E U N D
J A K E T H E B L A C K

Jake the Black

To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino

Delivered

O,

You’ve proven yourself a true friend. Better than I deserve. Maybe you already know from colleagues of colleagues, but I work with a group of like-minded people, and your information saved some of them. It set us back, but it would have been worse if it caught us off-guard. We can still move when we’re needed, but it might take a few weeks to prepare.

It’s a little late, but I should probably introduce myself. I’m a healer. I came here to escape and just couldn’t leave. Bit ironic, but you know how it goes. Come for the freedom, stay for the crippling injustice and helotry. A friend is even writing a story about me. The hopeless romantic waging an epic struggle against forces of oppression, and there are plenty in this city. I’ll let you know how it ends.

Anyway. I need a favor – to be returned however you like. I have a friend in your care. Vrwlyg Ueqxh. She’s not in danger, but without someone on the inside looking out for her, I fear she will be. I need her to stay safe and I’m trusting you to keep her that way.

(I hope I wrote her name right. Really not a fan of cloak and dagger codes and phrases. Ig-pay ommo-cay ould-way e-bay asier-eay. Actually, that’s not easier at all. We can stick with the cypher.)

Your friend,

A,

To the Collective of Kirkwall
Delivered

A,

Consider her safe and the favor repaid. I’ve been in need of an apprentice, and she is an extremely talented young woman and a light in this dark place. I am the better for knowing her. I am also the better for knowing you. It takes great courage to do as you do, and I appreciate your service and discretion, but now I must ask for the latter.

There must be a period of mourning. We have lost many of late, and we cannot afford to lose more. I will let you know when it’s safe again, but it may be longer than a few weeks. Should you need me for anything else, you have my support in any actions you take. I hope I have yours as well, for there is a situation I was hoping you could assist me with.

These losses we have incurred. They have gone unquestioned because they have not been out of place. The conditions we face would drive ordinary men to madness. Tensions rise, accusations fly, and the slightest misstep is met with the most grievous of punishments. Do not think I missed what you had scratched out in your earlier letter. You are not wrong. I have lost good men and women recently on false charges - inciting to riot, profane practices, and other fabrications.

I am doing all that I can to protect my people, but I need more support. I do not know the extent of your reach, but there is a woman of… grand status in the city. She has the ability to put a stop to this kind of treatment if she would but speak on our behalf. She refuses to pick a side, but she has not seen these abuses firsthand. I know she would not wish this on any of the Maker’s children. If we could but show her…

But I am not in a position to speak with her alone. I am never without escort in the city. If I had a friend willing to speak on my behalf, on behalf of my people, it might make a difference.

Your friend,
O

To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino

Delivered

O,

I wish I had good news. A friend helped me get an audience, but she wouldn’t hear it. Doddering old biddy. ‘Gossip is a sin, child.’

She said it wasn’t ‘her role to form opinions on you-know-who’s character’ but that she showed, ‘an admirable devotion to her duties.’ The abuse, the beatings, the rape, the … brands. It all meant nothing to her. She said that we had to be made to suffer the consequences of our actions and that the Maker never burdens us with more than we can overcome. It was like talking to a Chanter.

She’s proud of what’s happening. Or blind to it. She said if it came to it, the Maker would step in, as if this is His will. I knew it would be a waste of time. It’s not right. Andraste preached freedom and ended slavery. She didn’t fight the Imperium for us to become another one. I know there are others who would see it that way if we could reach them. I’m sorry I couldn’t help,

Your friend,
A
To the Collective of Kirkwall  
*Delivered*

A,

Do not be so quick to burn this bridge. She is not the blind, doddering old biddy you believe her to be, but she cannot heal a wound if she does not know how deep it goes. If she does not believe in our suffering, then we must show it to her.

There are those who would Seek out the Truth of these abuses, but their presence may do more harm than good. I have long agonized over how far to walk this road, but I am left with no choice. I have enclosed a letter with my personal seal. It must go to the Divine in Val Royeaux. I dare not send it through my usual channels.

I am trusting you to see this delivered.

Your friend,
O

---

To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino  
*Delivered*

O,

Are you sure this is a good idea? It starts at the top. The Divine is the one who appointed Grand Cleric. The Grand Cleric appointed the Knight-Commander. I’m sorry for speaking plainly, but it’s the truth, and it’ll be plain to anyone who seeks it. You’re looking for friends in high places when you should be looking for friends in low places.

Do you know what the people think of the trade levies? Of the curfews at night? Of the raids in the city? There’s our support. Talk to my friend about what life was like out here. We all know the new laws aren’t coming from the Viscount, they’re coming from the Knight-Commander. If you were willing to speak openly against her, I think this city would surprise you.

Your friend,
A

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To the Collective of Kirkwall  
*Delivered*

A,

I spoke with your friend. She had several fascinating stories as to the conditions in the city that align with yours. Perhaps I am too far removed these days. She’s doing well, in case you were curious. She has developed a talent for force magic, particularly maelstroms of manipulative energy and ethereal weights. She has an uncommon precision to keep such overwhelming power under control.

We must exercise the same caution. I cannot take this to the city without the support of its leaders. I will take your suggestion under advisement, but please, see my letter delivered.

Your friend,
O,
To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino

(A detailed list of relics and antiques is included with this letter)

Delivered

O,

It’s done. I hope you’re right. I’m glad she’s doing well. She’s important to me. I don’t have a lot of things left that are, and I could use your help with that.

I heard you sometimes acquire things for your colleagues. Are we colleagues? If we’re not, we should be. Since we’re colleagues, I was hoping you could acquire something for me. I’ve recently gained access to… an emporium, of sorts, in the city. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of it, but anything you can imagine is there. Compendiums, codices, relics, antiques, schematics. The catch is it’s for a price, and it’s a price I can’t pay.

If you could get me the coin, I could get you anything you need. All I need is eighty-four sovereigns for something for myself – a book that was stolen from me and somehow ended up there. I’ve tried everything to get it back, but this isn’t the sort of place you can break into and they don’t take exchanges. Believe me, I tried both.

I would even be willing to make a copy for you. The things in this book are things you won’t find anywhere else. Summoning, binding, enough necromancy to make a Mortalitasi blush. If that doesn’t interest you, I’ve included a list of things that might.

Your friend and colleague,
A,

To the Collective of Kirkwall

Delivered

A,

That is no small sum, my friend. I will speak with the lucrosians about your list and keep you apprised, but there are some pursuits even they cannot afford. Of course, I will make no mention of your book.

I have a proposition for you. You mentioned yourself a healer. We provide such services here, but one must first inform the harbormaster, charter a ship, receive dispensation from the templars, compensate the lucrosians … Anyone who comes here, comes here publicly, and that kind of knowledge is leverage in the wrong hands.

There is no discretion for the jilted lover, the expectant mother, the wounded duelist, the Blooming Rose patron. You could fill a void in this city and your purse at the same time working with the nobility. Perhaps with enough time, they might even come to see you as an ally and take on our plight. When that day comes, I would have no hesitation speaking out publicly.

I know where you can start. There’s a gentleman, late in his years, who came to us recently. He is not suited for this life. He spoke too plainly upon his arrival and was made to answer for it. I suspect he will not be with us long, either by his own hand or by the templars. Bresilp Qi Mbomvcm. Perhaps you could give your sympathies to his family.

Your friend and colleague,
O
To the Desk of First Enchanter Orsino  
*Delivered*  

O,

Don’t worry about it. I had to ask. Closed mouths don’t get fed and all that. Or if they do it’s not pretty. You’d need a bib, probably smear a lot of food, make a mess, have to change. I’ll figure it out. I already offer the services you mentioned, but my patients are a little different. Most of them can’t rub two coppers together, let alone a sovereign. I couldn’t charge them for something they’d die without.

When it comes to the nobility…

The old fellow you lost recently. I found his wife, Agnes. It meant everything to her. With the flood and her tears, it’s lucky this whole city isn’t under water. They’re not exactly nobility anymore, but she gave me a brooch. It had a goose or something on it. It fetched a sovereign, but I wouldn’t feel right about charging her either.

I don’t suppose you have eighty-three more people who need my sympathies? With less grateful families?

In all seriousness, I take it things have settled down? When do you suspect we’ll hear back about whether not our friends will come Seek out the Truth?

Your friend and colleague,  
A,

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To the Collective of Kirkwall  
*Delivered*  

A,

The opposite. I will be as candid as I can, for I fear this will be our last correspondence for some time. There have been incidents these past few weeks. Violent outbursts from some of the new recruits. One or two recruits I would understand; there will always be those who join the order for the wrong reasons, looking to live out some perverse fantasy, but this is different.

There is a pattern to it. The new recruits vanish for a few days, and when they return they are changed. This is not some new initiation ritual, nor some simple trip to the Blooming Rose. This is something else.

There was a new recruit by the name of Wilmod. He had friends and family among us and visited them often. He treated us as equals and spoke openly against those who did otherwise. There were even rumors he joined to help others escape, though I suspect them unfabricated. All the same, I knew him to be a good and kind man, but after his initiation he was no man at all.

It started with the outbursts, easily excused. An apprentice handled too roughly; an order issued too loudly. A few apologies, and it was over. The old noble gentleman we lost was the worst. Wilmod brutalized him. Our healers saw to a dislocated hip, a fractured elbow, and terrible, terrible bruising… It was a good thing we lost him. He would only have been made to suffer more in here.

The Knight-Captain confronted Wilmod for it, some days later, and Wilmod was overcome with Rage. It burned him from the inside out. I watched the lava push his eyes from their sockets and melt them onto his cheeks. His skin blackened and charred and he left pieces of himself behind when he
charged. We lost two brothers in the fight. The order seven. The Knight-Captain is permanently scarred.

I apologize for my verbosity. It is needed. Only one of us could have done something like this to Wilmod. I know you have colleagues who would see the order undone, and you may even count yourself among them, but this is not the way. Please, if you know something, if there is anything you can do to put a stop to this, if there is anyone you suspect, do not be silent. Put an end to it, before it puts an end to all of us.

There is no way to tell how many other recruits have been corrupted. We have been put on lockdown until it is deemed safe again while an investigation is conducted. If I suspect you falsely, forgive me. I do not wish to leave you on such dire news, but if anyone were to Seek out the Truth of our plight now, it would not go in our favor. I fear what they will find when they arrive, and they will arrive. They cannot ignore the summons of someone in my position. You were right to advise me against it. I wish I had listened to you, my friend.

As to the nobility, you cannot put others before yourself to your own detriment. Grateful though they may be, they are not your brothers and sisters, and you will discover there are limits to their gratitude. We are perhaps done a disservice in our upbringing to not understand the true value of coin. At the right times in the right amounts, there’s nothing more powerful. The lucrosians understand this better than anyone, and we would do well to learn from them on occasion.

If you truly wish your book reclaimed, you must claim it with the coin it takes to do so before someone else does. You are not the only one with an interest in necromancy. Over a million people live in this city, and not all of them have good intentions. You may find a bleeding heart bleeds itself to death.

Your friend and colleague,
O
See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:33 Dragon Verimensis 17 Mid-Day
The Hanged Man – Varric's Quarters

The setting: The Hanged Man. The cast: Three rogues, two mages, one warrior. The scene: A game of cards.

Enter Anders, our hero, about to turn the Maker’s gaze back on His creations. The culmination of all his trials and tribulations was for this moment. The moment he finally won a hand of Wicked Grace. It was so close Anders could taste it, and it tasted exquisite. The pot was up to seventeen silvers, which meant it was just a little shy of the eight thousand or so more Anders needed. He’d be able to buy Amell’s grimoire back from the Black Emporium in no time at this rate.

“What’s the high suit again?” Merrill asked, flicking the edge of one of her cards with her thumb nail. It was a tell, or a trick, or a something, but Anders didn’t care. Anders couldn’t lose. He had the high suit. Four serpents. There was no beating him. He drew a dagger on his turn, shuffled his hand, and discarded it. He’d been discarding the same card he picked up for the past three rounds, and no one hand noticed. All he needed was someone to play the Angel of Death, and the game was his. If only Oghren could see him now.

“Serpents, Kitten,” Isabela reminded her with a tap on the nose. Merrill flushed pink and didn’t seem to notice when Isabela switched a few of their cards and stuffed them into her boots. Neither did anyone else, but Anders let her have it. No amount of cheating could stop him now.

“So, Blondie,” Varric nudged him with his foot to pull his attention away from his card, “Not to spoil the ending, but what do you think the chances are that we’ll have to introduce Bianca to our friends from Starkhaven?”

“Pretty high, I’d wager,” Isabela answered for him, discarding more cards than she should have had to begin with, “The whole putting demons in other people thing is a real turn off.” Isabela’s hand hesitated over the draw pile, and Anders didn’t doubt more cards were finding their way into her boots while she waggled her eyebrows at him, “When it’s not consensual.”

Anders snorted, “Again, Justice isn’t a demon, but I really wasn’t getting a ‘Love and Lyrium’ vibe from O’s letter.”

“You read my friend-fiction!” Isabela exclaimed, dropping her boots off the table so quickly a few cards fell out. “How far are you? Did you get to the part where-?”
“Stop,” Fenris cut her off, a hand in front of his face as if he couldn’t bring himself to look at Anders. “Please.”

Varric wasn’t a better choice. “It’s really good,” Varric mouthed.

Fenris muttered something in Tevene and made a very determined effort to turn his cards into a face mask. Anders didn’t blame him. The smut in her friend-fiction was shameful, but Varric wasn’t wrong, it was pretty good.

“You’re so cute when you blush,” Isabela teased, tapping Fenris’ nose the same way she had Merrill’s to the same effect.

Anders stared at the three of them. Were they all… a thing? No… maybe? No. Then again, he wouldn’t put it past Isabela. You really couldn’t fault anyone for sleeping with her. It was just… understood, but he doubted Fenris would be with a mage even by association. There was no way the three of them were all together. Well… No.

“It’s not consensual,” Anders said. Cards. Focus on cards. Focus on victory. Gossip is a sin, Anders. Not your business. “Demons seek out mages. For them to possess a non-magic host, the veil has to be thin, or they have to be summoned. It’s thin in Kirkwall, but not that thin. Someone is doing this to the Order, but I don’t think it’s Dec, or anyone from Starkhaven.”

“It’s no wonder they’re on lockdown,” Varric whistled, “How do you know if it’s your friend or your friend plus one? A very nasty plus. I doubt they all glow. I’m pretty sure Blue is the exception and not the rule.”

“They don’t,” Merrill said, a little too cheerily for the topic, Anders thought. “They augment a mage’s connection to the Fade beyond any normal capacity for mana. It’s like putting too much pressure in a pot. You have to expend mana as a counterweight, otherwise they start to reshape themselves into something that can hold it. Like a tea kettle. It’s why Justice glows, and why most possessions aren’t pretty.”

“Aww, you think I’m pretty?” Anders joked.

“Also, you can smell it in their blood.” Merrill ignored him. She’d been doing that a lot recently, ever since Anders had started ignoring her. Anders supposed he deserved it for unjustly suspecting her of stealing his grimoire, having her followed by a Lowtown gang, refusing to help her people recover an ancient part of their magical history, and just generally being an ass. He’d have to make amends. Somehow. Maybe she was like Valenna, and Anders could just get her a rock and pretend it never happened. Probably wishful thinking.

“Normal thing to know,” Hawke mumbled.

“Oh, not really,” Merrill drew a card, and finally seemed to realize her hand had changed. She glanced at Isabela, and then to the floor, and gathered up a few of the scattered cards, but never once looked over her head for the joke, “Most of my people have forgotten the old ways.”

“Blood magic,” Fenris sneered around the cards he’d all but shoved into his mouth, “Demons. You made a mistake letting those mages go. The moment it was convenient, they gave themselves over to the first demon’s promise and now they are well on their way to making themselves magisters. Also, you cheated, put the cards from the floor back.”

“What cards?” Merrill asked innocently.

“The ones from the floor,” Fenris said flatly. “Not in hand, not in play,”
“But they were in my hand,” Merrill protested, “I just dropped them. That’s not really cheating to pick up something I dropped, is it?”

“Not in hand, not in play.” Fenris repeated stubbornly. They definitely weren’t together, Anders decided. Not knowingly, at least.

“I don’t know why you’re being so cross.” “Not in hand—” “Varric, are there any rules against dropping cards?”


“You know possession isn’t the only thing that can cause mutations,” Merrill told her cards, frowning, “Too much lyrium can do the same thing. It also causes paranoia, obsession, dementia…”

“Three for three,” Anders joked.

“It’s impressive, sure, but I wouldn’t call it a mutation,” Isabela added, nudging Fenris with her shoulder. The lyrium-branded elf winced at the contact but didn’t scoot away.

“I know your markings hurt,” Merrill said insistently, waving her cards at the exchange, “I could help you—“

“Fasta vass,” Fenris snapped, “I don’t want your pity. Save it for the victims of all of the blood mages the abomination insists on protecting.”

“Not all mages are like your magisters, you know,” Anders said, for what must have been the hundredth time since he’d met the man. Fenris rolled his eyes, but Anders continued anyway. “Most of us know how to say ‘No’ to demons and we’re friendlier than you think. I don’t think Dec is the one possessing templars.”

“Tell that to his future victims if our suspicions are correct,” Fenris said.

“Or, we could try to make sure there are no future victims by finding the real culprit. I was hoping that you all could ask around.” Anders said, with glance around the table, before his eyes settled on Hawke. “See what you can find out about what’s going on, without involving the guard.”

The man was sitting quietly beside him, a hand over the cards he kept face down on the table. He was still in his Red Iron armor, despite his recent ascension to nobility, and it was still fetching. Deep reds and blacks accented a powerful build that had stood against templars, qunari… magic rocks. The archer was staring at him, enigmatic red eyes perfect for Wicked Grace and terrible for reading.

Hawke was the one with the influence, the affluence, and all the other fluences. The motley crew wasn’t here for Anders, and had all but fallen apart in Hawke’s absence. Anders didn’t have any way to compensate or convince them, but Hawke did. If Anders had his support, he could do anything. Even win Wicked Grace. “It would help Beth,” Anders added, if only because he didn’t know if Hawke would say yes for him.

“We’ll take care of it.” Hawke said. Anders wondered if he would have done the same if he hadn’t mentioned his sister.

“So we’ve got a mystery on our hands,” Varric mused, palming two cards so clumsily even Anders’ noticed. “I’d start with the Rose. There are only so many places the templars frequent—“

“Aha!” Isabela caught his wrist. Heartless. Anders would have ignored it. Maybe that was why he usually lost, “Nice try, handsome. Two fingers might be all you need for some things, but cheating
takes a little more finesse.”

“Rivaini, you wound me,” Varric sighed, but put the cards back. Anders wasn’t sure if they were same cards he stole, but they were cards. He’d worry about helping with the prosthetic later. For now, this was war, and he was warden, and there was only one thing they found in war.

“I thought that was your brother?” Merrill said.

“Good one, Daisy. Like I was saying, the Rose-“ Varric shuffled his cards, but his metal fingers did as poor a job of supporting them as they did picking them up. Three cards slipped, and in Varric’s scramble to catch them, the rest followed. “Son of a bitch!” Varric snapped, slamming his metal hand on the table. It rattled cups and coins and silenced all of them so well Anders heard the quake in Varric’s next breath. “-… sorry, mother.”

Or maybe it was just cards.

“Thank the Maker, my hand was terrible,” Anders lied, scattering his cards in the discard pile. He left his seat to squeeze between Hawke and Varric and take a look at the prosthetic. Varric wiped at his eyes with his free hand, tears staining his sleeve and reddening his complexion.

“I’ll get more drinks!” Isabela announced, fleeing at the sight of feelings.

“Okay, hear me out,” Anders said, taking off Varric’s leather glove to reveal the metal one beneath it. It was a decent contraption, a metal glove with mock fingers in a permanently relaxed position. The goal was for them to move in tandem with Varric’s index finger, but it was a work in progress. Not Anders’ work. Anders had no idea how to make something like that, but Varric had a friend who was working on it. For now, the fingers were frozen, and the entire thing had to be perfectly fitted to Varric’s hand or it was more hinderance than help. “When we find Bartrand, we boil him in oil.”

“Too prosaic,” Varric shook his head, flexing his hand when Anders took off the prosthetic. “Trapped in a cave with hungry bears, right at the spring thaw.”

“Bears don’t normally attack people,” Merrill shook her head, gathering up Varric’s hand to massage his amputation. “Mostly they just run away if they see you. Though one did chase Pol once when he stumbled across a sow with cubs.”

“Dipped in molten gold and left as a statue in the Viscount’s Keep,” Anders offered instead, adjusting the fennec leather straps that held the prosthetic in place.

“That’s poetic,” Varric allotted.

“Aveline might notice,” Fenris countered.

“Could feed him to Dog,” Hawke suggested.

“That’d be one big shit,” Varric said. Anders fit the prosthetic back onto his hand, and Varric flexed it. “I hope Gerav finishes my new hand soon.”

“I’m sure it will be lovely,” Merrill said. “But does it have to be silver? This one doesn’t really match anything you wear. Oh! I could paint it for you!”

“That’d be nice, Daisy,” Varric agreed.

“So long as you do not paint it in blood,” Fenris snorted.
“Really?” Anders sighed.

“Play nice,” Hawke added.

“Blood doesn’t make a very good paint,” Merrill said thoughtfully, “It dries a sort of dirty brown and I think madder root red would go better with Varric’s wardrobe. I still have some left over from the scarf I made for Beth.”

“I’d love that, Daisy, thanks,” Varric gave her hand a pat. “I don’t think Rivaini is coming back. Does someone want to count the coins?”

Hawke handled it. They came up short, and Hawke took the loss Isabela had stolen. Anders pocketed the measly silver he’d bet and eyed the ten Varric took back suspiciously. “Wait a second, did you drop the cards on purpose?”

“Blondie, how could you?” Varric clutched his chest hair like an aghast noblewoman might her pearls, “I am a wounded man, aggrieved the loss of his livelihood.”

“You cheeky bastard,” Anders should have known better. He gathered up his things with a sigh, “So, look, I’ll talk to Dec, and if you all could just ask around, hopefully we can figure this out. Same time next week? Merrill, do you have a minute?”

Merrill had bundled herself up in so many scarves she looked as round as Varric by the time she was done. “Of course,” Merrill toddled out into the hall. Anders followed her and tried to think of what he wanted to say.

’Sorry I’m so selfish I didn’t want to share what little pieces of Amell I have left, even though he had the soul of a Dalish and never hesitated to help Velanna relearn her heritage by teaching her how to be an Arcane Warrior?’ ‘Sorry I immediately assumed you stole his grimoire because that’s what I would have done?’ ‘Sorry I had you stalked by a group of Lowtown thugs because it was easier than just talking to you?’ ‘Sorry I didn’t appreciate how much you do for the Collective helping me gather herbs in the Planasene Forest until you stopped because I started ignoring you with no explanation?’ ‘Sorry that I didn’t give you the same benefit of the doubt I gave Amell when you had to use blood magic on Justice and I to protect yourself, Beth, and the entire alienage from us?’

Anders floundered like a fish, opening and closing his mouth for so long Merrill laughed at him. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry,” Anders managed.

“That’s okay,” Merrill rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet and tugged at a few of her scarves. She reminded Anders of a walking ball of yarn, “I do strange things too sometimes. What did you want to talk to me about? I don’t think anyone in the alienage will know anything about what’s happening. We try to avoid the templars, ever since raid.”

“Right-no.” Anders took a deep breath and pushed past his spirit’s discomfort at the mention of the raid. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Merrill blinked at him, wide green eyes that couldn’t possibly have been as innocent as they seemed. She had to know he’d been being an ass. Maybe she just wanted him to say it.

“Being an ass?” Anders tried.

“Oh,” Merrill said. “Thank you.”
“So… are we good?” Anders asked.

“No,” Merrill said.

“What do you mean no?” Anders demanded, “Look, I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding you. I thought— I thought you stole my grimoire, after our fight, but it turns out it was just some random thief, and they sold it to some evil emporium under the city, and it’s going to cost me a fortune to get it back. I think that’s a pretty sufficient punishment, so I just- want us to be friends again.” It wasn’t like he had many, and Merrill… She was a good person. A good mage. He missed their weekly excursions outside the city, their magical debates and theory-crafting, her positive attitude in the face of anything and everything.

“You thought I stole your grimoire?” Merrill took a step back from him. “Because we had a fight? Why? Because I’m Dalish?”

“No,” Anders ran a frustrated hand through his hair. This wasn’t working. Why wasn’t it working? It had always worked with Amell, with Hawke, and anyone else Anders cared about. ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘That’s okay.’ Problem solved. Normally the only reason people didn’t forgive him was because he didn’t care enough to apologize. What was he supposed to do if apologizing didn’t work? “Because that’s what I would have done.”

“You would have stolen something from me if I didn’t let you borrow it?” Merrill looked hurt.

“No-I mean-“ Probably. “I—” Maker, he just kept making it worse. “You— Look, my grimoire, it was important to me. Don’t you have anything like that? Something you’d never trust anyone else with?”

“I do,” Merrill said. Okay. Progress. “I’m sorry about your grimoire. I don’t know what I would do if someone stole my mirror, but … I’d be mad at them, not you. I know I make stupid mistakes, and I’m dangerous, but I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends,” Anders said. “Look, what you did to Justice… can’t we just call it even?”

“I was protecting Bethany from you!” Merrill argued. “I was protecting myself. What were you doing? Who were you protecting, having me followed every night? That’s because of you, isn’t it?”

“How do you-“

“I’m not stupid,” Merrill glared at him, folding her arms across her chest. “I can’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry,” Anders said. The word felt hollow, and Anders didn’t know how to fill it. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know,” Merrill admitted. “More than sorry.”

“More than sorry,” Anders joked unhappily, and immediately wished he hadn’t. Merrill rolled her eyes and started down the stairs. Anders followed her through the Hanged Man to the exit, and caught her in the doorway. Cold air whipped inside and pooled sleet at their feet, and Norah yelled at them to close it. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“How?” Merrill asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Anders admitted.

“I’ll see you next week, Anders,” Merrill shook her head and left.
Anders felt miserable. He stood in the doorway and watched Merrill vanish into the distance, snow eating up his boots until Norah physically dragged him from the entryway with a lecture Anders barely heard. He took a seat by the door and fiddled with the cat-barf colored scarf that Merrill had made for him. He should have known better. How many of his problems could have been solved by now if he just had the good sense to talk them out?

All it took was a letter to Orsino, and the First Enchanter was all but throwing mages at Anders for him and the Collective to rescue. If Anders had written to him as soon as he got to Kirkwall, he might not have wasted half a year trying to put together the framework of an Underground. He didn’t even need to worry about phylacteries when Orsino wrote off every mage they rescued as a suicide. They were just thrown away, no questions asked, and the mages were free.

Decimus might have had to use blood magic to convince the Coterie and the Redwaters to help escaped mages, but at the end of the day, they hadn’t required much convincing. It was just talking. Maybe if they’d been a little better at it, a little more persuasive, a little more cunning, then they wouldn’t have needed the blood magic at all.

What was he doing? Why couldn’t he just talk to people like a normal person? He hadn’t changed at all. He was just like Isabela, still running away from anything that made him uncomfortable. Suddenly Hawke seemed a great deal more relatable. How many more situations was he just making worse by not talking them through?

Not Decimus. Anders wasn’t going to jump to any conclusions. The fact that Decimus was eager to bind demons to spelltomes didn’t mean he was eager to bind them to templars. Everyone had a limit. Decimus had helped him. Decimus had helped the Collective. He was a part of every major rescue mission that Anders had organized. Surely he had to understand that unleashing demons in the Circle would do far more harm than good.

Just because he was a blood mage didn’t mean he was an evil blood mage. Anders would just go talk to him. If it turned out he was behind it after all, Anders would just-…

Would just what? Just ask him to stop? The man had made a splinter cell in the Libertarians and named it the Resolutionists, for Maker’s sake. He didn’t believe in half-measures. Just last week he was giving a speech about how they would show every person in Thedas how little protection the Circle of Magi actually offers and how they would take their fight to the Chantry… but it was just a speech, wasn’t it? Anders gave speeches all the time.

What would he do if Anders tried to stop him? He wasn’t the sort of man to give up a cause any more than Anders was, and Anders was fueled by a spirit of Justice. Anders traced a vein in his hand, imaging it cracked open with spirit fire. “What do we do?”

“Who are you talking to?” Hawke appeared in front of him, and Anders jumped, knocking his knees on the table and falling back into his seat.

“Maker’s breath, don’t do that,” Anders muttered, rubbing at his heart. “I’m going to end up with heart problems like Thom one day.”

“Who’s Thom?” Hawke asked, taking a seat across from him.

“Patient,” Anders said. He glanced around the Hanged Man, but no one was paying them any particular heed. Anders lowered his voice anyway. “You don’t think Decimus is really behind this, do you?”

“Do you?” Hawke shot back.
“I don’t know,” Anders admitted. “I hope not. He’s a good man, Hawke.”

“A good man who possesses people with demons.” Hawke corrected him.

“He’s helped the cause,” Anders continued, “I could have Beth out tonight if she wanted to leave.”

“But she doesn’t,” Hawke said simply. “Others don’t. You want them in there with abominations?”

“No,” Anders said, “Of course not, but-“

“No,” Hawke cut him off. “He’s doing this, he dies.”

Anders chewed on his bottom lip, “What if I can get him to stop?”

“Can you?” Hawke asked.

“I don’t know,” Anders sighed, leaning back in his chair to rest his head against the wall. He regretted it immediately. It was sticky. Why was it sticky? “We have a meeting this evening. I’ll talk to him.”

“Do you want me with you?” Hawke asked.

“No,” Anders sighed, “The less involved you are the better. If I can’t handle this, Justice will.”

Anders felt a surge of confidence from his spirit at the mention, but Anders couldn’t take any comfort in it. He didn’t want to have to handle it. He wanted to be wrong. He wanted it to be someone or something else. Not one of the strongest allies Anders had met in the city since he’d met Hawke. “We have to stop this before the Seekers get here to investigate the Knight-Commander.”

“What then?” Hawke asked.

“What do you mean?” Anders asked.

“I mean, what are you hoping they’ll find?” Hawke elaborated. “If the Grand Cleric didn’t care about what happened to Karl, why would the Seekers?”

“How could you even-“ Anders started, hand erupting with flame. Hawke caught it and snuffed out the blue fire between his gloves before Anders could set the whole tavern aflame.

“I’m not saying it was right,” Hawke kept hold of his hand. The leather was coarse and queerly comforting, as was the fact that Hawke didn’t seem to care about the magic that came with his outburst. At the same time, Anders had a profound urge to rip his hand out of Hawke’s grasp that didn’t seem at all like how he should have felt. It had to be Justice. “I’m saying what then?”

“I don’t know,” Anders didn’t know anything. He didn’t know what to do about the Seekers, about Decimus, about Merrill, about Hawke, holding his hand and waiting for a better answer. Anders knew it was a bad idea to write to the Seekers. A waste of time to talk to the Grand Cleric. He’d warned Orsino. Some problems Anders needed to talk through. Others… Others were past the point of talking.

“You should,” Hawke said. “I don’t want to lose you to this.”

“Lose me?” Anders repeated, grinning. “I didn’t know you had me.”

“I just meant-…to your cause,” Hawke backtracked.

“That’s all?” Anders blurted, catching Hawke’s hand when he tried to pull it away. It felt good to
hold it. It felt better to be held.

“What?” Hawke asked.

“I mean... you’ve done a lot,” Anders said, despite himself. He could practically feel Justice scrabbling at the inside of his skull with where Anders felt the sudden need to take the conversation, but he couldn’t help it. First Beth, then Merrill, now maybe Decimus. Hawke wasn’t the one losing people. Anders was, and Hawke was the one who kept them around. Who kept them going. Who kept them grounded. “You got me the audience with the Grand Cleric, you saved that boy Feynriel, and those apostates from Starkhaven…”

“Wasn’t about you,” Hawke said, but let him keep his hand.

“That’s just makes it matter more that you follow your convictions,” Anders decided, and the sentiment seemed to quiet Justice some. “My cause is to make a world where your sister can be free again. It’s not a bad thing to lose myself to, and I couldn’t do it without your support.”

“And?” Hawke said.

“And we were going to get drinks once,” Anders finished lamely.

“Once,” Hawke agreed.

Great job, Anders. A masterful seduction. He tried to retrieve his hand, but Hawke tangled their fingers together to keep a firm hold on it. Hawke sighed, and fished his chantry amulet out from under his vest. He held it between them on his thumb, “Where do you fit with this?” Hawke asked.

“The chantry did many good things for you and your family, but it can’t be a good part of our society if it will not accept mages.” Anders said. He didn’t fit with the chantry at all. He fit with the Chant of Light. Hawke should have been able to separate the two, for his sister’s sake. “Its laws were made a thousand years ago, based on fear of an empire that has long since crumbled. If it can’t acknowledge that its templars are beyond its control, it must be torn down.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” Hawke put the necklace back under his vest. “Elthina can’t acknowledge the templars are beyond her control. She’s one woman. You’re one man. You can’t tear down the chantry single-handedly.”

“It would not be single handed,” Anders had Justice. He had the Collective. They gained new mages every day, and fewer and fewer left Kirkwall when they were given the chance to stay and fight.

“Who would help you?” Hawke asked, “Decimus? Do you think he gave the same speech before he started possessing templars?”

“Decimus is hurting people - Maybe. I’m talking about an institution,” Anders said.

“There are people in that institution,” Hawke argued. “And who’s talking? You, or Justice?”

“Who would you listen to?” Anders demanded. He suddenly wanted his hand back. “Justice is no malevolent influence as you seem to think. He is the embodiment of righteousness. If he disapproves of something, it is wrong.”

“Alright then, tear it down.” Hawke said.

“What?” Anders deflated. He couldn’t have been that convincing. Was he bleeding? Had he accidentally mind controlled him or something? He stared at Hawke, flabbergasted.
“Tear it down,” Hawke said again, “What’s your plan?”

“I-“ Anders stumbled.

“Don’t have one.” Hawke finished for him. “You should. What if you have to kill Decimus today? What if you have to kill them all? What if what you’re doing kills more people than it saves? How many people are risking their lives each time you free a mage from the Gallows?

“You don’t know. You don’t think. We risked everything to break into the Gallows, and Beth was fine. She was never in any danger. I like you, Anders, but you’re impulsive. Look at me. Really think about it. Do you really want to be with me? Does Justice, because I won’t get just you, will I?”

“… It’s not just you,” Anders said. “He doesn’t want me to be with anyone.”

“Then why are you asking me about all this?” Hawke asked.

“I-…” I’m lonely? I’m tired? I like the way you stand up for your convictions? The way you take care of your friends? The way you fight for mages? The way you keep me grounded? I don’t care if this is wrong? “I don’t know.”

“Then figure it out,” Hawke let go of his hand and stood. “… Be careful tonight. …You can come by the estate after, if you want dinner. Just fly in. I’ll leave a window open.”

Anders left the Hanged Man. Hawke was right. Of course Hawke was right. There was no separating him and Justice. Anders couldn’t be with Hawke if Justice didn't want him to be. He wandered the crowded streets of Lowtown, trying to turn his thoughts elsewhere. The floods were killing Kirkwall. With the refugees piled in from Darktown and the nightly curfews, the gang wars were spilling into the day. The Dogs fought the Sharps, the Sharps fought the Coterie, the Coterie fought the Carta, the Carta fought the Reining Men, and left Anders and Aveline cleaning up the mess.

The half of the gangs that didn’t end up in jail ended up at his clinic, even flooded as it was. Anders spent the day healing wrenched limbs, crushed arms, cracked skulls, and open wounds. Even Cor was part of the fighting, and stayed after Anders finished healing his broken foot to talk about how Kanky was regretting not agreeing to help his cause. Apparently, one of the mages they’d freed had decided to stay on with the Redwaters and was wreaking havoc as a veritable human canon at sea.

Anders locked up after Cor left, and sloshed his way through the sewers. The waters were down to a thin film, but when you slept on the floor, there was no difference between one or two inches of sewage. Anders hoped it would clear up by Pluitanis. He had a cot, so he was better off than most, but it was the smell that concerned him. Or rather the lack of it with how well he’d adjusted over the past month. At this rate, he was going to permanently damage his sense of smell.

He tried not to think about it, pulled on a breath of mana instead. He held it until the sensation dulled in his left arm, and his veins cracked with blue fire. Justice stretched their fingers and fiddled with the ends of the scarf they wore. It was soothing for both of them, Anders imagined, considering no part of him felt otherwise. He had Justice. No matter what happened, he’d always have Justice. Anders flipped a mental coin for whether to talk about Hawke or Decimus, and decided to go with the more pressing concern.

“So… what do you think we should say?” Anders asked his spirit, running his fingers over the back of his hand, “Tomes good, templars bad? Hey Decimus, just curious, what do you think has been possessing the templars lately? I’m getting the sense that the templars are filled with a lot more Rage than usual? Hey Decimus, maybe we gave you the wrong impression, but most people don’t like to
share their bodies with spirits or demons?”

Justice didn’t have any suggestions. It didn’t matter to him what they said. It mattered what they did. Anders stopped in front of the bloody door that marked one of their many Collective safehouses and sighed. Well. Here goes nothing. He knocked three times, and the door opened.

“So, a templar and a demon walk into a body-“ Anders started, when pain tore through him, as if his blood was boiled with all the fire of the sun, until there was nothing left but ash, and he collapsed.

Chapter End Notes

A fanart of Merrill from this chapter and all of her scarves!
Enemies Among Us

Chapter Summary

“I had a run in with Alrik myself. He’s the one who did the ritual on Karl. Nasty piece of work. Likes to make mages beg.”

“Ser Karras said if I tell anyone he’s been in my chambers, he’ll make me tranquil.”

Chapter Notes

Hey what’s up you guys!? Welcome back to Accursed Ones. Don’t forget to SMASH that kudos button, bookmark, and subscribe. Let me know what you think in the comments down BELOW.

Dark chapter. TW: Implied rape if you need to skip this one.

9:33 Dragon Verimensis 17 Evening

Darktown - Collective Meeting House

It was more than pain that came with a templar’s lyrium-infused smite. It was the death of magic. It cut them off from the Fade. Not completely. Never completely. There was always a part of them that existed beyond the veil, but on this side, the world was immutable and unchanging. No amount of will would reshape it into fire, or lightning, or any of the primal forces usually at their command.

Anders’ magic dissipated. There was no room for it around with lyrium’s song and the burn it left behind. Justice felt it like a Calling, only there was no Archdemon to make it sing so. There were only templars. Five.

Justice took the fall on their shoulder and rolled through the sewage. They were quick to their feet, but the water added weight and soaked into the suede. A templar rushed them, just as hampered, his red skirt steeped in filth that dyed the chantry sunburst a putrid brown. He didn’t have the range, or the speed, and his thrust was clumsy. Justice caught the blade in their coat, twisting with the motion to free them of it and put them behind the templar.

They were so much more than man and magic. They would reshape the world where magic failed. Locking their hands around the templar’s throat and jaw, Justice wrenched. Windpipe crushed into spine crushed into muscle, and a last gasp pulsed beneath their fingers. Head and helmet gave way from shoulders with a snap, and lulled unnaturally backwards, when a second templar came at them, weapon raised high.

It wasn’t a sword. Too late, Justice saw the brand, then he saw darkness.

Anders didn’t know how long it had been when he came around. Thickets and reeds dotted a barren landscape, casting queer shadows that seemed to slither away into an emerald sky. Far away,
someone was crying. Anders crawled towards the sound. His legs were boneless, his right arm dead at his side, but he still had his left. He grabbed dirt, rock, and will, and crawled, but the ground melted to rot in his grasp. What had once been rock became boil, and burst, hot pus seeping beneath his nails.

“Fuck,” Anders swore, but kept crawling. Pus wept down his arm and solidified into maggots. They burrowed into his skin, writhing ecstatically through his veins, trilling, singing, Calling.

Far away, someone was still crying. Anders pushed through the corruption, and the maggots grew quieter and quieter, until his skin was his own again. It wasn’t his Calling. “Hello?” Anders grabbed one of the cobblestones in the streets of Amaranthine, and dragged himself through the bloody gutters, “Is someone there?”

It was Darrian. The bulbous mess of man and Rage was huddled in on himself, naked skin stretched to translucency trying to contain the twitching muscles beneath. Spines and spikes jutted through his skin everywhere bone met bone and rattled with every sob that wracked his disfigured form. Anders pushed himself into some semblance of a sitting position, and gathered as much of Darrian as he could into his one good arm. “Hey, I’m here,” Anders said. “I’m here.”

Tears spilled down Darrian’s contorted face, “Where is here?”

“I-…” Anders looked around the deserted cobblestone streets. Rivers of blood ran through the gutters up into the ocean above. Bloated bodies knocked together in the foamy waters, their eyes wide and white and fixed on him, no matter where the waves took them. “Amaranthine,” Anders said slowly, but it felt wrong.

Darrian walked his knotted hands up Anders’ arms to tangle them in his hair and pull him close. Skinless lips pressed up against his ear. “Save him,” Darian whispered.

“Anders asked.

The corpses shrieked, “Save him!”

Anders snapped awake. He was in what looked like a storage room, long since abandoned. It was bereft of windows, a single sconce on the center pillar the only light source. A blood-orange glow illuminated walls lined in shelves lined in cobwebs. Broken pallets were stacked against overturned crates and scattered haphazardly throughout the room, offering little cover between the two exits Anders could see. One stairwell led up, the other down. Nearby, someone was crying.

It was Alain. He was lying on his side a few feet away, and he was everything Anders had tried to make the Collective. Woolen clothes from Lirene, leather boots from Franke, a scavenged leather vest from Cor, a scarf from Abigail. It wasn’t a collective of mages, it was a collective of people coming together for mages.

Except no one was coming now. Anders’ coat was missing, his legs and arms were bound, and his right arm was in agony. Something had scalded him. The underside of his forearm was a dripping mess of charred skin and crusted blood. It should have been a simple thing to heal, but nothing happened when he tried.

The Fade was there, just beyond the Veil, but he couldn't reach it. Each attempt felt like an inhale that brought no air into his lungs. It had to be the templars’ shackles - runes on the inside weakening his connection to the Fade. Except Anders had worn those shackles before and cast through them. Simple cantrips, but he’d done it. The shackles just made him feel fatigued and unfocused, but this was different. This was suffocating.
Anders tried to remember what had happened in the fight. They had killed a templar. Taken blows. Then darkness. They must have lost themselves to their anger. There must have been reinforcements. Anders remembered killing one templar, which would have left four, but they would have needed four score to stop them. They were just exhausted.

Focus, Anders. Think back to your apprenticeship and all those lessons with Senior Enchanter What's-His-Face. Hands were a focal point for magic, and in lieu of a strong connection with the Fade, a mage needed contact with whatever they wanted to use that magic to reshape. Anders twisted in his shackles, stretching his fingers until they grazed the burn on his forearm. Pain laced through him like lightning. Anders screamed through grit teeth, but no magic flowed from him to his wound.

Skin, or what resembled it, stuck to the tips of his fingers when he pulled them back. Blood glued together bits of crinkled black, with all the scent and sensation of overdone bacon. Anders swallowed back his dinner, not for the way his own peeled skin reminded him of it, but for the fact that he couldn’t heal it. He could always heal. He was a mage. A spirit healer. The matrimony of the Maker’s first and second children. He was Justice.

Even as Anders thought it, it felt wrong. It didn't resonate with him. It wasn't the core and cause of his being. It was just... justice. Just a word. An ideal. A spirit. Why couldn't he feel his spirit?

"Justice?" Anders said.

No one answered him. No veilfire rippled through his veins. Nothing welled in him. Nothing drove him forward, or spurred him on, or championed his cause, or helped him to his feet. He was alone.

His soul felt sundered. He couldn't be alone. They were themselves. He wasn't him. He wasn't one person. He was Anders and he was Justice and they were one and this was wrong. Anders couldn't breathe. Half of him was missing and panic filled the void Justice had left. He wheezed, choking, but next to him Alain was crying.

Alain. Save him. He'd dreamed. He had a dream. Save who? Alain? Justice? Himself? He couldn't dream. How had he dreamed?

Save him. Focus Anders. Anders dragged himself across the floor to Alain's side and squeezed his shoulder. "Alain, what happened?"

"Can you h-h-heal me?" Alain asked without looking at him. His voice was hoarse, and Anders wondered how long he'd been crying. How long had Anders been unconscious? How long had Alain been here? Where was here?

"I have to get these shackles off first. They're a real fashion crime," Anders joked. Alain inhaled a rickety breath, and Anders squeezed his shoulder again, "Can you sit up?"

"It's the sigil. Not the shackles." Alain said, not moving. Anders had no idea what he was talking about. "Please... you can h-h-heal dwarves. You can h-h-heal through anything. Please h-h-h... help me."

"Heal what?" Anders asked. A mottled maroon colored bruise marred Alain's throat, like he'd been choked, and his palms were scuffed a bloody pink, but Anders didn't feel any major breaks or bleeding.

Alain's words were barely more than a whisper, but Anders heard them. He'd heard them before, in the Circle, from mages curled up in dark closets and corners, who could never be healed so simply.
'I can still feel him.'

"Flames," Anders draped his shackled arms over Alain and squeezed as best as he was able. It was awkward, and pushed his manacled hands up under Alain's chin, but Alain squeezed feebly back. Anders searched for words, but everything that came to him fell short. Sorry wasn’t strong enough and no magic would make it okay. Justice would have known what to say. He was the one with the strength. The conviction. Anders was just Anders.

"I'm here," Anders decided. "I've got you."

"He’ll come back," Alain shivered.

“I’ll kill him,” Anders promised.

Alain shook his head against Anders’ chest and said nothing. Anders disentangled himself from Alain and tested the shackles at his feet. He could still shuffle, but he wasn’t running anywhere any time soon. “Where are we?”

“Above the wine-cellar,” Alain hugged his knees to his chest. “The meeting place is down the s-s-stairs.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Anders used the wall to shimmy his way to his feet, keeping one eye on the stairs leading down for any templars that came up, “The ceiling was caved in, and it was blocked off last week. How would they know to clear it out?”

Alain didn’t answer him. He also didn’t get up. Anders tried to nudge him with his foot, but the shackles made it so difficult his toe barely grazed him, “Come on, we have to get out of here. Whose house is this?”

“I don’t know,” Alain told his knees, not moving.

“Well where are we?” Anders demanded. He knew they were on the west side of Kirkwall, but nothing beyond that. Darktown cobwebbed beneath the entire city, sewers intersecting with mineshafts intersecting with natural caverns. Anders might have been able to find his way to the lifts, but Kirkwall’s above and below were two completely different beasts. “Lowtown? Hightown? The Foundries?”

“I don’t know,” Alain said unhelpfully.

Anders bit back a frustrated growl. It wasn’t Alain’s fault. Anders could have been in his position if he’d been the first to arrive to the meeting. It didn’t make sense. Or maybe it made too much sense. Bardel had warned him, after Karl. The templars knew about him. They’d sent for his phylactery months ago. Maybe they’d finally gotten it from Kinloch and that was how they’d tracked him down.

Or maybe Orsino had set him up. Maybe he hadn’t destroyed Jake’s phylactery after all, and the templars had used it to follow him when the Collective rescued him from the Gallows. Or maybe Orsino didn’t trust him to investigate the templar possessions, or thought he was part of it, and wanted to get into the Knight-Commanders good graces by turning on him.

Or maybe it was one of his patients. Maybe there was a bounty on his head that was worth the trade, if it would buy them a roof over their head with Darktown flooded. Or maybe it was the Coterie. Maybe they knew Decimus had used blood magic on Harlan, and they wanted revenge. Or maybe it was Aveline. The Guard Captain had already turned in a few mages to the templars, and she was the reason Beth was in the Circle –
A scream from downstairs cut off Anders’ train of thought. Anders ran towards it and tripped over his shackles. His elbows took the brunt of the fall, and his face took the rest. Anders bit the inside of his cheek, skinned his already skinned arm, and forced himself to stop. He lay on the ground, shackled, blood welling in his mouth, Hawke’s words running through his ringing skull. ‘You don’t think,’ Hawke had said. ‘You’re impulsive.’

Hawke was right. He couldn’t do anything tied up like this. He had to think. He had to plan. He didn’t have magic, so what did he have? Anders swallowed, tasted copper, and changed his mind. He didn’t have the Fade. That didn’t mean he didn’t have magic.

Anders shuffled back to sit beside Alain. He hated how easy it was. Downstairs, a woman was screaming. Anders could hear his demons in her voice. The fear of capture, the agony of betrayal, the despair, the pain. Nothing in him fought it. No righteous fire kindled in response. Nothing drove him to action, to purpose, to battle. Not in that moment. Not in the way Justice would have.

Don’t think about it. Think about the spell. He had the blood from the cut in his mouth and the burn on his arm. There was power there. He could feel it, pulsing in time with his heart, and he would use it to its last beat if it came to it. The spirits in his dream had told Anders to ‘save him’, and right now there was only one him Anders had a chance of saving.

Anders tilted his head back and held his chin up to keep the blood in his mouth, but some still spilled when he spoke, “Alain, listen. I can melt the chains – freeze them.” Frost was better. It would take less blood to chill already cool air than it would to bring about a fire with no natural spark. And it would numb the pain. “Either way, it’s going to hurt. I don’t know how well I can control the temperature so it doesn’t touch you without a staff, but if I get the chain you can run-“

Alain was shaking his head, but that was too bloody bad. Anders wasn’t asking and they didn’t have the time to argue. He was about to cast the spell when something distracted him. It was quiet. The screaming stopped. Anders looked at the stairs and heard the muffled conversation of a handful of different voices from below, coupled with laughter.

A templar’s helmet popped up from below, followed shortly thereafter by a body, to which it was regrettably still attached. He was followed by two others, one of them carrying a body Anders’ hoped was still alive. It was Terrie. The templar dropped her next to Anders and Alain, while another manifested shackles out of one of the crates in the storage room. Anders hoped she’d killed the missing fourth.

She looked… better than Alain. She was covered in a foul sludge from the fight, but her clothes were intact, and she had no visible breaks or bruises or casting cuts. Anders hoped the screaming had just come from the templars’ smites. He didn’t know if he could live with himself otherwise.

Alain kept his face in his knees, but Anders couldn’t help his scowl. The templar shackling Terrie stared at him through his visor. Anders imagined he was grinning. The other two took off their helmets, but the change didn’t make them monsters turning into men, just monsters turning into different monsters.

One had a mustache and goatee, the other had muttonchops. If they kissed, they’d have four arms, four legs, one beard, and no soul. Anders couldn’t decide which one to hate more.

The templar doing the shackling slapped the glyph on Terrie’s face with the back of his glove. It cut her cheek, bruised her jaw, and made Anders wish the man’s helmet was off so he could commit his face to memory. He’d kill him. He’d kill them all. Not yet. Not now. He didn’t have the blood. “What’s this then?” The templar asked.
Muttonchops walked over to Alain, who scrambled violently backwards until he was pressed up against Anders’ side. “Well, princess? What is it?”

“It’s a gl-gl-gl-“ Alain stuttered.

“Gl, gl, gl, gl,“ Muttonchops parroted back, rolling his eyes. “Cut it off her.”

Alain found his courage, all but diving over Anders’ towards Terrie, but Muttonchops grabbed him and shoved him back against the wall. “It’s not dangerous!” Alain protested.

“I don’t believe you,” Muttonchops sneered. He leaned over Alain to leer at Anders, so close Anders could feel the man’s breath on his neck. “What do you think, Anders?” Muttonchops asked, licking his jaw up to his ear. “Is it dangerous?”

Anders didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. He did his best to ignore it, holding onto the taste of copper in his mouth and worrying the cut with his teeth to keep the blood flowing. He’d need it for whatever spell he was going to cast to save them. Patience. Planning. It had to be worth it. It had to save them. It couldn’t be for him and his anger.

He’d been through worse than a templar’s humiliation. Namaya’s betrayal. Solitary confinement. His father drowning him. Amell…. This was a moment. It would pass. For him, for Terrie, for Alain… The ends would justify the means.

.. he hoped Terrie stayed unconscious.

“I guess it’s dangerous,” Muttonchops decided.

Muttonchops pulled a dagger from his belt and tipped it playfully back and forth. Anders could lock his arms around the templar’s neck to slam his head down onto his own dagger… and get impaled by the templar behind him. He could spit corrosive blood into Muttonchop’s face and hope he bled enough for Anders to cast another spell before he got impaled by the templar behind him. He could use his own blood even if he got impaled to kill every templar in the room… unless he got impaled through the heart.

He’d been impaled before, but he had Justice. Did he still have Justice? Would Justice save him if he was impaled now? Could Justice save him if he was impaled now? Was Justice even still a part of him? Anders had to assume he wasn’t. Anything he did had to be something Anders could do, and Anders couldn’t save Terrie’s face.

“Oh for the love of Andraste,” Goatee sighed, loud and dramatic, “It’s a repulsion glyph, Karras, not an invitation to make her repulsive. You had your turn with the boy. Do you really think we want to look at some bitch’s skinned face while we have ours?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Helmet shrugged, tracing the glyph on Terrie’s face. He pressed down harder, and the edge of his metal glove cut into her skin.

“See?” Karras said, waving the dagger at Terrie and the templar squatting over her, “He doesn’t mind. Don’t be such a prude, Otto,“

Otto rolled his eyes and drew what Andres initially thought was a sword, but quickly realized was a brand. There wasn’t a sunburst on it. Anders tried not to panic. Otto held it over the sconce’s flame for a long minute, and then shoed Helmet away from Terrie. He knelt over her, slapping her face a few times until she stirred. “Good morning,” Otto purred.

Terrie jolted upright with a primal scream, and Otto slammed the brand into her chest. Terrie’s
scream curdled with sobs, and Otto kept the brand firmly planted with one hand and stroked Terrie’s cheek with the other, “Now that’s the sound I like to hear. Do you know what this is? A little glyph of neutralization, almost like the one on your cheek. Your friend Alain gave us the idea, when he told us about your tattoo. Apparently, a mage’s magic can sustain a glyph inscribed on their flesh indefinitely. The more powerful the mage, the more powerful the glyph. You’ll never feel the Fade again, and I don’t even have to make you Tranquil.”

“Come on, we should go, we still have two more to get when they show up,” Helmet said, nudging Otto off Terrie.

“You’re going to beg for demons to take you by the time I’m done with you,” Otto said, putting his helmet back on, “I wonder if they’ll hear you through the glyph? Won’t it be fun to find out?”

Karras wasn’t as quick to follow, “I heard you’re our shapeshifter,” He whispered, sticking his tongue into Anders’ ear, “Normally, I don’t fuck animals, but I’ll make an exception for you.”

The templars left.

Terrie grabbed at her chest, coughing violently. She pulled at her shirt, and it suctioned off her burnt skin with a hiss that made Anders’ heart twist. “Alain, what did he mean?”


“Alain, what did he mean!?” Terrie screamed, clambering over Anders’ legs to reach Alain. Anders should have stopped her, but he didn’t.

“I told you I didn’t like the b-b-blood magic!” Alain screamed back.

“Do you like this!?” Terrie demanded, wriggling across the floor on her stomach to beat at Alain’s legs with her shackles, “Do you!? Is this better!? Do you like this more Alain!? Do you like it!? Does this please your delicate sensibilities you damned craven!?”

“Terrie,” Anders forced himself to say, still holding the blood in his mouth.

“What!?” Terrie rolled over to face him, still half on his legs, eyes wild. “If you tell me to calm the fuck down I swear to the Maker I will—“

“They said they wouldn’t h-h-hurt anyone,” Alain sniffed.

“Well hear ye, fucking hear-ye, Alain, they lied!” Terrie flailed her arms over her head in Alain’s direction. “You worthless, rotten, stool pigeon!”

“Terrie, he knows,” Anders felt numb. It was the safest way to feel. He couldn’t afford to feel anything else. He had enough blood for one spell. It had to count. He couldn’t get them all out and he couldn’t expect the Collective to help them. It didn’t matter how many apostates or malificarum they sent while the templars had their brand. If they were going to get help, it couldn’t be from a mage. And if someone was going to get it, it couldn’t be Alain. His dream be damned, Anders couldn’t trust him. “I can get you out.”

Terrie stopped flailing and struggled into a sitting position, watching him intently. “How?”

“I’ll freeze the shackles on your ankles and shatter them. It’s going to hurt,” Anders warned her, “So be ready. Get out of here, stay on the west side of Kirkwall, and go to Hightown. Look for an estate, north of the markets, with a red emblem of two hawks fighting on it. Tell the man who lives there what happened. Where we are.”
“I will,” Terrie promised. She braced herself, and Anders spat the blood out on her shackles.

Part of him watched, petrified. What if it didn’t work? He’d invented the spell on the spot. Amell had warned him not to invent spells with blood magic, but it wasn’t as if Anders could mind control the chains into falling off. What if it the glyph on his arm didn’t just sap his connection to the Fade, it also sapped his connection to blood magic? What if they were all doomed?

The blood congealed on the chain links between the shackles, and slowly ceased to drip. It crackled on the metal and seemed to suck the warmth from the room. He brought his manacles down hard on the chain links, and they shattered into shards of ice and jagged steel. Bits imbedded themselves into his hands and Terrie’s ankles, but it worked. There was nothing he could do for the shards, or the frostbite that was bound to follow, but it was better than dead.

Anders let out the breath he’d been holding and watched it turn to fog in the magic-chilled air. Terrie leapt to her feet and ran up the stairs without a word, but found several colorful ones when she reached door at the top. “It’s locked!” Terrie glanced between Anders and the stairs that led down into the dark with the templars. “Anders, it’s locked!”

Of course it was locked. Why wouldn’t it be locked?

Anders struggled to his feet and shuffled his way to the stairs one painfully small step at a time, his numb veneer cracking. Maker save him, he was pathetic. This was a pathetic way to die. Justice would have been ashamed of him. He would have flexed their way out of their chains and charged up the stairs and through the door, and then turned around and charged right back down and into the templars. Anders was going to waddle his way to the Maker’s side.

They should have recognized the glyph. They should have anticipated this could happen. They shouldn’t have marked their meeting houses in blood. They shouldn’t have mixed maleficars and apostates. They shouldn’t have gotten comfortable. They should have planned better. They should have known it couldn’t be this easy to lead a revolution. Now they were going to die, and there would be nothing just or noble about their death.

Anders reached the stairs, and then realized he was stuck at the bottom. He couldn’t lift his foot high enough to get up one. He really was going to die here. Why was he even trying? He couldn’t pick a lock. What was he going to do? Blood magic the door open? Anders tried to reach the first step and collapsed on the stairs with an inane cackle, “These stairs are really inclined to ruin my day.”

“Just crawl!” Terrie hissed down at him.

Anders crawled, dragging himself on his elbows and knees, feeling no better than he had at the bottom. “So, Anders, how did you end up betrayed by a close friend and about to die horribly to a handful of sex-crazed templars?” Anders mumbled to himself, “Oh you know, step by step.”

Terrie shook him by his collar when he reached the top, “Hurry up! Melt the lock.”

He could do that. With blood. Which he didn’t have. Anders looked Terrie over and settled on the cut on her cheek. He pulled from it, and corroded it, and flung it at the lock. It sizzled, and popped, turning the metal an angry red before it set fire to the door. “This feels worse.” Anders decided.

Terrie flung herself shoulder-first into the flaming door. On her third attempt, the door splintered, and Terrie went rolling through it. She was back on her feet in an instant, and then she was gone, running from what Anders could only hope was an otherwise abandoned building.

Anders could follow her. Slowly. Whether he waddled or wriggled his way out, it wouldn’t be
pretty. Someone was bound to notice him rolling through the streets, leaving a trail of slime from the sewage like some kind of giant, trussed up slug. The templars would catch up with him, and what of Alain? What of Decimus? What of Grace? Was Anders really going to leave them to suffer whatever horrors the templars wanted to inflict on them?

Alain… Alain had betrayed him. Like Rolan had betrayed him. Like Namaya had betrayed him. Like Ferrenly had betrayed him. Worse, Alain had betrayed Terrie, and Decimus, and Grace, and the whole of the Collective. How many other Collective Meeting Houses were being raided right now?

But Alain had suffered worse than the consequences of his action, and Anders didn’t know the extent of Decimus’ crimes. Whatever they had done, they had been driven to do, and Justice… Justice wouldn’t approve of him leaving them to their fate. Justice had befriended thieves, and maleficars, and murderers. Even Velanna, who had murdered droves of innocent traders, had been redeemable in Justice’s eyes. Anders had to help.

A shard of metal was embedded in his wrist. It missed a vein, but it would do. He couldn’t twist his fingers around the manacles to reach it, but he didn’t need to. Anders held his hands to the burning door frame and positioned the shard so it caught on the lock’s strike plate. Wrenching his hands down ripped the shard out and sliced up the side of his wrist to the bone. It burned, but it bled.

Anders pulled from the blood, froze the chains at his feet, and shattered them with the manacles on his wrists. Shrapnel flew, burying itself in his arms and legs. The cold was almost a comfort, Anders decided, running back down the stairs to Alain. It kept him numb. Kept him focused. He cast the same spell on the shackles at Alain’s feet, and smashed them again, to more shrapnel and more biting cold.

“Alain, come on,” Anders grabbed Alain’s hands and pulled, “We have to go.”

Alain didn’t move. “I just want to go home.”

“Good plan, get up,” Anders said, pulling harder. Alain stayed stubbornly seated.

“The Circle is my home,” Alain said. “Since I was six. I want to sleep in a bed. I want to write to my family. I don’t want to live like this.”

“Are you shitting me?” Anders let go of Alain in disgust and took a step back. “You still want to go with them? After they-“

A scream from downstairs cut him off. Anders ran for the wine cellar and didn’t make it more than a few steps down before he stopped, relief flooding over him. Decimus. The old mage’s hands were sheathed in dark red energies, tethering him to the four surviving templars. Grace stood behind him, her arm cut laterally, blood flowing freely into the miasma of Decimus’ spell. Decimus could have possessed all four of them for all Anders cared. He’d saved them.


“I dare say I am helping more than a little,” Decimus chuckled, face twitching as if trying to discern how to smile, “What has happened?”

“Funny story,” Anders grinned, starting down the stairs, when one of the templars exploded. The blast knocked Anders back into the storage room, and Anders heard the telltale echo of two souls tangled in one body from below in the guttural laughter that followed.

“I have happened!” A voice declared, reverberating through the house.
Too many things happened at once. Decimus lost his hold on the templars in the aftermath of the explosion. One of the templars contorted, his legs spindling out from beneath his skirt, thinner and thinner, until they snapped under his weight. He flopped into the feculent water, and his legs kept growing, twisting up over his head. Toes burst from his boots, and sharpened into claws that skittered across the ceiling, pulling him out of the sewage. The silver sword of mercy on his chest burst open, and his ribcage sprouting forth like spider legs and spilling his lungs onto the floor. They landed in the sewage, still inhaling and exhaling like beached fish while he screamed, his helmet hiding whatever had become of his face.

“Envy!” One of the templars screamed. “Karras, get reinforcements! We’ll hold them off!”

One of the templars rushed the abomination. One rushed Anders. The last rushed Decimus. Anders was ready. Decimus wasn’t. “Dec!” Anders screamed, too late.

The templar impaled him. Grace screamed. Decimus caught the sword when it was already through his chest, his fingers shaking on the silverite. He smiled, a normal smile for once, soft and sweet, “Grace, love…run from me,” Shadows enveloped him, and Anders didn’t see the rest.

The templar was on him. Anders cast a hasty spell of corrosion that melted through the templar’s breastplate and stumbled him. His swing went wide, and Anders scrambled backwards. He was halfway to the stairs out when he remembered Alain, still curled up on the floor and drowning in despair. His hesitation cost him. Something embedded itself in his lower back and dropped him to his knees. A hard blow followed, knocking him onto his side.

“Die here,” The templars snarled, little more than a blur of silver and violet. Anders blinked. He couldn’t see. He blinked again, and the templar was gone, up the stairs and out the charred husk of the door.

The injury was agony. Liquid fire spread through his veins, and Anders retched. Vomit mingled with blood in his mouth and stuck to his chin. “Alain,” Anders retched again, “Come on. We have to go.”

Alain didn’t move. Anders crawled up the stairs, one step at a time, slipping on his own blood and vomit, each breath a cough that tore through his lungs shredded them like paper. His hands were still bound, his arms still shredded with shrapnel, and he stopped halfway up, exhausted. “Alain,” Anders tried again. Downstairs, the abominations were cackling. The wine cellar caught fire, smoke and heat started billowing into the storage room, and Alain still wasn’t moving.

Anders must have passed out. The thunder of metal on hardwood woke him, templar after templar rushing past him on the stairs and into the wine cellar. The templars were screaming, bellowing orders over the roar of flames and abominations. Anders started crawling again. Alain was still downstairs. The templars hadn’t even noticed him. No one was coming to save him. It was just Anders.

“Alain!” Anders tried to yell. It came out as a hoarse whisper. “Alain, please! We have to go!”

Anders sat at the top of the stairs, exhausted. He could force him. He had to force him. He couldn’t let Alain die here. He had to save him. Anders pulled on the blood pouring from his arms and spun the spell with his will. Freedom. Safety. Forgiveness. Alain didn’t deserve to die.

Something grabbed him. His concentration broke, and he was dragged upstairs and slammed back into a wall. “What do we have here?” A templar’s tinny voice sang at him, “A blood mage bleeding to death?”

“Ironic, right?” Anders’ voice barely broke a whisper, but damned if he wouldn’t go out with a joke.
The templar didn’t laugh. He gurgled. An arrowhead burst out from his throat, fountaining blood onto Anders’ face. The arrowhead vanished as quick as it had appeared, and Anders wondered if he’d imagined it in his pain-infused delirium. The templar collapsed, and Anders collapsed with him.

A shrouded figure in black and brown leathers appeared at his side, dark hood pulled low to hide his face, but there was no hiding his eyes. Hawke threw Anders’ arms over his neck and lifted him into his arms. Anders blinked. Anders thought he blinked. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again they were in another room, sitting on a windowsill that opened out into Hightown. There was a trellis beneath them, and Hawke was shaking him.

“Mage bane,” Anders guessed by the pain. “Justice… Alain…”

“I have you,” Hawke wrapped an arm tight around his waist, and swung their legs out of the window, “Hold onto me.”

“Can’t heal…” Anders slurred.

“I have you.” Hawke said again, more firmly, “Stay with me.”
Save Me

Chapter Summary

In which Anders is saved.

Chapter Notes

Hey what's up you guys!? Welcome back to Accursed Ones. Don’t forget to SMASH that kudos button, bookmark, and subscribe. Let me know what you think in the comments down BELOW.

9:33 Dragon Verimensis 17 Twilight

Hightown

Hightown was burning. The flames from the cellar had spread to connecting manors, and people were spilling into the streets. Some came to aid, others to gawk. A ring of templars barred citizen and guard alike from doing either. "Stay back," Some ordered. "Stay calm," Others suggested.

Anders was for both. Hawke manifested a cloak and draped it over him. It smelled like Ferelden. Rain, dirt, and dog, and Hawke like leather. Anything was better than the vomit crusted in Anders’ stubble. He took a deep breath and hoped it would ground him. Hawke's arm around his waist kept him upright, but no amount of support would keep him conscious.

He wasn’t going to make it. Tears from the smoke blurred Anders’ vision, the world fading in and out around him. If not for the shackles, he couldn’t even have kept his arms around Hawke’s neck. The cloak was a start as far as disguises went, but there was no hiding the chains connecting his wrists. Or so Anders thought until Hawke wrapped his scarf around them, and suddenly Anders wasn't a dying mage but a drunken lover.

"Really just... walking out of here?" Anders asked around his thickening tongue. Just making it down the trellis had been a struggle. Hawke seriously couldn't expect them to walk out of a back alley and through a dozen templars, guards, and nobles without being noticed.

"We're together," Hawke's declaration wasn't exactly the romantic one Anders had imagined. Hawke wiped dried vomit and blood off Anders’ lips with his thumb, and Anders supposed he could forgive the lack of flowers. He was alive. Hawke had saved him. Hawke - “You're drunk."

Hawke was cunning. It was a trick. Blood loss was getting to Anders. Drunk honestly sounded about right.

"Try to walk,” Hawke said. Anders tried for an obedient step, but his legs were imbedded with shrapnel and gave out from under him. Hawke squeezed his waist and held him aloft where he would have collapsed. Anders couldn’t imagine the strength it took to do with one arm. “I won’t let you fall,” Hawke promised, “Pretend you can walk. Make it look real.”
Anders couldn’t walk. Not through Magebane. This disguise wouldn’t hold however long it took them to get clear of the crowds. Anders’ arms and legs were lacerated; it was only a matter of time before he bled through his scarf, and the less said of the injury on his back the better. There’d be no hiding him once his blood stained Hightown’s marble streets.

Anders made his peace with it. “If they catch me-”

“I have you,“ Hawke cut him off.

“If they catch me,” Anders said again, “If they make me Tranquil. Kill me. Swear it.”

Hawke didn’t answer him. Anders grabbed for the only thing he could reach, shaking fingers clutching Hawke’s hood. It fell from his face, permanently maimed from the last time Hawke had protected a mage. He looked down at Anders over a broken nose, scarred lips hiding missing teeth and twisted into a frown. He said nothing. Anders wasn’t Bethany. Anders wasn’t his family. Anders was barely his friend. How much could Anders expect Hawke to risk for him?

Anders searched Hawke’s eyes, but they belied nothing of the thoughts behind them. Hawke clasped his jaw, and for one inane moment Anders thought he would kiss him, “On my father’s grave.”

Anders nodded, and tried for another step. Hawke held him through it, and Anders had to hope it looked real enough when Hawke pulled him into the crowd. Citizens had stepped back to push the guards forward, and the templars were falling apart under the onslaught. Even their armor seemed to rust, reflecting flames on one side and the blood-orange of the guard on the other.

The marble mansions weren’t at any risk of collapsing, but the flames devoured doors, window frames, trellises. They spilled out into the gardens and raced up vines and trees to the roofs, where they danced among the shingles and lit up the night sky. Inside, demons still cackled, and outside, nobles still gawked.

"Isn’t that the de Soliere’s place?" Asked a giant duvet in the vague shape of a woman.

"Is it?" Returned a bundle of fleece, “I hope they're alright.”

"Oh, haven't you heard?” A woman in a lace night frock sidled between the walking blankets, “Heborah was a mage. He took his own life when they brought him to the Circle. Poor Agnes sold it. I heard she lives in Lowtown now.”

“Just dreadful,” Said the fleece. “But I thought Heborah actually escaped? Perhaps that’s why the templars are here?”

“I heard Agnes left the city,” A pile of furs chimed in, “A gentleman from Starkhaven bought it. I do hope he’s not hurt. These mages ruin everything.”

“Oh, Garrett –“ The woman in lace spotted them as they skirted past, and grabbed Hawke’s arm. Anders swallowed back vomit at the suddenness of their stop. “Leandra would know - Garret would you see if Leandra can step out?”

“Of course,” Hawke said.

“Who is your...?” The furs gestured vaguely at Anders, a fox pelt bouncing up to briefly reveal a thin human arm beneath.

“He’s my...” Hawke looked at him for a long moment, and Anders laughed. This had been Hawke’s idea, and the man couldn’t even think of a term for him that wasn’t ‘filthy fucking sewer rat.’ No one
was ever going to believe they were together. “He’s mine.” Hawke decided.

Apparently, they believed it. “I think he’s had a touch too much, darling.” Lace said, covering her nose. “Not a friend of your uncle’s I hope?”

“He’ll be fine,” Hawke said. “I’ll send Mother out.”

“Such a shame,” Fleece tutted as they left, “I hope it's not serious. Wasn’t your daughter around his age?”

“And the seneschal's son, if he leans that way,” Duvet added.

“With his sister in the Circle?” Lace scoffed, “Scions don’t have the luxury of leaning. I'll have a talk with his mother.”

Anders didn’t hear whatever followed. He also didn’t remember closing his eyes, but he was inside when he opened them. Burning maple crackled in a marble hearth beside him. The dusty chandelier above was candle-free, the hearth alone casting light throughout the room. Moth-worn curtains blocked out the moonslight, tightly drawn as if shamed by the state of the foyer and the few delipidated armchairs that furnished it.

This couldn't have been Hawke's estate, Anders thought groggily as Hawke untangled them. Maybe Fenris' mansion had been closer. He could already hear the bitter little elf bitterly bitterlying on about how bitter he was in that shrill voice that -…. wasn't at all how Fenris sounded.

It sounded like Leandra. Anders' head lulled backwards to find Hawke's mother smiling at him. No. That wasn't right. Upside down meant it was a frown.

"How could you do this to me?” Leandra was lamenting, chasing after Anders with a towel. "Oh-not on the rug! It's the only one we have."

"He's not a damn dog," Hawke snapped, lying Anders out on the floor. Upright to downright was a bad idea. Anders threw up in his mouth, and what he couldn't swallow spilled down his chin.

Leandra gagged, shoving a towel under Anders' head, "Don’t you dare raise your voice at me, I raised you! After everything this family went through with your sister-"

"Mother!" Hawke slammed a fist into the floor. It was leather on stone, and muted, but it might have been a gong for how his mother went silent. "Get a bucket of water, and the kit from my room with the bandages. Now."

Leandra fled, muttering under her breath, but bandages weren't magic. Anders was past needle and thread. Hawke could sew him into a quilt and it would do nothing for the Magebane poisoning him. He needed a cleansing aura, which Anders couldn't channel without Justice.

"Blood-" Anders coughed. His lungs crackled, burning up like the log in the fire beside him. Less air came with every breath.

"Takes four pints to die," Hawke wiped away the vomit on Anders' mouth for the second time that day. A lockpick fell from his sleeve to his hand, and with a few taps Anders' shackles were gone, "You're not there yet."


"I hear you," Hawke said, eyes lingering on each cut as if adding them together. It was going to take
him a while, Anders thought bemusedly, and decided he had time to close his eyes.

A shake woke him, seconds later. "What?" Anders started.

"Stay with me," Hawke said.

"Where would I go?" Anders mumbled.

"The Void. Eyes open," Hawke ordered, squeezing his shoulder before he stood. "I'll be back."

Stay awake. Hawke ran out of the room, and Anders lay on the floor in the foyer. It wasn't exactly what Anders expected of a Hightown mansion.

True to his namesake, Gamlen had gambled the mansion away. The family estate had actually been left to Leandra, a fact Hawke had presented to the Viscount in a recent audience. It won him back the property, considering Gamlen had never had a legal right to sell it to begin with, and considering Hawke had killed the slavers Gamlen had sold it to. Finders keepers and all that, Anders supposed, but Hawke didn't have to keep everything the slavers had left.

He could have spruced for some furniture at least. A servant or two. It seemed the thing to do to fit in with folks who gossiped in furs and fleece and goose-feather duvets. Anders couldn't imagine what else Hawke was doing with the coin he'd won from the expedition.

"Stay awake," Anders mumbled, watching dust motes fall from the chandelier. "Stay awake…Can't die on the good rug… Think of the scandal… the wailing and gnashing of teeth… Don't you cry for him, he don’t need your sympathy, he died a legionnaire, and that’s the best that dust can be…”

Anders sighed and sat up. It was quiet in the chapel, save for the crackling of the sconces that lined the walls and illuminated the tapestries in a pale green light. Anders stared at one depicting the death of Andraste’s sister, Halliserre. Her charred body lay in the center of a clearing, and written in the ashes were the verses of Threnodies, ‘In your heart shall burn an unquenchable flame, all consuming, and never satisfied. From the Fade I crafted you, and to the Fade you shall return each night in dreams, that you may always remember Me.’

“It’s not fair,” Anders said. “It’s right there. What clearer sign does the Chantry need of the Maker’s love for magic? Why else would He gift us with it? The Search for the True Prophet has the right of it. Andraste had to have been a mage. How else would you explain the death of her sister? Or her connection to the Maker in her dreams if she wasn’t a Dreamer in the Fade? How else would she be aware of Him?”

Someone squeezed his shoulder. Anders turned around on the pew. Aura was sitting beside him, golden hair aglow, with eyes like veilfire. She smiled, “I love your theories.”

“You do?” Anders asked.

“Of course,” Aura said. “You want to believe in a just world, and you think with the Maker on your side you prove your cause a righteous one.”

“It’s not just because I want to be right,” Anders argued, “Think about it. The war against the Imperium, the earthquakes, the firestorms, that’s not the wrath of the Maker, it’s the wrath of a mage.”

“Perhaps,” Aura tangled their fingers together. “And you think if her wrath could bring low the Imperium, yours could the Circle?”
“The Chantry,” Anders said. “If the Grand Cleric won’t reign in the templars, and the Seekers of Truth don’t see that Meredith is out of control, then there’s no one left for us to turn to but ourselves. The Circle is a prison, but the fault isn’t on the prisoners. I just have to convince them to rise up.”

“Your convictions comfort me,” Aura said, running her thumb over the back of his palm. Her hands were cold, as if cut from ice, but strangely soothing. “You are doing good work, freeing mages from the Circle and turning them to the Collective.”

“That’s not the response I usually get,” Anders said, and sighed. “But it’s been a year and I’ve only freed a handful. It’s like taking a chisel to a mountain.”

“How else are valleys made?” Aura asked. “Does an avalanche not start with a snowflake? A firestorm with a spark? A storm with a raindrop?”

“Why do you believe in me?” Anders asked.

“I am you,” Aura said.

“Oh, good,” Anders laughed and stood. More crazy. More hallucinations. No one would ever feel the same way he did. He was alone in this fight. The chapel dissolved, burning up around him like the streets of Amaranthine as Leonie’s arrows rained down from above. Anders scrawled out a hasty glyph of warding and grabbed Aura. Hallucination or not, he couldn’t let her die. “Stay close. I’ll get you to safety.”

“I am safe,” Aura said, seemingly unconcerned by the death and destruction hailing down around them. “I am you.”

“And I’m Mr. Wiggums,” Anders said. “Listen, as soon as the volley stops-“

“Anders,” Aura said forcefully. “Hear me.” She stepped out of his grasp and out of the glyph. Arrows pin cushioned her. Anders screamed, but Aura smiled through it and held out a hand for him. There was something familiar in the offer. In her smile. Against all his better judgment, Anders took her hand. Aura pulled him out into the volley, and arrows pinned them together.

“This is a moment,” Aura said while Anders screamed, “Weather it and you will come out the stronger for it. Breathe. I have you. I am you. No force in this world or the next will keep me from you.”

Anders woke still screaming. It felt like his veins were being pulled out of him through his lower back. Someone was holding him down, and Anders thrashed until he heard Hawke’s voice, “Anders! Anders, hold still!” Hawke’s chest was pressed against Anders’ back, arms pinning Anders’ own to his side, so close Anders’ felt his beard scratch against his ear when he spoke, “She needs you to hold still.”

He tried. Maker, he tried, but it burned like nothing had ever burned before. Anders dug his nails into the floor, and Hawke manifested a hand for him to squeeze. “She?” Anders asked to take his mind off the pain.

“Merrill’s here,” Hawke explained. “She’s… doing blood magic shit. I don’t-whatever. You have to hold still.”

Anders tried to laugh. It came out as a wheeze, “Now you’re - fuck - okay with blood magic?”

“Shut up,” Hawke said.
“What would the Chantry think?” Anders asked.

“Shut up,” Hawke said again.

“It’s almost-Maker’s fucking-fuck- It’s almost like it matters how you use it–“

“Shut up,” Hawke squeezed his hand. “You’re right. Alright? You happy?”

“I’m dying,” Anders laughed. “I’m ecstatic.”

“Not letting you die,” Hawke said.

“I didn’t know it was your choice,” Anders said.

“It is,” Hawke said. “Shut up. Let her concentrate.”

Anders couldn’t see Merrill. He could see the fire, the drawn curtains, and a pair of boots with too many buckles. Anders followed them up long legs to a tight black corset, to a golden choker on a long neck, to a glinting labret nestled beneath lips pursed in concern. Isabela knelt to push his hair out of his face. “Hey Sparky. Rough go?”

“No talking,” Hawke said.

“Pssh,” Isabela waved a hand in Hawke’s face.

“Creators,” Merrill’s voice mumbled from somewhere behind him. “It’s almost a vial’s worth. You’re lucky the Dread Wolf didn’t take you. I think I have it all. You can let him go.”

“You think, or you know?” Hawke asked.

“I have it all,” Merrill said.

Hawke let go of him. Anders missed the weight. Without it, all he could feel was the sharp throb in his lower back, and the pinpricks of shrapnel down his arms and legs. Merrill’s face popped up in his field of vision, upside down vallaslin resembling antlers on her cheeks. “How do you feel? Not good, probably. I pulled all the impurities from your blood, but I don’t know how to close the wounds. I brought some bandages, but um, I think Hawke has that covered. Did you know there’s a neutralization glyph burned into your arm?”

“Got that,” Anders put on his most grateful smile. He was surprised Merrill had come after how Anders had treated her. She was too good for her own good. Or maybe Isabela had persuaded her, “Thanks, Merrill.”

“You’re welcome,” Merrill vanished, and reappeared a moment later to sit next to Isabela, “I wouldn’t be a very good friend if I didn’t help when I could. I brought you some elfroot, for the pain.”

“Still friends, then?” Anders asked, accepting the leaf Merrill offered him to chew.

“I meant Hawke,” Merrill said.

“Kitten-“ Isabela reached for Merrill’s hand, but the elf folded her arms across her chest before Isabela caught it.

“I’m still upset with you,” Merrill said seriously. “But you’re hurt and I know—- I think—- you’d heal me if our places were reversed.”
“I would,” Anders said.

“I don’t know how to do stitches.” Merrill said to Hawke. “Arianni might. She’s teaching me how to knit, and she makes pretty sweaters. Not that Anders is a sweater, but—”

“I’ve got it, Merrill,” Hawke said.

“I’ll bring you some spindleweed then,” Merrill stood up, and padded out of sight, “If you add it to a meal a day it, it helps with recovery. I don’t know how long it’ll take to heal naturally.”

“Why would it need to heal naturally?” Hawke asked.

“The glyph on his arm,” Merrill explained, “We’ll have to find a way to get it off before he can heal. Right? Or…?”

“Right,” Anders guessed, twisting his arm so he could see the burn where he was lying. It looked putrid, yellow pus leaking down his arm to drip off his elbow and onto Leandra’s prized rug. He was a terrible house guest.

“You know if you just connected that bit there, you could make it look like cleavage,” Isabela mused. “Or maybe a butt!”

“Someone just cut it off, please,” Anders held his arm out to Isabela, considering she was the only person he could see.

“The whole thing or just the burn?” Isabela asked, thoughtfully fingering the hilt of a dagger at her hip.

“No one’s cutting off your arm or your skin,” Hawke said, pushing Anders’ arm away from Isabela.

“Want me to make it a butt?” Isabela asked eagerly.

“It should be fine once it scars,” Merrill said. “Once it pulls your skin taut, that should ruin the integrity of the glyph.”

“That will take weeks,” Anders protested, “I need this off now.”

He couldn’t go weeks without knowing what had become of Justice. If it meant he was missing a swath of skin from his arm, then that was what he meant. It wasn’t anyone else’s decision what he did with his body. Anders tried to sit up, and pain laced up his spine from the wound on his back. Anders swallowed down a scream and banged his fist on the floor to focus on a different pain.

“You don’t need it off,” Hawke said. “You want it off. You can stay here until it scars. Hold still, I’ll handle the stitches.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t have any prophet’s laurel,” Merrill said. “But um, elfroot should be fine for the poultices. I’ll be back with the spindleweed.”

“Wait for me, Kitten, you’ll get lost,” Isabela gave Anders’ hand a pat, “Stay sparky, Sparky, we’ll be back to check on you.”

Anders heard the sound of a door opening and closing to signal their departure, which left him alone with Hawke. Anders tried to look back at the man, but all he could see was his boots from where he was kneeling next to him. “You want to tell me what happened?” Hawke asked, rolling Anders’ tunic up.
“You first,” Anders let Hawke lift him to get his tunic off, grateful the man wasn’t just cutting it off. Anders only had the one. “Where’s Terrie?”

“Ran,” Hawke explained. Anders heard water dripping, and then felt a chill as a cloth ran over his back. “Told me you’d been captured by templars, that they weren’t going to send you to the Circle, that…” Hawke stopped, and Anders felt his hand on his shoulder. “… Did I get there fast enough?”

“For me,” Anders gave the hand on his shoulder a grateful squeeze. Karras’ threat hadn’t been at the forefront of his mind. Not when Alain had already lived it, and there were greater threats to worry about. Capture. Tranquility. Death. Not just for him, but for Alain, and Terrie, and Grace, and Decimus. “… There was a boy there. Maybe twenty. And a woman who looked like Terrie. Do you know if they made it out?”

“Mother will find out,” Hawke went back to cleaning the blood off his back, “She’s watching the fire with the rest of the nobility,”

“Like some damn blood sport,” Anders snarled, missing Justice’s echo. “People died in there. Decimus died in there.”

“What happened?” Hawke asked again. The washcloth vanished, replaced with one that dried.

“It doesn’t matter,” Anders thought of Alain, and how immobile the boy had been while Anders escaped. Hawke didn’t need to know it was Alain’s fault. “It won’t happen again – You need to clean the wound before you suture anything, you know, and not just with water. You’ll want a poultice, and you need to make sure there’s nothing still inside me, no metal, no dirt, no-”

“I know,” Hawke cut him off, and Anders felt said poultice smeared on his back and around the edge of his wound. “Merrill took care of it. Don’t change the subject. What happened?”

“They caught us,” Anders didn’t know what else there was to say. “… One of the templars was possessed, and Decimus gave himself to demons so we could escape. I couldn’t fight… I can’t feel Justice through the brand.”

“That’s it?” Hawke left him briefly to hold a needle over the fire. “You don’t know how they caught you? You don’t know who’s possessing the templars?”

“Well it’s not like I can ask Decimus now, is it?” Anders frowned. What did Hawke want from him? It wasn’t as if anyone could plan to be betrayed. There was bound to be dissenters in every group. Anders just had to do better next time. Hawke didn’t need to know the specifics, like how their blood magic had scared Alain into going to the templars in the first place, or how Anders hadn’t been persuasive enough without it to save the poor boy.

Hawke came back with the needle and threaded it, and set his free hand over Anders’ wound, “Are you numb yet?”

“Not yet,” Anders said, staring at the burn on his arm. Maybe if he just peeled some of the skin off…

“Leave it alone,” Hawke ordered, reading his thoughts.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Anders put his arm down at his side to force himself to stop looking at the burn. “This is-I can’t feel him. You don’t understand. I am Justice. He is me. He-“

Anders stopped short, remembering his dream. Aura had said she was him. Anders had no reason to dream of Aura. She wasn’t important to Anders; she was important to Justice. Anders thought back to his earlier dream of Darian and Amaranthine, and his most recent dream at the chapel at Vigil’s
“Keep. They all meant something to Anders, but they meant more to Anders and Justice. Did Justice finally have a demesne? Could he finally dream again, or was it just some strange side-effect of the glyph?”

“Anders, are you numb?” Hawke asked again. Anders couldn’t feel Hawke’s hand on his back, so he supposed the poultice had taken hold. Anders nodded, and while he couldn’t feel the sting of the needle, he could still feel pressure on his skin as Hawke’s suturing pulled it closed. He focused on the sensation over his dreams. Hawke wouldn’t know how to interpret them. Anders could ask Merrill later.

…but except she wasn’t speaking to him.

Focus on something else, Anders. Like the nice fellow sewing up your back. “Where’d you learn this?” Anders asked.

“Mother,” Hawke said.

“Not the answer I was expecting,” Anders admitted.

“Father wasn’t a healer,” Hawke explained, “He was mercenary. Someone had to sew him up.”

“So, earlier, it didn’t sound like she was too happy to see me,” Anders said. If he couldn’t pick at a literal wound, he’d pick at a metaphorical one. “Not that I’m not grateful to be rescued, but I thought you didn’t want me or Merrill near your family. You know, after Beth.”

“I don’t,” Hawke said. “But you need to eat, and you can fly in for dinner, and Merrill… no one knows she’s a mage. It’s not like she’s walking around with her staff, and even if she was, it just looks like a branch.”

“Because that’s a normal thing to walk around with,” Anders mused.

“She’s an elf. Doing elf shit,” Hawke said. “No one cares.”

“That’s kind of racist,” Anders said.

“This city’s kind of racist,” Hawke said. “Neighbors’ll probably assume she’s a servant.”

“Why don’t you have any of those, by the way?” Anders asked. “When you told me to come over for dinner, I was picturing a table with chairs, maybe a couple of plates… my clinic has more furniture.”

“Working on it,” Hawke said.

“I guess there are a lot of rooms to furnish,” Anders decided, turning his head to look at the other side of the foyer. A hallway seemed to go on for leagues, and a stairwell curved up to a second and possible third story. “How many are there, by the way?”

“Lost count after twenty,” Hawke joked.

Anders laughed and shifted his arms. There was still shrapnel in them. “Do you have a bowl or something, so I can start pulling these out?”

“I’ll get it. I’m almost done.” Hawke said.

True to his word, Hawke finished shortly thereafter, and set aside the bloody needle and what was left of the thread. His kit was no small thing. There was needle, thread, forceps, drivers, bandages
and towels, piles of elfroot: both raw and ground into pastes and poultices, mortar and pestle used to make said poultices, pumice, and several bowls of water. What he lacked in furniture, Hawke certainly made up for in supplies.

“I’m going to sit you up,” Hawke warned him before doing so, but knowing the pain was coming made it no less painful. Anders clung to Hawke long after the man had finished moving him, struggling to even out his breathing around the agonizing tremors that ran up his spine. Hawke followed one with his fingers. It was an unexpected comfort, as were the words that followed it. “I have you. Breathe through it. I’ll wrap it when you’re ready and we’ll start on your arms.”

“I’m good,” Anders lied. Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Anders let go of Hawke and sat back. Red eyes raked over him, and Anders was suddenly and acutely aware he was without a shirt. Rib-cage thin and covered in blood and sewage wasn’t exactly the look he was going for, but it was the only one he had. Anders traded modesty for humor, “Like what you see?”

“You’re a mess,” Hawke said, wrapping bandages around his lower back and midriff. He really knew how to flatter.

“But I could be your mess,” Anders joked, “Think of how many fun nights like this you’re missing out on.”

Hawke tied the bandage off and met his eyes without matching his playfulness. “This isn’t fun. You want to sit up or lie down while I get your arms?”

“Up’s fine,” Anders said. He wasn’t looking forward to moving again. “It was a joke, you know.”

“It wasn’t,” Hawke took one of Anders’ hands, picked up a pair of tweezers, and started pulling shards of metal from his arm. “Scared the shit out of me tonight,”

The wounds bled anew, and the sting brought Anders near to tears. Weather it. That’s what Aura had said. What Justice had said. He just had to weather it. Humor helped. Hawke didn’t understand.

“It isn’t like I planned this, you know,” Anders said, trying not to wince as a particularly jagged piece of metal came free of his arm. “… My friend died tonight. I can’t feel Justice, I don’t know if Grace is alive, I don’t…” Anders had to stop. The whole of the Collective might be destroyed, for all Anders knew. Selby, Evon, Donal… they could all be dead, and it was all on Anders.

He shouldn’t have trusted that every mage would be willing to go to the same lengths as him. He shouldn’t have agreed to make the spelltomes. He should have expected someone would betray him. He should have gotten to the meeting before the templars raped Alain. He should have killed the templars before they killed Decimus. He should have planned better. He should have been better.

“It’s your life,” Hawke said, dropping the bloody chunk in the bowl beside them. “It’s always going to be your life. I know what it’s like. Your life was my father’s life.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe he thought it was worth it?” Anders demanded. The son of a mage should have understood. Anders couldn’t stop, no matter what happened. When the choice was fight or die, it wasn’t a choice. He was so tired of Hawke’s excuses. “That some things are worth fighting for?”

He didn’t need a lecture. He needed an ally. Anders twisted out of Hawke’s grasp and reached for another pair of tweezers. He could debride his own injuries and was about to say as much when Hawke caught his face in his calloused hands and forced Anders to look at him. Anders couldn’t read what he saw in his eyes.
“Why do you think I came for you?”
Chapter Summary

In which Hawke has some reservations.

Chapter Notes

Today is my birthday! Thank you for reading. I appreciate the feedback. Don’t forget to SMASH that kudos button, bookmark, and subscribe. Let me know what you think in the comments down BELOW.

9:33 Dragon Verimensis 18 Early Morn

Amell Estate – Foyer

It was a soothing scent, maple. Like the coming of autumn, displaced as it was at the end of winter. It masked the rank and rotted scent of Anders’ burn and smelled… sweet. Almost cloying. It whispered promises of rebirth, recovery, resurrection. Peaceful promises, with none of the violence that Anders lived and breathed and bled.

It was there in the fire, reflected in the red of Hawke’s eyes as he held him. Hawke didn’t say anything else, but he also didn’t let go. Apparently, the question wasn’t rhetorical.

“I still owe you seven silver for Wicked Grace?” Anders guessed. He didn’t know what to do about the hands on his face and settled on holding Hawke’s wrists. “…I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Course I came,” Hawke said, letting go of Anders’ face to resume debriding his arms. There was nothing gentle about pulling shards of metal out of someone’s skin, but somehow Hawke managed. His calloused fingers were deliberate, precise… almost intimate. Anders didn’t know how it made him feel. Not really. Not when half of him was missing. But the half that was left couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Your support means the world to me,” Anders said, watching him.

“I hear you,” Hawke said.

“What does that mean?” Anders asked.

Hawke finished with the last of the shrapnel in Anders’ arms, and then ran his hands along them as if to double check for any he’d missed. Anders doubted he needed to linger the way he did. “Legs or burn next?”

“Legs,” Anders decided, wishing Hawke would answer him, “The burn is going to be bad. I’ll probably pass out before you finish.”

“You need sutures here,” Hawke ran his thumb along the bone-deep cut on Anders’ wrist. Anders
wondered what he’d think if he knew Anders had done it to himself. Maybe he wouldn’t care. Maybe he’d understand. “And you need to change. None of this matters if you’re covered in shit.”

“Right, I’ll just dip down to the old Darktown wardrobe and put on a fresh pair of trousers, then,” Anders rolled his eyes. “Maybe I’ll pick up doublet or two while I’m there.”


Anders stopped him with a hand on his chest before Hawke could pick him up, “Answer me first. What do you mean you hear me?”

“It means I hear you,” Hawke said unhelpfully. “What do you want it to mean?”

“I want it to mean I’m not alone,” Anders’ mouth said without consulting him. The words fell like vomit, one after the other, “There’s no one else in this city who isn’t a mage who would stand with me. Not against templars. Not without hesitation. You’re the one bright light in Kirkwall.”

It wasn’t a question, but Anders wished Hawke would answer it.

“I’m taking you upstairs,” Hawke said, “Brace yourself.” Anders should have listened. It was like being stabbed all over again when Hawke picked him up. Pain ran up Anders’ spine and knotted up in his shoulders. Hawke must have felt him tense, because he did his best to massage it away with the hand on his shoulder.

“Are you going to say anything?” Anders asked.

“What do you want me to say?” Hawke asked.

“I don’t know,” Anders admitted. “You’re not alone, Anders? I’ll always come to your rescue, Anders?”

“You’re not alone. I’ll always come to your rescue,” Hawke said obediently. It didn’t sound sarcastic, so Anders decided not to take it as sarcasm.

“It was a pretty dramatic rescue, you know,” Anders recalled, resting his head on Hawke’s shoulder. It was a nice shoulder, as far as shoulders went. “Templars all around. You appearing out of the shadows. Very theatrical. We should tell Varric.”

“Not his business,” Hawke said. “Bath then bed. I’ll bring you breakfast when Merrill comes back with the spindleweed.”

“No oatmeal,” Anders said.

“No oatmeal,” Hawke agreed.

Upstairs was no less sparse than downstairs. Hawke took him through an empty loft, down an empty hall, into an almost-empty room, before ending up at the wash. It was furnished, if nothing else. There was a latrine, a basin, and a bench. A massive wooden washtub made up one corner of the room, and a hearth the other. All of it drained into Darktown.

Anders tried not to think about it, but it was too symbolic. He’d be pissing away his clinic in Hightown while he recovered, and the guard would be there to tell the refugees it was rain. He couldn’t just abandon the refugees just because he was hurt. Not when Aveline was flooding the brig as fast as the rains flooded Darktown. Maybe he could convince Hawke to check on them.
Later. When he was clean. There was no soap that Anders could see, but there were towels. Someone had already drawn the bath, for all the good it did him. He couldn’t get the bandages wet, which meant the bench would have to serve.

“I’ll get you some trousers,” Hawke said, setting him on it.

“No smalls?” Anders asked.

“You won’t fit in my smalls,” Hawke said.

“Are you bragging or teasing?” Anders wondered.

“Yes,” Hawke grinned. Anders grinned back. Hawke left to fetch him a change of clothes, and Anders sat on the bench. The sun was coming up, if the light from the eastern window was any gauge. That, or the flames had devoured the rest of Hightown and he was about to be burned alive.

It would have been better than being left alone with his thoughts. Anders was circling the drain in seconds. Damn Alain. Damn him. If he had just trusted them. They were just spelltomes. A few demons bound to new purpose. Decimus had been a good man and a good mage. Anders had believed in him. He’d done more for their cause in a month than the rest of the Collective had managed in a year, and it had all gone up in flames.

There’d be nothing left but ashes now. There was no blood magic holding the Redwaters and the Coterie to their word. Alain was for the Circle. Terrie had vanished. Grace wouldn’t have left Decimus’ side, no matter how sweet his goodbye. They were all gone. Dead, captured, or soon to be, to say nothing of the rest of the Collective. Alain might have betrayed them to the last man for all Anders knew.

Those that survived would have to face the Seekers of Truth, and Maker save them when they showed. At this rate, the Seekers would arrive just in time to witness possessed templars running amok in the city, and Anders still had no idea who was possessing them. The ones that weren’t possessed knew his face, his name, and after tonight might know Hawke was hiding him with how the nobles gossiped. He’d lost his grimoire, his coat, his magic, his spirit. Everything had come together just to fall apart.

Anders picked at the blood crusted under his nails and wished Hawke would come back. He could feel the pinpricks of frostnip starting in his arms and legs, and they were bound to start swelling soon. Anders was dragging his legs onto the bench when Hawke came back with trousers, and a bowl full of supplies.

“I need to get the metal out before I can change,” Anders explained.

“I have you,” Hawke took over, emptying out the bowl and laying it beneath him to catch blood and shrapnel. “There’s some more elfroot under the bandages.”

Anders chewed on it instead of his thoughts while Hawke worked on his legs. The man was still in his leathers, but he was missing his gloves. There was a smattering of dark hair on the back of his hands Anders knew didn’t stop at his wrist. He let his eyes wander over Hawke’s arms and down to his thighs, recalling the strength in both for Hawke to carry him through Hightown.

Hawke stared at him for staring, but Anders could always blame the blood loss. It wasn’t as if there was anything else to look at. There was a mirror over the basin, but Anders looked less and less like Anders of late. Gaunt, frostnip-blue skin, covered in sewage and torn near in two by the templars. Anders wasn’t someone Anders wanted to look at.
“That’s the last,” Hawke said, dropping the final bloody fragment into the bowl. Each piece had come with chunks of skin, crusted blood, bits of hair, until the bowl looked like something from a necromancer’s ritual. Hawke didn’t seem bothered, at least. “You need help changing?” Hawke asked.

“I’ve got it,” Anders waved him off, “No peaking.”

Hawke turned about obediently on the bench. Anders glanced between the towels and the trousers and wondered if he really had it. Setting his hands on the bench, Anders tried to lift himself up to shimmy out of his pants, and nearly shimmied right off the bench. “Andraste’s dirty socks-I,… do not have this.”

“Anders, you-“ Hawke started.

“Do you think-“ Anders started at the same time. “… you first.”

“You need help,” Hawke said plainly. “If you had passed out I’d have already taken care of you.”

“I’m a healer. I get that…” Anders sighed, looking back at the mirror. He didn’t see Anders; he saw Kristoff, with deep pitted skin and sad sunken eyes, “This just isn’t really how I want you to see me.”

“You don’t know how I see you,” Hawke said.

“Filthy fucking sewer rat doesn’t really leave much up for interpretation,” Anders smiled sadly. “I was a looker once. You should have seen me. Clothes, wit, hair, name something sharp and I was sharper. Your loss, really. Just at a… temporarily embarrassed heartthrob point in my life. Once I gain a few stones, cut my hair, take regular baths, it’s over for you. I’m telling you; it’ll be love at first sight.”

“You’re stalling,” Hawke said.

“So?” Anders asked.

“So…” Hawke sighed, scratching his scalp, “You didn’t have to send Tamatha.”

“Terrie?”

“Whatever,” Hawke shrugged. “You didn’t have to send her. You said yourself, you weren’t sure I’d come. You could have freed yourself. You didn’t. You knew what they were planning to do to all of you, and you saved her… I see that.”

Hawke stood up, retrieved a towel, and dropped it Anders’ lap. “I’m going to lift you up. Get undressed, clean up, I’ll lift you again when you’re ready to change.”

There wasn’t much point in arguing, Anders supposed. Hawke looped his arms under Anders’ shoulders and lifted him an inch off the bench. Anders battled with his trousers and the towel until he was able to replace one with the other. Hawke set him down and supplied him with a pumice and another towel. The latter helped with his modesty, but did nothing for how cold the bench was on his backside.

“No soap?” Anders asked.

“Mother is on some strange milk cleanse,” Hawke held up his hands to forestall all of Anders’ whos, whats, wheres, whens, and whyss. “It’s in fashion. I don’t know. Use the pumice. Get your arms. I’ll
help with your legs.”

“‘I am so getting an infection,’” Ander predicted, cleaning his arms.

“You want me to get you some milk?” Hawke asked, pulling Anders’ legs back onto the bench to chase away blood and grime with pumice and towel.

“I hope you’re joking,” Anders said.

“Merrill said she got all the impurities out of your blood. Shit falls into that category,” Hawke said.

“I still can’t believe you went to her for blood magic,” Anders said.

“I went to her to save you,” Hawke corrected him, “Not for blood magic.”

“You can’t separate the two,” Anders said.

“Watch me.” Hawke said.

“You honestly still feel the same way about blood magic after tonight?” Anders asked. So much for old dogs and new tricks.

“If that was all it was,” Hawke allotted. “But it’s not. I’m never going to agree with you, Anders, but I trust you to know when to stop.”

“Honestly,” Anders muttered, “Sometimes you make me want to wring your neck, but I suppose I’ll take it.”

“Feelings mutual,” Hawke said. It hurt to hear back, and Anders regretted saying it.

Hawke finished with his legs before Anders finished with his arms and spent the excess of time massaging his feet. He went about it absent-mindedly, eyes fixed on some far corner of the room, like he’d been doing it for years. Calloused fingers slid between his toes, pushed down his cuticles to free dirt beneath his nails, kneaded at the soles of his feet.

“Thanks,” Anders said.

“Hm?” Hawke hummed.

“For um… you know.” Anders said eloquently. Hawke raised an eyebrow at him, and Anders forced himself to continue, “Fighting for me.”

“I hear you,” Hawke said, “Finished?”

“Finished,” Anders said proudly, setting aside the pumice and towel.

Hawke went about helping him into his trousers in a haphazard sort of dance that almost ended with Anders trading his life for his modesty when he slipped on the wet floor beneath him. Hawke caught him, but it cost him his towel and trousers, and left him pressed up against Hawke naked and bleeding. Because of course it did. Anders wasn’t allowed to have any fucks or dignity left in him.

“Blighted bloody brand,” Anders slammed his fist into Hawke’s chest, “As if this day needed to get worse. At least I wouldn’t care if I was Tranquil.”

“I’d care,” Hawke said, holding him.
“Just- give me a second to ditch my dignity,” Anders said, preparing himself for mental and physical acrobatics he’d need to get dressed.

“Anders…” Hawke tilted Anders’ chin up to meet his eyes, “I don’t care.”

“Ouch,” Anders said.

“You want me to close my eyes? I’ll close my eyes. You want me to match you? I’ll match you. I don’t care,” Hawke said, “You’re a healer. Act like it.”


“Bare ass naked?” Anders supplied.

“You’re not like this for me,” Hawke said. “If you were, I wouldn’t let you feel this way.”

“You can’t control how I feel,” Anders said. “What does that even mean?”

“Means if you wanted me to see you like this you’d know damn sure I was for it,” Hawke ran his thumb over his chin and his nail grazed Anders’ bottom lip, “But you don’t, so I’m not. Alright?”

It was mature enough. Anders could match it.

“… Alright,” Anders said. “Just-… help me sit.”

Hawke helped him sit, fit Anders’ legs through his pants, and picked him up so he could pull them on and cinch them at his waist. When he finished, Hawke cut them off at the knees to get access to his legs. They were stitched, bandaged, and all too fast followed by his arms, which meant the burn was next. Anders flicked at his nails in silence while Hawke worked, watching his hands.

He still felt the ghost of them… everywhere. In his shoulders, along his spine, in his arms and legs, his hands and feet, the edge of his lips. It was a pleasant sort of haunting. One Anders wasn’t keen to banish. What were they? What could they be? What did Hawke even want them to be? Anders searched Hawke’s collar for the chain of his necklace, but it wasn’t visible. The chantry sunburst was there, somewhere under his armor. Anders didn’t doubt it, but Anders didn’t fit with it.

… he could fit with the rest of him. Hawke might change his mind. He had seen the abuses of the templars firsthand, and he’d made allowances for the blood magic… but Anders didn’t want to be just an allowance. Hawke ran his fingers over a suture he finished, touch lighter than the feathers in his quiver, and Anders had to battle back a shiver.

“I’m sorry for putting you through all this,” Anders said, fighting with his feelings. “I don’t have to stay here, you know. I can rest up in my clinic.”

“Don’t do that,” Hawke said without looking up from his suturing.

“Do what?” Anders asked.

“Blame yourself,” Hawke elaborated, “You didn’t do this, it was done to you. You’re staying here.”

“You can’t just order me around, you know,” Anders argued for argument’s sake. It was easier than admitting he liked the command in Hawke’s voice. “You’re not my commanding officer. This isn’t
“If this was Ostagar, you’d be dead.” Hawke chuffed. “You want to go, go, but you’re walking out of here on your own.” Hawke tied off a final suture, and then sat back and waited for Anders to call his own bluff.

“I’m just saying, people saw me come here,” Anders said. “What if the templars come knocking?”

“They won’t,” Hawke said with a certainty Anders envied. Hawke apparently decided Anders wasn’t leaving, because he went back to bandaging his arms and legs, which left only the burn on Anders’ forearm.

It was mess. The brand wasn’t the most hygienic thing in the world to be stabbed with, and the burn had turned putrid and yellow, which meant infection. Merrill had allegedly pulled the impurities from his blood, but she must not have been able to work around the glyph. Anders hoped it didn’t mean lockjaw, but he supposed he’d find out in the next few days. If it was, then he wouldn’t have a choice but to cut the glyph off.

“Lie back,” Hawke said. “I’ll wash your hair, and then get the burn.”

“I don’t know that my hair’s a priority,” Anders mused, but lied down. He wasn’t eager to have his arm debrided.

“It is,” Hawke said, but he was smiling when Anders looked at him. “I’ll be back with a bucket—"

“No!” Anders almost rolled off the bench in his scramble to catch Hawke’s wrist as he walked past. “Just-use the bowl.”

“… alright,” Hawke said slowly. He emptied the bowl into the basin and refilled it with water from the bath, all mercifully without question for Anders’ outburst, but the silence was no better. Anders didn’t want to be alone with his thoughts. Not after everything that had happened tonight.

“Tell me about Ostagar,” Anders said.

“Told you about Ostagar,” Hawke shielded Anders’ eyes and poured out some of the water over his hair.

“Tell me more about Ostagar,” Anders said stubbornly. “Humor me. Make conversation.”

“… Ash Warriors were there,” Hawke said after some thought, combing his fingers through Anders’ hair. “Carver’d been bragging to half the encampment about how his brother used to be one of them, but you don’t stop being an Ash Warrior. I warned him to leave it, but he ended up getting into it with one of them. I think he thought if he could best one, it would be like besting me.

“… Ash Warriors were there,” Hawke said after some thought, combing his fingers through Anders’ hair. “Carver’d been bragging to half the encampment about how his brother used to be one of them, but you don’t stop being an Ash Warrior. I warned him to leave it, but he ended up getting into it with one of them. I think he thought if he could best one, it would be like besting me.

“He was always showing his ass, all mouth and no trousers. The Ash Warriors make the Red Irons look like greenhorns… When I joined, one of their first lessons was some shit about dying before battle, so you’re ready for it. They cut shallow lines, all down your arms, and pour salt in them until you scream. Turns out it’s actually a lesson in not doing stupid things. Carver needed it.

“Our captain broke it up. Probably saved Carver’s damn life, for all the good it did. Varel always saw shit before it hit the windmill.”

“Varel?” Anders tilted his head back to look at Hawke. “Seneschal of Amaranthine Varel?”

Hawke made a sound of agreement, “That was him. You knew him?”
“He served the wardens in Amaranthine,” Anders recalled. “I could never remember his name. I-uh… I didn’t care enough to remember it. I take back what I said earlier. I looked better, before, but I wasn’t better. I was selfish. He was a good man… would have done anything for the wardens.”

“Was?” Hawke asked.

“He died,” Anders said, searching Hawke’s eyes to see how it hit him. He couldn’t read the man right side up, let alone upside down, but Hawke’s hands froze in his hair and Anders imagined it hurt. “I’m sorry.”

“How?” Hawke asked eventually, going back to washing his hair.

“Darkspawn,” Anders said. It was always darkspawn. What else killed wardens? Unless wardens killed themselves. “They attacked the Vigil, and our Commander—... the Commander, not my Commander, got him killed.”

“That’s not me,” Hawke said.

“What’s not you?” Anders asked.

“People dying under my command,” Hawke explained. “Aveline mentioned you were worried about how I lead. I know I’m not the kind of leader you’re used to serving under, but no one dies for me.”

It would have comforted Anders to hear, once. “Some things are worth dying for.”

“You die, and the thing doesn’t get done,” Hawke said.

“You know, that’s actually not a bad point,” Anders allotted.

Hawke barked out a laugh, and started drying Anders’ hair, “You have any stories about Varel?”

“I mean… sure, I guess,” Anders shrugged, “He was a tough bastard. I met him when the darkspawn attacked Vigil’s Keep for the first time. The talking kind. They took him up to the top of the keep, and I think they were going to throw him over the edge, for dramatic effect or something. Or maybe he was bait? Am—... We had to use blood magic to get him away from the darkspawn. He was unarmed but ready to go right back in with fisticuffs.”

“Sounds like Varel,” Hawke said.

“No comment on the blood magic?” Anders prodded.

“You did what you had to do,” Hawke said, helping him sit back up when he finished with his hair.

“… Thanks,” Anders said. Hawke straddled the bench beside him, and Anders wondered who was stalling. Maybe both of them. His burn wasn’t going to debride itself, but… well, exactly. It wasn’t going to debride itself. It could wait. “I really didn’t like him, at first. Not the most mage-friendly fellow, but … we had this Guard Captain, Garevel. Nasty bloke. Always looking for an excuse to kill someone.

“The people revolted. No one could blame them. Darkspawn were swarming the fields, ruining the harvest, and they were starving. They just wanted into the granaries, and Garevel wanted to kill them, but Varel wouldn’t let him. He kept trying to reason with them until the Commander—until we all got back to talk them down. Actually—”

Anders stopped when the memory came back to him. That had been blood magic too. The people
wouldn’t leave on their own. What stories did he have that didn’t involve blood magic?

“Actually?” Hawke prompted.

“That wasn’t when I decided I liked him. It was later. When it was about me.” Anders held up both his hands and wiggled his fingers, “Selfish! The templars sent a retinue to bring me back to the Circle, even though I was Grey Warden, and Varel sent someone to warn me. We uh…” used blood magic to convince them to leave? “We were able to prepare for it and get them to leave. After he— Andraste’s ass, what did he say… It meant a lot to me…”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hawke said. “Matters what he did.”

“Still wish I could remember,” Anders said.

“… Being a Grey-Warden wasn’t enough to keep the templars away from you?” Hawke asked.

“No mage is ever really free,” Anders said. He knew Justice would have echoed him if he could.

Hawke didn’t have a retort. Anders didn’t know whether that made him feel better or worse. His silence was companionable, if nothing else.

“We should probably deal with this,” Anders held out his burnt forearm.

“Breakdown what you need me to do,” Hawke said, taking his hand.

“You have to remove the burned tissue, which is not as easy as it sounds. Get a washcloth, and wipe off the glyph, but whatever you do don’t scrub. Whatever skin’s still left and loose, you’ll have to cut off. The blisters don’t look too bad. You can just deflate them.” At Hawke’s blank stare, Anders continued, “Basically make a hole in it and squeeze out the fluid. Wash the burn again. Once you’re done, you can put the poultice on the bandage and wrap it. It’s going to hurt, no matter what you do or how much elfroot I eat, so … just try to ignore me.”

“You want me to do this here?” Hawke asked.

“Maybe let me sit on the floor in case I pass out,” Anders said, “But here is fine.”

Hawke moved him to the floor, set out the supplies, and held his hand. “You want something to bite down on?” Hawke asked, hovering over his arm with the washcloth. Just the drip of water stung.

“… maybe,” Anders agreed. Hawke took off his belt and Anders bit down on it.

Anders had never known a gentler touch, and it was agony. Blackened skin sloughed off his arm with each pass of the washcloth, and translucent bits hung like gristle from what lingered of the reddened skin beneath. He screamed through the belt, tears spilling down his face, and struggled to breathe around his sobs. It was worse than the brand, and almost worse than when he’d been impaled in Kal’Hirol. He should have just had Isabela skin him.

Hawke had to skin him anyway. Loose skin that lingered had to be cut away, and Anders swore his nerves weren’t dead. He felt every slice and nick as Hawke cleaned and cleared the burn, and swore he blacked out. Hawke seemed to be working on a different piece of his burn every time Anders blinked. It was like a tapestry of torment blocking off the Veil. Anders sucked in a breath of leather, wishing he could will himself unconscious. His nightmares were kinder.

His arm still burned long after Hawke finished. Hawke wrapped it in poultice-coated bandages, and carried Anders from the wash. Hawke took him to the room they’d passed to reach it, and Anders
had to blink through tears to take in his surroundings. It was spacious, furnished with a mattress but no bed, clothes but no dresser, and bow and armor but no stand. Hawke laid him out on the mattress, and smoothed back his sweat-soaked hair, “Get you water?”

Anders shook his head, “Just stay here.”

“Alright,” Hawke sat cross legged on the floor beside him.

“Twenty rooms and none of them are for guests?” Anders asked.

“They’re not furnished,” Hawke said, “Told you, I’m working on it.”

“What did you do with your coin from the expedition?” Anders wondered, “Give it to Gamlen?”

“Just about,” Hawke chuffed, shifting to lie down on the floor beside him. It was sweet of him, really, considering Anders was pretty sure this was his bed.

“Seriously, what happened?” Anders asked, “And don’t say it’s not my business.”

“That’s not it,” Hawke told the ceiling. “… I had to find a way to pay for the expedition, after Beth. Time was running out, Bartrand was looking for other partners. I did what I had to do, same as you, it just cost me.”

“So what did you do?” Anders asked.

“… I borrowed it,” Hawke shrugged. “It’s not your problem.”


Hawke shook his head. “Carta… Fifty sovereigns. I repaid it, but they want a hundred in interest. I don’t have it.”

“What are you going to do?” Anders asked.

“I’m working on it,” Hawke said.

Which meant he had no idea, Anders was willing to bet. “Weren’t you the one who told me to plan?”

“I get fifty silver on Red Iron jobs, if I’m lucky. A sovereign or two if it’s a big one.” Hawke counted imaginary coins on his fingers. “Carta’s not going to wait a year for their coin, and the estate doesn’t get me any. Mother doesn’t work. Beth doesn’t get a stipend. Plan was to get Beth here, whatever it cost. If the Carta wanted a pound of flesh after, they could have it.”

“Maybe I could help,” Anders said. It was partly his fault. He’d cost Hawke his savings when Beth had needed a healer, and it was the least he could do to repay the man for saving his life.

“Blood magic?” Hawke guessed.

“No…” Anders said. “Unless?”

“No,”

“Orsino had an idea, then. Healing the nobility. I wasn’t for it, but…” Amell’s grimoire could wait… it would still be there, however long it took Anders to come up with the coin. Hawke needed him now. “I could get the Coterie to connect me to the Blooming Rose and work out from there. It
probably wouldn’t take long for me to get what you need.”

“This is my problem,” Hawke turned him down. “You heard the nobles outside. Those are the people you’d be looking to heal. This city isn’t for mages.”

“But-“

“No,” Hawke cut him off, rolling over so they were face to face. “It’s not your business.”

“Seriously?” Glaring while prone didn’t carry the gravitas Anders wanted, but he didn’t have the strength to sit up. “How can you say that to me? You said I was worth fighting for, that I wasn’t alone, that you’d come to my rescue. Back there in the wash… am I crazy? Are you just teasing me? When you told me to think about the Chantry and where we fit, did you even mean it?”

“Course I meant it,” Hawke’s eyebrows drew together and he pushed himself up on his elbow, “Anders-“

“Then why don’t you want my help?” Anders demanded. “Don’t you have any faith in me?”

“These people don’t want you to heal them,” Hawke waved a hand around the room as if the nobles were in it, “You’re nothing to them. A curio. They’d turn you in just to gossip about it later.”

“That’s my risk to take, and maybe I think you’re worth a few.” Anders argued stubbornly. “You saved my life, why can’t I return the favor?”

“I didn’t want to save your life – No, shut up – I told you I didn’t want to lose you to your cause, and you almost died for it tonight. Anders I… I don’t know where we fit. You’re a maleficar, and you’re possessed, and you live in a sewer. Your life is for some secret mage underground and you’re constantly risking it. You want the Circle torn down, but Bethany’s happy in it, and we-… I-… I want you, but you terrify me. ‘Us’ terrifies me. Tonight terrified me.”

Anders wished he could sit up. He tried, propping himself up on his elbows, but Hawke’s hand on his chest pushed him back down. It traveled over bare skin to map the angles on Anders’ face. There was no fear that Anders could feel. His touch felt soothing, safe, sustaining.

“I’m here,” Anders promised, tracing the break in Hawke’s nose down to his lips. They were soft, made softer when Hawke wet them.

“Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting,” Hawke mumbled against his fingers.

“So I’m perfect now?” Anders teased.

“Close enough. I’ve never met a better man. The refugees, the mages-”

“I’m just… doing what’s just.”

“He’s not here,” Hawke reminded him, “This is just you. You’re Benedictions.”

“Which verse?” Anders asked, watching his lips.

“All of them.”

Hawke’s eyes were on Anders’ lips, and it was all the encouragement he needed. He slid his hand from Hawke’s face to the back of his neck and pulled, not caring if Hawke came down or he came up. Neither of them moved. Hawke’s hand on his chest kept him flat. “Get some sleep. I can’t lose you, Anders. It’s hard enough when you’re not mine. It would kill me if you were.”
The incense was like a fog. It rolled down the steps of the Chantry, carrying whispers of the Chant of Light. Anders scaled the stairs with Hawke, twisting Karl’s Ring of Study on his finger until it wore his skin raw. The incense-thick air seemed to sense his trepidation and didn’t part for his passing. Endless waves crashed against him, as if intent on sending him far from salvation’s shore.

If not for Hawke’s support, Anders knew he wouldn’t have been able to make the climb. Emerald light rippled through the fog, formless shapes picking up the Chant of Light and echoing it in Karl’s voice. It grew duller and duller the closer they came to the Chantry’s doors until it was a soulless monotone, intoning erudition, “Jealous of life… they could not feel, could not touch.”

“I can’t do this,” Anders wheezed. He couldn’t breathe. A rattling sound echoed in his chest when he tried, like there was nothing left in him but incense.

He ran back down the stairs, marble steps crumbling in his wake, faster and faster until the destruction overtook him. The entire Chantry came down, collapsing in on itself like the thaig in the Deep Roads, only the enemy within couldn’t be bested so easily. The force of the implosion sent Anders to his knees, and for all he searched the emerald sky, there was no Maker in the Black City to hear his prayers.

Hawke emerged from the rumble in His absence.

“You can,” Hawke said, kneeling beside him. “Tell me again what you’re going to say.”

“There have been rumors -… Stories-…” Anders couldn’t think. The incense was too thick.

“Accounts,” Hawke supplied.

“There have been accounts,” Anders repeated dutifully. “…Of Karl-Oh Maker, Karl-…”
“Harrowed mages,” Hawke corrected him.

“Harrowed mages made tranquil against their will. The Rite of Tranquility—… Chantry law forbids performing the Rite of Tranquility without significant provocation and the consent of the First Enchanter. As the Grand Cleric—… as Kirkwall’s Grand Cleric it is your sacred charge to ensure that no mage—no man is unjustly severed from the realm of the Maker and the first of his children. You have an obligation to investigate these accounts and strip the Knight Commander of her command if they are found true.”

“Good,” Hawke said. “Stand up.”

Anders stood up. The Grand Cleric Elthina stood before him. She was incense given human form. Old and grey and ashen, with a suffocating presence that seemed to suck the air from the room. She heard him out with an impatient frown that seemed to imply she wished she hadn’t.

“Thank you for trusting me with your concerns, my child,” Elthina face’s split into an unexpected smile, her wrinkles stretching to an almost impossible depth, “I will summon the Seekers of Truth to investigate these claims. In the meantime, no further mages will be made Tranquil until they have been made to stand trial, and I have received sworn statements from the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter.”

“That’s—,” Anders laughed in disbelief, “That’s amazing. That’s wonderful. That’s—…. That…”

Anders trailed off. Elthina was still smiling at him, an unnatural green light ghosting her eyes. There was something wrong about it. As if she didn’t quite see him, or her eyes weren’t quite hers.

“…That wasn’t how it happened. You—… you told me it was all gossip, and that you admired Meredith…” Anders fit the memory together in bits and pieces. The Chantry dissolved, and Elthina along with it. The Fade. This was the Fade.

“Justice!” Anders realized. He whirled to face Hawke, but he was gone. A warped replica of Anders took Hawke’s place, a version of himself Anders hardly recognized. There was a strength about him, born from a weight his year in Kirkwall had stolen from him. He was dressed for battle, silver and blue armor emblazoned with gryphons, with sword and shield in place of staff, but it was him. It was Justice.

Anders tackled him. He wrapped his arms around Justice’s neck and clung to him like a dying man to prayer. Justice was all armor, with no warmth or give to his embrace, but he could have manifested as an iron maiden for all Anders’ cared. “Maker’s breath, finally,” Anders laughed. “I’ve been casting sleep spells for days. I thought I was going to bleed out before I figured it out. Are you alright? Talk to me. Hug me, stupid, I know you know how.”

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The stiff encase of metal that was Justice’s hug was the greatest comfort Anders had had in weeks. “You are aware of me?” Justice asked cautiously.

“Of course I’m aware of you,” Anders pulled back to take in Justice’s face. It was like Anders’ face, veined with veillfire. There was a hardline to his lips and brow that spoke of a mixture of confusion and conviction, and was all too perfect for him.

“You look good. We look good?” Anders waved his hand over Justice’s face, “This, whatever you’ve got going on here looks good. Is this how you see yourself now?”

“I am you.” Justice said firmly.

“Right, sure, out there, but you’re your own person too,” Anders hugged him again, burying a hand
in Justice’s hair. It was cropped short, another interesting twist Anders most certainly would not replicate, but didn’t mind seeing if it made Justice happy. “It’s so good to see you. Really you. Merrill had this theory that since possession puppets from the Fade, and my magic powers the glyph, it was sort of syphoning your energy - whatever, I don’t care, I’m just glad she was right.”

“It is good to see you as well,” Justice said. “I have been trying to communicate with you when you visit the Fade, but you walk as if under the haze of blood magic. It is most disquieting.”

“Yeah, that’s—how most people are when they’re in the Fade,” Anders shrugged, “They’re asleep. You have to be a Dreamer to visit the Fade at will, or use a ritual like we did back at Vigil’s Keep with lyrium or blood magic. Spirit healers can kind of cheat. Once we’re acclimated to our spirits, it’s pretty easy for them to wake us.”

“It was not easy,” Justice said. “I tried many times to make you aware of me to no avail. I had begun to fear if we would ever be able to communicate.”

“You and me both,” Anders patted at Justice’s arms and shoulders. “This is—I don’t know how I feel about this. I know I’ve been saying I want to be able to dream again, but this feels weird, right? Before-with Compassion—we were still us.”

Justice watched Anders’ hands crawl across him without comment, when it suddenly occurred to Anders he should probably respect his spirit’s autonomy. There was no telling how long Justice would have it. Anders stuffed his hands into his pockets and Justice followed the motion with his eyes, frowning. “You are not distressing me.”

“Reading my mind?” Anders guessed.

“I am familiar with it.” Justice said.

“I feel for you,” Anders joked, looking for a place to sit. The pews of the Vigil’s chapel manifested beneath him. Anders sat, patting the space beside him for Justice. “You don’t think we’ll be like this in the Fade from now on, do you?”

“I cannot say,” Justice said unhelpfully, joining him on the bench, “There is a block across the Veil. When I reach for you it is as if the mortal realm does not exist. I feel your presence here like a shadow, as if something has pulled us apart but only just. Your days bleed through, the senses separate, and I have spent mine piecing them together.”

“Sounds like you really adjusted,” Anders said. “Building a demesne from my memories, talking to me in my dreams… but, hey, about that, what the fuckshit? Darrian, Amaranthine, the Chantry, that one with the Broodmother? Are you mad at me? You know I would do something about the brand if I could.”

“I feel no animosity towards you, Anders,” Justice said, with a look of such profound confusion he seemed offended Anders had even considered it.

The rest of the Vigil’s chapel came into being around them, but it was off. The statue was more Aura than Andraste, and the tapestries were woven together with the worst of his nightmares. Their battle with the Broodmother, where Sidona and Eram had died. The ruins of Amaranthine, where they had killed Darrian. The dark of the Deep Roads, where Anders had nearly gone mad. The Chantry, where they had killed Karl.

“Do these memories not console you?” Justice asked.

“No offense,” Anders said, “But are you sure you know what that word means?”
“These were grievous injustices,” Justice stood and marched to the nearest tapestry. He surveyed it with his hands locked behind his back, like a commander assessing a battlefield. “I am exultant to have righted them at your side. They were a great comfort to me in your absence. We won a great victory against the Darkspawn this day. Here, we won our first battle after we joined. And here, we swore to bring down the Circles and avenge the man you loved.”

Anders watched Justice pace among the tapestries with heavy steps before he stopped at the one with Karl. His embroidered blue eyes twisted up in Anders’ heart like a knife. Why couldn’t Justice have stopped by the bone dragon or some other horrible monster? Why did it have to be Karl?

“I never said I loved Karl.”

“I am aware,” Justice ran his fingers over the tapestry, Karl’s ring of study gleaming on his hand as it did Anders’. “I believe he felt it in our final moments with him, all the same.”

“So look,” Anders cleared his throat, scrubbing tears from his eyes, “I don’t know how much time we have before I wake up, but I wanted to ask you what to do about the Circles. I feel like I’m in over my head. We’ve freed a few mages, sure, but what’s the long term? I’ve been trying to think about how to achieve our goal, and short of a revolution, I just don’t see it.”

“Then we start a revolution,” Justice said.

“And how do we do that, exactly?” Anders asked, “No one from the Collective has come to visit me, and I’m worried they might all be dead or blame me for what happened. They were our only allies, and they’re gone. Maybe the Seekers could replace the Knight-Commander, or the Grand Cleric, and that helps this generation, but what about the next? If we really want to make a difference, we need the Circles free of the Chantry’s yokel, but they already voted for independence once and it didn’t pass.”

“Then you must convince them to vote again.”

“How?”

Justice hesitated, and Anders was grateful the spirit hadn’t just tossed out the first cliché that had come to mind. He stood holding his elbow, chin in hand and deep in thought.

“Exactly,” Anders sighed, throwing himself back on the pew to watch the demesnes float through the Fade around them. One of them belonged to Compassion, somewhere out there.

“… There was a passage,” Justice said eventually, coming back to sit beside him. Anders made room for him by draping his legs over Justice’s lap. “In the Warden-Commander’s journal. He spoke of how the crown had agreed to grant Ferelden’s Circle their independence in exchange for his service during the Blight, but how this attempt had soured because he did not have the support of the nobility. You need not repeat this mistake.”

“You think I should start healing the nobles,” Anders deduced. “Hawke said it was a bad idea.”

“His opinions need not concern you,” Justice said. “Convince the nobility, as you have convinced the refugees. Convince your fellow mages, within and without the Circle. Appeal to their sense of justice. Once you have the support of the people, come forward and demand freedom for yourself and your fellow mages. If it is not granted, take it by force.”

“Revolution,” Anders said.

“Yes,” Justice said. “I have missed our talks.”
“Me too, Justice…” Anders said, “Are you going to be alright, when this over and we’re back to normal?”

“You are asking if I find it preferable to be apart?” Justice asked.

“I guess, yeah. You’ve been back in the Fade for almost a week now. Do you miss it? I could try to find a way for us to separate permanently. Amell said it was possible to undo a possession. I think he even had the spell in his grimoire… once I get it back from Xenon.”

“Is this your wish?” Justice asked.

“You first.” Anders said.

“I am you, Anders,” Justice surveyed his hands and mapped them against Anders’ own. They were a perfect fit. “As much as you are me. I have not felt whole in our time apart.”


Silence stretched for a time, Justice’s gauntlet-clad hands resting on Anders’ legs. The demesnes floating above were too fluid and formless for Anders’ to guess which belonged to Compassion. Justice was the only constant in the Fade.

Anders nudged him. “I’m not cutting my hair.”

“It is a liability in battle.” Justice said stiffly.

“Beauty is pain.”

“You have reservations,” Justice said, “I understand. You need time to adjust.”

Anders shook his head, “Not happening.”

“We will revisit this discussion.” Justice decided.

“No, I don’t think we will,” Anders said. “No revisiting. We visited. We’re good. Besides, this could be our last chance to have a real conversation, shouldn’t we talk about something, you know, profound?”

Justice growled at him. An inhuman growl, low and deep in his throat, and Anders woke up to a face full of mabari.

Anders recoiled, smashing his head back into his pillow. The mabari lurched forward in pursuit, a thick glob of slobber dislodging from its jowls to land on Anders chin. It snarled, breath like hot garbage, its teeth too close to Anders’ face for comfort.

"Hey buddy..." Anders said cautiously. "You wanna... fuck off? Yeah? You wanna fuck off? Go see Hawke? Hawke!"

"Hessarian's hairy ballsack, about damn time you woke up," A familiar voice said.

Anders glanced around the slathering mabari to see Cor sitting in a corner of his room. The Bastard waved. “Little help?” Anders asked.

“Cor blimey, no,” Cor laughed, “You’re a dead man.”

No sooner had he spoke the words than Hawke burst into the room, holding a half-fletched arrow
like a dagger with wild eyes, “What?”

“The dog,” Anders explained.

“The dog,” Hawke repeated slowly, lowering the arrow. “What about the dog?”

“What?”

“He won’t bite,” Hawke waved the arrow at Cor, “What about him?”

“Oh, I definitely bite,” Cor grinned yellow teeth at him.

Hawke ignored him, “Said he knew you.”

“So you just left me alone with him?” Anders asked, “What if he was lying?”

“He’s got you there, friend,” Cor said.

“Not your friend,” Hawke said, “I was gone for a minute. Dog would have killed him if he tried anything.”

“I think the dog would have killed me, actually,” Anders said.

“You’re fine,” Hawke whistled, and seemed to command both dogs. The mabari settled into a corner of the room, growling like a rusty wagon wheel, and Cor took his spot at his bedside. “Down the hall if you need me. Dog stays.” Hawke left.

"Ferelden to his toes, that one," Cor said, eyeing Anders’ bandaged midriff. "How's my favorite healer doing?"

"How long have you been here?" Anders asked.

"Long enough to know you fart in your sleep," Cor said, digging through his pockets. "Heard you got your ass kicked. Brought you some shit, yeah? Figured it would keep you from chewing your tail off while you get better. Didn't know you'd have a right hoard already. Might nab a few things on my way out, nothing personal."

“Or you could, you know, not.” Anders said.

Cor wasn’t wrong. Anders was well off. Everyone Anders had ever met had seen to it. At first, it was nothing much. Hawke bought him a mattress and moved him into his own room in the estate. Varric brought him parchment, Isabela smutty literature, Merrill some earthy Dalish tea, even Fenris brought him a drink, and Aveline a generously stern look. Then Hawke had taken a trip down to Darktown to retrieve Anders’ things, and someone had spotted him.

Word had spread, the way words do, and refugees had come creeping up into Hightown after him like rats hunting the cheese in a spring-trap. They brought bandages, herbs, charms and trinkets, poorly knitted socks, waterlogged books, cracked mirrors, warped drinking flasks, playing cards and other odds and ends.

His room was littered with it. In lieu of furniture, he’d organized it into piles. One for clothes, one for medicinal supplies, one for games, one for trash. The trash pile was definitely the largest. Cor was just going to add to it. Leandra was going to kill him. She disapproved of his visitors and made it no secret. Whatever fondness she’d had for him had been thrown out with the rug Anders had ruined.

“What will the neighbors think?” Leandra would say after each visit. Anders knew them all by name.
The Arenburgs, the Reinhardts, the de Carracs, the Cavins, the Harimanns, the de Launcets. It was exhausting. Anders didn’t know how Hawke put up with it. Bedridden as he was, it wasn’t as if Anders could stop the refugees from showing up, and once they arrived, there wasn’t much point turning them away.

Their mere presence caused the scandal. Lowtown trash, all of them. Visiting Hawke, if anyone asked, which everyone did. He hadn’t been in Hightown a month, and Anders was already ruining his reputation.

“Bree made you set a dice from some old soup bones,” Cor was saying, upending his pockets onto Anders’ chest, “Manus made you—whatever the fuck this is, and I got you this.”

A necklace joined the ever-growing pile on Anders’ chest. Under normal circumstances, Anders was a sucker for jewelry, but a necklace of rotten teeth wasn’t exactly what he considered normal. “You shouldn’t have,” Anders picked it up gingerly by the rope, and dropped it as far away from himself as he could. “Really.”

“Cut my bleeding heart out why don’t you,” Cor snorted, “First you don’t write, now you don’t want my gifts?”

“You can’t read, Cor.”

“Conall’d read it to me,” Cor said dismissively, “Sideways, Lirene filled me in. Bitch is my bitch now, believe it or not.”

“Or not,” Anders said.

“Necklace ain’t just a necklace,” Cor continued. “From the Weavers. I felt all kinds of twisted after Kanky fucked you, so I figured we fuck him back, yeah? Got you an in with the Weavers that don’t cost two sovereigns. You get the Bleeder some blood every now and then, and you get your boat.”

“Blood? You mean— you don’t mean what I think you mean.”

"Aye, I mean it.” Cor said.

“No,” Anders said quickly, refusing to let himself think about it. Without Justice, he couldn’t trust his answer. He had to draw a line somewhere, and human sacrifice seemed like a pretty low bar. “Thank you, but—” If they were templars… if they were going to die anyway... “No.”

“Oh yeah?” Cor raised an eyebrow at him, “Who else you got left? Redwaters pissed off, week back.”

“They did?” Anders asked. “... of course they did. No. No more blood magic. That’s what got me into this mess in the first place. I have a friend who’s a captain. She could probably put in a good for me with ... someone.”

“Suit yourself,” Cor shrugged. “Figured I owed ya. When you back up on your feet? Floods got us a good dozen extra Dogs, and now we got half the foundry, good third o’ Darktown, even some of the Bazaar, but the boys could use you. Vallen’s been after us like a bitch in heat, and the fighting’s getting good. Think she’s jealous ‘bout me and Lirene.”

“I’m sure that’s it,” Anders agreed. “Couldn’t be the theft, the extortion, aiding and abetting mages…”

“What, now it’s a crime to be a criminal?” Cor asked.
“I’m not a Dog Lord, Cor,” Anders said. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt because you think I’ll be there to heal you. The stitches in my arms come out today, but my legs and back need more time.”

Cor stood and scratched at his crotch, “You keep saying that, but we both know you’ll be with us till the last dog is hung. Take your time, then. We’ll see you out there, Anders.”

Cor left. Hawke spent the day on a job, and Anders spent it copying pages from Amell’s journal, or more specifically, the few that were illegible scribbles. If Anders didn’t know any better, he would have thought it evidence of a stroke. The symbols weren’t in any language Anders could read, but there was only one other language Amell spoke, which meant it was elvish.

Anders hoped there were enough pages to make a bandage for the rift he’d rent in his relationship with Merrill. For all he knew, it was a waste of ink. Amell only seemed to write in elvish when he was flustered or frustrated, and Anders was fairly certain most of it was profane. The last thing he wanted was to hand Merrill a piece of parchment that told her to go fuck herself, but that would be his luck at this rate.

There was a familiarity to the way Amell wrote. Not just because it was Amell, but because he was slightly more. Amell hadn’t been possessed. It wasn’t the same. But it was close, and Anders wanted to believe he would have understood. He would have wanted Anders to be for more than the cause of mages. He’d want him to be for mages’ causes. Merrill was a start.

He was halfway through a page where Amell had been ranting about the Chantry’s hypocritical use of blood magic, when there was a knock on his doorframe. Anders looked up to see Leandra standing in the doorway. She surveyed the trash heaped about his room and made a sound more whimper than sigh, “This was to be Carver’s room. He was a good boy. Clean.”

“Lovely estate, marm,” A woman in Coterie green said, stepping around Leandra and into Anders’ room. She looked as if she’d spent too much time in the sun and acted much the same. It was Lilley, of course, because one gang wasn’t enough for one day. “Appreciate the tour. Trouble you for some tea?”

“Of course,” Leandra forced a smile, “All of Hightown pities me, my daughter is in the Circle, my eldest son is a thug, I’m harboring an apostate, and now the Coterie is in my home, threatening what little I have left. What’s a cup of tea? Sugar?”

“Two cubes, if you could marm,” Lilley said. “Be out of your knickers before you can piss ’em,”

“My knickers,” Leandra muttered under her breath as she left, “Maker save me.”

“Did you really have to threaten her?” Anders asked.

“Have to?” Lilley sucked the words in through the gap in her teeth, and spat them back out the same way, “Want to, now there’s a thought.”

“What are you doing here?” Anders demanded, trying for indignant and ending up somewhere in the vicinity of confused. “If it’s about our deal, I have to heal myself before I heal anyone else. The Coterie can wait.”

“See, waiting really wasn’t part of the deal,” Lilley tutted, skipping through a pile of trash and crushing half of it in the process to squat at his bedside. “Not our part, at least. Harlan’s had a change of heart.”

“What, he switch it out for one that beats?” Anders asked. The blood magic must have worn off with Decimus dead, because not enough had gone wrong of late. He’d lost his boat and now he was going
“Cute,” Lilley tapped his nose, “The way Harlan sees it, there’s no point to healing both sides in a war. You still want our tunnels, we gotta talk about your dogs.”

“They’re not my dogs—” Anders protested, probing himself up on his elbows with a great deal of effort.

“Mmm, that’s a lot of shit for one chamber pot,” Lilley said. “Here’s the new deal. You don’t heal them. You don’t look at them. You don’t sniff their asses or whatever the fuck else you dogs do. They go up in flames, you don’t so much as piss on them to put them out. You get me?”

“Get yourself,” Anders said. “I’m the Darktown Healer. I heal everyone in Darktown, and everyone in Darktown is in a gang. There’s no other way for refugees to survive in Kirkwall, and your turf war isn’t just with the Dogs, it’s with the Sharps, the Sisters, the Avengers, the Reining Men, the Carta—“ A thought occurred to Anders, “No, in fact, you can go back and tell Harlan that if he wants me to keep healing his men, then he can get the Carta to forgive Hawke’s debt or he can get a new healer.”

“That’s how you want to play this?” Lilley cracked her knuckles, as if her hands actually held the cards the Coterie was playing. Anders was willing to call it. No blood magic. No Justice. Just Anders. Anders had been healing the Coterie for months. They needed him. They owed him. If they were this scared of the Dogs, they might not survive without him.

“That’s how I want to play it,” Anders said.

“… Alright.” Son of a darkspawn, it worked. “I’ll take it back. Hawke, he’s the one shares the mines with Hubert, right? Hubert pays his dues. We’ll see what Harlan says.”

The mine! Why hadn’t Anders thought of the mine? Why hadn’t Hawke? Why did he even need the Coterie? Couldn’t Hawke pay off his debt and pay for Anders’ grimoire with whatever he was earning from the mines? Anders would have to ask him.

“But you,” Lilley pulled at his bandages with a dirty fingernail. Anders swatted her hand away. “You got balls. Fancy someone to suck ‘em?”

“…Thanks, but no thanks,” Anders tried to grin. His face refused and contorted into the sort of expression a person made when they were about to sneeze. Lilley shrugged and stood in time for Leandra to come back with her tea.

“Thanks marm,” Lilley said, accepting the tea and pouring it straight into Anders’ chamber pot. “Be seeing you, Anders.”

"I suppose this is my life now," Leandra lamented, staring at Anders chamber pot as the scent of piss brewed with chamomile filled the room. "Tea and crumpets with... thugs and scoundrels."

"Not a bad one, marm." Lilley said.

"Let me see you out. Maker's mercy - don't touch the paintings. If you're going to get your filthy fingers all over something, please just steal it."

Lilley left with Leandra, and Anders’ eyes drifted to Cor’s necklace. He hadn’t needed it. He didn’t need it. If Hawke could compromise on blood magic, so could Anders. He could convince the people to support his cause without it. He’d convinced Hawke. He’d convinced Lilley. He’d convinced most of Darktown and Lowtown, and Hightown was next. He didn’t need the Weavers.
He had Isabela, and she was bound to know a captain the Collective could utilize to get mages from the city. Anders flipped through Amell’s journal, aimlessly searching for more elvish to copy until one passage stuck out at him.

_The Chantry would speak about the sanctity of the mind, but the mind is no more sacred than the lungs, the liver, the heart. It’s an organ of reasoning, nothing more. True reasoning requires connection to the rhythm of blood. Interrupt that tireless pounding of life, and the mind is open to control._

_There’s nothing unique to blood magic about it. The heart skips the same beats when it finds love or faces fear. It makes no difference if the push to change it comes from magic. The Chantry and their Templars use the same coercion without it. Their sword of mercy is the same one Hessarian used to kill their beloved Andraste. The symbol alone speaks volumes to what they truly hold sacred._

_Control. Power. Fear. Martyrdom. They’d have every mage follow in Andraste’s footsteps. They don’t care about the sanctity of a man’s mind, only the malleability of it. The idea of anyone else with sway over the minds of the masses terrifies them. Let them brand me maleficar, foul, corrupt, accursed. Mien’harel na nadas._

Anders tapped his quill on the paragraphs after he finished copying the few elvish symbols at the end of them. He missed Justice. He didn’t trust how he felt without him. Amell made a convincing argument, but Hawke had made convincing arguments in the opposite direction. What if he couldn’t convince the nobles on his own? If the way they thought was wrong, was it wrong to change their minds?

_Probably. Maybe. Technically? How technical could he afford to be when there were new Tranquil in the Gallows’ courtyard every day? Decimus had been for it, but Decimus was dead. He’d convinced the people he needed to convince, and Anders had been one of them when it came to spelltomes. What if Decimus had used to blood magic to convince him? How would Anders know? Did it matter?_

It mattered to Alain. It mattered to Hawke.

Anders set the quill aside and lay with Amell’s journal over his face. He wouldn’t need blood magic at all if he could get all of Kirkwall to read it. Amell might not have been able to convince the nobles in Ferelden, but they hadn’t read his journal. They hadn’t heard him out. If Anders could just get them to listen, to read, he could get them to understand.

_The elvish was for Merrill, but the rest … could be for Beth. For Hawke. For Kirkwall. For Elthina and Orsino and maybe even Meredith._

_Not all of it. Just the important parts. The parts that people needed to hear._

_… Maybe the parts without blood magic._

Anders grabbed a fresh piece of parchment and wet his quill.

_“Andraste said that magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him, but it is not ruling to wish the same rights as any man…”_
Elvish Translation: Revolution is inevitable.

Fanart of this chapter!
Have Your Pie and Eat it Too

Chapter Summary

In which there is pie.

Chapter Notes

If you haven’t checked it out, I added a new chapter to Apples and Apostates, my side-story for Accursed Ones that provides some insight into different characters’ perspectives.

Thank you so much for reading! I sincerely appreciate it. As always thank you for any kudos, comments, subscriptions, or bookmarks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

9:33 Dragon Verimensis 24 Evening
Hightown: Amell Estate

Andraste said that magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him, but it is not ruling to wish the same rights as any man. Mages deserve the same freedoms of all men. The right to love, to life, to liberty. Mages have no rights to marriage, to children, to land.

The Templar Order’s symbol is Hessarian’s Sword of Mercy, but they are not an order that practices mercy. Mages are subjected to the Harrowing, a ritual that pits them against demons, and are killed if they fall prey to them. There’s no reason for mages to martyr themselves following in Andraste’s footsteps – possession can reversed with a ritual of lyrium and magic, both of which can be found in abundance in the Circle.

The Circles are an institution of oppressive. They are abusive and unjust. No child should be torn from their parents for the crime of being how the Maker created them. Mages’ gifts are granted by the Maker, and it is not for man to decide how the Maker created mages is not normal.

It goes against no will of the Maker for mages to live as free as other men. The Chantry made its laws a thousand years ago based on fear of an empire that has long since crumbled. Andraste fought against slavery only for her followers to make slaves of mages.

“No...” Anders crumbled up the parchment and tossed it over his shoulder. He didn’t even know where to start. There was too much to say. Did he appeal to mages, or to the masses? Did he appeal to Andristianism, or against it? How did he call the Chantry to task without condemning the Chant of Light? Where was the line between reinterpretation and heresy?

Anders pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and frowned at it. A single blot of ink grew larger and larger with every frustrated tap of his quill, but no words sprung from it. Anders rolled over and stretched, his back in knots. He’d been writing for hours, leaning over the edge of his mattress to scribble out passage after unsuccessful passage on the floor.
Justice wouldn’t have had any trouble. He would have taken to the page with abandon, huge scrawling capital letters detailing his hatred for the Circle in no uncertain terms. Maybe Anders was going about this all wrong. Maybe he should just let Justice write it.

Anders stared at the ceiling and ran an idle finger along his necklace, vial of blood bouncing each time he passed over it. If only every other word in Amell’s journal wasn’t about blood magic, he could have just copied it verbatim. Except the Chantry didn’t come into play in Amell’s version of freedom. He didn’t care about the Chant of Light, or the Chantry, or what the masses thought, and that was the problem. You couldn’t change the world without changing the people in it.

“How am I supposed to pay for all this paper, Anders?” Hawke’s voice broke through his thoughts, and Anders glanced up from his nest of parchment to find him in the doorway.

The left side of his greaves were scorched, and there was a rip in his left vambrace. His right vambrace was missing completely, his arm a mess of rent flesh. Anders pictured him blocking a swipe from a rage demon, or a disgruntled arsonist, or a flaming nuggalope. Anders was leaning towards nuggalope. Hawke looked exhausted. Whatever it had been, the repairs wouldn’t be cheap and his arm wouldn’t heal pretty.

“It’s not on loan,” Anders joked, putting up his quill, “Varric gave it to me, remember? Or did something get your head? You look like you could have used me.”

“Could always use you,” Hawke said, stepping over a few piles of various and sundries to throw himself on the floor at Anders’ beside. The pages of Anders’ manifesto took flight, like pheasants startling from the underbrush, and scattered around the bed. A few landed on Hawke, but he made no effort to do anything about them. He lay with his head on Anders’ mattress, blinking slow blinks at the ceiling.

Anders propped himself up and leaned over him, grinning. “I’m listening.”

“Was a mess,” Hawke said, completely missing his meaning. Or completely avoiding it. “Fenris killed the magistrate’s son.”

“What!?” Anders almost fell on him in shock, “I thought you were going to rescue him?”

“So did I…” Hawke flicked a strand of Anders’ hair. It fell stubbornly back into Hawke’s face, and he twisted it up in his fingers. Anders definitely wasn’t cutting it. “He was killing elves. Girls. Little girls. Not just killing them. Said he was possessed but I don’t think he was. I think it was just him.”

“Maker’s breath,” Anders muttered. Little girls. This whole city was damned, “How do you know he wasn’t possessed?”

“Merrill checked his blood,” Hawke said. Casually. Like the blood magic was normal. It was more comforting than Hawke playing with his hair. “He wasn’t like you.”

“There’s no one like me,” Anders said glibly.

“I know,” Hawke’s gaze drifted off Anders’ hair and to his eyes. The eye-contact was so rare Anders swore sometimes he forgot their color, more bittersweet than red in the moonslight. There was something uniquely Hawke in how they searched Anders’ own. For what, Anders had no idea.

It would have been so easy to kiss him.

Well, maybe not that easy. He’d have to scoot forward a bit, get around Hawke’s broken nose, find his mouth under his beard… plus the mood was all wrong. Definitely not the sort of topic Anders
wanted to remember for their first kiss.

“What happened with the magistrate?” Anders asked instead, threading an experimental hand through Hawke’s hair. It was somehow both sweaty and coarse, and not altogether pleasant, except that it was Hawke, and he didn’t stop him. He even hummed when Anders ran his nails along his scalp.

His lips would have been softer. Anders thought of them moving against his fingers, whispering praises of perfection, and wondered why anything else mattered when he’d lain awake aching for him ever since. So what if Hawke was terrified of them? Life was terrifying. Bettered to be terrified together than terrified alone.

“How me,” Hawke said, still watching his eyes, “Swore revenge. Still managed to get an audience with the viscount tomorrow.”

“Sounds productive,” Anders grinned, “You know, despite the murder. Well on your way to hobnobbing with the rest of the nobility,”

There was no reason not to kiss him. Anders could die tomorrow. The burn or the laceration could throw a clot, even on the mend, and tangle up in his heart while he slept. Hawke could die on a job. Why not live first?

 “… should have been in the Circle.”

“What?” Anders’ blood chilled, and he recoiled so quickly he pulled his own hair on Hawke’s hand in the process.

“Magistrate’s son,” Hawke elaborated, letting Anders’ untangle his fingers from his hair. “Didn’t know what he was doing with his magic. With his mind. He was sick. Maybe in the Circle... Magistrate’s been hiding him his whole life, and now he’s dead.”

“He was a monster,” Anders said with disgust in equal parts for the man and the Circle that might have housed him. “That had nothing to do with being a mage.”

“Not saying it did,” Hawke didn’t fight him. He picked up one of the crumpled balls of parchment and turned it over in his hands. “What is all this?”


Hawke smoothed the paper out against his knee and read, “’Magic is a gift from the Maker, a connection to the Fade from which the Maker formed the physical world and all living beings, and the Maker himself declared that all men should return to it. Threnodies 5:8 - It’s 5:7 – To cut any man off from the Fade is to cut him off from the Maker-… is this about your old lover?”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Anders joked.

“You’ve had more than one made Tranquil?” Hawke asked.

“No, it’s more in general,” Anders took the parchment away from him, wadded it back up, and threw it over his shoulder. “I’m just trying to gather my thoughts.”

“Literally?” Hawke asked.

“It’s kind of turning out that way,” Anders agreed, “It’s like a manifesto on magic. To convince
people that the Circles are abusive and unjust. What do you think?”

“I think you need a lot more paper,” Hawke said.

He wasn’t wrong. Anders gestured to Hawke’s gored arm. “You want me to stitch that up?”

“Looks worse than it is,” Hawke said dismissively, “You want dinner?”

“Always,” Anders agreed.

Hawke left to bathe and came back a short while later with dinner. It was fish and egg pie, which was apparently some kind of Starkhaven staple that Leandra had gotten from Sebastian now that he was back in Kirkwall. Anders couldn’t say much for the presentation, which was a whole fish head sticking out of the pie, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

Anders could say more for the man presenting it. Hawke was fresh from his bath and hadn’t seen fit to bother with a tunic. His sunburst amulet framed a strong collarbone, and void-black hair adorned a muscular chest, running down his stomach to vanish beneath his trousers. They hung off his hips, loosely knotted and tempting fate, but it was his arms that distracted Anders the most. They were archers’ arms, and they’d saved his life on more than one occasion.

Anders could see now why Hawke wasn’t concerned with his injury. The wound had cauterized, three wrinkled pink slashes cut across Hawke’s forearm, which meant rage demon. Anders’ ran his fingers over the burns when Hawke handed him his dinner, thinking of his own brand hid by his bandage.

“I think I wear it better,” Anders joked. “Make sure you put a poultice on that.”

“Later,” Hawke said. “Eat.”

“Fish pie?” Anders asked.

“Looks worse than it is,” Hawke said again, this time with a grin.

Anders thought of staring at the fish to keep his eyes off Hawke, but the fish stared back. He didn’t have to leer. Hawke had a handful of colorful tattoos Anders supposed would be safe to comment on if Hawke asked. Like the one of a red anvil stabbed through with a sword, just above his waist and pointed straight at his crotch.
… Maybe he’d stare at the fish after all.

“Mother’s practicing for a dinner party.” Hawke explained, reclaiming his spot at Anders’ bedside, “Get used to it.”

“I’m not complaining,” Anders said.

“You’re complaining,” Hawke said.

“I’m complaining a little,” Anders allotted, taking a suspicious nibble. It tasted, unsurprisingly, of fish. “How is the dinner party going to work with no furniture, by the way? Are you going to convince the nobles that minimalism is in fashion or something?”

“Furniture’s on loan from Seb,” Hawke said, “Something about worldly possessions getting in the way of his quest for vengeance or his service to the Chantry. Can’t remember which.”

“Because those are totally similar,” Anders said.
“Always going on about one or the other.”

“Hold on - I thought he left the Chantry?”

“Thought so too,” Hawke shrugged, “Not sure now.”

“You know, it’s touching how many details you remember about your close friends,” Anders teased.

“Not a friend,” Hawke said around a mouthful of pie. “Looks at me like I’m Lowtown trash, like the rest of Hightown, just better at hiding it.”

“Didn’t you say he was one of the good ones with the Chantry? Especially considering he left it?” Anders recalled. “I thought we liked him?”

“Sometimes.”

“Something happen?”

“Thinks I should take the name Amell,” Hawke explained. “Said it would make me more legitimate.”

“And we … don’t like the name Amell?” Anders asked cautiously, impressed with himself for even being able to have the conversation.

“Rather have people respect the name Hawke. It was my father’s name. I think Mother regrets it. His life. His magic. Leaving all this behind. I’m not an Amell,” Hawke paused between bites, as if there was more he intended to say, before changing his mind and shoveling down more fish.

“… And?” Anders prompted.

“… And I don’t want you to think of me that way.” Hawke admitted, looking at Anders through his bangs.

There was a vulnerability in his eyes that Anders imagined he could heal with his mouth if not his magic. If not for the fish. It peeked out of the pie like a voyeur at the entire exchange, gawking with glossy eyes, and Anders shook the thought away.

“I don’t,” Anders promised, grabbing the nearest ball of parchment. He smoothed it out to reveal a smear of ink and a few blurred lines from the Chant. “These aren’t just for abstract people, you know, they’re for you. I know you think Beth is safe in the Circle-”

“Anders-”

“But I know she’s not. If you could just read… not this one, maybe this one-“

“Anders,” Hawke caught his hands to stop him from rifling through his mountains of papers. “Let’s just have dinner.”

Anders deflated. He looked at the passage he was holding, a short diatribe on the injustice of solitary confinement, and crumpled it back up.

Hawke kept hold of him, massaging Anders’ wrists with his thumbs until Anders looked up at him. “I’ll read it when you’re finished,” Hawke promised. “Just don’t want to fight with you.”

“Why would we fight?” Anders fought. “You know what the templars did to me. What they did to Alain. You know Beth is wrong. You know she is. You know what happened to Elsa, to Karl-“
“Anders,” Hawke sighed, letting go of him.

“No, you know!” Anders persisted, “You’ve seen it. You can’t sit there and tell me the whole system isn’t corrupt.”

“You really want to do this now?” Hawke asked.

“Yes, I want to do it now,” Anders said hotly. “You told me to plan, so I’m planning. You told me to think about where I fit with the Chantry, so I thought about it. Did you?”

“Every day,” Hawke said softly. He looked at the pie. The pie looked at him. “Beth is happy, Anders. For the first time in a long time. I know what happened. I was there. But men did this to you. Not darkspawn. Not monsters. Not templars. Just men. Just like the magistrate’s son was a man.”

“That’s nug shit. Those ‘men’ are what the Chantry made them.”

“They’re what the Knight-Commander made them,” Hawke countered. “Not the Chantry. And the Grand Cleric here? She isn’t the Chantry. Any more than the Divine is the Maker. She’s just one woman.”

“That one woman is the Grand Cleric of the entire Free Marches,” Anders waved a hand towards the window and the horrors that lay beyond it, all going on with Elthina’s blessing. “She controls the Chantry. Why are you defending her?”

“Not defending her. I’m saying this isn’t the way it’s supposed to work. All men are the Work of our Maker’s Hands—”

“Please don’t.” Maker save him, Chantry dogma was worse than dog shit.

“From the lowest slaves to the highest kings. Those who bring harm without provocation to the least of His children are hated and accursed by the Maker.”

“Transfigurations,” Anders cited, “I know the Chant, Hawke, you can just tell me the verse if you’re going to quote it.”

“Do you? Got a verse wrong in your manifesto,” Hawke scratched at his scalp, “Look, you’re the least of His children.”

“Thank you,” Anders said flatly. “I’m touched. You’re touching me. The bad sort of touch.”

“Tell me I’m wrong. Look at yourself,” Hawke’s hand waivered indecisively between the bandages on Anders’ midriff and forearm. “Look at what they did to you. Look at what they did to Allen.”

“Alain?” Anders corrected him.

“Whatever. It’s the third commandment. This city stops at the second. I’m not blind.” Anders took the phrase like a punch to the gut. “I know what can happen to mages here. You’re sitting right in front of me. This whole city is sick. You can’t heal it with this,” Hawke picked up a piece of his manifesto and threw it onto his bed, “It’s not enough, but it’s not the Chantry’s fault. It’s the people. Petition for a new Grand Cleric and the Chantry can work the way it’s meant to work – holding the templars accountable.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Anders said sarcastically, “Except the Divine appointed her, so who should I petition? The Maker?”
“The Divine’s old,” Hawke waved the thought away. “She’ll be gone in a year.”

“What if she’s not?” Anders countered. “What if the next one is just like her? How long are we supposed to live as slaves? Ten years? A hundred? When is enough enough? The mages must be free. If the Circles vote to split from the Chantry, the Templars won’t be able to control us anymore.”

“This is how you get them to vote?” Hawke picked up another piece of parchment and made a show of skimming it. Anders couldn’t tell if he actually read it.

“Yes,” Anders said.

“… Why don’t you have anything from Transfigurations 1:5?” Hawke asked.

“What?”

“Harm to men’s livelihood and peace of mind,” Hawke quoted for him. “That’s what Tranquility is, isn’t it?”

“It–…yes!” Anders pushed his pie aside and snatched his quill back up. He grabbed the nearest parchment, already used, and turned it over. “Exactly. Those–… Knickerweasels, what’s the verse?”

“Those who steal from their brothers and sisters, do harm to their livelihood.” “Slow down. Do harm?” “-to their livelihood,” Hawke said again, slower, “And to their peace of mind. Our Maker sees this with a heavy heart.”

Anders waved his hand over the wet ink, willing it to dry, “Does this mean I have your support?”

Hawke inhaled deeply and exhaled even deeper, but didn't answer him. ”We should take your stitches out.” He said instead.

Anders fished out a set of tweezers and a scalpel from one of his piles and held them hostage for Hawke's answer, "Does it?"

"I support you, Anders." Hawke said after too long a pause.

"But?” Anders guessed.

"But Beth is my sister," Hawke said. "You won't win if you ask me to choose."

Close enough. Anders relented his hold on the tools, "I’m not asking you to."

“And you need to be more careful,” Hawke said, running calloused fingers over the stitches littering Anders’ arms.

It wasn’t such a terrible thing to counsel caution, Anders supposed. Especially considering Anders was starting to look more like a traditional abomination after what he had been through. Seam upon seam stitched his arms and legs together, haphazard and horrible without a flicker of veilfire beneath. Hawke set tweezer and scalpel to one, and Anders wondered if he’d come apart without them.

“The change that you want isn’t going to come today,” Hawke said, snipping the first stitch. Somehow, Anders didn’t unravel. “It isn’t going to come tomorrow. It takes time.”

“I know that,” Anders said.

“You’re impatient,” Hawke continued, “You try to rush this and you’ll get yourself killed.”
“I know that too,” Anders said.

The stitches were slow going. They had to be cut free, one at a time, and pulled from his skin. It wasn't pain so much as pressure, and the uneasy sensation of something sliding under his skin that was a little too reminiscent of the Blight. Hawke’s hands helped, chasing away the sensation with a gentle caress as the sutures came free. It was nice. Almost too nice.

“That was something I wanted to ask you about when you got home,” Anders said.

“Ask me,” Hawke paused to meet his eyes, and Anders forgot his question. A handful of alternatives came to mind, ‘Fancy a go?’ the loudest and least productive of them. He’d tear the stitches in his back if he tried anything enthusiastic.

… Then again, Hawke seemed pretty gentle.

“‘The mine,’” Anders cleared his throat and his thoughts, “The Bone Pit. Why can't you use it to pay off the Carta?”

“Everything I get from the mine goes back into the mine,” Hawke said. “It barely breakeven. Won't turn a profit for at least three more months with everything I have to replace.”

“I might be able to help,” Anders said.

“Does this have to do with the Coterie?” Hawke guessed. “Mother said they showed up today.”

It was surprisingly astute of him. Anders probably wouldn’t have made the connection in his place. "If anyone can convince the Carta to forgive your debt, the Coterie can.”

“In exchange for what?” Hawke asked.

“Nothing,” Anders said.

“It's never nothing,” Hawke finished removing the last of the stitches on Anders’ arms and set the tools aside. Anders wished the rest of his wounds could heal so quickly. He wished the city could.

“This is exactly what I mean.”

“What?” Anders asked.

“You,” Hawke said with a gesture that encompassed all of him, “You’re impulsive. The Carta, the Coterie, it doesn’t forgive the debt, it just moves it. Told you I was handling it.”

“That’s a fine ‘Thank you,’” Anders said, “How about, ‘thank you, Anders, for coming to my rescue! I don’t know how to ask for help when I’m in trouble, so I lash out at everything except the problem.’ Or ‘You’re so brave, Anders, I can’t believe you stood up to one of Kirkwall’s most fearsome gangs just for me.’ Or ‘I can really tell how much you care, Anders, even though I won’t be with you because I’ve suddenly decided it’s sacrilegious.’”

“That’s not it,” Hawke said.

“Then what?”

“It’s complicated,”

“Then uncomplicate it,” Anders said.

“What do you want me to do?” Hawke asked. “You want me to tell the world, the knight-
“commander, that I’m with an apostate?”

“It’s a start,” Anders said. “I know I can’t give you a normal life, I’ll always be hunted, hated…”

“This is supposed to convince me?” Hawke asked.

“It got your shirt off,” Anders joked.

Hawke laughed, a loud bark that dissolved into chuckles, his face flush beneath his beard, “Damnit, Anders you’re… It’s wash day.”

“Sure it is,” Anders said. “You said if I wanted you to see me, you’d make sure I knew you were for it. Am I supposed to see you?”

Hawke shrugged. Loquacious as always. Anders didn’t care. They could die tomorrow. He didn’t want it to be with regrets, but he couldn’t reach Hawke without sitting up, and he couldn’t sit up without help. He propped himself up on one elbow and shoved past his trepidation to run his hand along Hawke’s thigh, through the hair on his stomach, up to his collarbone, waiting for Hawke to stop him.

Hawke didn’t. He sat, silent and still, until Anders couldn’t reach any higher, and collected Anders’ hand to cradle against his heart. His rapid pulse said everything he didn’t.

“You make me question everything,” Hawke clasped Anders’ jaw with his free hand, and ran his thumb along Anders’ cheekbone, “I can’t be my mother, lover dead to darkspawn, and me resenting him for who he was and what he made our lives…”

“Then don’t resent me.”

“Don’t die.”

“Not really part of the plan.”

“Swear it.”

“Stop teasing me. You can’t say the things you say and do the things you do and expect me to resist you. I’m still a man.” Anders gathered the sunburst amulet in his palm and half expected it to burn like the Rite. It didn’t. He pulled, but Hawke tilted his head so their foreheads touched and their lips didn’t. “Kiss me.”

“ Anders, I’ve never-“

“Garrett!” Leandra barked.

Hawke started and headbutt him, and Anders almost broke the chain on Hawke’s necklace jerking backwards. Anders massaged his forehead, lamenting the lack of his magic for the migraine that started behind his eyes. Hawke swiveled around to look over his shoulder, where Leandra was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

“Can I see you in the kitchen?” Leandra framed the request in such a way as to make it clear it wasn’t one.

“Fine,” Hawke said, not moving.

“Now?” Leandra pressed.

Hawke gathered up their plates, the bloody stitches, some trash from one of Anders’ many piles, and his chamber pot. There were more tattoos on his back. A mabari’s face decorated his shoulder, a chantry sunburst in place of one of its eyes, and a second was set low on his back. Anders didn’t quite process what it was before Hawke left.

Hawke didn’t return, and the night passed restlessly. Anders tossed about on his mattress, torn between too hot and too cold and too itchy and too lustful to sleep. He could always let a few drops of blood for a sleep spell, as he had been doing for the past week, but he couldn’t stop thinking of Hawke and where his dreams would take him.

The same dreams that Justice shaped.

Sex was a need of his body. Or something. That was what Justice had said, but that didn’t mean Justice wanted to be the one filling it. Justice… Justice wanted love, but love wasn’t keeping Anders awake at night. Anders shimmied out of his trousers and wrapped a hand around his aching cock to stroke the concerns out of his head.

It didn’t work. His arousal pulsed in time with his heart, loud and fast and hot. Too hot. Definitely too hot. Sweat ran between Anders’ shoulder blades to the small of his back, where it soaked into sheet and bandage alike. It itched, between heartbeats, and kept him on the edge of orgasm. Anders bit back a keen of frustration and arched his back, thrusting into his palm. A spasm of pleasure shot down his spine but twisted up into pain when it reached the wound in his back.

“Fuck,” Anders gasped, letting go of himself. He lay with his trousers around his ankles, trembling and frustrated. Tensing his arm had pulled the skin around his brand and hurt almost as much as the wound on his back. A tremor seized him, every so often, from his back, his arm, his cock, and brought no release.

Justice might.

Anders scratched at one of the stitches on his legs, let enough blood to light the candle at his bedside, and worked on his manifesto until morning. He fell asleep somewhere in the middle of the day, dreamed of darkspawn, and only woke again when Hawke was back from his job, with Isabela, Fenris, and Merrill all in tow. They stopped by his room to visit, but Anders didn’t have much to offer by way of hospitality.

Only Fenris seemed to care. The barefoot elf padded circles around his room, unable to find a place to sit. He wore a look of disgust on his face as he surveyed the hills and valleys of garbage Anders had accumulated, “Venhedis… You live like this?”

“Don’t you live in a haunted mansion full of dead bodies?” Anders asked.

“We cleaned out the bodies a few months ago,” Merrill said cheerily, burrowing into a pile of paper like an owl. “I planted a few flowers outside last week. You should come see. “

“He is not invited,” Fenris said, giving up on finding a spot to lean against the doorframe.

“Play nice,” Isabela said, sitting in Merrill’s lap. She was taller, thicker, and generally bigger than Merrill in every way, but the tiny elf seemed delighted to be smothered. Anders couldn’t blame her. He remembered it being fun. “How are you doing, Sparky?”

“Like death,” Fenris supplied.

“No flirting,” Anders warned him. Hawke chuckled, and found a spot for himself on the edge of Anders’ mattress. “How did it go with the job from the viscount?”

“Turned out it was actually a job from the Arishok,” Hawke said.

“Fenris didn’t kill him too, did he?” Anders asked.

“No,” Fenris shot him a frown for the question.

“Shame,” Anders said.

“He has lots of guards,” Merrill said, “I think it would be difficult for anyone to kill him. And I don’t think anyone should.”

“Kitten-” Isabela drew out the nickname in such a way as to suggest this was a reoccurring argument. She shook her hands through her hair, pushing off her bandana, and turned to take in Merrill’s frown.

“You weren’t there,” Merrill picked up Isabela’s discarded bandana and twisted it anxiously. “You don’t ever come see the compound. He cares about elves.”

“Not about mages,” Anders said.

“Well no…” Merrill agreed.

“He cares about the Qun,” Fenris corrected them both, “Nothing more. The mage is well, the job is done, am I still needed?”


Isabela left with Fenris. Merrill stayed, still twisting the pirate’s bandana around her fingers.

“Why do you care about the Arishok?” Anders asked. “You’ve seen what the Qun does to mages.”

“I’ve seen what this city does to elves,” Merrill countered. “There was another riot in the markets today. You know I saw someone get stabbed this morning? It’s not… so exciting anymore. The city hahren said the guards knew the nobleman’s son was killing elves and refused to do anything about it.”

“It was just a rumor, Merrill,” Hawke said. “Aveline would have stepped in if she had proof.”

“But she didn’t,” Merrill said. “You did.”

Apparently, Hawke didn’t have a retort. He asked, “You staying for dinner?”

“I don’t want to be too much trouble… that um… that would be nice.”

“It won’t be,” Anders warned her. “Fish and egg pie.”

“What’s wrong with egg pie?”

“I’ll tell mother,” Hawke left them alone.
“So what happened?” Anders asked again. “What did the Arishok want? And why was the Viscount asking on his behalf?”

“I don’t know,” Merrill said. “About the Viscount, I mean. Hawke came to get me later. Some elves stole poison gas from the qunari and used it on a few of the hexes in Lowtown, over on the east side. I don’t really know what he thought I could do about it. It’s not like I know every elf, you know.”

“That’s insane,” Anders said. “Why?”

“Well there are a lot of us…”

“I mean why about the poison gas.”

“Oh! Right. I think they were hoping people would think the qunari were attacking so they could start a war.”

“Still not really getting the why in all this.”

“The alienage is angry,” Merrill said solemnly, “You can feel it in the air. In the vhenadahl. People are upset with the hahren, the qunari, the guards, the city, their lives… do you know what it’s like for elves in Kirkwall? Do you even care when they’re not mages?”

Anders bristled, propping himself up on his elbows and opening his mouth for a retort about being the embodiment of justice, and forced himself to stop. He didn’t. He was the cause of mages. Not the cause of elves. But that didn’t mean it was right.

“I don’t,” Anders said honestly. Merrill blinked; her eyes seemed impossibly big in their shock. “I care—but I don’t know what it’s like. I’m already in stitches for one plight, if I take on another I might lose an arm… I got you something. It won’t help, but—”

Anders rolled over and rifled through his papers. Maker, had he managed to lose them in his manifesto? Had he thrown them out somehow? Hawke was back with dinner before Anders finally managed to find the few pages of elvish he’d copied from Amell’s journal. He handed them to Merrill without comment or explanation, feeling equal parts sheepish and foolish.

Please don’t let it be profane. Please just let it normal.

Merrill stared at the parchment, and Anders stuffed himself with pie.

Hawke made a face at him. “Don’t tell me you like it now.”

“Is this… written elvish?” Merrill asked eventually, tracing the poorly copied symbols almost reverently, “Real written elvish?”

“… can’t you read it?” Anders asked.

“No. This symbol looks familiar but…” Merrill stumbled over herself in her haste to stand, and tripped and fell into his manifesto, “I have to ask my spirit!”

“Wait!” Anders caught her ankle when she tried to get back up, “Just- I don’t know what it says either, but it might… not be the nicest things. Amell was… kind of possessed by this ancient elf spirit. He only wrote in elvish when he was upset.”

“… I thought you didn’t want me to have his grimoire.”

“It’s from his journal. I -… you were right. He would have wanted you to have it.”
“… Thank you, Anders.” Merrill hugged the parchment to her chest. “This is a kind gift.”

“Are we friends again?” Anders asked.

“Friends again,” Merrill agreed, rolling up the parchment and sliding it into her belt. “I-… oh… sorry Hawke… The pie… yes. Let’s have pie. Oh my, that’s very unsettling. Does it have to have its head sticking out like that?”

“You could push it back in,” Hawke suggested.

Merrill poked the fish head down into the pie, and it crept slowly back out, mouth agape. “No, no, that’s much worse.”

Anders gagged on a bite and Hawke barked a laugh. They ate for a time, Merrill and Hawke regaling him with tales from the day’s job. Apparently, some of the elves were upset that some different elves were abandoning their gods for the Qun, and that had sparked the entire ordeal. They’d stolen poison from the qunari, framed an old contact of Hawke’s for the theft and framed humans for the attack, all at the behest of some mysterious benefactor that wanted the city in turmoil.

It had worked. The Viscount had asked for Hawke’s help to avoid an incident as much as to avoid it being known that he was trying to avoid an incident, but an incident had been caused anyway. A quarter of east Lowtown had been quarantined, the elves had been blamed, and the alienage was under a tighter curfew than the rest of the city as a result. There weren’t enough guards to enforce it, which meant outsourcing to the templars, which led to the riot with the rumors of some of the templars being possessed spreading.

The whole thing was a mess.

“So, look,” Anders said, steering the conversation to lighter topics, “Not that that’s not all horrible, but I have to know. What’s going on with you and Isabela?”

Merrill choked on her fish. “What? Nothing! Why would anything be going on?”

“Something is definitely going on,” Anders said.

“Leave it,” Hawke said.

“Don’t tell me you know and I don’t,” Anders said.

“There’s nothing to know,” Merrill said with a painfully innocent and painfully fake smile. “We’re friends. What else would we be?”

“More than friends?” Anders suggested.

“Good friends?” Merrill guessed.

“Don’t play stupid,” Anders said. “That doesn’t work on me.”

“I-… um…” Merrill fiddled with her fish head. She picked it up and put it face down in the pie, and by her flush Anders imagined she wished she could do the same.

“Fenris,” Hawke said for her.

“So she’s sleeping with him,” Anders shrugged. “She sleeps with a lot of people. Have you said anything to her?”
“No!” Merrill looked aghast. “I couldn’t! Fenris—... he seems happy. And Isabela, she’s—...” Merrill
set her pie aside and sighed into her hands. “... She’s so .... She can make everything better with a
smile. It’s like magic that doesn’t get her in any trouble... But I can’t.”

“Why not?” Anders asked.

“How do you do it? You and Isabela... You’re so open. It’s like you’re not even ashamed.”

“What would we be ashamed of?” Anders blinked.

“... Liking... all types of people.”

“...That not something the Dalish are for?” Hawke asked.

“No... not in my clan, at least.” Merrill said. “Some clans are different but... The Keeper always
said that it was our duty to make sure the clan survived beyond just our lives. After Marahriel ... she
never let me forget. She said I had to set an example for the clan.”

“She sounds like a bitch,” Anders said.

“I can’t be with a human. Or a—... someone like me. Please don’t tell Isabela.”

“We won’t,” Hawke said for them, with a frown in Anders’ direction, “Not our business.”

“What makes you think she doesn’t already know?” Anders asked, ignoring him, “You should say
something. What’s the worst that could happen? You’re already exiled. Who cares what your clan
thinks? Who cares what Fenris thinks? I doubt they’re exclusive and if that doesn’t bother you, why
should anything else?

I don’t know what it’s like to be Dalish, but I know what it’s like to give everything for a cause, and
trust me, this... sex, love... that’s not something you give up. It’s not something you want to give up.
It’s not something you can give up.”

Chapter End Notes
Starkhaven Fish and Egg Pie

Starkhaven's famous pie is made with lightly poached fish from the Minanter River, which runs through the most beautiful of Nordheim cities. I've heard that King Otternest Vool ate a fish pie for his supper every day until his untimely death at the hands of brigands.

INGREDIENTS

- Good pie dough, made with butter
- One to three fish, depending on size, from the Minanter River (corp. trout, or others)
- One cup of dried currants
- One cup of sliced almonds
- Two or three eggs, boiled hard and sliced
- Half a cup of butter
- Half a cup of flour
- Two cups of fish broth (or reserved poaching liquid)
- Two cups of milk
- Salt, pepper, and freshly grated nutmeg
- One cup of single cream
- One egg, beaten, for preparing the crust
- Whisked or other small job, fried till crispy (optional)

DIRECTIONS

In a good-sized pot, place any gallon of water. Add in this one cup of good wine, a cup each of chopped onion, carrot, and celery, several sprigs of thyme, a leaf or two of bay, and a handful of sea salt. Heat the liquid until it steams; then gently add the fish to the pot. Ensure that the pot is fully covered. Continue to let it simmer, but do not let it boil. When the fish is just cooked through, remove it from the liquid and let it cool. Remove the meat from the bones and break it into chunks.

In a separate pot, melt the butter. Add the flour and stir for about two minutes. Add the broth and milk and whisk vigorously till the mixture is smooth. Continue to whisk while you bring the sauce to a boil and allow it to cook for at least ten minutes. If you find the sauce too thick, thin it out with more broth or milk. Once it is cooked, take it off the heat and stir in the cream. Season liberally with salt and add freshly ground nutmeg and pepper if desired. Now stir in the meat from the fish, the currants, the almonds, and the sliced eggs. Transfer this mixture into a large ovenproof crock.

Roll out the pie dough into a circle large enough to cover the crock. Brush the beaten egg around the edges of the crock, then place the pie dough over top, covering the fish filling. Crimp the edges and cut away any excess dough. Brush the dough with egg and make slits in the crust. Bake until the crust is golden and the filling is bubbling. If desired, serve the pie topped with small fish, deep fried whole for added texture and flavor.
Anders was going mad. Over a week he'd spent at Hawke's estate, and for over a week Hawke had tortured him.

Hawke brought him breakfast every morning and dinner every night. He changed his bandages, his sheets, his clothes, even his damn chamber pot. He helped him with everything from using the wash to writing his manifesto, but he did it all as a friend.

Anders was done being friendly. He wanted more than friendly. Hawke rarely bothered with a tunic in the comfort of his own estate, wash day be damned, and it was miserable.

Anders couldn't wear anything but his torn trousers with his injuries. Anders had an excuse. Hawke didn't. Hawke just had muscle. A powerful build that captivated Anders every time he came into the room. The thickness of his arms, the set of his shoulders, the strength in his thighs. Anders was obsessed. He felt like Isabela, biting his lip whenever Hawke was in arm’s reach, her desperate whimper of ‘Maker, the chest hair’ floating about in his lust-addled head.

It was like a demon of desire had taken up residence in Anders with Justice’s absence. It wasn’t his fault. Not when Hawke had capitulated to everything Anders had been arguing for since he set foot in Kirkwall. The blood magic, the freedom of mages… Hawke had even taken on his hatred for oatmeal. How could Anders not want the man, when Hawke did nothing but care for him day and night between jobs?

It didn’t help that Hawke didn’t know how to flirt. He’d been washing Anders’ hair one-night, attentive fingers massaging his scalp for far longer than necessary, and Anders had made some glib comment about it being more straw than hair after a year in Darktown. The appropriate response would have been something like, “Goes with your arguments” or “Could be a scarecrow for templars” or any number of things Anders expected Hawke to say, instead of what he actually said.

“Color’s wrong,” Hawke had said, “There’s a touch of red, like fire. It’s in your hair, your eyes, your soul… burns through the blue like the sun.”
“Pretty sure that’s the fever,” Anders had joked, but whether it was fire, or fever, or Hawke, it dried out his throat and left him sweating for the rest of the wash.

It was always something like that. Some stupid comment about his convictions or a general refusal to play into Anders’ self-depreciating remarks. Anders almost missed being called a filthy fucking sewer rat. At least he would have known to handle it. And it wasn’t as if he didn’t know how to handle how Hawke was treating him, it was just that he couldn’t. Whenever he came close to kissing him, Hawke would step back, and Anders couldn’t chase him.

His mattress never turned him down, but his mattress wasn’t getting him off. Anders couldn’t count the nights he spent aching for Hawke. His fantasies could have filled the Fade, but they never finished him. His right arm always cramped, and he couldn’t keep a steady rhythm with his left. His bandages itched as soon as he started sweating. The stitches on his legs pulled whenever he curled his toes and the less said of his back the better.

Anders had never been more frustrated. He’d known Hawke for almost a year, and Anders had never seen him with anyone. He doubted Hawke would waste the coin it took to go to the Blooming Rose, and unless Isabela had developed a sudden talent for discretion, Anders was it. He was willing and waiting and wanting and if he couldn’t stand it, Anders had no idea how Hawke could.

Anders lay on his stomach, trying and failing to write more of his manifesto. Hawke was at his side, because Hawke was always at his side. The archer had one of his suits of armor laid out in front of him, and he was working grease into each piece for... archer reasons. Definitely not the sort of reasons that Anders would have preferred for the grease.

He wasted ink, watching Hawke’s hands; a steady drip from his quill to the parchment that soaked into the hardwood. They were captivating. Steadfast and strong, a smattering of charcoal hair on the back of his palms, every calloused finger attentive to every inch of the leather.

Hawke worked the grease into his chest piece, and Anders would have killed to be in its place. Hawke’s thumbs circling his nipples, his hands kneading their way down his stomach until they reached his aching cock. His fingers wrapped around him, slick with grease and stroking him to completion -

“What?” Hawke asked.

“What, what?” Anders asked, wrenching his gaze off Hawke’s hands.

“You’re staring,” Hawke said.

“You’re staring,” Anders shot back.

“Don’t know what to write?” Hawke guessed, gesturing to Anders’ page full of ink blots.

“I know what to write,” Anders put his quill up to massage at his shoulder. Thank the Maker he was on his stomach, “I just don’t know how to write it.”

“Need help?” Hawke set his chest-piece aside to join him on the mattress. It sank with his weight and pressed Anders’ up against his thigh. Maker’s breath, he smelled amazing. An earthy scent like leather and clay and all the things of a man who made himself from nothing. “What are you trying to say?”

“If I knew I’d say it,” Anders said.

To Anders’ shock, Hawke’s hands traded places with Anders’ own to massage his shoulders. It felt
as fantastical as Anders imagined it would. He cleared his throat to smother a moan, and tried to look over his shoulder, “What are you doing?”

“Can’t afford the frame yet,” Hawke said. “You shouldn’t have to sleep on the floor.”

Hawke massaged his way down Anders’ back, working out knot after knot. His greased fingers glided over Anders’ skin, alternatively kneading or caressing, and kindled a fire in the pit of Anders’ stomach. It tangled up in his toes and curled his fingers. Anders couldn’t help his moan. “Fire and Blight, your hands,” Anders groaned into the mattress. Hawke was going to be the death of him.

Hawke melted tension along his spine, and Anders’ whimpered, “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Thought you deserved it,” Hawke murmured.

“You know this is torture, right?” Anders asked. Hawke pressed his thumbs into the nape of his neck, and Anders swallowed down another moan. “Fuck— you’re torturing me.”

“Doesn’t sound like I’m torturing you,” Hawke countered, his voice a low rumble that seemed almost taunting, as if he knew exactly what his hands were doing to him. Hawke mapped his way across Anders’ back, his neck, his arms, his legs, every inch of him that was free of bandage or stitch.

It was one of the best massages of Anders’ life, and it was going to drive him insane. He couldn’t decide what to do with his own hands, and alternated between chewing on them and burying them in his hair. He felt flush, pleasure rippling through him at every press of Hawke’s hands to pulse in his cock, and it was everything he could do to keep from thrusting into the mattress.

He should have told him to stop. It was the sensible thing. They were ‘complicated.’

“Fuck me,” Anders begged.

Hawke’s hands paused on his back, “You’re still hurt,” Hawke said. It wasn’t a no.

“I don’t care,” Anders said.

“You talk to your spirit?” Hawke asked.

“He knows I need this.” Or near enough. Anders didn’t care right now. He’d worry about Justice later.

Hawke straddled him, and whatever blood that was left in Anders’ his head left it to rush to his cock, stiff and throbbing against the mattress. Maker, finally. He hadn’t been laid in almost a year. He couldn’t think of a better place to be than pinned between Hawke’s thighs, safe, surrounded, no templars, no Circle, nothing but Hawke’s fingers buried inside him, his lips on his neck-

“I’m rolling you over,” Hawke warned him, taking hold of Anders’ shoulders to move him onto his back.

“Fuck-Hawke—” Anders swallowed down a gasp, pawing up at Hawke’s chest. It was still torture. Anders couldn’t reach the parts of Hawke he wanted to reach. He scrabbled for the strings that held Hawke’s tented trousers to his hips, but the knot was worse than a chastity belt.

Hawke wasn’t in the same hurry. He swept his oiled hands over Anders’ chest, his thumbs circling over Anders’ nipples and working them into stiff peaks until Anders was writhing beneath him, his every breath a pleading gasp. Anders thrust upwards, desperate for some kind of friction, but Hawke
caught his hip to push him down into the mattress.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Hawke murmured, kneading Anders’ hip instead of his cock.

“Don’t tease me,” Anders begged.

“Not teasing,” Hawke traced the edge of Anders’ bandage, “Not hurting you either. Go slow.”

“Slow,” Anders repeated obediently, shivering at Hawke’s touch as it ran along the waistline of his trousers. Hawke shifted to put himself between Anders’ legs, and Anders grabbed at his hands, “Wait- I want to see you.”

“You want to see me or feel me?” Hawke countered, pushing Anders’ cut-off trousers up as far as they would go to graze the inside of his thigh with his teeth.

Anders’ hips jerked – he couldn’t help it. He was aching to bury himself in any part of Hawke. His hands, his mouth, his ass, anything to drown out the arousal roaring through him. Hawke pinned his hips to the mattress with a steadying arm.

“Feel,” Anders choked out, “Fuck - feel.”

“Garrett Florian Hawke!” Leandra screamed, manifesting out of the Void and into the doorway. “What in the Maker’s name are you doing?”

Hawke slammed a first into the floor beside them, turning his head on Anders’ leg to look at his mother, “What the fuck does it look like?”

“Are you shitting me,” Anders dug the heels of his palms into his eyes with a strangled sob. This was it. This was how he died. Justice’s blue had been stolen from him and all that lingered of the color was in his balls.

“Anders, dear, cover your ears,” Leandra suggested, “It looks like you are trying to ruin this family. Darling, we talked about this-”

“Now?” Hawke demanded, sitting up, “You want to do this now?”

“I already lost Carver and Bethany, so close together. Don’t make me lose you too. Gamlen is still lame from the last time we were caught with magic-”

“Mother-“

“Don’t ‘Mother’ me. You’re missing teeth! Your nose – My hip will never be the same. You need to find a suitable young woman to marry – one without magic. How are we to pay for the estate without a dowry?”

“Mother!” Hawke snapped, “We’re not doing this now.”

“When would you prefer?” Leandra asked, picking imagined lint off her dress. It was purple, which meant it was ludicrously expensive. For Hawke’s sake, Anders hoped it was a mix of red madder and blue woad, or purple brazlwood, not true Waking Purple made from thousands of sea-snails dredged from the Waking Sea and worth countless sovereigns.

“Nevermind,” Leandra waved a hand over them, as if she could brush their relationship away as easily as she had the lint. “I just came to tell you that I asked around, and people are saying that there were four mages responsible for the fire last week. One is dead, and two were taken to the Circle.
You know the servants from the Vael estate are coming today to set up the house. Just—Maker’s breath, get dressed and make sure you’re ready to receive them within the hour.”

“Two?” Anders tried to sit up. His stitches pulled taut on his back, and he collapsed with an agonized hiss, “Which two? What were their names?”

“A man and a woman, from Starkhaven. People are saying—Dear, you don’t want to hear this. Why don’t you just focus on getting better?” And getting out of my house, Anders imagined Leandra wanted to add by her strained smile.

“Saying what?” Anders demanded, “What are they saying?”

“Dear boy,” Leandra sighed unhelpfully, adjusting the sleeves to her dress. “You really—”

“Just tell him,” Hawke cut her off.

Leandra frowned at him, “They’re saying that the Circle is too overcrowded. That Starkhaven is cursed. Their Circle burnt down; their Royal Family was murdered... They’re saying they’ve brought their demons to Kirkwall and that the Knight-Commander should call for the Rite of Annulment while she still has any templars left.

“The new punishment for any mages caught trying to escape is a choice between Tranquility or death... but Beth is a good girl. She’s still sending her letters, and Ser Thrask assures me things aren’t as dire as they seem. It’s just talk. People always talk. Our family will be fine. We just have to trust in the Maker.

“Now please, get dressed and meet me downstairs,” Leandra left.

“This is all my fault,” Anders realized. Void take him. He should have listened. To Hawke, to Cera, to the Collective. They told him to be patient. To plan, to have contingencies, and he hadn’t listened. He’d drowned the city in blood to save its mages and only ended up hurting them. Decimus was dead. The Redwaters were gone. The Coterie might close off their tunnels.

For what? For a few dozen free mages and some spelltomes? How was that justice? What would happen to Alain? To Grace? Were their choices Tranquility or death?

Anders couldn’t breathe. An agonized gasp tore from him and dissolved into a sob that wouldn’t cease. Anders hated how good it felt. It was release, in lieu of the kind he’d been craving for the past week. It was selfish and served nothing and no one and he hadn’t changed at all since his first night in Vigil’s Keep save that now he used blood magic for all the wrong reasons—

Hawke lied down beside him and pulled him into his chest. Anders hated it. He didn’t deserve Hawke’s pity, but he also couldn’t turn it away. Anders cried until he couldn’t. Hawke ran his fingers through his hair, whispering verses from Exaltations. “’Whoever passes through the fire is not lost but made eternal; as air can never be broken nor crushed, the tempered soul is everlasting.’”


“You were,” Hawke said. “’Remember the fire. You must pass through it alone to be forged anew. Look upon the Light so you may lead others here through the darkness.’”

“Who am I supposed to lead now?” Anders demanded. “The Collective is dead or gone or hates me—”
“Me,” Hawke said, “You lead me. I’ll help you get them out. Alain,” Hawke actually got his name right. “If he’s not dead. If he’s not Tranquil. I know the warrens; I know how to move through this cesspool of a city. I’ll help you get him out.”

“They’ll just kill you too,” Anders mumbled. “Or Beth, for knowing you. Your mother’s right. You shouldn’t be with me. It puts you at risk. What if your position isn’t enough to keep you safe? What if the knight-commander turns on you?”

“Things I’ve thought,” Hawke ran his fingers through Anders’ hair and slicked it back with what little grease lingered on them. “But I’ve never felt this way about anyone. I don’t know what’s right here, Anders.” Hawke untangled them, but hesitated in leaving his side. His fingers danced over Anders’ lips, wet with snot and tears, and ultimately withdrew, “I have to get dressed.”

Hawke didn’t come back. Anders spend the rest of the day alternatively listening to the commotion of Sebastian’s servants setting up the house, crying, writing his manifesto, reading Amell’s journal, crying, or trying to get off. He had the most success with crying.

Anders lay abed that night, a page in Amell’s journal open to better days, a hand around his cock that was more or less decorative. It was a good page. There was a sketch of Anders sleeping naked, and beside it was a long-winded diatribe on how he looked and sounded during sex. It ended with talk of how Amell had made sure Anders always had a candle, so he didn’t have to wake up to darkness.

Hawke had made sure of the same. It was a firestorm waiting to happen with Anders manifesto scattered around the room, but it was a comfort in the absence of veilfire. Anders ran his hand lazily up and down his shaft, red eyes bleeding together in his fantasies, occasionally interrupted by a memory of Decimus and his sad smile, and the knowledge that Grace hadn’t run.

Anders chased the thoughts away with memories of Hawke’s eyes boring into his while he straddled him. They had been so close. Maker, just five more minutes, and Hawke would have had Anders’ trousers tangled around his ankles, his cock stiff and throbbing and leaking down his shaft for Hawke’s tongue.

Anders swallowed a moan, imaging the warmth of Hawke’s tongue licking up the underside of Anders’ shaft, chasing veins and ridges, before taking him deep into his mouth. Anders thrust into his palm, imaging the swirl of Hawke’s tongue paired with a hard suck, and a pang in his back broke his fantasy. Anders whimpered.

Just – Maker, fuck - Hawke. Think of Hawke. Saliva and cum escaping around his straining lips, soaking his beard, eager groans vibrating on Anders’ cock. His red eyes heavy with want, hands wrapped around Anders and stroking in time with his mouth. Pleasure burned through Anders’ veins and pulsed into pain at his brand, stretched taut from the rapid strokes of his fist. Anders dug his free hand into the mattress, gasping frustration. So close – he was so close – Maker just let him-

His skin tore. The glyph broke. White hot ecstasy surged over him. His skin split with veilfire along his veins, and Anders came hard in a storm of magic. Static crackled over sweat-soaked skin and ripped from his throat in a cry of rapture. Anders collapsed, spent beyond measure, and lost himself to a blissful oblivion.

Justice frowned, assessing Anders’ hands, sticky with his release. Anders’ body was weak, his limbs trembling with the aftershocks of hedonism and mindless indulgence. The stitches on his back had torn with the glyph, and added a second ache that pulsed in tandem with the one from his cock. Justice sat up and pulled on Anders’ magic to wash across his wounds and burn out his stitches.

Their arm, he avoided healing. The glyph wouldn’t serve. Unwrapping the bandages, Justice
surveyed the interlocking magics that had bound him to the Fade. Two mirrored symbols akin to the shape of a man’s heart and bearing the same pulse. Justice set Anders’ nails to the edge of the scar and ripped, painting Anders’ arm and mattress a vivid red.

It was a simple thing to heal, their flesh regrown into a heart shaped scar. Justice traced it, burning the shape into his memories. Never again. It would serve as a reminder. A warning of the risks of complacency.

Justice stood and surveyed the room in which he found himself. It was littered with whispers upon whispers. A broken mirror jutted out of a pile of trinkets, and Justice retrieved it. It echoed of a young woman’s distress at her own visage, marred by the rough hand of a guardsman, and gladly gifted to the man who had healed it. Beside it, a waterlogged book pulled too late from a flood told the stories of a boy grown too fast to man to provide for his loved ones, in a city that held no love for him. Justice flipped through it, and felt it freely given to the first person to show the boy a kindness.

There were many such stories, lingering on every bit and bauble strewn about the room. Like memories floating through the Fade. He could not hear them all.

… This place was a distraction.

Justice found most of Anders things discarded in a far corner and dressed. A new coat was there, better, brighter. No scraps of cobbled suede, but black hardened tusket, reinforced with quillback-spine struts. It whispered of the women who had woven it, arguing over the need for perfection. Course we’ll make another. Anything for him. Loden wool lining murmured of the men who had sheered it.

Justice shrugged into it, and the echoes of the one who had gifted it. Don’t thank me. You need armor. Real armor. Good, hard leather. I’m not letting this happen to you again.

… Hawke was a distraction.

Justice gathered the scattered pages of Anders’ manifesto and left.

Anders came back to himself in his clinic. It had been raided, at some point. Most of his furniture was upended, and his cot was missing, but he could always sleep on an operating table until he found another. Anders shifted the satchels on his shoulders. They were light, carrying only his books, cookware, and the pages of his manifesto. The gifts that had littered his floor in Hawke’s room were missing.

“I guess we don’t need them,” Anders allotted, righting a table and depositing his things on it.

His lantern was already lit with veilfire, Anders noted when he poked his head outside his clinic. The floods had finally cleared and left lichen in their wake. The bioluminescent glow painted Darktown in all the colors of the Fade, shadows on shadows shifting like something out of the Black City. It was equal parts beautiful and bizarre.

Anders leaned on the doorframe to his clinic, watching the shadows shift and hugging his staff. Anders channeled an aura of aptitude for no other reason than the fact that he could, the runes on his staff rippling with energy. Maker, he had missed magic. The breath of the Fade. The whispers from across the Veil. The taste of mana and the comforting presence of his spirit.

There was nothing like it. It was like being held close, cradled… a bond so complete Anders hadn’t been Anders without it. The world hadn’t been right without it. The concerns that had consumed him for the past week seemed almost trivial in comparison.
Ander reached for the Fade, frustrations forgotten, and knitted together a bloom of raw magic that felt equal parts regenerating and energizing. He let it tingle through his fingers until sensation dulled in his right hand, and his veins split through with veilfire up to his shoulder.

“I missed you,” Anders said, tracing the scar Justice had left on their forearm. “Guess you missed me too.”

Justice gave him a thumbs up, and Anders laughed. “Couldn’t have said goodbye to Hawke before bringing us back here?”

Justice gave him a thumbs down. “What did you say in the Fade?” Anders mused, deepening his voice, “You have reservations. You need time to adjust.”

Justice’s thumb pointed stubbornly downwards, and Anders laughed again and dispelled the veilfire. “Alright, I get it. You want to get back to work. So do I, but there’s this little thing called pleasantries. Good morning, good night, nice to see you, I’m taking off for a bit. We can’t just vanish. Hawke will have a panic attack.

“Let’s… go check on the Collective, go back to Hightown, let Hawke know we’re okay, and then we can reopen the clinic.”

Justice’s thumb pointed outward, neither up nor down, and Anders could guess what parts his spirit was willing to compromise on. Anders was locking up his clinic when he heard the commotion echo through the caverns of Darktown. Another raid.

Anders hadn’t had the chance to enchant his new coat. The only thing on him he could transform with was his staff, and he wasn’t willing to leave the rest of things to the mercy of the templars, but it was more than that. They didn’t need to run. They didn’t want to run. The memories of Decimus’ death, of Alain’s abuse, of Grace’s capture burned bright in his memories and cried out for vengeance.

They’d never run from templars again. Anders tugged at the sleeves to his coat, pulling them down over his wrists. So long as no brand touched his skin, nothing would stop them. Not ever again. The templars would rue the day they’d crafted a brand that didn’t go so far as to make him Tranquil.

He’d ask Franke to make him some gloves later. For now, he’d watch for brands. Anders gripped his staff as the military chatter grew closer and reached through the Fade for lightning. It crackled along his fingertips and gathered in a darkening storm along the cavern roof, only to dissipate when the approaching group rounded one of the cavern corners and came into sight.

Orange. Not silver. Guards, not templars. Anders let go of the magic in his confusion. Since when did guards come to Darktown?

Their leader spotted him and raised a fist to call their men to halt. Anders lowered his staff—walking stick, if anyone asked, and hesitated at their approached. Their orange helmet came off, and orange hair came out. Aveline. Why? Anders waved, and wondered if he should have stopped channeling his tempest after all.

Aveline stomped up to him like a charging bronto, and Anders took an uneasy step back. “What are you doing here?” Aveline cornered him.

“I live here?” Anders wasn’t sure why he made it a question.

“You’re supposed to be with Hawke,” Aveline hissed. “How am I supposed to explain you to my men?”
“So you weren’t leading all these men down here just to arrest me?” Anders asked.

“Have you done something arrest-worthy?” Aveline returned.

“This is a trick question,” Anders decided. “I’m an apostate.”

“This is a warning,” Aveline corrected him, “Why are you walking around with a staff?”

“It’s a walking stick,” Anders said.

“Don’t play stupid,” Aveline said. “My men won’t if they ever catch you with it.”

“What are your men even doing in Darktown? Since when do you care about refugees?” Anders asked.

“Since those refugees have gang affiliations,” Aveline said, glancing over her shoulder at the loitering group of guardsmen, “You may as well know now. I have the men, and we’re cracking down. We arrested Ignacio yesterday.”

“Strand?” Anders didn’t believe it. “The Sharps? You arrested Ignacio Strand, of the Sharps Highwaymen? Are you insane? Do you have any idea how much territory is up for grabs now? How many gang wars you’re going to cause?”

“Less work for us if the gangs destroy themselves,” Aveline said. Callous bitch. She had no idea what she was doing. Better the demon you knew than the demon you didn’t. With Ignacio gone, his territory could go to the Coterie, or the Carta, or worse, the Reining Men. “Look, I know some of the people you associate with, Anders.”

“No surprise there. Most people know Hawke,” Anders joked.

“Fine. Be glib,” Aveline dismissed him. “Look, this city is full of people who are dead set on ending badly. For Hawke’s sake, I don’t want to see you end up the same way.”

“Who’s the one making them end badly?” Anders demanded.

“You know what I’m saying. Every Dog has its day, Anders. Cor’s is coming. Don’t be there when it does.” Aveline turned back to her men, calling loudly, “Walking stick! Let’s move out.”

Anders watched the patrol depart deeper into Darktown, frowning. He’d have to warn Cor… after he checked on the Collective. Anders left towards the docks, relieved at the familiar faces he passed on his way through Darktown. It was night, but Darktown never slept. Anders relit fires, refilled water canteens, and healed a half-dozen cases of gripe before he’d even gotten a half-league from his clinic. All the while Anders shook excited hands and returned more than a few hugs.

It was almost enough to make him forget where he was going and what might await him when he got there. This was where they belonged. It was their cause, almost as much as the plight of mages was their cause. They were meant to heal. To be a force not just of reckoning but of healing and salvation for the downtrodden in Kirkwall. It gave them purpose, but more than that, it let them see progress. Anders might have had to wait to see the mages free, but he didn’t have to wait to heal a broken arm or leg, contusions and cuts.

And with each spell cast, Justice was there at his fingertips, as much a comfort to Anders as his patients. It kept him grounded. Kept him focused.

Anders stopped at the ladder that led up to the docks, anxiously shifting his staff from one hand to
the other. He had to know. He had to be sure. The mages needed the Collective. Alain’s hatred for
blood magic couldn’t run so deep as to see them destroyed. It wasn’t as if they were all maleficarum,
flooding the streets with blood and sacrificing children and kittens. It was just a few spelltomes, and
it was just Decimus and Anders.

Selby, Donal, Evon, Bancroft, and the countless other mages peppered throughout Kirkwall didn’t
deserve whatever fate the templars had in store for them. They had to be okay. They had to be.
Anders stared at the flecks of moonslight breaking through the storm drain, tinted green in the lichen-
light, and thought of the stained glass of Kinloch’s Harrowing chamber. He couldn’t be responsible
for the death of another mage. Not again. Not when all they wanted was nothing more than the
freedom to breathe the open air under an open sky.

Veilfire roiled over him, and straightened his spine when panic bowed it. Anders had an obligation,
whatever awaited him. He climbed.
The Collective Packaging House still stood, nestled between the Harbor Master’s Office and Woodrow’s Warehouse, like the many parcels stacked therein. Donal still manned the door, Selby the desk. Anders’ fears and paranoia had been unfounded. He had knocked on the door, fully expecting the packaging house to be packed with templars in place of postage, and had been greeted in the usual fashion.

Well, not quite the usual fashion. Smiles were few and far between from Donal, from Selby, from Bancroft, but Anders smiled enough for all of them. He sat through lecture upon lecture, unable to help his grin for the very fact that they were still there to lecture him. He lost his Most Trusted status, but it was a small price to pay when he hadn’t lost the Collective.

Anders deserved it. The only thing Anders most trusted about himself was the fact that he couldn’t be trusted. Everything was to go through Selby first, from the rescues from the Circle to the contracts and contacts for the Collective. It seemed a fair exchange, considering Anders had cost them the Redwaters. Someone had to protect the Collective from Anders protecting the Collective.

Terrie had survived, somehow. The Collective had found her before the templars, and once her own brand healed she had decided to come work with Anders in his clinic. After everything, she didn’t even know if Decimus had been the one possessing the templars. "He might have been," was all Terrie could say on the matter. The only way to be certain was to wait and see if the incidents stopped with his death.

In the meantime, it was nice to be back in the clinic again, to gather herbs with Merrill again, to have an aide again. It was nicer to know Terrie didn’t blame him for the capture of her sister or the death of her brother-in-law. Given time, she didn’t even blame Alain.

“He was too young. For everything,” Terrie had said simply, and that had been the end of it.

There was other work Anders could do for the Collective while on probation. He was still approved to take contracts, the most lucrative of which came from the Black Emporium. The contracts didn't specifically say 'go the Black Emporium,' of course, but some requests could only be fulfilled with
goods and services only Xenon could provide. Which left them for Anders.

It wasn't that anyone else couldn't take them. It was just that the Emporium was invitation only, and Anders was the only one in the Collective with an invitation. It served to mend some of the blood his magic had turned bad. And it paid. It paid well, sometimes in whole sovereigns, just in return for purchasing artifacts from the Antiquarian on the requestor's behalf.

Anders had Hawke to thank for it. He had no idea how Hawke had earned the invitation, but the coin-starved mercenary had no use for it. Unlike Anders' clients, Hawke didn't have hundreds of sovereigns to waste on magical artifacts when he was struggling just to buy sundries. Anders tried not to think about the kind of people his clients must have been.

It was beyond tempting not to simply buy Amell's grimoire instead. Anders had the coin… albeit temporarily. Nothing was stopping him. Nothing except the need for the good will of the Collective, his own moral code, and a literal spirit of Justice. If not for all that, Anders would have caved. Instead he bought other things for other people.

Anders sat on the edge of a walkway in the Black Emporium with Merrill, their feet hanging out into the abyss. It was a massive labyrinth of a library, cobbled together from driftwood and scavenged lumber. It hung suspended in the depths of Darktown's caverns, where the Veil was thin.

Anders still had trouble believing such a place existed. It was littered with artifact upon artifact, tome upon tome, and virtually unknown to the world outside of Hawke's small company of friends. An ancient skeleton of a man sat at its epicenter, molding into his chair. He was guarded by golems, which perhaps explained why no one had simply raided his magical archives.

It certainly explained why Anders hadn't. Amell's grimoire was still there, set high on a shelf that only telekinetic magics could pull from. On either side were other grimoires, bound in human skin and hissing with demons. Amell would have loved it here.

Anders had tried everything to get it back, short of paying for it. He'd brought Amell's journal to prove the handwriting matched. "Finders keepers!" Xenon had gasped. He'd asked Hawke to steal it for him, but just touching the shelves had Xenon sputtering, "Don't manhandle the merchandise!" In a moment of weakness, Anders had even gathered up all of the spelltomes he'd made with Decimus for a trade. "No exchanges!" Xenon had wheezed at him, like a corpse expelling air on death.

Xenon was… beyond disgusting. The macabre cadaver was almost pure leather, rotten and sunken with too many limbs. If that was the immortality Avernus had offered, Anders was good.

There was no getting around the eighty-four sovereigns. Not unless Dog managed to eat the Antiquarian. The mabari had already tried the first time Hawke had brought it, and almost been crushed by a golem as a result. Not on command, of course, but Xenon was basically jerky, so what did anyone expect, really?

"An honest mistake," Xenon had rasped good-naturedly. "You would be surprised how often that happens."

Anders was glad the decaying caretaker was absent from the section of the library that held Amell's grimoire. Without his feeble gasps, it was almost peaceful. Dust motes danced in the silvery light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere in the Emporium, illuminating row upon row of grimoires, scrolls, and tomes. There were too many to count, all covered in cobwebs and years of decay. There was no way anyone would ever find Amell's grimoire among them, Anders told himself.
"It's very high up," Merrill noted, craning her head to regard the nondescript grimoire with the Amell house crest embossed on the spine. "It's almost as high as…"

"Something that high," Anders said.

"Did you ever notice that the Amell symbol is two hawks?" Merrill asked, tilting her head to the side as if it would change the symbol into something else, "Why do you suppose that is? It's not like Hawke picked it."

".. I don't know."

"I never thought about. Maybe it's a coincidence?"

"Maybe," Merrill nudged his booted foot with her bare one, "I don't think anyone will buy it. Eighty-four sovereigns is a lot of coin. I don't think I've ever seen eighty four of anything. Except maybe people in Kirkwall. And halla at the last Arlathvhen. And trees. And grass. Would you count grass? The blades, maybe?"

"So it's an uncommon number," Anders said.

"How long do you think it will take to get it back?"

"I'm not sure," Anders said. "These Emporium contracts aren't normal, you know. They pay well, but they don't pay often. It's not like you need a new grimoire on necromancy every day."

"You do if the first one doesn't have what you need." Merrill said.

"Astute and creepy. Thanks."

"You'll really teach me shapeshifting when you get it back?"

"No offense, Merrill, but you're the last person I would go to for coin, " Anders said. "Hawke pays your rent."

"The Dalish understand currency," Merrill huffed, swinging her legs, "We just don't use it. When I came to this city… there was a lot I didn't know."

"I know what you mean," Anders said.

"The clan would never charge someone for a place to live," Merrill elaborated. "If someone joins the clan, the clan comes together to build them a new aravel… like how Hawke and all of us came together for you."

Anders wasn't sure he considered Hawke's band of misfits a clan. A gang, maybe. "Thanks Merrill."

"It's too bad you can't just invoke vir sulevanan to get your grimoire back," Merill said.

"Invoke vir what now?"

"I don't know the word in common," Merrill confessed, looking sheepishly. "It's when you do someone a favor so they give you something."

"You scratch my back I scratch yours?"
"But I'm not itchy…"

"No—that's how you say it. Favor for a favor. Anyway, I tried. Unless you know how to un-corpsify someone, there's nothing Xenon wants."

"Amell might."

"Amell might," Anders agreed.

"... still no dreams?" Merrill asked.

"Still no dreams," Anders said. "I guess we can't talk as two people if we're not two people. I miss Justice, but we miss us more, if that makes sense."

"Not really," Merrill admitted, "But you could always cast the glyph again if you wanted, I suppose."

"That's going to be a hard 'No' from both of us," Anders said with a shudder for the memory. "Imagine going a week with no arms, then imagine it's twice as bad."

"Two weeks with no arms?"

"I was going to say something more like a week with no arms and no legs."

"Oh," Merrill looked put out for having guessed wrong. "Well then why didn't you just say that?"

"It was just a phrase," Anders said.

"All words are just phrases when you put them together," Merrill said.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"If I say yes, does it make me less funny?"

Anders laughed, his smile hurting his face. "Did you talk to Isabela?"

Merrill shook her head. "Creators no. I thought about what you said but it's… tricky. What if she doesn't feel the same way?"

"Then she doesn't feel the same." Anders said with a shrug. "Wouldn't you rather know?"

"Elgar'nan, I don't know." Merrill sighed. She leaned over the abyss, putting all her weight on the rope-railing and trusting as if it were magic. Maybe it was. "Do you suppose you could come with me?"

"Will I come with you to ask Isabela if she wants to be in an open relationship with you and Fenris?" Anders clarified.

"Would you?" Merrill asked, spinning on the rope to face him. Her trust in it was going to give him anxiety. "Maybe we could talk to her today!"

"On Wintersend?" Anders asked.

"Is that bad day to ask?"

"Not exactly," Anders said. "It's a human holiday for tournaments… like fighting pits but with
"knights."

"Isabela likes fighting," Merrill said eagerly.

"And arranged marriages."

"Oh dear, she definitely doesn't like that. Maybe tomorrow, after Wicked Grace?"

"Deal," Anders said, tugging her back from the rope under the guise of a shoulder hug. "So hey, on a related note, it's killing me, why is she even still with Fenris? I thought she was more of a one and done?"

"Fenris isn't so bad. He's kind of like Hawke."

"Sure, and I'm kind of like Aveline."

"I mean, not really. You break the law. Aveline arrests people who break the law. Except she doesn't arrest you. Maybe she's a bad guard…"

"I was being sarcastic," Anders said.

"Oh! I suppose that makes more sense. But Fenris just doesn't know how to explain how he feels. And mostly he just feels cross. Like Hawke. I feel sorry for him. He was a slave. When we went to clean his house, he got so angry. He said his old master liked everything clean. It was so sad.

"But he can't just live with a bunch of dead bodies, so we cleaned up the bodies and broke things. Statues, paintings… it was fun. You should spend more time with him. With all of us."

"So I can break things," Anders said.

"So you can be with people. I know you have your cause; I have one too. Sometimes it gets so bad I forget to eat and Varric has to bring me food," Merrill laughed, like it was funny. Like it was normal.

Anders stared at her and felt wretched. It was too familiar. He should have been a better friend.

"I'll try," Anders conceded. Hawke's group of misfits may not have been Wardens, or a clan, but if the Dog Lords taught him anything it was that gangs weren't all bad.

They sat in companionable silence for a time, until a general malaise stirred him from his spot. It didn't serve to sit idle. There was always work to be done, and lately he was always waiting.

Waiting to earn enough coin for Amell's grimoire. Waiting for the Collective to trust him again. Waiting for Varric to find out if the templars were still being possessed, or if the incidents would die down with Decimus's death. Waiting for Orsino to write him again.

"So hey, I need to drop this off," Anders patted the parcel at his side, "Meet you at the clinic?"

Merrill agreed and stood with him, peeking and peering into piles of baubles and trinkets on the way out. Somehow, she ended up with a pair of gloves and some paint brushes that Xenon gave her for free. And a single sock.

"Only one!" Xenon had gasped when Merrill had tried to make a pair.

Anders made his way back to the packaging house, dropped off the parcel, and then headed back to his clinic, caring for the refugees he encountered along the way. Things were good, all waiting aside. The Coterie had agreed to wipe away Hawke's debt with the Carta. Cor and the Dog Lords were
fine, despite Aveline's threats. The battle over the Sharps' territory hadn't been too bloody. He and Merrill were friends again.

The world wasn't ending, it was changing.

If his time at Hawke's estate had done anything for him, it had proven he had the support of the common people. Any one of the refugees could have turned him over to the templars. Ever since the fire, there were wanted posters plastered throughout Lowtown with his likeness, or near enough.

No one had. Not even Fenris, for all he allegedly hated mages and magic. Even Aveline had had half the posters taken down for … some city ordinance or another. Amusingly enough, something had gotten lost in translation along the way, and the posters didn't name him as 'Anders' but rather 'An individual hailing from the Anderfels.' It made for a nice bit of plausible deniability for anyone who knew him.

It also made for a nice bit of information for the Collective. If the people were willing to harbor mages, they might not need to smuggle them out of Kirkwall at all. The Dogs were comfortable with it. Orsino just had to be comfortable with it, but until the templars were stable, they didn't have the First Enchanter's support. As far as Anders was concerned, they didn't need it.

Less templars meant less people watching for mages slipping through the cracks and out into the city. The Dalish were still good on their promise of support, thanks to Hawke and Merrill. The elves could go to the Dalish, the humans to the Dogs, and it could all go on with or without Orsino's go-ahead. But Selby wanted them to start funneling mages slated for Tranquility, and she wanted to do it with Orsino's blessing.

And so the waiting.

It wasn't just the Collective Anders waited on, it was Hawke. Waiting for Hawke to want Anders as badly as Anders wanted him. Anders couldn't stop thinking of him and the week he had spent in the archer's care. Isabela had warned him, what seemed like ages ago now, that he should prepare to be pampered. The nights at the Hanged Man and a few bundles of food were one thing, but living with Hawke was another.

Anders missed waking to him - or even waking to his growling mabari. He missed breakfast and dinner and all the moments in between. He missed Hawke washing his hair, massaging his back, straddling his hips… He missed Hawke's hands, and the way they felt against bare skin, as if in that one moment Hawke had worshiped Anders more than the Maker himself.

A vague feeling of discomfort rolled over him, and Anders frowned. And he missed Hawke's help with his manifesto. His promise of support whenever Anders was able to rescue Grace and Alain. The discomfort subsided, but only just. Justice was a hard spirit to please, Anders supposed. If nothing else, Justice's disapproval made Hawke's absence more tolerable. When only half of Anders' ached for him, it felt more infatuation than desperation.

Anders hadn't seen Hawke since Justice had dragged them from the estate a few days ago. He'd come back to Hightown to be greeted with a rather taciturn Leandra. She promised to deliver word that Anders was alive, but she didn't say which word. Anders doubted it would be any of the ones he wanted Hawke to hear. And even if it was, Anders wanted Hawke to hear it from him.

Still, he didn't want to risk Hawke, which meant visiting Hightown under the cover of darkness, or waiting for Hawke to visit him, and Hawke didn't visit him. Anders could have gone as a crow, but he had yet to enchant his new coat to transform with him. Without Amell's grimoire to reference, he wasn't sure he would remember the charm in its entirety, but after yet another day and no word from
Hawke, he didn't see a choice.

He couldn't just leave it. Justice had his reservations, Hawke had his reservations... Maker, even Anders had his reservations, but Hawke was worth it. He was doing good things for Kirkwall. A Ferelden risen to nobility and sympathetic to the plight of mages was everything the City of Chains needed to see was possible. Everything Anders needed to see was possible. Hawke was change. He was hope. He was...

He just was. Anders would work it out when he saw him. Hawke couldn't expect him to plan everything. Anders got back to his clinic to find Merrill pacing through it and reading a page from his manifesto.

"Oh! I'm sorry," Merrill put down the parchment, picked it back up, and put it back down again all in the span of a few seconds, "I got bored waiting - This is a nice story. What's it for?"

"It's not a story," Anders rolled the parchment up and tied it off with a bit of twine, small enough for a crow to carry. "It's a manifesto on magic."

"But… what's it for?"

"To teach people. To show them that mages are no different from other men."

"But we are different. We're magic."

"That doesn't -" Anders swallowed a sound of frustration, "We shouldn't be treated differently for our magic. I just… there has to be some combination of words that explains that. That I can use to convince people. I know if I can just get the right words in the right order, people will understand. Mages should be free. I just-... I'm working on it."

"Hahren Paivel used to tell stories on magic," Merrill said. "They were good stories. I could tell you some, sometime, if you like."

"... that would be great, Merrill," Anders said. He hadn't considered incorporating anything from the Dalish, but they'd convinced their people to live peacefully with mages and no templars, and must have gotten something right. "Thanks."

"So can I watch the transformation?" Merrill asked, taking a seat on one of his operating tables.

"I just have to enchant my coat first," Anders said, shrugging out of the coat and laying it out on a spare table.

"Can you not transform without it?" Merrill asked.

"I can," Anders said."But only I can."

"Am I missing something dirty? I feel like I'm missing something dirty."

"My clothes don't transform with me, unless they're enchanted, and the enchantment only works on things made from animals."

"Oh my… does mean you have to wear leather underthings? Or no underthings?"

"Normal questions."

"I'm sorry, it's just silly. Wouldn't that be something? I suppose wool would work too. So how does the enchantment work?"
"I guess we'll see," Anders slit his wrist, and let his blood drip onto his coat. It soaked into the leather, the bone, the wool, carrying his will along with it. When he finished the spell, Anders healed his casting cut and eyed his work dubiously.

What if he got it wrong? Would he fuse with the coat and transform into some sort of leather abomination, like Xenon and his chair? Would he turn into a crow with a tiny coat? Would the coat just stay the same and smother his tiny crow body to death?

It was fine. It would be fine. Probably.

"Alright, I'm going to change so…" Anders took off his boots and his socks.

Merrill kept watching him attentively, tapping her fingers on her knees as if she wanted to be taking notes. "Should I close my eyes? I don't want to miss the spell."

"It's fine," Anders said, trading his tunic for his coat. He turned around to shimmy out of his trousers and smalls, and tied the coat closed. Simple. Not that he cared either way after the ordeal with the brand. Hawke had already seen him naked; Merrill seemed inconsequential in comparison.

"Why don't you enchant the rest of your clothes?" Merrill asked. "It didn't seem to take that much blood."

"Tunic and smalls are cotton, the boots and trousers have linen or flax stitching or something. The coat was custom made," Anders explained.

"Well… here goes nothing." Anders rolled his toes on the cold cavern floor and cast.

A perfectly normal crow stood on the floor of a nondescript cavern, the clack of its talons echoing through Darktown. It paced for a time, surveying the glowing lichen illuminating its roost with a reverent appreciation for the way the disjointed emerald light echoed of an old roost from an old life. An elf crouched beside it, petting its feathers, measuring its wingspan, and cooing her approval.

The crow permitted it for a time, but it had a mission in mind. Hopping onto a nearby table, the crow picked up a bit of bound parchment in its beak, and flew through Kirkwall to Hightown.

The crow landed on the roof of a hawk's roost, went hopping from window to window, searching in vain. It flitted down to the garden situated in the center of the estate. It was a peaceful plot of land, beholden to two small trees and overgrown with elfroot. The crow tapped idly along the windows connected to the garden, peeking as it went, until it reached the dining hall.

The hawk was therein, mingling with preening hens all too eager for courtship. The hawk laughed, a queer sound from its lips that felt pulled from parchment in a stiff series of 'Ha's. The crow squawled, dropping its parchment to beat against the glass with beak and wing. The hawk glanced at him, smiled at the hens, and excused itself to join him in the garden.

Anders exploded in a shower of feathers, furious. A tree blocked his silhouette, least he alert the half-dozen noble women stuffed into the dining hall like fish in one of Leandra's pies. All of them just as gawking and glassy eyed for Hawke and his peacocking.

A black doublet lay beneath a tight crimson corset that trimmed his waist and made his shoulders look impossibly broad. Silver chains looped under his arms, and leather straps hung about his legs, accents that highlighted the power in both. His hair had been slicked back with grease, and he looked… noble. Anders hardly recognized him.

"What are you doing?" Hawke whispered angrily, pinning Anders against a tree to block him from
"Are you trying to get caught?"

"No, that's my question," Anders hissed back. "What is this?"

"I told you, it's a dinner party," Hawke said.

"On Wintersend? Are you seriously - Is this some - are you getting -" Anders didn't know how to say it. Maker, he hadn't thought Leandra was actually serious. Was she really trying to arrange a marriage for Hawke? Was Hawke really letting her? Did he have a choice? Did he want one?

The garden door creaked open, and Hawke covered Anders' mouth with his palm.

A voice called out, "Serah Hawke?"

"What!?" Hawke snapped. Very posh. Definitely every young noblewoman's dream.

"Is everything alright …?" The voice asked.

"Fine - I need… I'll be inside," Hawke said eloquently.

"Alright …" The door shut.

Anders shoved the hand off his mouth, scowling. Hawke stood pressed against Anders, thigh between Anders' legs, an arm above his head, effectively trapping him. Anders was vaguely aware it should have made him feel claustrophobic, but all he felt was fire.

"You leave without a word, your room covered in blood, and I have to hear from Mother that you're even alive, but you're the angry one?" The longer Hawke spoke, the harder it was for Anders to feel anything but consumed by him.

"Yes I'm the angry one," Anders snapped. "I saved you a hundred sovereigns and this is what you spent it on? This is why you haven't been by the clinic? Because you're too busy trying to pick your favorite noblewoman?"

"This was my father's," Hawke tugged at the doublet, "You know what I've bought for myself since I got here? A bar of soap because Mother won't stop buying milk. One bar! I spent more on the mattress you ruined.

"And you didn't save me anything. The Coterie upped Hubert's dues on the mine, and now the Carta is spreading rumors Varric and I had Bartrand killed."

"So you thought it was a good time to get married?" Anders demanded.

"This isn't - I'm not -" Hawke scratched furiously at his scalp and ruined his hair in the process. Ebony strands jutted out at odd angles and made him seem every bit a crow with ruffled feathers.

"You're not what?" Anders asked.

"I'm not getting married!" Hawke barked, eyes darting to the door as if afraid someone heard him. It made his argument far less convincing. "This is-..."

"Not an engagement party?" Anders asked. "Just a normal party full of suitors and I missed the invitation?"

"How would Mother send it?" Hawke asked, "Drop it in a latrine?"
"Yes, I live in the sewer," Anders threw up his hands, "The sewer is the place where I live. Does kicking me while I'm down come naturally to you now, or were you just trying to walk over me?"

"I'm not- You-..." Hawke choked, ruining more of his hair running his fingers through it. "You didn't talk to him, did you? Justice. That's why you left as soon as your magic came back."

"Don't make this about me! I came here to see you."

"Well you see me! Why are you here?"

"I don't know anymore," Anders said. "I'm not fighting a dozen nobles for your favor." He'd lose.

"This was Mother's idea," Hawke explained, as if that made it better.

"Don't act like you've never heard the word 'No.'" Anders scoffed, "It was one of the first things you ever said to me."

"I can't say no to her. The estate is in her name, not mine. If I try, she- I..."

"What?" Anders asked.

"She'll use Carver," Hawke said, "She always uses Carver."

"What does your brother have to do with an arranged marriage?"

"Nothing. Everything. I-he-it was my fault. My strategy. I was supposed to blind it. I only got one eye... the ogre ripped him in half and threw him on her. She was pinned under his chest the entire time it took Beth and I to kill it."

"... I'm sorry. I still don't - ... I don't want to say 'So what?' But..."

"You can't be here," Hawke said.

"Why?" Anders demanded. "Because you can't stand to look at me after last week? You just - you don't even care do you? You used me."

"Anders, no-"

"I won't forget this," Anders shoved Hawke's arm aside.

Hawke grabbed him and spun him back into the tree, winding him. "Used you? For what? For a few seconds of my hands on your chest? You think that's all I want from you? This is just a damn dinner party."


"I'm not getting engaged."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe this," Hawke kissed him.

It felt aggressive. It felt like capsizing. Like a wave of emotion had taken Anders and shattered him to driftwood and flotsam. Hawke's lips crashed against Anders' own, stealing protests, breath, heartbeat. His hands on Anders' face locked them together; his palms were warm, his lips warmer, his breath near scorching. Anders forgot how to breathe, and gasped instead.
Hawke's beard scratched his face, bark scratched his back, and it was all Anders could do to respond. To push back against him with a hungry groan, to tangle his fingers in Hawke's hair and ruin it the way Hawke was ruining him.

Hawke stole a hand beneath his coat, cooling the flush skin on Anders' chest, "Where is your tunic?"

"I'm not - wearing one," Anders managed around Hawke's lips. He tasted like whatever wine he'd been drinking. Anders couldn't place it, but still felt as if he'd shared the bottle.

"Why are you like this?" Hawke asked, giving Anders no time to respond before his mouth was on him again.

"I didn't plan-

"You never do."

A banging interrupted them. It didn't come from the dining hall. Leandra scowled from the kitchen window, her face scrunched up like she'd eaten a mound of lemons. She made a spinning gesture with her hand, as if motioning for Hawke to come inside.

"I have to-..." Hawke let go of him.

"Yeah, no, go," Anders agreed.

"You're not going to-..." Hawke gestured vaguely at him.

"We're good," Anders assured him, still struggling to catch his breath. "Yeah. I'll uh-I'll see you tomorrow. Wicked Grace."

Hawke took a step back, and a sound like the crunch of leaves broke through their heavy breathing.

Anders pointed at the flattened page from his manifesto. "That's my-

"I know," Hawke peeled it off the bottom of his boot, and folded it up for his pocket. "I'll read it."

Anders grabbed him before he could head back inside, and smoothed Hawke's tousled hair back. Then, because he could, Anders kissed him again. Softer. Slower. The rattle of Leandra's rage at the window almost soothing for how Hawke ignored it.

"She's going to kill you," Anders said against his lips.

"You're worth it."
Hearts of Gold or Near Enough

Chapter Summary

In which Varric runs from his responsibilities.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome back. This chapter is mostly dialogue. I hope you're still enjoying the ride.

I added two more chapters to Apples and Apostates if you want to check them out. Requests are always open.

Thank you for any bookmarks, subscriptions, kudos, or comments. They're very motivating and I sincerely appreciate it. Most of all thank you for reading.

9:33 Dragon 2 Pluitanis Early Evening

Kirkwall Docks: Collective Packaging House

To The Collective of Kirkwall,

Delivered

A,

It is good to write to you again, my friend. I hope this letter makes its way safely into your possession. I cannot say if you have had a hand in the quiet we have enjoyed of late, but if so, you have my sincere thanks. Time will tell if the storm has passed, or if we have simply sailed into the eye, but there have been no further incidents. Our lockdown is ended and not a moment too soon.

Your likeness has made its way to my desk, and I confess it is not altogether unflattering. For your sake, I hope it is not an accurate rendition. All the same, I trust this means that you are alive and well.

I had feared for your fate after the fire at the de Soliere estate. A brand was discovered there. A makeshift glyph, worked by one of our kind and imbued with lyrium. It might comfort you to know it has been destroyed and its use expressly forbidden. Should you or one of your companions have suffered from its effects, I am led to believe that something as simple as a crack in the structure will nullify its effects.

I think it would be to our mutual benefit to rekindle our relationship. There are several individuals who would benefit from making your acquaintance. Please write back if you are in a position to receive them. Time is of the essence.

Your friend and colleague,
“Well?” Anders fidgeted while Selby read and reread First Enchanter Orsino’s letter. It was one of many in the packaging house, hastily sent and hastily opened, by the pounce that covered Selby’s desk. The fine white powder jumped with every thoughtful tap of Selby’s letter opener as her ash-grey eyes moved across the page. Anders heart kept time with the taps, jumping in his chest for her verdict.

“We don’t have a way to get them out of Kirkwall,” Selby said, more observation than refusal, “Not without the Redwaters. Not with the curfews. The Captain Vallen doesn’t slack on patrols. The roads aren’t safe.”

“The refugees will take them,” Anders said easily.

“The alienage won’t,” Selby countered, burning the letter over the candle on her desk. “Between the guards, the templars, the qunari... I won’t leave elven mages to be hunted like rabbits.”

“The Dalish, then,” Anders refused to let his hopes turn to ash as quickly. “I know the warrens. I can get them out.”

“Can you?” Selby raised an ash-grey eyebrow at him.

“Of course I can,” Anders said with a confidence he might not have earned. “I have a friend who helped someone with elven blood escape the Gallows. He talked to them. They said they’d take more.”

“How many more?” Selby asked.

“I-” don’t know? Didn’t think to ask? Anders held up a finger, and added more until he wasn’t so much counting as shrugging.


“As many as we need,” Anders decided.

“No,” Selby saw through him. "We need numbers. Sketch can only hide so many in with the servants. It takes time to move them between the Hightown families, even the ones that think all elves look the same.

"I'm not saying no, love. Don't make that face. Write him back. No charge, there's some paper in the desk over there. Here - you can use my quill. Don't spill the ink. We can take three if they're elves. Six if they're human.

"Get me numbers on the Dalish. Meeting times, places, and names. Then we can take more."

Anders wrote, making a chair of a stack of parcels beside Selby's desk that gave like parchment and sunk when he sat. "My manifesto?"

"Finish it first, love." Selby gave his free hand a pat, "I want you in the tunnels for the rescue."

"... really?" Anders stopped writing; ink dripped onto his letter and swallowed up a sentence. Selby's pat turned into a pinch, and Anders stowed the quill. "...Even after everything with Decimus?"

"You were impulsive, running off with those Starkhaven mages, but sometimes impulsive is good. Makes you move. Gets you going. Before you came to Kirkwall, I thought it would take an urn to
get a mage out of the Gallows… but if that's where they end up anyway why save them at all?

"We all want the same thing, love. Our Most Trusted status isn't just about us trusting you, it's about you trusting us. Get us what we need with the Dalish, and we'll get you back where you belong."

Anders finished up his response to Orsino and left it with Selby. Wrapping Merril’s makeshift scarf into a makeshift hood, he headed out into the quays, staff held high. At this point, ‘staff’ might have been a bit of a misnomer. As much as Anders hated bastardizing it, he didn’t see a choice. A crystalline cage set atop dragonbone runework wasn’t exactly the most subtle thing to be toting around Kirkwall, so he improvised. The shaft he wrapped with leather, and the cage he hid behind broken bits of bone, tied together to resemble a fishing spear.

No one looked twice at him the entire walk through the docks, despite passing more than a few leaflets plastered with his picture. Anders peeled one off the wall of the Harbor Master’s Office that had been vandalized with what he could only hope was paint.

“TAKE BACK OUR STREETS!” The leaflet screamed at him. “Ferelden refugees, Qunari soldiers, now arsonist mages? THIS ENDS NOW! Send a message that Kirkwallers WILL NOT ACCEPT THIS! Band together to drive foreign waste from our doorstep. Reclaim the Free Marches FOR THE MARCHERS! If you care about our future, join the Friends of Kirkwall! Reclaim our city!”

What Anders could only assume was a rather crude map had been drawn at the bottom, hiding whatever bounty the templars were offering for him. Great. Anders crumpled up the leaflet and burnt it into ash in his palm, shaking it out on the stairs to Lowtown. Another gang. Just what Kirkwall needed. Just like he’d predicted. Getting rid of the Sharps hadn’t done anything for the city.

Anders climbed the winding streets to the Hanged Man, taking care to stay in Coterie or Dog Lord territory. He could probably get away with moving through old Sharps’ hexes, before curfew, but he didn’t want to risk it. The narrow alleys seemed to fold in on themselves, blocking out the sun at all hours of the day save the middle of it, and there were too many shadowy corners for too many shadowy figures.

The markets were safer, the common cutpurse not much of a threat when Anders had no purse to cut. They were buzzing with flies and Lowtowners, and Anders danced his way through stalls hocking everything from rotten produce to Andraste’s Ashes before he reached the Hanged Man. It loomed over the lot like a drunkard over the privy, vomiting patrons into the gutters.

Norah was outside, throwing bucket after ineffectual bucket of seawater onto the walls in an effort to clear away the latest bit of graffiti. The Hanged Man had more tags than a sailor tattoos, and wore them all with as little loyalty. Dogs drank with Coterie drank with Winters drank with Irons, or didn’t drink at all, and everyone wanted to drink. Anders waved Norah a hello and saw himself inside, just in time for the evening bar fight.

Someone grabbed him, and wrenched him out of the fight or into it. A bottle flew through the space his head had occupied moments prior, narrowly missing and shattering on the wall behind him. Sour ale splattered on his face, smelling faintly of vinegar. Isabela grinned at him, sparkly white teeth the cleanest thing Anders had seen all day. Wavy black hair covered half her face, her bandana missing. Anders supposed that meant Merrill had kept it.

“Remind me how you can stand it here again?” Anders asked, wiping his face off.

“Drink enough, Sparky, and standing is the least of your worries,” Isabela grinned, leading him to a table with a good view of the fight. Her long legs covered more ground than his, and he stumbled to keep pace. “Someone’s eager. You’re never this early for cards. Think you can win back those fifty
“I was hoping to see you, actually.” Anders checked the chair for vomit before he sat. “I wanted to talk to you about the raiders you used to sail with.”

“You did?” Isabela asked, spinning her chair to drape her legs over his lap, “What in the world would make a man of justice like you poke your nose in such a dirty business?”

“Is it though?” Anders wondered playfully, “Because I seem to recall you freeing hundreds of slaves at the cost of indebting yourself to the entire Felicisima Armada.”

“Temporary insanity.” Isabela pushed her boot into his face. They smelled like ale and leather, and Anders supposed he should have been grateful they weren’t caked in vomit. “A bout of foul morality. A horrifying fit of decency. If that’s what you’re looking for, Sparky, you’re looking in the wrong place. Why don’t you ask Hawke or something?”

Anders pushed the offending foot back into his lap, “I know you’re not as selfish as you pretend-”

“You take that back!”

“There have to be others like you,” Anders insisted. “Raiders or smugglers with hearts of gold.”

“Sorry, Sparky, I’m one of a kind,” Isabela flashed him a grin. “Why this sudden interest in raiding? This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain island in a certain sea, would it?”

“What if it did?” Anders asked.

“I’d tell you that most sailors aren’t looking for gold in their hearts, and they’re not likely to find any in your cause.” Isabela said. She sounded sage and almost sorry. Anders checked his ears for wax, but he’d heard right. She wanted to help.

“WHAT ABOUT YOU?” Anders asked. "HOW DO WE GET YOU A NEW SHIP?"

Isabela laughed, and ignored him for the bar fight, pointing to the few patrons who weren’t on the floor. “Look! The Red Irons won! They can iron my red anytime. No, that one doesn’t work. Hmm…”

“Fill your cup?” Anders suggested. “Cup their fill?”

“Oo, good ones,” Isabela agreed.

Norah came back inside with her empty buckets, stepping over and sometimes on a few unconscious patrons on her way back to the bar. “No one gets another round until someone pays for this table!” Norah called out.

A handful of patrons rushed forward, some of them doubtless too drunk to remember they hadn’t been involved in the fight in the first place. Others made an attempt to prop the two shattered halves of the table back together. A few sots must have thought it actually worked, because they made the mistake of trusting it with their drinks, and it promptly collapsed again like an overfull levee.

Eventually, someone must have paid, because Norah loaded up a tray with tankards and started making rounds.

“Now if only I knew what it took to get some of that Red Iron from you-know-who.” Isabela grinned at him, waving Norah down. Isabela flicked a copper out of her corset that Norah dropped
“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Anders said, shaking his head when Norah offered him a drink. “Seriously, what about you? Why not get a new ship, or steal one-”

“We pirates prefer the term ‘commandeer’” Isabela corrected him, extending a pinky to drink.

“Commandeer then,” Anders said. “What’s stopping you? Wouldn’t it help you look for your relic if you could look outside of Kirkwall?”

“I’ve looked outside of Kirkwall, remember?” Isabela said. “It’s here. I know it is. Someone’s just waiting for the right time to sell.”

“You ever going to tell me what this relic is?” Anders asked, “Maybe I could help you look for it and you could help me move people. You know, favor for a favor.”

Isabela took a long drink, and belched into his face. “You have pretty eyes.”

“You’re impossible,” Anders sighed.

“You love it.” Isabela said.

A shock of white hair appeared in the door to the Hanged Man, the only visible part of Fenris save for the lyrium tattoos that glowed through a heavy winter coat. He scanned the crowd with a scowl that didn’t lift, even when he spotted them, and made his way over by walking over benches as opposed to the floor.

“Speaking of impossible,” Anders muttered.

“Oh, I know, just look at him,” Isabela threw an arm over Anders’ shoulder and pulled him conspiratorially close, “That taut, controlled body, brooding demeanor and intense gaze… I hear he still wears the shackles from his life in bondage under his clothes. You know what they say about men like that, don’t you?”

“That wounds heal but scars are forever?” Anders guessed.

“But-...” Isabela’s lips pursed like her ale had turned sour. Well. More sour. “I had a whole joke lined up. You’re no fun.”

“Are you sure Fenris likes you joking about that time in his life?” Anders asked.

The man in question reached their table in time to hear the question. He snatched up a chair and dragged it, squealing protests, to sit beside Isabela. “Do not presume to know what I like, mage,” The word dripped out of the corners of Fenris’ mouth, like a lush who was brimful of vomit. Anders was so glad he agreed to spend more time with Hawke’s friends.

“Here I thought we were friends,” Anders said with forced despondency.

“You thought wrong,” Fenris said, stealing Isabela’s drink without a dagger ending up in his palm. They must have been close.

“What about all that time we spent together in the Deep Roads?” Anders recalled. “Remember when we painted each other’s toenails?”

“You picked the wrong color,” Fenris said.
Anders hated himself for laughing. Someone must have thrown an extra log in one of the hearths, because Anders swore a trick of the light made it look like Fenris smiled.

“What are we waiting down here for?” Fenris asked.

“Varric is in some sort of meeting,” Isabela explained, waving at Norah for another drink to replace the one Fenris stole. “I’ve seen more dwarves in the past hour than I have in my whole life. It’s pretty funny, actually. They keep scurrying in and out on their stumpy little legs.”


Isabela shrugged, “Because they’re short?” Another copper traded corsets, and Norah handed her a replacement tankard.

“No, I mean why the meeting,” Anders pressed. “Does it have anything to do with the rumors?”

“What rumors?” Fenris asked.

“About Bartrand,” Anders explained. “People are saying Hawke and Varric killed him.”


“Carta people. It’s—...” Anders hesitated. Hawke had told him of his debt in confidence. He had no idea if Hawke had told the rest of their group. “Complicated.”

“And what of us?” Fenris asked, “We were there.”

“I don’t think anyone cares about us,” Anders said.

“Oh, people definitely care about you, Sparky,” Isabela pulled a leaflet from her corset and unfolded it to a picture of his face, “You’re finally famous. We’ll have to come up with a better name for you than ‘that Anders fellow’ though. I’m thinking, the Terror of Hightown! What do you think? Too much like the Butcher of Lowtown? You’re right, I should work on it.”

Fenris snatched up the parchment and shredded it, to Anders’ shock.

“Aw, you do care,” Anders said.

“I care about being seen with you,” Fenris corrected him.

“Sure you do. We’re friends now,” Anders decided.

“Hawke!” The tavern roared. It sounded like a collective cough, at first, and almost startled Anders out of his seat. He was barely back in his seat before Hawke was standing beside him, a hand on the back of Anders’ chair he contemplated taking.

Was that the kind of relationship they had? Did they have a relationship? What did the hand mean? Was it there on purpose?

“What are you all doing down here?” Hawke asked. He looked himself again, clad in dark leathers that seemed to pull the shadows up around him. Only his eyes caught the light, flickers of red beneath a strong brow and wild bangs. They looked at everyone but Anders.

Anders should ask him, though now wasn’t exactly the best time to ask. Not with the dog there too. It growled at Anders, and trotted over to sit at Isabela’s feet.

“Varric’s in a meeting,” Isabela explained, scratching the mabari’s ear. Anders was not jealous.
“And you didn’t interrupt it?” Hawke asked, “You know he hates meetings.”

“The sea is a cruel mistress,” Isabela said with a whimsical sigh. “Plus I want to see how many dwarves can fit in his room. I’ve counted at least fifteen so far. Soon they’ll have to start stacking on top of each other. Wouldn’t that be funny?”

“How many drinks have you had?” Fenris asked.

“Leave me alone,” Isabela huffed.

Hawke abandoned them to head back towards Varric’s room. Anders scrambled out of his chair to follow, and heard Isabela and Fenris doing the same. He nearly slipped on the stairs in his haste, coated in saltwater that was mostly salt from their last wash. Isabela caught him from behind, Hawke from in front.

“Easy Sparky,” Isabela teased, “The fun hasn’t even started yet.”

“You good?” Hawke asked, keeping a hold of his arm until Anders nodded.

“My heroes,” Anders joked.

“This is definitely a sandwich I could get behind,” Isabela mused.

“I am right here,” Fenris muttered.

“You could come too,” Isabela flapped a hand at him.

“I’m out if he’s in,” Anders said.

“Your loss,” Isabela said.

She hadn’t been kidding about the number of dwarves. Varric looked like he was holding court, or whatever dwarves called court. Dwarves upon dwarves upon dwarves were packed into his room, and seemed to be split into two groups that were yelling at each other. Anders recognized Batrand’s ex-fiancée Raella, who seemed to be leaning more towards the middle with Varric. He was sitting in his chair, head in his hands, and couldn’t have looked more miserable if he tried.

“The Kalna will not stand for this!” One of the dwarves was shouting.

“You have no proof of these allegations!” Someone shouted back.

“Is his absence not proof enough?” Someone else hollered. “You ascendants have been clamoring for more sway since you saw the surface! Bartrand’s death-”

“Alleged death!” Raella interrupted. “The expedition-”

“We all know Gavorn is behind these rumors!” Yelled yet another person.

“Varric!” Hawke’s bellow cut through the chaos, and pinned each dwarf in place like an arrow. “A word?”

“Of course!” Varric jumped up, and wove through the crowd with a speed Anders had never seen from him, “If you will all excuse me, my esteemed colleague and I have pressing business to attend, so-”

Varric grabbed Bianca, his jacket, and Hawke’s hand, and all but leapt down the stairs in his escape.
None of the dwarves followed their abrupt about-face. It was almost as if Varric’s position mattered more than his presence. “Ancestors preserve me,” Varric muttered, “Who told them where I live? I should leave the city for a few days.”

“What’s happening now?” Isabela asked, leaning back against the stairwell to let Varric and Hawke pass as their group turned around, “No cards? Can we at least get a few more drinks to go?”

“Sorry, Rivaini, today is not a good day to be me,” Varric shrugged into his jacket and swung Bianca onto his shoulder. They followed the hasty dwarf all the way back to the entrance in time for their missing companions to step through it. If not for the fact that she was out of uniform, Anders might have assumed Aveline had arrested Merrill. The elf looked terribly lost, and the guardswoman had a guiding hand on her shoulder.

“I found her wandering around out back,” Aveline explained.

“This didn’t keep me from getting lost at all,” Merrill mumbled, turning a ball of twine over in her hands and looking at it like it had betrayed her. She had Isabela’s bandana tied about her neck like a favor. Maybe after tonight it would actually be one. Anders still had to help her with that conversation.

“What are you all doing?” Aveline asked.

“Leaving,” Varric said, “I think House Tethras could stand to have my cousin Elmand in charge for a few days.”

“You don’t have a cousin Elmand,” Aveline frowned.

“I’ll introduce you sometime,” Varric offered, ducking under Aveline’s arm to leave the Hanged Man. “He’s a little on the shy side.”

Everyone followed Varric out into Lowtown’s streets, and loitered in the center of the hex like rocks in the rapids. People flowed haphazardly around them, sometimes crashing them into them, and Anders tugged anxiously at his scarf. Merrill came over to adjust it to better hide his face when she noticed him fidgeting.

Aveline noticed as well, and said nothing. There was that, at least. “Varric… he’s imaginary.”

“Which makes him a much better head of the household than I am. He never misses the Merchants Guild meetings, for one. Ancestors, it’s only been…” Varric started counting on what fingers he had left, and gave up. “Not enough for them to start holding assembly in my room. Holy mother of green cheeses, this whole business with Bartrand is giving me a headache.”

“So… are we playing cards outside?” Merrill asked, gauging the sky and the few clouds that peppered it, “I suppose the weather is nice today.”

“No cards, Kitten,” Isabela said sadly. “Varric’s too busy being accused of murder. You know what I do whenever that happens?”

“Three guesses,” Fenris said.

“Hide the bodies,” Isabela grinned.

“Maybe this isn’t something we discuss in the open?” Aveline suggested.

“Killer, how is the estate looking these days?” Varric asked.
“Why not?” Hawke shrugged, waving them all towards Hightown, “Mother couldn’t hate me more.”

“I need to talk to both of you about these rumors,” Aveline said, maneuvering Hawke and Varric to the front of their little group. The dog took up any space Anders would have filled, not that he wanted anything to do with Aveline. He supposed he could always stay later at the estate to talk to Hawke about whatever they were now.

Anders fell back to walk with Isabela, Fenris, and Merrill and went back to pestering the pirate captain. No one who called themselves the Queen of the Eastern Seas could honestly say they didn’t know a ship captain who might be willing to smuggle mages. If the Collective could find one ship, even temporarily, Isabela had to know dozens.

“So about that ship…” Anders said.

Isabela groaned. “This again. Fine, fine, Martin. Happy now?”


“He’s a friend,” Isabela explained.

“A friend or a friend?” Anders wondered.

“I never let him steer my ship, if that’s what you’re asking. From what I hear, he doesn’t have good control of his rudder. But he stood up to the Terror of Llomerryn... Slavery, murder, torture… nothing is too much for Ianto. He’d traffic in souls, if he discovered a way to extract them from people.”

“I’m sure the magisters are working on a method for that as we speak,” Fenris muttered.

“Anyway,” Isabela said, “Martin stood up to him when the slavery started, and Ianto slit his throat.”

Well, that wasn’t the most glowing of recommendations. “And they… buried him shallow?” Anders guessed.

“You could say that,” Isabela laughed, “The sea spat him back out. He’s alive and well, and he’s one of the good ones. He can help you and… “

“And?” Anders prodded for her to continue.

“And I can keep him honest.” Isabela raised a hand like she might a white flag of surrender. Anders could have kissed her. He settled on bumping into her as they walked, and was rewarded with a playful shove back in the opposite direction.

“What are you two talking about?” Fenris asked.

“Your favorite topic,” Isabela said sarcastically. “Mages!”

“You want to help him,” Fenris stressed every word, like he was learning them for the first time. “Am I understanding this correctly? You think the mages should be free?”

“Everyone should be free,” Isabela said, so Anders didn’t have to, “Not just mages.”

“Not everyone’s dangerous,” Fenris argued.

“It’s not about who’s dangerous,” Isabela countered. “It’s about having choices made for you. Don’t you wish you had the choice not to have lyrium stuck under your skin?”
Fenris didn’t say anything. Isabela nudged him, and he mumbled something Anders couldn’t hear, but argued no further.

Well throw him in a fire and call him Andraste, Isabela accomplished in one minute what Anders had been trying to do for one year. Anders doubted Fenris would be storming the Gallows anytime soon, but Isabela had actually convinced him to agree with something where mages were concerned. First Hawke, now Fenris… who did that leave in Hawke’s motley group who wasn’t for the cause of mages? Aveline?

Anders stared at the guardwoman’s back. She was as red as a Chantry sunburst, and gesturing rather violently between Hawke and Varric. A few words carried back to him; she was still on about Bartrand and their failed expedition, but mostly about how irresponsible they’d been to bring along no credible witnesses. “An apostate and an escaped elven slave?” Aveline was saying, “No, you two came back alone. Tell me how-”

Anders decided he’d leave that one for now. He couldn’t die on every hill. They reached Hawke’s estate without incident, and set up for cards in the parlor. It had gained a modest amount of furniture, courtesy of Sebastian. There were couches, armchairs, a rug, and tapestries galore, all depicting various scenes from the Chant of Light. What there wasn’t was a table, so they played cards on the floor.

It was a good game, all games considered. Anders only lost a few coppers. No one had learned anything investigating the possessed templars. Anders supposed there was no harm discussing it in front of Aveline, considering the guard knew everything after the incident in Hightown. Not that he wanted the culprit locked away or Tranquilized, but odds were the culprit in question was dead. Even Varric, who knew everything about everything, had learned nothing. To Anders’ surprise, he hadn’t even remembered Anders asking him to investigate two weeks ago.

“Sorry, Blondie, there’s been so much on my plate lately I’ve had to add a few notches on my belt,” Varric apologized, shuffling what Anders was sure were too many cards in his hands. They slipped on his prosthetic, and went spraying into Isabela’s face. “Ah-...”

“Don’t worry about it, Varric, it happens to a lot of men,” Isabela teased, sneaking a few of the wild cards into her own hand.

“You know, I might start with the Rose, if we really want to be sure Decimus wasn’t behind the possessions,” Varric took his accident well, and he went back to shuffling his cards without comment, “There are only so many places the templars frequent.”

“You said that last time,” Anders reminded him.

“I did?” Varric asked. “That’s… I don’t remember. That’s weird.”

“... Varric,” Merrill said gently, reaching out to touch his chin and turn him to face her. “Can you say that again?”

“That’s weird?” Varric said obediently. “What’s the matter, Daisy?”

“The part about the Rose,” Merrill said.

“I might start with the Rose,” Varric said. There was something wrong in the way he said it. Like he didn’t speak the language, and was just parroting the sounds.

Merrill drew a dagger from her belt. Everyone panicked. Fenris and Aveline were on their feet, Varric fell onto his back, and Hawke and Isabela were yelling at all of them to sit down. Anders
watched, fascinated, when Merrill slit her own wrist and wove a spell together. “His blood is his blood, his heart is his heart.”

“Daisy-hang on a second-what-”

“Merrill. Put the dagger down, now.”

“Blood magic!”

Merrill ignored all of them, and cast. Blood bubbled up from her wrist, popping into a fine mist that skittered through the air like a thousand tiny spiders. They crawled down Varric’s throat, and seemed to choke him. He started coughing. Aveline dove on Merrill, twisting the dagger out of her hand to shove her face first into the floor.

“Hey!” Anders stood up.

“Release him!” Aveline shouted, pinning Merrill with a knee and warding off Anders with the dagger. “Now, Merrill!”

It was just a dagger. It was nothing to him. To them. “Release her!” They bellowed, the words echoing through the estate.

“Both of you-” Hawke started.

“Aveline!” Varric coughed, rolling on to his knees. “Aveline stop! Ancestors have mercy, can this day get any worse?”

“What did you do to him?” Aveline demanded, not getting off Merrill.

“Can’t-... breathe-...” Merrill wheezed, scrabbling at the rug.

Isabela kicked Aveline. It wasn’t very effective. The giant guardswoman rocked to one side like a buoy, and Anders had to knock her off with a blast of energy pulled straight from the Fade. She toppled end over end until Hawke caught her.

“Are you alright, Kitten?” Isabela asked, gathering Merrill up into her arms. Anders let a wave of healing magic roll over her casting cut and the bruise Aveline had left her with.

“That didn’t go quite like I thought it would,” Merrill mumbled.

“Is she alright?” Aveline demanded, struggling to right herself, “What about Varric? What did you do to him?”

“She saved me,” Varric said between coughs. “Though a little warning might have been nice.”

“Not on the rug-” Hawke started, hand outstretched as if to catch the few drops of blood that spilled from Varric’s lips before he gave up. “Fuck it.”

“Idunna,” Varric coughed again, this time catching the blood and spit in his good hand. “She’s a blood mage, at the Blooming Rose. I went last week. She-... Fuck, I don’t know. She did some kind of weird magic shit and I forgot all about her. She’s behind the possessions.”

“I’ll gather the guard,” Aveline declared and stood. Aveline looked between Merrill and her dagger, and at least had the decency to look sheepish when she handed it back. “Sorry.”

Anders considered stopping her. A blood mage was still a mage. He thought of Decimus and the
abomination that had killed him, and said nothing.

“That's okay.” Merrill slid the dagger back into her belt, and rested her head on Isabela’s shoulder.

“It’s okay?” Isabela repeated incredulously, smoothing Merrill’s hair back. “You just got hit by a human battering ram.”

“You may need help with this blood mage. I’ll come with you,” Fenris stood up and left with Aveline.

“I guess the game’s over,” Varric noted, wiping his bloody hands off on his trousers before lying back on the floor. “So that was a thing that happened. Thanks again, Daisy. Remind me not to go anywhere by myself in this city… ever again. Killer, you mind if I just… sleep here? Today was exhausting.”

“Guest room’s upstairs.” Hawke said.

“No stairs,” Varric whined.

“Yes stairs,” Hawke looped his arms under Varric’s shoulders, and hefted him to his feet. “You need me to carry you?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Varric said, “I'm getting too old for this shit.”

Hawke picked him up with an arm around his shoulders and under his knees. “So I heard you’re being fixed up with one of the Helmi daughters.”

“Thanks, Hawke, I’ve been trying to forget about that all week,” Varric sighed, “I guess now I’ll have to tell her about us.”

“Not love at first sight?” Hawke asked, the rest of their conversation fading as they departed. No other quips followed them, which Anders supposed spoke volumes as to where Isabela's concerns lied.

Merrill was still wrapped up in her arms, the two of them whispering what Anders could only imagine were soothing things to one another. "Awkward, boob crushing do-gooder," Isabela was muttering. Yep. Definitely soothing. It seemed like they were getting on. Merrill hadn’t even needed his help. Not like Decimus had.

Anders stared at them, and decided he could talk to Merrill about visiting the Dalish for the Collective later. He excused himself and wandered through the estate until he found himself in the garden. Anders sat in a patch of elfroot, and stared up at the darkening sky. It would be curfew soon. Too late for him to stay much longer and not stay the night.

He could almost make out the Chained Man, among the stars. The constellation dragging its heavy chain looked how Anders felt. Except Anders didn’t have a chain. There was no reason for him to feel the way he did. Everything had worked out in the end, in a twisted sort of fashion.

The Collective was still working with him. Orsino was writing him again. Isabela had given him a new contact for their smuggling operations. Any day now, Anders might be able to rescue Alain and Grace, and once he had a chance to talk to the Dalish, there would be no mage Anders couldn’t save.

Except Decimus. After everything, it hadn't even been him.

Anders thought of his sad smile, and whispered words. "Run from me."
Words not even meant for Anders, but ones that brought him near to tears for the ones he heard beneath them.

"Take care of yourself."

A knock on the garden door interrupted his thoughts.

Hawke joined him, standing with his thumbs in his belt rather than sitting. “You miss the sewers so much you have to sit in the dirt?” Always the comforting presence, Hawke.

“That’s me,” Anders agreed, counting constellations, “Anders the Awful they call me.”

“You staying?” Hawke asked.

“Do I get to be carried to my room?” Anders joked, surprised by how easily Hawke held his gaze when it drifted in his direction. “Do I still have a room?”

“Long as you want one,” Hawke assured him.

“What are we?” Anders wondered.

“What do you want us to be?” Hawke asked.

“Alive,” Anders wasn’t sure why it made him laugh, but it did. There must have been something wrong or worrisome with his laugh, because Hawke sat beside him when it dissolved into chuckles. “... It wasn’t even Dec. After all that, it wasn’t even him.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hawke said, setting a hand on Anders' thigh. "Don't live in it."

"Carver wasn’t yours," Anders covered Hawke's hand with his own. Apparently they did have that kind of relationship. "No matter what your mother says.”

“You weren’t there.” Hawke said.

“Neither were you.” Anders said.

“No,” Hawke agreed, “But I know you.”

“I know you too.” Anders said, dragging off his scarf to better see him.

Hawke's eyes might have been constellations themselves, for all their fire. The night seemed warmer for them, and warmer still for Hawke's lips against his. Anders wasn't sure who kissed who, only that Hawke tasted of spirits and smelled of home. There was a roughness to him, in this scratch of his beard, in the clutch of his hands.

Anders didn't know him. Not really. Not all of him. Not the way he wanted. He didn't know how fast was too fast, how hard was too hard, how much was too much. Anders straddled him, and Hawke's hands on his hips ground them together.

"Hawke," Anders said, then wondered if he preferred Garrett.

"Hm?" Hawke's lips fell to Anders' neck, where he was sure to leave a mark. Anders threaded his fingers through his hair, and Hawke bit him. Featherlight, testing. Anders pushed him down harder until he felt the sting of it and groaned.

He should have stopped thinking. He should have let himself have this one moment. Let it turn into
more. Hawke's hands found their way beneath his tunic, which he was actually wearing this time, and were warmer than his coat against the cold night chill. The question floated through his head, more unrelenting than Justice's disapproval of Hawke and the distraction he represented, until Anders couldn't ignore it.

"Do you... should I call you Hawke?" Anders asked.

Hawke stopped, and pulled back from him. He didn't seem upset, at least, his fingers tracing Anders' spine beneath his tunic. "Should I call you Anders?"

"... What?"

"I know it's not your name," Hawke said easily. "Any more than Fereldan is mine."

"... Says who?"

Hawke looked offended. "Common sense?"

"Anders is my name," Anders said. He wasn't of a mind to think of his father tonight or any night. "But Hawke isn't yours. Do you want me to call you Garrett?"

"Want you to call me Hawke," Hawke said, running a thumb over Anders' lips, "We are who we choose to be."

They stayed in the garden, through the night and into the break of dawn. Anders didn't remember quite when it happened, but at some point they ended up lying down, Anders head on Hawke's shoulder, Merrill's scarf a poorer blanket than Hawke's arms around him. They watched the constellations, and spoke. Of family. Of friends. Of everything. Of nothing. The low rumble of Hawke's voice in his ear, and the occasional press of his lips against Anders' brow wasn't quite the intimacy that Anders had wanted, but maybe it was what he needed.
Ghilan’him Banal’vhen

Chapter Summary

In which Anders visits the Dalish.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thank you for reading. I was considering making this two chapters and decided to go with one long one. Let me know what you think if you'd rather we keep them to 5K or 10K when there's more content.

I appreciate any and all feedback, constructive or otherwise.

9:33 Dragon 21 Pluitanis Evening

Somewhere Near Sundermount

Anders was a runner, not a walker. Walking was not his thing. The season never mattered. Whether it was freezing in Ferelden in Firstfall, or burning up in the Bannorn in Solace, somehow, he always ended up suffering his small clothes. He still had all of his clothes, for the moment, but Anders felt it necessary to keep a healthy level of suspicion about him.

He doubted he’d lose them for the reasons he wanted on this little venture. Wintersend had passed, and winter had been sent, but spring was little better. Destructive forces of nature assaulted him on all sides. The tiny pollen spores were worse than any storm Anders could have conjured. He sneezed. And sneezed. And sneezed. And for a bit of variety, he sneezed again.

“Come on Varric,” Anders called over his shoulder, wiping his reddened nose off on his scarf.

He shouldn’t complain, but Anders had never been one to heed ‘should’ and ‘should nots.’ The pace Hawke set couldn’t compare to one set by the Wardens, but there was a pace, and there was pollen, and that was enough. It also didn’t help that Anders hated being away from the city, especially when the Collective had resumed their rescues, but he couldn’t spend every minute of every day escorting a mage from the Gallows. Especially not if they had no place to put them.

And so, the Dalish. The Sundermount loomed, the tallest mountain of Vimmark. In all his time in Kirkwall, Anders had never been. He had no reason to go, but beyond that, the locals said it was haunted. Creatures from the Fade prowled its heights, and spiders and gasts littered its base. All in all, a lovely place for a summer home, if you were a Dalish, which Anders was not.

“I’m right behind you Blondie,” Varric’s wheeze was all but swallowed up by the wind, and Anders glanced over his shoulder to see the dwarf some ways back. The merchant prince moved like a wallop ball struck by the most petulant of players, rolling from place to place one tiny tap at a time. He looked much the same, round and bound in leather.
If Varric was the ball, Merrill was the mallet. She spoke little on the trek to visit her clan, her ordinarily pleasant expression twisted into a scowl that put Fenris to shame. Anders lost track of her, every so often, her mottled green and brown armor blending her into the foliage until she emerged to push Varric along. Combined with her silence, it was painfully unnerving and made her seem like the love child of Nathaniel and Velanna.

… Not that Anders had given them any chance of that.

Merrill appeared to step over a small boulder, and Varric followed, rolling over it and into the dirt, where he stayed. “I’m way behind you,” Varric corrected himself.

“Come on you two, we’re not even up the mountain yet,” Isabela urged from up ahead, one foot propped up on a fallen log as if she were sailing them to the top of Sundermount. Anders couldn’t decide if he loved or hated the enthusiasm. He was leaning towards hate.

Isabela didn’t need to be there. She was there for Merrill, who had some kind of magical mirror that needed some kind of magical tool from her clan to repair. Anders didn’t know all the specifics. Whatever the reason, it wasn’t his. Anders was there for the Collective, and Hawke was there for him. And for coin. But hopefully mostly for him. Varric came to escape the Merchant’s Guild, and Fenris… probably had nothing better to do.

“Are we sure we’re going the right way?” Varric asked, pitching face forward into the dirt the second he stood. “Nug-licking-... That’s the seventh root I’ve tripped over in the last ten minutes. They’re doing it on purpose, I swear.”

“They can hear you talking about them,” Merrill helped Varric to his feet.

“Good one, Daisy.” Varric dusted off his trousers, “You’re joking, right? Tell me you’re joking.”

“This is the right way,” Merrill ignored the question, pointing to a pile of rocks. “We just have to follow the cairns.”

“Rocks,” Fenris picked up the top stone on one of the piles. Either someone had painted a face on it, or a bird had taken a masterful shit. “Who knew the Dalish were the ones with stone sense? Perhaps you should have been with us in the Deep Roads.”

“Cairns, not rocks,” Merrill took the rock out of his hands and put it back on the pile, whispering something in elvish. An apology, maybe. “They’re sort of like shrines, to Ghilan’nain. They point the way home… except I guess it’s not home anymore.”

Not bird shit, then. Anders was glad he’d kept his mouth shut. Fenris coughed into his hand, and Anders wondered if he regretted defacing the shrine, or if it was just the pollen. Probably just the pollen.

"Don't remind me about the Deep Roads,” Varric said, flexing his fingers. “I wish I had actually killed Bartrand down there. I’m so jaundiced over these rumors I’m turning yellow.”

“Why are you all stopped?” Hawke came back down the trail in clipped steps, wind tearing through his hair. He had on a black leather jerkin with a rich golden trim, studded leather armor straining against thick arms and thick thighs. It was a gift from some noble or another, but it was better than his Oars or Iron armor.

It was better than better, actually. Hawke looked breathtaking. Anders forced himself to pick up his pace to walk at his side. Lately, what time he didn’t spend with the Collective, he spent with Hawke. If he could do both, he shouldn’t waste it. At least when it was both, Justice couldn’t disapprove.
“It’s another day’s journey to the encampment, assuming they haven’t moved on,” Hawke said. Behind him, pathways carved through rock and pine, adorned with the crumbling ruins of some long forgotten world. There were so many twists and turns up the mountain they’d be lost without the cairns. “We need to make the cave for camp before nightfall.”

"The clan can’t move on," Merrill said sadly, "Not without our halla. They’ll be there… She’ll be there. By the Dread Wolf, I’m not ready to see her again."

“To see who, Kitten?” Isabela asked.

“The Keeper… I can’t talk to her. We fight or talk circles around each other. She has a disappointed frown that turns your bones to jelly…”

“I hope it works on the Knight-Commander.” Anders mused. “She’s going to be the future of elven mages in Kirkwall soon.”

“It’s a good future… it’s just not mine,” Merrill said sadly, “The templars know better than to bother us. They’ll be fine with the clan.” Merrill pulled Isabela’s bandana off her belt to wring it together in her hands. “You can’t when we’re there—... we can’t be…”

“No one will even know I’m there,” Isabela poked Merrill’s nose. “I’m just here to help you get your little arrow helm.”

“Arulin’holm,” Merrill corrected her.

“Right.” Isabela said. "I'll be in and out faster than a first fuck."

"We might not need to steal it." Merrill said. "The Keeper might let me invoke vir sulevanan. I'm still one of the People… whether or not they consider me part of the clan."

"We're here to trade." Hawke reminded them. "No one does anything that jeopardizes that."

"Four syllables in one word!" Varric noted. "Good job Killer."

Hawke didn’t laugh, but Anders knew him well enough to know his hard exhale was more or less the same thing. Anders settled in at Hawke’s side as they continued, sneezing every so often and trying to keep the wind from sending his scarf flying back down the mountain. It whipped into Hawke’s face a handful of times before the archer got fed up and snatched it off Anders’ head.

“I need that, you know,” Anders said. For all he’d once hated helmets for what they did to his hair, he was beginning to envy them. And hoods. Anything would have been better at hiding his likeness than the scarf Merrill had woven him, which seemed to unravel a little bit more each day, making a slow transition from scarf into wig.

“You don’t have to wear it out here,” Hawke stuffed the scarf into his pack.

“Pretty sure I have to wear it everywhere, thanks to our friends in the Gallows,” Anders said. “At least until I figure out how to shapeshift into another person. I’m thinking the Grand Cleric. You want to hear my impression?”

“There’s no templars out here,” Hawke gestured to the pines that littered Sundermount, the only witnesses the birds and rodents - Anders hoped they were rodents - scurrying among them, “... And it’s good to see your face.”

“It’s good to be seen,” Anders was surprised how much he meant it. Hawke traced his jaw, so light a
touch the tips of his fingers ghosted stubble and no skin. Anders shivered, and the wind played no part in it.


“I’m good,” Anders promised. “They check the refugee camps, every so often, but it’s not like my clinic is a secret. With the posters… it’s probably only a matter of time.”

“You have the room,” Hawke said. “You need it, use it. You don’t have to risk yourself.”

“I’m fine, for now,” Anders said. Not that the offer didn’t tempt him, but some part of him resisted to the point of resentment. He’d accomplished nothing to further the cause, the week he spent in Hawke’s care. “It’s some of my friends I’m more worried about. The templars aren’t so much interested in me as destroying my kind and all I represent.”

“You still don’t have to sleep in the sewer,” Hawke said.

“No offense, but your mother hasn’t exactly rolled out the welcome mat for me,” Anders reminded him, searching for a more justifiable reason to decline, “How’s that going, by the way? You’re not married yet, are you?”

“... It’s going,” Hawke said stiffly.

“Translation…?” Anders pressed.

“She’s trying to work something out with the Reinhearts,” Hawke said.

“Did you try the magic word?” Anders asked. “It’s no, in case you forgot.”

“Bartrand was working to arrange Varric’s marriage, before he fucked off. The only reason Varric got out of it is because he’s the head of his House now,” Hawke scratched at his scalp; the tick was so bad it was a wonder he wasn’t losing hair. “I’m not.”

“So what?” Justice’s frustration fed into Anders’ own. “Your mother is just going to force you to marry someone you don’t even like? What about us? She won’t even let me alone in a room with you.”

A cairn ahead marked a divergence in their path. It veered up, and through the crumbling remnants of a stone structure. Anders stepped in front of Hawke once they were inside it, “Anders, what-?”

Anders clasped the back of Hawke’s neck, pressing the two of them together and hating all the times he’d gotten no further than this with the man before someone or something interrupted them. “I lie awake at night, aching for you,” Anders whispered.

“You think I don’t?” Hawke lifted him off the ground and pinned him to the nearest wall, his lips at Anders’ ear. The desperation in his voice was as much a torment as the grip of his hands on Anders’ ass, “What do you want me to do about it? You know I want you.”

“Then have me,” Anders all but begged, fisting his hands in Hawke’s hair. For one mad moment he couldn’t have cared less that their companions were minutes behind them. He could make do with minutes.

“Not here,” Hawke words were a stark contrast to his actions; he didn’t have magic, but he didn’t need it. He worshipped Anders’ neck, teeth and tongue leaving bruises and bitemarks. “Not at camp.”
“I don’t need flowers,” Anders pleaded.

“Not getting you any,” Hawke murmured.

“Ooo,” Isabela whistled when she came through the doorway, “This is exciting! You, Anders, and Justice. You know what they say, two’s company, but three is better.”

Hawke dropped him. Anders barely managed to catch himself before he hit the ground. Maker, he’d never been so frustrated in all his life. At this point, the others could watch for all Anders’ cared.

“Keep your nose out of our affairs.” Hawke said gruffly.

“Keep your affairs out of my nose,” Isabela shot back. “Really, don’t mind me. Please continue.”

“Tell him that,” Anders muttered.

“I just did,” Isabela winked at him.

“Not doing this. Not her business,” Hawke abandoned them, quick steps taking him out of the ruins and back onto the path.

Isabela threw an arm around Anders’ shoulders, leading him out after Hawke. “He has a nice ass, doesn’t he?”

“He is a nice ass,” Anders said, swallowing a sneeze as the forest grew back around them, grass giving way to bush giving way to tree. The pollen was there, like a templar with a phylactery, chasing him at every turn and adding to his frustrations.

“Truer words, never spoken,” Isabela grinned. “So, tell me everything. Did he float your frigate?”

“It’s complicated,” Anders said.

Isabela let go of him, “Ew.”

“You and Fenris and Merrill aren’t?” Anders asked.

“Of course not,” Isabela said, “Everyone loves me. I’m a lovable person.”

Anders laughed and left her, jogging to catch up with Hawke. His pack rattled on his back, staff hitting the back of his ankles for his efforts. The archer spared him a frown Anders was sure he didn’t deserve when he caught up. “Our affairs?” Anders repeated.

“What of it?” Hawke asked. “You’re mine, aren’t you?”

He said it so casually. Like it was nothing. Anders forgot how to walk and tripped over himself. Hawke caught him and righted him. “I mean… That’s a pretty possessive way to talk about someone you haven’t… we haven’t…”

“I’ll get a room at the Hanged Man, when we’re back,” Hawke offered.

“What about your mother?” Anders asked.

“I’m not getting married,” Hawke promised. “I’m Ferelden, I’m a mercenary, my sister is in the Circle, and as far as anyone in the city is concerned, I killed my business partner. There isn’t a family in Hightown who wants me for their daughter. And if there is, all I have to do is talk to her, and then there isn’t.”
It made sense, Anders supposed, but he couldn’t be the only one with an interest in Hawke. He was a self-made man, he owned half the Bone Pit, he was an ex-sergeant, and one of the most competent people Anders had ever met. He was selling himself short. “... Are you saying you act like an ass on purpose at your mother’s parties?”

“Don’t have to act,” Hawke said.

Anders laughed his way through a sneeze. “And we can’t just go find a cave somewhere because...?”

“Because you deserve a bed,” Hawke said. “... And a bath. Your face is—... Varric has a kerchief.”

“Have I ever told you you’re a real flirt?” Anders asked, wiping his nose off on his sleeve.

“You’re the one who said you liked that I was honest,” Hawke said.

“But does it always have to be brutal honesty?” Anders wondered. “What about compassionate honesty? Sentimental? Seductive?”

Hawke snorted and said nothing. Anders supposed that meant he had nothing to say. They walked together in silence, save for the song of the Sundermount as they continued their climb. Wind rattled through the pines to a litany of birds: waxwings and robins, bluebirds and sparrows. An occasional sneeze, and the rustle of woodland critters or ghasts skittering through the underbrush made up the chorus.

Sundermount was like the opposite Kirkwall, where Veil grew thinner as one descended. Here, it grew thinner the higher one climbed, until Anders could feel the Fade like a stranger’s breath on the back of his neck, making his hair stand on end. “We’ll have to be careful here. There could be tears in the Veil further up, where demons slip through.”

“You deserve better,” Hawke said suddenly.

“What?” Anders asked.

“You wanted honesty,” Hawke elaborated. “You deserve better. You shouldn’t have to hide your face in the city you’re saving. Don’t always agree with you, about the way you do it, but you want the right things. The men who caught you—... I have an arrow for them.”

“We’re going for seductive honesty, I see,” Anders grinned.

Their trip up the mountain was ghast-free, to Anders’ relief, as was the cave they made camp in. A chill wind blew from the entrance, carrying in pollen caught in the silvery light of the moons. It was a beautiful sight, made all the better by the dull blue luminescence of the glowing lichen above them. It clung to the cave ceiling, like dripping stars, and if not for his sneezing and their companions, it might have been one of the most romantic nights of Anders’ life.

Everyone unpacked and chose spots for their bedrolls. Anders was almost surprised Isabela’s bedroll wasn’t pushed together with Fenris and Merrill’s. The pirate strung up a hammock between two trees outside the cave, and the elves set themselves up in opposite corners within it. Varric picked a spot so close to the fire Merrill conjured Anders feared for his chest hair.

Merrill mumbled a small prayer as she closed the flame in with rocks, and fed it pine to keep it alive through the night without magic.

“Sylaise, whose heat rivals Elgar’nan’s light. Sylaise, whose temples rival Mythal’s cities. Sylaise,
whose breath rivals Andruil’s spear. Sylaise, whose skill rivals June’s craft. Sylaise, whose fire
cannot be quenched, we give ourselves gladly to your service.”

“Do we, though?” Anders wondered, debating throwing his bedroll down next to Hawke or finding
his own space. Hawke dropped his pack next to Anders’ feet, effectively resolving his dilemma.
Anders laid out their things together, and Hawke passed out rations.

“We do not,” Fenris said, accepting a bit of jerky from Hawke as he settled in by the fire.

“It’s just a prayer,” Merrill sighed, curling up next to the flames and rolling her toes on the rocks
containing them. Isabela came back inside, free of armor and most of her clothes, and claimed Fenris’
lap for her head and Merrill’s for her legs. Merrill didn’t even seem cheered by it. Maybe Isabela’s
feet smelled.

Varric peeled off his gloves, stretching his fingers and the prosthetic that passed for them. He looked
down at his hands and sighed a suffering sort of sigh. “It’s a good thing we left the city when we did.
Maybe this business with Bartrand will have blown over by the time we get back. Ancestors, why
did it have to be my hand? Why couldn’t he have closed the door on my foot?”

“To spare us having to carry you,” Fenris said.

“I’ve never had so many ideas for so many stories before in my life, and I can’t write any of them,”
Varric sighed. “Gerav does good work, but I just don’t have the same touch.”

“Varric, stop, you’re going to make me cry,” Isabela covered her eyes with an arm. “Are you telling
me I’ll never read the rest of Swords and Shields? They haven’t even had sex yet!”

“Sorry Rivaini,” Varric said sincerely. “Would you believe before I started that, it had been ten years
since I published anything? It’ll probably be another ten by the time I finish at this rate.”

“If it helps, I can’t write either,” Merrill said. “Not in Elvish. I’ve been trying to practice, but it just
looks like scribbles. I brought some for the Keeper… but she’ll probably just laugh at me.”

“... I could help,” Anders offered, pulling Hawke down to his side when he finished handing out
food. It was a decent seating arrangement. Anders, Hawke, Merrill, Isabela, Fenris, Varric, made all
the better by the fact that Aveline hadn’t joined them. “Not-... with either of those things, obviously,
but it’s been hard to find time to work on my manifesto with all of my patients. We could all get
together once a week to work on things. Like we do for cards.”

“... That’s a great idea!” Isabela agreed around a mouthful of jerky, while Varric and Merrill seemed
to belabor it. “Fenris will go.”

“Fenris will not,” Fenris frowned down at her.

“Fenris,” Isabela swatted the chest of the man in question, “Does not know how to read or write.”

“Vishante kaffas,” Fenris stood up so quickly Isabela’s head hit the ground with a loud thwack, and
Anders pushed a hasty surge of healing energy in her direction. “I told you - ”

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak ‘never gets sex again.’” Isabela snarled over him, massaging the back of her
head. “Like I was saying, Fenris only knows Tevene. So he’ll come. Good? Great. I’m going to
bed.” Isabela disentangled herself from Merrill and left.

Fenris stood, clenching and unclenching his fists, and stormed off to his bedroll. Anders got the
distinct impression that Fenris did not, in fact, read and write Tevene or any language. The four
survivors chewed their salty jerky in silence for a time until Varric broke it.

“So Daisy,” Varric changed the topic, “What was that little prayer earlier?”

“It was a song to Sylaise, the Hearthkeeper,” Merrill explained. “Sylaise’s path is called the Vir Atish’an. The way of peace. It’s for healers… I never followed it. The Keeper called my path the ghilan’him banal’vhen… the path that leads astray… I’m glad you’re here with me, Hawke.”

“What do I have to do with your Keeper?” Hawke asked.

“Nothing, really. When you came to ask me for help with Anders last month, even though I was still so mad at him… I was so happy. You didn’t want me. You wanted my magic. The old magic. The magic that everyone has always condemned me for.”

“Rightly so,” Fenris interjected from his bedroll.

“No one asked you,” Merrill hissed. “… I just… Anders was the only other person-... but then he-...”

“I’m sorry, Merrill,” Anders wished he could say something else. Something better. But sorry was all he had.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Merrill said to Hawke. Anders supposed he deserved to be ignored. “I don’t think I could face the Keeper without you.”

“We’re here to trade,” Hawke reminded her. Wind whistled through the cavern, bringing pollen, and Anders smothered a sneeze into his elbow. Hawke’s face crumpled up like a page from Anders’ manifesto, and he scooted away slightly. “You don’t want to talk to her, don’t talk to her. We’re getting your tool, ink, and ironwood. They get mages.”

“Untrained, unsupervised mages, entrusted to the care of one elderly apostate on cursed ground riddled with demons,” Fenris revised. He looked comfortable, curled up in his blankets and ignorance. “You must truly hate your clan to propose such a trade.”

“Can you just go to sleep?” Merrill demanded.

Fenris grunted, and rolled away from them to face the cavern wall.

“Actually, I think that’s my queue,” Varric said, crawling into his bedroll and under his blanket. “I’ll take you up on that offer, too, Blondie. It’d be nice to have somewhere quiet to get away and just write, every once in a while. Try to keep it to a whisper, would you?”

“I hope it works,” Merrill whispered obediently into the fire. She needn’t have bothered. Varric started snoring almost immediately. “I’m terrified of the task she’ll give me… I just know it will be horrible.”

“She was grateful for the elf kid,” Hawke said.

“Feynriel,” Merrill reminded him.

“And for more mages,” Hawke found Anders’ thigh and Merrill’s shoulder, and squeezed both. “Said it would give your clan an advantage, and that she’d have to repay me. She can make good on it. You don’t need to do anything for her.”

“We’ll see,” Merrill sighed. She looked miserable.

“Are you sure you’re both okay with this?” Anders asked, overcome with the sudden need to self-
sabotage in the face of Merrill’s vulnerability. “You weren’t exactly happy your clan took in Feynriel, and I know you still have doubts about … what I’m doing.”

“You’re going to do it anyway,” Hawke said simply.

“It’s not because they took in a mage,” Merrill said. “The clan will need a new First, and a new Second… We take in elves from the cities all the time. But Feynriel… he’s a half-breed. I’m happy for Arianni, but the Keeper was the one who exiled her for falling in love with a human in the first place. She just- She makes me so-... She would never make that kind of exception for me.”

“Learn to live with disappointment,” Hawke said. “That’s all family is.”

“Or,” Anders frowned, reaching across Hawke to take one of Merrill’s hands and squeeze it, “Maybe you find a new one.”

Merrill squeezed back, at least. “Let’s just not stay here any longer than we have to.”

The three of them found their bedrolls. Anders took off his coat, and sat on the one he shared with Hawke, watching the archer untie himself from his armor. Lace after lace came apart under his deft fingers, until he was down to his tunic and trousers. He really did look breath-taking, basked in a mix of orange and sapphire light from fire and lichen. He looked down at Anders, face slightly in shadow save for his lips, framed by his beard like a work of art made for men to worship, and said, “Don’t sneeze on me.”

A laugh tangled up with a sigh in Anders’ throat, and came out like a wheeze that must have been too close to a sneeze for Hawke’s comfort, because he took a step back. “I mean it.”

“You can’t stop me,” Anders joked, reaching through to the Fade. A small burst of elemental magic disrupted the earth beneath Hawke’s feet, and sent him stumbling into bed and Anders’ arms.

Anders decided he liked having Hawke above him. Hawke adjusted easily enough, propped up one elbow with only some of his weight on Anders. His free hand wandered, mapping Anders’ body like the most diligent of cartographers, as if he couldn’t afford to miss a single angle or curve. “You always use magic in bed?” Hawke asked, voice low.

“Do you want me to?” Anders whispered back, conjuring static about his fingers and letting it play across Hawke’s lips. It made his eyes flutter, which couldn’t have been a bad thing.

“Not sure,” Hawke said.

“Could you two maybe do that outside?” Merrill’s voice intruded on the moment, “It’s kind of intimate.”

Hawke rolled off him, and Anders rolled onto his shoulder. The unyielding stone beneath him was a stark contrast to the cushioning body of the man beside him. Anders wasn’t sure how he could be expected to sleep. Hawke pulled their blankets over them, and seemed content with his lot. Anders lay awake, thinking of Hawke, the rise and fall of his chest and steady breathing, how easy it would be to unsteady it.

Isabela slept outside. There was no reason they couldn’t. A ripple of irritation pursued the thought, and Anders thought it might be the pollen until he recognized it for Justice, and tried to turn his thoughts elsewhere. The Dalish. He’d have to give some kind of speech to Merrill’s Keeper. Or maybe not. Maybe she really would take as many elves as Anders could get them.

The alternative was Sketch. An elven apostate Anders had never met and was not allowed to meet,
who tossed elven mages in with elven servants like a salad of servitude. That wasn’t freedom. Not
the kind Anders wanted for them. It could be worse, but it could be better.

A breeze tore through the cavern, and Hawke wrapped his arms around him, their shared body heat
fighting back the chill in their shared bedroll. Anders was glad he wasn’t asleep. Congestion and
Justice aside, Anders wanted the distraction.

He twisted his head and bore the scratch of Hawke’s beard for a kiss long and languid, sounded by
their thready breath and the wet break of their lips. Anders curled his fingers in the thick wool of
Anders’ tunic and squeezed his hips, and Anders muffled a sound not quite a moan in Hawke’s
mouth.

There was no better distraction to be had. Anders broke off him to settle back against his shoulder,
and stare at the lichen bleeding blue on the ceiling. “See any constellations?” Anders whispered to
keep from waking the others.

Hawke hummed thoughtfully, threading his fingers through Anders’ hair for so long Anders feared
he might fall asleep. “Judex,” Hawke decided.

“How?” Anders demanded, scowling up at the reflection of starlight for its betrayal.

Hawke pointed to the ceiling and traced the outline of the Sword of Mercy until Anders finally saw
it. A controlled burst of elemental magic killed the constellation, and rained dust down on them.
“Damnit, Anders,” Hawke smothered a laugh into his fist and wrenched the blankets above them to
save them from the worst of the ash.

“Well, what were you expecting me to do?” Anders demanded from under the covers.

“Nothing less,” Hawke decided after a pause. Anders found his lips, beneath the covers, and
Hawke’s hands slid down from his hips to his ass and squeezed.

Anders’ urgent whimper was swallowed up in their kiss. “Come outside with me,” Anders pleaded;
the words fled from his mouth and into Hawke’s. Anders chased them with his teeth, biting Hawke’s
bottom lip and sucking until he felt Hawke’s answer pressed hard against his thigh. Anders slid his
hand between them to massage Hawke’s cock over his trousers, desperate for the groan that spilled
from Hawke’s lips, for how he twitched against his palm, for the involuntary jerk of his hips,
“Please.”

Hawke might have been his thrall for the effort it seemed to take from him to catch Anders’ hand and
pin it against his chest. “When we’re back,” Hawke promised, breathing hard.


“Because,” Hawke squeezed his hand. “You’re not a tryst. This isn’t the Circle. You’re not with the
Wardens. You’re just a man, like you said, and you deserve to feel like one. A warm bath. A hot
meal. A soft bed. No fighting, no running, no rushing. You’re mine, and I’m going to make you feel
how I want you to feel.”

“... How am I supposed to feel?” Anders asked.

“Safe.” Hawke said.

The word wove through him like a spell and twisted up in his heart before flooding his veins, setting
every inch of him to shivering. “You’re really okay with this?” Anders asked. “You’re really going
to help me free mages? Even though Beth doesn’t want to be free?”

“How? Beth got lucky,” Hawke said. “She’s got the First Enchanter looking out for her, thanks to you. You got lucky. If I hadn’t gotten there when I got there… Whatever you want from me, Anders, you have.”

Anders gathered up a handful of Hawke’s tunic with his free hand and tugged, only half-joking, “Just five minutes outside. No one will notice—”

“No.” Hawke said.

“You’re a liar and I hate you,” Anders said, but he slept.

They reached the Dalish encampment the next day without incident. The Dalish made no secret of their presence, assuming one knew enough to follow the cairns to find them. The entrance was a bed of pine needles, lined in blood red banners embroidered with the faces of halla, and lit with lanterns shaped from their horns. The decorations gave a warmer welcome than the Dalish.

They blockaded the entrance to their encampment, arrow upon arrow trained on Hawke’s group as they approached, reflective eyes glinting in the lantern light. Anders traced a glyph of warding into the needles with the butt of his staff while Hawke and Merrill approached, just in case.

“Look,” Isabela nudged him, pointing through the wall of elves to the flecks of red sails beyond, “Elven land ships! Screw sea ships, I want one of those.”

“I don’t think they’re for sale,” Anders noted.

“Everything has a price,” Varric said encouragingly.

“The question is who pays it,” Fenris added.

“Now you’re getting it, Broody,” Varric said.

From up ahead, Hawke made a gesture for them to join. Merrill looked cowed. Her eyes were downcast, shoulders slumped and staff clutched tight to her breast.

“All good, Kitten?” Isabela asked.

“Everyone is staring at me,” Merrill said, “Let’s get this over with.”

Day started earlier on the Sundermount, where the sun could find them, free of Kirkwall and its quarries. It couldn’t have been more than a moment past sunrise, but the Dalish were already up and about. Anders didn’t need to spend more than a minute in the camp to know their lives were infinitely better than the ones lived in Kirkwall’s alienage.

It was a beautiful encampment, for one. Aravels were ringed about clearing, grand elven land ships like ornately carved wagons, donned with colorful silken hoods. Scattered around them, the trappings of the lives of the elves who lived in them. Pine boxes, wicker baskets, clay pots, all decorated with symbols from the forest. Trees, horns, leaves, and roots.

The Dalish moved about freely. Hunters came in with their early morning kills and traded them off to tanners who skinned and soaked them, who traded them off to cooked, who smoked or dried them. Carpenters, bowyers, metalworkers,loomers, weavers. Everyone seemed to have a place and excel in it.
Screw doing something right. The Dalish did everything right. Anders really needed to take Merrill up on hearing those stories.

Anders bumped into one of them, while he was gawking, and the elf whirled on him, boney finger pressed so close to Anders face it was almost picking his nose. “Watch your step shem! You don’t know how many arrows are trained on you right now!”

“Yes, insult the people who are only here to help,” Anders shot back. “That will work out wonderfully.” Well… Maybe not everything, Anders revised as the elf stormed off. They were about as welcoming as Velanna had made them out to be. Merrill must have been the exception.

Anders found a seat for himself, out of the way, and watched everyone disperse. Varric found the camp’s storyteller and was immediately engrossed. Isabela poked about one of the aravels. Hawke and Merrill went to meet with the Keeper. Anders considered joining them, but the Keeper knew Hawke. She didn’t know Anders. As much as he wanted to make a case for his cause, it was probably better for Hawke to make it for him. Anders tried to trust him.

Fenris came to sit with him, his expression unreadable beneath his silverite wolf helm. Now that Anders actually knew what he looked like beneath it, it seemed more silly than intimidating. “I think if I can take off my scarf, you can take off your helmet.”

“No,” Fenris said, voice tinny beneath his helmet.

“If they were going to ambush us they would have done it already,” Anders surmised.

“Ambush you, perhaps.” Fenris said. “I deal with enough questions from the witch without the Dalish adding to them.”

“I think you’re good. Brace yourself, because no one might have told you this before, but you’re not the most approachable person,” Anders joked. “You know, on account of how you kill most of the people who approach you.”

“You are not as funny as you find yourself,” Fenris said.

“What are you so worried they’ll ask you?” Anders asked.

“You see the irony in this question, I hope,” Fenris said.

“It’ll be more ironic when you tell me,” Anders noted.

“My markings,” Fenris relented. “The witch-

“Merrill.” Anders supplied helpfully.

“Is constantly asking after them. How they work. How they feel. How Danarius kept them from poisoning me. I did not escape one mage to become beholden to another.”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe ‘the witch’ is asking because she cares about you?” Anders suggested.

“No,” Fenris said.

“Well, I tried.” Anders shrugged and went back to watching the Dalish. The conversation with the Keeper did not appear to be going well, by Merrill’s folded arms and Hawke’s glower. Then again, Hawke only had so many expressions. There was happy glower, sad glower, angry glower, steamy...
glower, which was any glower… It was hard to tell.

“... She does not care for me,” Fenris said.

“Get under your skin?” Anders shot him a grin.

“You would not be the first,” Fenris joked.

Anders laughed so hard he nearly choked. Maker, but he was dark. Maybe he really didn’t mind Isabela joking about his life as a slave.

“She cares for Bela,” Fenris continued. Nicknames already. Anders was going to have to catch up. ‘Killer’ wasn’t exactly romantic, and Kitten was taken, so Hawke was going to have to do for now. “I am no better than her mirror. A shattered thing to be pieced back together to sate her curiosity.”

“I think her mirror is a bit more important to her than you are,” Anders said. “But you’re in there somewhere, deep down. Deep Roads deep, probably, but still. Merrill only cares about magic when it serves the Dalish. If she’s asking about you… it’s for you.”

Fenris didn’t have a reply. A tiny elf ran up to them, dressed in a tunic he’d dyed brown with mud, and pointed to Fenris’s helmet. “Are you the Dread Wolf?”

“Leave me be,” Fenris snapped.

“Hey!” Anders said loudly, leaping off the box to steer the boy away from Fenris. “What’s your name?”

“Tamlen,” Tamlen said. His face was mostly eyes, his head mostly ears.

“Tamlen,” Anders repeated, kneeling. “He’s a wolf, but he’s not the Dread Wolf, as far as I know.”

“He could be,” Tamlen warned him, “The Dread Wolf is a trickster! He’d never tell you.”

“How do you know I’m not the Dread Wolf?” Anders asked.

Tamlen’s eyes grew so big Anders feared they’d fall off his face, before the boy laughed. “No, you can’t be. You’re a human! ... Are you human?”

“I’m mostly human,” Anders said, letting a bit of veifire crack his skin.

“Feynriel is mostly human, too,” Tamlen said, not the slightest bit perturbed by the display of magic. Maker, to have such a childhood. “But he’s still one of the People. Is that staff? Are you a mage?”

“I am,” Anders agreed, conjuring a ball of light in his palm for the boy.

Tamlen gawked at it, delighted. “Is it true humans lock up mages?”

“Yes, it’s true,” Anders said.

“Is it true they lock up elves?” Tamlen asked.

Anders reflected on the alienage, and said “Yes, that’s true too.”

“I don’t like humans.” Tamlen decided.

“Humans don’t even like humans,” Anders joked. “Where are your parents, Tamlen?”
“Out hunting,” Tamlen said. “I’m supposed to be listening to Hahren Paivel, but a dwarf is distracting him. Don’t tell the Keeper!”

“Promise,” Anders held a finger to his lips, and Tamlen ran off.

Hawke and Merrill rejoined them, and Anders couldn’t help noticing Fenris’s helmet seemed to point away from her. “You’re good,” Hawke said.

“What’s good?” Anders asked. “I need specifics, remember.”

“She said she’d take them all, and they’d make it work. You just have to get them up the mountain,” Hawke said. “Something about all of the People being for all of the People. Merrill gets her tool, and we get all the ironbark we can carry. The only thing she wouldn’t give up was the ink. Said it was sacred.”

“It’s just ink, really.” Merrill grumbled, kicking at the pine needles littering the ground. “The blood is what makes it sacred. She just wanted to say no to something, even after I gave her real written elvish. Nothing is ever good enough for her.”

“If it’s just ink, then I’ll just get Solivitus ink and he can pay what he pays,” Hawke decided. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, really?” Anders stood up, and Fenris went to fetch Isabela and Varric, “That’s it?”

“One of our hunting parties is missing,” Merrill said. Of course there was a catch. There was always a catch, “They should have come in this morning. She wanted us to find them before she would give us anything.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to track,” Hawke said. He tilted his chin back and looked at Anders like he was trying to get the measure of him. “... Think you could get a bird’s eye view? This’d go faster.”

“You know shapeshifting isn’t Chantry-sanction.” Anders warned him, but by the Maker and all the elven gods, if hearing Hawke finally ask him to use forbidden magic didn’t do things to a man. “In the Circle, they used to say that the Maker made men, ‘immutable as the substance of the earth’ and that was how men should stay.”

“I want you how I want you,” Hawke said, unconcerned.

“He’d have to get undressed,” Merrill said thoughtfully.

Hawke barked, startling a few nearby Dalish, and Anders couldn’t help snorting. It didn’t help any that Merrill looked completely oblivious. She glanced around the encampment and sighed. “... They gave my aravel to Feynriel. Maybe we should go find a cave?”

“I should be fine,” Anders assured her. “I had the Dogs get me some new clothes last week. All wool or leather. I haven’t tested them yet, but I guess now is as good a time as any.”

"What do you mean you haven't tested them?" Hawke asked.

"Well it's a charm," Anders explained, "Like an enchantment. It's more involved than a normal spell. I usually cast it straight from my grimoire, which I don't have, so I'm going off memory. But it worked with my coat, so I guess my memory is pretty good."

"What happens if it's not?" Hawke asked.
"I don't know," Anders admitted. "I turn into a pair of socks?"

"I have enough socks," Hawke said. “Stay human."

Their group gathered at the edge of the Dalish encampment, where it dissolved into the forest. Hawke tracked the trail left by the hunters. It might have gone faster with Anders flying overhead, but Hawke wanted him to be careful, so Anders was careful. They took more than a few left turns, and Anders was beginning to suspect Hawke was bullshitting all of them until he called for a halt at the entrance to a cave.

"In there," Hawke said, kneeling to string up his bow. "More tracks go in than come out."

"There's a joke in there somewhere, I just know it," Isabela dusted her hands with dirt and drew her rapier.

"What are we looking at here, Killer?" Varric asked, loading his crossbow. "Ghasts? Wyverns?"

"Humans. Heavy armor." Hawke pointed to a footprint dug into the forest floor. There were no toes, which meant shoes, but the rest was wind to Anders.

"Mercenaries?" Fenris guessed, tapping his feet while he stretched.

"Not sure," Hawke said. "But they're gone and the elves aren't."

"Not elves. People," Merrill corrected him, anxiously wringing her staff, "Pol, Radha, Harshal, and Chandan. They're good hunters. Well… not Pol, but he's worldly. He's lived with humans. He knows how to talk to them."

"We might be speaking past tense here, Kitten," Isabela warned her.

"No!" Merrill said fiercely. "They could have just made camp. Let's hurry."

Hawke led them in darkness. Anders reached across the Veil and pulled on a wisp to hold a ball of light above his staff, illuminating the far recesses of the cave. It almost resembled the streets of Kirkwall, sandstone walls weaving a crooked path down into the depths. Cobwebs emerged, the deeper they dived.

Small things, at first, like little snowflakes hung up on spindles of thread. They grew into snowballs, from snowballs to icicles, from icicles to an avalanche of silk. Hawke sighed so long and so hard he ran out of breath. “Spiders. Why does it always have to be spiders?”

Anders inhaled mana, and exhaled fire. The silk wall dissolved into ash, painting the sandstone in grey. The makeshift snow wasn't the only thing that fell from the ceiling. Giant flaming spiders joined it, hissing their fury.

Oops. Well… that was one way to start a fight.

“Fuck!” Hawke screamed and loosed an arrow down the throat of the first to hit the floor.

Anders channeled an aura of aptitude and carved out a glyph of repulsion beneath Varric’s feet. A spider tackled Isabela, and caught her buckler between its fangs, wrenching violently back and forth. Anders heard a crack, and Isabela screamed. A root tore up from the ground and tangled around the spider’s head, twisting tighter and tighter until it popped like a pimple, a stream of black blood painting the cavern wall.
“Varric, Anders, cover Isabela,” Hawke recovered enough to order, “Fenris, forward. Merrill, give us a chokehold.”

A wall of roots sprang up, creating a narrow passage down the center of the cavern Fenris and Hawke planted themselves in. A few spiders managed to skitter in along the ceiling before Merrill finished. Anders carved another glyph of repulsion beneath Isabela and joined her in it, trusting Merrill and Varric to finish them.

The Veil was so thin this high up on the Sundermount it didn't feel like he was summoning Justice so much as becoming him. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. Veilfire split along his palms as he untangled the shattered buckler from Isabela’s arm and set it aside. Bone broke through skin at her forearm, as white as the smile Isabela flashed him through the pain. “I guess I do need you riding in on your spirit to protect me after all.”

“We are here for you,” Anders promised, “Sleep.”

He cast the spell with the command, and Isabela slept. An open fracture was no dislocated elbow. Anders couldn’t just wrench it back into place. He unwound some of the leather on his staff, fashioned a tourniquet on her arm, and went to work. It was a slow process, traction. The split bone and marrow sunk back into rent muscle, bubbling with blood and stopping him every time he came into resistance, until it finally set. His magic knit bone back together, followed by muscle, followed by skin.

The fight was over when Anders woke her. One solitary spider yet lived, pinned to the ceiling by a bolt through its thorax. It hung above them, legs twitching, spitting poison fury until Hawke put an arrow through its head.

“Need we go further?” Fenris asked, “Is this encounter not answer enough these hunters are dead?”

“We have to find them,” Merrill said. “Even-... even if they’re gone. We have to bring their amulets back to the Keeper for their families.”

They continued, Anders with strict instructions not to set fire to any cobwebs they passed. They were maybe fifty paces in when the wailing started.

“... This is place is Setheneran. Do you think a spirit got through?” Merrill asked.

“Maybe,” Anders said. “The Veil is thin enough.”


“Merrill, take point,” Hawke ordered. “Anders, more light.”

Merrill moved to the front of their group, and Anders added a second wisp to his spell. The wailing grew louder, the further they went. A vibration accompanied it, deep, erratic thumps that seemed to come from the Sundermount itself. It was a wretched sound - dark and keening like a death knell. As if the mountain itself were in mourning.

The passageway opened up into a massive cavern, where a creature was pacing over the bodies of three Dalish. It was as large as a dragon, and vaguely resembled one, save that it seemed built from bark. The spindly beast’s back was almost to the ceiling. It stumbled about on legs like massive tree trucks, a webbing of leather connecting them to its narrow body. It reminded Anders of an Envy demon, its head swaying back and forth from one Dalish to the next, but there was no malice in its motions.
Two of its five legs were missing, as was an arm and an eye. It’s one surviving arm hung low, occasionally nudging one of the lifeless hunters like a desperate child trying to shake long dead parents awake. It stumbled over on its broken feet and crashed into the ground, crawling to rest its head on the nearest Dalish, its threnody shaking the mountain.

“Well shit,” Varric said.

“What-no-... how-?” Merrill bit back a sob.

“Merrill wait-!” Hawke called too late. Merrill was gone, bolting into the cavern. She skidded to her knees at the body of the closest elf, but the creature paid her no mind. It seemed more concerned with lamenting its loss than causing more.

“...Why-... how did this happen?” Merrill bent over the body, shoulders shaking, “Oh Harshall… I’m so sorry. I’ll tell Ineria for you.”

“And so we have our answer,” Fenris said. “This thing has ended them.”

“No!” Merrill whirled on him, her green eyes rimmed in red, “It’s a varterral. It would never… They’re bound to the People. It would never hurt a Dalish. It can’t. It’s magic.”

“Because no magic ever went awry,” Fenris snorted.

“You’re not helping,” Isabela hissed, taking a cautious step into the cavern. The varterral twitched like an upside down spider, and flailed to its feet, screaming fury.

“Out!” Fenris grabbed her and dragged her back into the passageway.

The varterral’s head reared back, and Anders wasn’t going to wait to see what came out of its mouth. “Look out!” Anders conjured a barrier and dragged Varric and Hawke into it. Caustic poison flew, and his barrier shimmering when it splattered against it. It burned through rock, and sandstone, and Anders didn’t want to find out what it did to flesh.

“Merrill, get out of there!” Anders yelled.

“Time to go, Daisy!” Varric added.

“It won’t hurt me,” Merrill said dispassionately, standing. “I need to get their amulets…”

“Damnit-...” Hawke muttered through grit teeth as the three of them stumbled backwards, out of the varterral’s range and sight of Merrill. “Anders, can you?”

“I can try,” Anders supposed. This was their task, after all. If Anders wanted the Dalish to take in mages, he had to complete it. He’d faced a dragon. What was a varterral?

“Wait,” Isabela grabbed his pack, and wrenched him back by it. “Just trust her.”

“... Alright,” Hawke said.

So they waited. Varric paced, wringing his hands so much he dislodged his prosthetic and had to
Hawke and Fenris stood, backs to the cavern wall, arms folded. Isabela sat, patient, trusting, foolish. Anders had been her, a lifetime ago. He knew what it was like to wait for a friend who was never coming back. He worried at his earring for the span of two heart beats and broke.

“Fuck this, I’m getting her out of there,” Anders reached through the Veil and pulled on the spirit that waited for him there, flooding his veins, splitting his skin, burning through his eyes and painting his world in sapphire. “Merrill!” Anders yelled with Justice’s echo, running back into the cavern and straight into her as she left it.

“I found this,” Merrill said, her voice as lifeless as the hunters. She pressed a dagger into Anders’ hands, blind to the fire that split them. “… in Chandan’s back… Poor Tamlen… both his parents…” Anders turned the blade over in his hands, a chantry sunburst engraved into its hilt. “… Templars.” “… Were they mages?” Fenris asked.

“No,” Merrill said.

“Does it matter?” Anders demanded.

“What are templars doing on the mountain?” Varric asked… someone. It wasn’t like any of them would know. It wasn’t like templars needed a reason. “Since when do templars hunt Dalish? That’s just asking for a war. What’s changed?”

“I have,” Merrill said, staring down at her hands and the three amulets dangling from them, “I’m in the alienage… They were looking for me.”

“Kitten…” Isabela reached out to her, but Merrill flinched back.

“You don’t know that,” Hawke said. “Don’t this make this about you.”

“Who else would it be about?” Merrill demanded.

“… What about the kid?” Varric offered. “Feynriel. Thrask warned us they’d keep looking for him.”

“You don’t know that either,” Hawke said. “Stop borrowing trouble. We need to get back.”

“What about the templars?” Anders asked.

“What about them?” Hawke said.

“We can’t just leave them out there,” Anders gripped the dagger so tightly the leather creaked, “These were innocent people, and templars killed them for the crime of knowing a mage!”

“I don’t think anyone is suggesting that, Blondie,” Varric said, but Varric didn’t understand. Varric wasn’t a mage. He wasn’t oppressed. He was a prince. He lived a life of luxury never fearing that the people who knocked down his door would bring worse than words.

“I was,” Isabela said, “We don’t know what happened here. You found a dagger. It happens to have a sunburst on it. That doesn’t mean whoever was wielding it was a templar. Hawke has a sunburst on his necklace, and Hawke’s not a templar.”

“Not about me,” Hawke said, covering Anders’ clenched fist with his own, “Don’t make it about you. Elves— People are dead. It’s about them. Clan should know.”

Anders shook him off, “This was an injustice! It cannot go unanswered!”
“Last time you answered an injustice you nearly died,” Hawke argued, “What if they have more of those brands?”

“The mage is right,” Fenris said. “Better to deal with it now than live with a wolf at your back. We should track them down.”

“No, what are you doing? You’re supposed to be on my side,” Isabela pushed Fenris in no particular direction, “Look, has it occurred to you that there is no justice in the world? Other than that voice you keep in your head?”

“… They have Pol,” Merrill said suddenly, a hint of color that wasn’t tattooed into her flesh returning to her, “… They must. He wasn’t with the others.”

“We will save him,” Anders shoved the dagger into Hawke’s hands and started for the entrance.

He didn’t run, but the pace he set was a pace for Wardens, and there were none with him now. He heard the clatter of Hawke’s quiver as the man ran after him and couldn’t help the veildfire that burned in his palm when Hawke caught it. It spread up his arm and into his chest, flaring to life in his heart.

“Anders, stop! Think, if templars did this-“

“Enough!” Justice whirled on him, dropping Anders’ pack. “You would counsel caution when a man’s life hangs in the balance! You are a distraction – Anders spends more time convincing of you of the need for justice than working in the pursuit of it. He has no need of you!”

The human released him. Justice saw them from the cave and Anders saw them into the sky. Sundermount shrunk as a crow soared above it, surveying ruins and the pines that sprouted from them. Men of metal were below, somewhere in the twisting trails and treks; it was just for the crow to find them. It circled high and low, weaving with the wind until it caught a glint of something reflecting off the sun.

The crow perched in a tree at the edge of a clearing. Men of metal had made their nest within it, madder root red tents encircling a fire. A half-dozen templars milled about it, sharpening swords and polishing armor. Beside the fire, two of them held an elf. He was naked, save for an amulet and the ropes binding his arms and legs. His skin was a pale pink, his hair a gentle ginger, his feet an ugly black. The templars swung them out over the fire, laughing.

“Talk, knife-ear, before we burn the other end.” One of the templars ordered.

Anders fell on them. He didn’t remember the fight. He remembered the storm.

His arms alit with lightning, and his fist shattered through a silver sword of mercy to clutch the blackened heart beneath it. Each electric pulse forced another beat from the dead man’s body, twitching and seizing in Anders’ arms as his blood turned to fire and fuel and fury. The first templar to recover and come for him melted mid-charge. The molten silverite liquified flesh and evaporated blood.

The red haze choked the encampment and all within it. Never again would a brand touch their skin. Never again would they be torn asunder. Never again would they suffer a templar to live. The ground quaked, and split with fissures, spitting fire and ice, and all was red and blue.

Anders stood in the bloody abattoir of his victory, when it was over, breathing hard and holding a charred heart in his hand. The encampment was gone. The earth had swallowed it. Tent poles jutted out of the bent and broken ground at odd angles, charred bits of fabric fluttering with the pollen in the wind. Anders sneezed red. He tasted copper. He dropped the heart, coughing, and spat out a bit
of... something.

Something he didn’t want to think about. His legs hurt, and Anders slid to the ground beside the frozen body of a templar. Their eyes were sludge, icy chunks melting from their sockets down a face so purple it was almost black. Anders looked away from it, rolling up his pant legs and rolling down his socks to look at his feet. His boots fell apart with the motion, the laces...

Maker, the laces. They were woven into his legs like stitches, some bit of his charm gone horribly wrong. Anders tugged on one and winced. They were thicker than stitches, and didn’t come out as easily. They’d have to wait. He was here for a reason... for something...

For Pol. For Merrill’s friend. Anders looked around the encampment, but the bound elf was nowhere to be seen. Anders dragged himself through the wreckage, climbing over the faults left by his earthquake, calling out every so often. “Pol? Pol, where are you? It’s safe now.”

Anders found the elf at the bottom of a crevasse, his feet burnt down to the bone, staring sightlessly up at the sky.

… Damnit.

Anders slid down, taking care not to fall on him. He looked ... lost. Like he’d woken up a little too early, before the day was ready for him, and he had to face it alone. Anders looped Pol’s bound arms around his neck and climbed back out. It was a struggle to the top, but somehow he made it, even with the mess his magic had made of his feet. At least Anders still had his, not melted to marrow by a templar’s malice.

Anders couldn’t find the elf’s clothes. He searched the camp for something to substitute for modesty, and ended up pulling down a few scraps of tent. Anders laid them out over Pol, sat beside him, and waited. He pulled out the laces from his left leg and was working on his right when Hawke and the others found him.

Merrill ran to Pol. Hawke ran to him. Anders didn’t deserve it. Not after what Justice had to said to him, but Hawke was there, pushing Anders’ blood-soaked hair back from his forehead, anxious red eyes searching Anders own. “Any of this yours?” Hawke asked.

Anders shook his head. The others hung back. Anders didn’t blame them.

“Anders, do something,” Merrill begged, cradling Pol’s naked body to her chest. “Help him,”

“I’m sorry, Merrill,” Anders said.

“Heal him!” Merrill shrieked; Pol’s arm flopped limply against her side as she rocked him back and forth. “You have to - all of this – all of this death and you can’t...? You have to heal him!”

“He’s gone, Merrill,” Anders said. “I’m sorry.”

Isabela took a tentative step forward and seemed emboldened when no varterral burst forth from the wreckage to chase her back. She sat at Merrill’s side while she wept, saying nothing. Varric and Fenris joined her and did the same.

“… They tortured him,” Anders said eventually. “For information. Whatever it was... he didn’t give it up. He died bravely.”

“As if the way one died mattered,” Fenris muttered.
Merrill sniffed and laid Pol out on the ground, “When death is all there is, it matters.”

“Get his amulet,” Hawke said. “Let’s go.”

They walked back to the camp in silence.
Chapter Summary

In which there is no abstention and no absolution.

Chapter Notes

Not much to say about this chapter. It was exhausting to write so I hope it's cohesive. I appreciate any comments / bookmarks / kudos / subscriptions. Thank you for reading.

9:33 Dragon 22 Pluitanis Mid-Day
Sundermount: Sabrae Clan Encampment

News of the hunters' fate hit hard. The clan seemed determined to make it hit Merrill harder. They blamed her for everything from the hunters’ deaths to the Blight, and they meant the latter literally. Apparently her mirror had had it once, much like the staff Anders had found in Kal'Hirol, and had spread it to the clan, killing Tamlen’s namesake. Ironically, they seemed to care more for the dead Tamlen than the living one.

Anders watched the boy run off at the news of his parents’ deaths and not even the Keeper followed him. "It is the way of men, da'len," The wizened old elf said simply. She reminded Anders of an old willow tree, great and grand, failing and frail. "I will return their amulets to their families."

Their group dispersed to gather up the supplies they were promised, save for Anders. The Keeper raised an eyebrow at him, wrinkles cracking like bark across her skin, "Do you need healing, da'len?" She asked with a gesture to Anders' mangled leg.

"No, I'm all stitched up," Anders joked rather than look at his right leg. He'd gotten as far as rolling up his pant leg and taking off his sock, but hadn't had a chance to heal it. He'd developed a limp on the walk back to the camp that was like to be permanent if he didn't see to it soon. "Not to make this about me, but... what does this mean for us?"

"For us?" The Keeper repeated, tilting her head. Silver hair spilled over her shoulder like withered vines, crinkled green eyes belying little, "Of course, you mean the mages. What do templars always mean, da'len?"

"I don't know," Anders hated riddles.

"Neither do they," The Keeper said. "Or they would not fear us so. You need not worry. When I say we will take them all, I mean we will take them all. I would not turn away one of the People."

You turned away Merrill, Anders wanted to say but didn’t. "What if more templars come? I can't promise you'll be safe."

"I did not ask you to," The Keeper said. "We are the last of the Elvhenan, never again shall we
submit. Next time, we will be ready. Merrill tells me you found a varterral in the mountains. It will serve to protect the clan."

It didn't protect the hunters. "What if it's not enough?" Anders asked.

"Then I will be," The Keeper said.

What choice did he have but to trust her?

Anders found an out of the way place for himself in the ruins outside of the encampment. It wasn't the most ideal hospice, but then neither were the sewers. The only real difference was this one had a less than ideal aide. Tamlen was there, the tiny elf a shuddering bundle of knobby knees and drooping ears.

He started when Anders sat in the grass beside him, two big eyes filled with rivers the wrong kind of red.

“Hey,” Anders said gently.

“Hi,” Tamlen sniffed, looking at Anders’ leg. “Your leg is gross.”

“Yeah,” Anders agreed. His calf had swollen on the walk, as if to accommodate the thick sutures that had become of his laces. All in all, Anders supposed he should count himself lucky it was the only part of his charm that had failed. It could have been the whole boot. It could have been his small clothes. “It’s okay, though. I can heal gross things.”

“What about dead things?” Tamlen asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Anders gave the boy a smile, “But I had a friend once who could bring the dead back to life.”

“You did!?” Tamlen’s tears stopped, “How did they do it?”

“Magic,” Anders explained. “But it didn’t bring back souls - just bodies.”

“... I wish I could do that,” Tamlen told his knees, which seemed to shrug at their shortcomings, “... just for a hug.”

Anders set a hand on the boy’s shoulder, and turned it into a hug when he didn’t flinch. “It’s okay to be sad.”

“I’m not sad,” Tamlen said, but his tears begged to differ, “I’m angry.”

“It’s okay to be angry too,” Anders aimed to pet the boy’s hair, but his ears got in the way, and Anders ended up bending them about on accident.

“They left me,” Tamlen muttered.

“They left to go hunting,” Anders said. “They didn’t leave to die. Sometimes death just happens, and it’s okay to be angry, because it’s not supposed to be fair. It’ll never be fair, because you’ll never deserve what happened.”

Tamlen sniffled, and his nose scrunched up into his eyes. “Your leg smells.”

“Well, you can sit with me and my smelly leg, or you can sit with your clan,” Anders said, “But you can’t sit alone. Do you want to go back to the Keeper, and let her know you’re okay?”
Tamlen ultimately decided on his clan. Anders turned his attention back to his mutilated leg and the laces leaking from it. He took hold of one and pulled. The string slithered beneath his skin like a tapeworm, coming free with a wet sort of hiss and burning the skin it passed through. Anders endured. Tamlen’s parents hadn’t. It could have been worse.

Somehow, someway, somereason, Fenris found him. The elf squatted next to him, watching without comment until Anders couldn't take it anymore. "What?" Anders demanded.

"Did you kill him?" Fenris asked.

"Kill who?" Anders asked.

"Pol," Fenris took off his helmet; for once, he wasn't scowling beneath it. "The Dalish."

"What kind of monster -?" Anders started, "Why would you even ask me that?"

"He is dead," Fenris said, as if that was all the confirmation he needed. "You were there."

"So I must have killed him?" Anders couldn't believe he thought he’d been making progress with the man. He tugged too hard on the lace in his frustration, and bit back a curse at the pain that shot up his leg. "Where do you get off?"

"Do you remember?" Fenris asked. "Are you sure?"

… No.

"Fuck you," Anders snapped, shuffling about on his ass to face away from the accusations. It wasn't quite as dramatic as storming off, but he didn't have many options.

"It was a question. Not a condemnation." Fenris said calmly. "The others will not understand if you did."

"...what are you trying to say?" Anders twisted to look at him again. Really look at him. Fenris was squatting on the balls of his feet, helmet looped under his arm, looking at Anders like he was a corpse he’d stumbled across, and he was sad to find him that way. "Are you saying that if I accidentally killed an innocent man in a frenzy, that what? That you're okay with that?"

"No," Fenris said. "Nor should you be."

"Great, well, thanks for clearing that up," Anders waved the bloody lace at him. "You can leave now."

Fenris left.

It ate at Anders on the walk back to Kirkwall. Chewing at his feet, licking at his palms, gnawing at his guts. He thought back to the storm. The inferno. The earthquake. The corrosive miasma of blood. Pol. His feet. The blackened bones dripping melted marrow and losing toes as Anders dragged him to the surface.

No.

The templars had killed him. Anders had killed the templars.

Anders lay awake that night in the cave, where the lichen hid its constellations from the jealous sky. He’d burned Judex from the cluster, but it lingered when he closed his eyes, the luminous upside down sword rendering its guilty verdict.
It wouldn't be his first horror.

Anders couldn't sleep. He left the cave, and found himself a quiet grove to wash the gore from his clothes. The water came away red. Always red. No matter the magic. No matter the race. Anders swore he tasted copper. He sneezed, spat, and sneezed again. The memory smelled, even through his own snot. Burnt flesh, soiled trousers, upturned earth. The heart in his hand. The thing in his mouth. The rent limbs and eaten flesh.

Templars.

He’d killed the templars.

They continued down the mountain in the morning, following the cairns back to the Imperial Highway. The ancient road skirted the Planasene Forest, and ran along the Wounded Coast. They had to cross it to reach the warrens into the city if they were to avoid the main gates, and they had to avoid the main gates.

"Why?" Merril had asked, all too eager to be back in the city. "Don't we look like lumbermen? With all the lumber?"

"Lumbermen look a bit less dangerous, Daisy," Varric had said. "Less armor. More axes."

"Ironwood's not wood." Hawke had added, "Don't need anyone else knowing about your clan."

Trading with the Dalish wasn't exactly frowned upon, but it wasn't exactly smiled upon either. It was more... suspicious-squinted-upon, and the last thing Anders needed with the templars hunting him was suspicious squinting.

They took the warrens into the city, to a carpenter's shop in Hightown, who traded sovereigns easier than Hawke traded words. Hawke passed out their cuts, and they dispersed.

Anders may have had the Keeper's support, but it wasn't over. The Redwaters had made everything so easy. Out of the Gallows, onto a ship. Race was irrelevant. Without a staff, a mage was just a man. But until Anders could get Selby on board with Martin and find a new ship, the mages they freed stayed in Kirkwall, the City of Chains, where the name said it all.

After the riots, the poison, the murders… elves were noticed. Fenris and Isabela kept to the shadows when they split for his mansion. Varric escorted Merrill back to the alienage. The elven prison was guarded by guards and templars alike, but with the latter attacking the Dalish, would mages really be safer on Sundermount than in the Gallows?

… what was he supposed to tell Selby?

… what was he supposed to tell Merrill?

Nothing. Nothing because the templars were dead and Anders had killed them and only them.

Anders barely noticed Hawke maneuver him into an alley behind the carpenter's shop. The narrow pathway put even the richest streets of Lowtown to shame, affording everything but comfort. It was almost grotesque in its opulence, lined in vibrant rose trellises, with corroded copper drains breaking up the marbled gutters, as if even the nobles’ piss deserved a royal welcome into the sewers.

Hawke didn’t belong here. If Anders deserved better than Darktown, Hawke deserved better than Hightown.
"You good?" Hawke asked.

"Good with what?" Anders wondered what kind of expression he was making to warrant the question.

"Your feet," Hawke elaborated, gesturing to the blackened socks Anders had all but walked off on the way back from Sundermount. "You're not an elf. You don't have the skin for it. How are you taking it?"

"I can take a lot," Anders shrugged. He took a moment to think about what he'd said, and decided it warranted a grin, but he didn't have it in him.

"Doesn't mean you should," Hawke said, "You need new boots?"

"Franke'll spot me," Anders said. "He owes me an ale."

"Ale's a copper, shoes like yours cut a sovereign." Hawke said.

"Then it's a good thing my cut is a sovereign," Anders joked mirthlessly. Without his shoes to put it in it, Anders had no choice but to spend it. He'd stuffed the leather remnants of his boots into his pack and it wouldn't cost much for Franke to put them back together.

If only his magic could have done the same for Pol.

"I'll be fine," Anders promised, "You don't need to worry."

"Yes I do," Hawke pushed a stray strand of Anders' hair under his scarf. Something about him looked off. He was still missing teeth, and the scar on his lips broke up any twist to them, "Damned reckless of you to go after those templars. They could have had brands."

"But they didn't," Anders caught his hand and kissed it, trying to place what was wrong with him, "Don't borrow trouble."

"You are trouble," Hawke said. "Don't need to borrow it. Get what you need from the Dalish?"

… he was smiling. He looked off because he was smiling.

"... Yeah," Anders said cautiously. Smiles. What was next? Full sentences? "I did. I'm good. I thought I would go check on some friends. Let them know how it went."

"When are we getting the rest of your friends?" Hawke asked. "The kid and the wife?"

"When we can," Anders said. He didn't want to think about it. If Orsino or Bardel couldn't get Alain and Grace out... then they couldn't get them out. There were others they could save in the meantime. "I have to take who I can get for now. This helped. Really... thank you for your support. I'll see you tonight? Should I bring anything? Wine? Chocolate? Flowers?"

"Thought you said you didn't need any flowers," Hawke said.

"You might," Anders had to force his smile before he felt it.

"Don't," Hawke said. "Wouldn't know what to do if you did."

"It's not that complicated, you just eat the flowers and water the chocolate," Anders joked.

Hawke laughed, and squeezed the hand Anders had forgotten he was still holding, "Sunset. Hanged
Man. Don’t be late.”

Anders’ smile left with Hawke. He hurried to Franke’s shop in crumbling socks that came apart as fast as his composure. Hawke was right. He wasn’t an elf. His feet were in agony, more blister than callous, and his conscience felt much the same.

It wasn’t right. After Velanna, Nate, Karl… Anders should have been able to weather Pol, but the fear festered, rubbing its way into his thoughts like an ever growing pustule, and Maker help him when it burst.

Franke would take his mind off it. The cobbler had finally saved enough from working at the tanners to rent out his own space at the edge of the foundries. It wasn't the markets, but Anders couldn't say if that was for or against Franke’s favor.

It was mid-day, and the market was making use of the light that breached the sunken quarries. Marchers flooded the streets, an undulating mass of cutpurses and customers. Shopkeepers moved like serpents, snatching up any who strayed too close to the edge. Stalls blended seamlessly with shacks, making it impossible to tell which was which, save for the vendors that burst out of them. Each one was worse than the last.

"Real bread! No sawdust!” One sawdust covered merchant cried, shoving a loaf at Anders as he walked past.

"Fresh fish!” Promised another, smelling of anything but and waving whitefish at him, "Real crab!”

"Healing potions!” Called a third, hoking horseshit, or near enough by the bottle's color, "Cures chokedamp! Don't go back to Darktown without it!”

Something in him forced Anders to a halt. Something ancient. Something angry. Their soul suffered for sophistical sins. They agonized over lives others so flagrantly disregarded. This merchant, this miser, would undo all they had wrought. No potion nor poultice held such power. As if they could be bottled.

Anders clutched at the bridge of his nose. Maker, he didn't need this. Not now. Not with the quarries wallpapered with his likeness, and rabid templars substituting for guards in a gang ruled city. He just wanted to fix his shoes so he could go back to Hawke in them.

"Healing potion, serah?” The merchant pressed, scuttling like a roach to the edge of his stall where Anders had stopped, "Summer's coming. Chokedamp'll be getting worse soon. Cures the gripe and the cough too!”

“You have to stop,” Anders muttered, pushing the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I know we’re upset, but you have to stop.”

“Headache, serah?” The merchant guessed, “My potions will fix you right up!”

“What’s in it?” Anders shouldn’t have asked. He should have left. He had to leave.

“Only the finest of herbs!” The merchant cooed, holding the vial out to him like a proud parent might a child. “Prophet’s Laurel! Dawn Lotus!”

“Elfroot?” Anders supplied. His head swam, and he saw spots like sapphire stars as the merchant continued.

“Ah-yes!” The merchant stumbled, “Of course! Plenty of elfroot! Buy two! Save one for summer,
for the chokedamp!”

“How much?” Anders asked.

“You could buy it for a song!” The merchant gave a flourishing little bow from behind his counter, and gathered up a few more vials from a box he must have kept at his feet, “A fair price to save a life-”

“How much!” The counter shattered. Anders hadn’t meant for it to shatter, but the wood came apart like wind at his rage. The merchant jumped back, vials clattering at his feet. A few broke in his mad scramble; the smell of rotten flesh and overripe tomatoes spoke of nightshade and henbane. “How much are you charging the desperate, the despondent, the downtrodden!? What is the price of their lives?”

Anders grabbed the merchant by his collar when he tried to flee, and lifted him off his feet. “How much!”


Anders stared at the frayed bit of linen in his hand, so threadbare it was almost see through despite the stains. The merchant was just as desperate. Just as downtrodden. They couldn’t - “Who are you with?”

“I’m just-”

“Who are you with!?” Justice shattered the rest of the vials with a blast from the Fade.

“Friends of Kirkwall!” The merchant said quickly. “People get hooked. That’s all. It just gets them hooked, it doesn’t kill them-”

“You are a merchant of deceit and dishonor, purveying draughts of death!” Justice snarled, “The blood of innocents is on your hands. It is not the chokedamp which kills them, it is their trust in you! How many have you sold?”

“I-... I don’t-” The merchant swallowed.

“How many!?”

“I don’t know! A few dozen.”

“You will find these lost souls, you will tell them of your lies, and you will send them to the green lantern in Darktown.” Justice caught the scrabbling merchant by his jaw and forced his gaze back to him, “You will atone.”

“Okay-Yes! I’ll go-I’ll tell them!” The merchant promised - words once hollow filled with truth.

“These Friends of Kirkwall, how are they known?” Justice asked.

“The old tevinter heraldry,” The merchant said. Justice let him go, and the merchant bolted from his stall.

Anders stayed where Justice left him, kneeling in a broken stall in broken glass, the puddle left by the potions seeping into his socks. Maker, why couldn’t they just let it go? He wasn’t ready to turn
around and face the scores of templars and guards that had to be waiting for him at the commotion. This didn’t help Pol. It didn’t help Alain, or Grace, or anyone. There was always going to be some poor bastard duping some other poor bastard.

Maybe Anders was the poor bastard. If he couldn’t control himself around a simple charlatan, could he honestly say he’d controlled himself around the templars?

“That was some shit,” Someone said from behind him. Anders turned around to a face full of Dog, and felt an undeserved rush of relief. Two thugs with hair, skin, and eyes in varying shades of dirt smiled down at him, “Serves him right, yeah?”


“Haven’t seen any all day,” Sabin said, his eyes the closest thing to orange in sight, “Bastard says they have something big planned. Think they’re going for Kanky, with how Stannis is cracking down at the docks. You hear the Redwaters split?”

“I heard,” Anders pulled his scarf up over his nose, and poked his head out of the stall. Everything was brown. From the walls, to the crowds, to the merchants. No orange. No purple. “What are you doing here?”

“Making friends,” Bree’s chipped grin was almost as much a comfort as the lack of guards. “Ain’t right, what they been slingin’. Last month it was Andraste’s Ashes. This month it’s healing potions. Next month’ll be a poultice of piss. I’ll tell the Bastard you got here first, yeah? You got the blood of a Dog, Anders.”

“A feral one, maybe,” Anders picked up a piece of the broken counter, and ultimately set it back down when it didn’t puzzle itself back together. Nothing was ever so simple. “I didn’t mean to do this. I just—how heartless do you have to be to sell counterfeit healing potions?”

“Don’t feel bad, yeah?” Bree said, “No one lives long without one.”

“Ain’t your fault,” Sabin agreed, “Friends of Kirkwall are friends of no one. You should come by the Den later. Last clash with the Coterie weren’t pretty. Your mages what joined us are nice and all, but they’re no healers.”

“The Coterie is bothering you?” Anders frowned, “I told them not to give you trouble,” Well, maybe not in so many words, but he’d told the Coterie he wouldn’t stop healing the Dogs, so what was the point of fighting? “I’ll tell them to back off.”

“You got sway with the Coterie?” Sabin’s pupils ate up the orange of his eyes, as if even the color couldn’t be trusted with such talk, “How’s that possible?”

“He’s the Healer,” From how Bree said it, Anders might have been the only one in all of Thedas, “He’s got sway with everyone. You need an escort? Where you headed?”

“Franke’s,” Anders said.

He didn’t need the escort, but the walk took away some of his woes. Franke’s shop was about the size of a shoe. It smelled aggressively of leather and feet, and the walls were panelled in half-finished boots. A cramped workstation was covered in an array of tools Anders didn’t know the names for but vaguely reminded him of torture devices. The Dogs sniffed at them and fled.

Franke went to work on his boots. The repairs cost him nothing, save for the energy it took to follow along with one of Franke's stories. Anders sat in a portable bootblack chair Franke rolled up to
Hightown on occasion, massaging the blisters on his feet. The story was something about something. Anders heard the words 'feet' and 'dandelion' and 'cranberry' but it was hard to listen to anything other than the angry voice in his head.

"But carriages are just like that, yeah?" Franke paused, and looked at him for a response.

"...yeah?" Anders agreed?

"... you know what I just said?"

"Carriages are just like that?" Easy.

"Afore that."

Feet. Cranberries. Anders flipped a mental coin. "... something about dandelions?"

"You got something on your mind?" Franke guessed, "Something to do with how your boots peeled off your feet like bananas?"

Anders eyed Franke’s workstation, wondering how much he should even tell him. The first time Franke had thought him guilty of murder the cobbler had stabbed him, and a few of his tools looked suspiciously close to knives.

Then again, at least if it was Franke Anders would know he deserved it. "I threatened someone," Anders confessed, "On the way over here. And not with a good time."

Franke dropped his grin and his tools, turning to face him on his stool, "... they have it coming?"

"They were selling this addictive poison," Anders explained, "Passing it off as potions…"

"So they did?"

"The new gang put them up to it. Friends of Kirkwall, the ones who replaced the Sharps."

"So they didn't?"

"I don't know." Anders ran a weary hand through his hair. "... maybe. He was just trying to make a living."

"Franke's making a living, yeah?" Franke grinned. It was a big grin. It stretched his lips, puffed his cheeks, crinkled his eyes, until it didn’t fit on his face and Anders had to share. "Sounds like he was making a killing."

Anders snorted, "I'm not a Dog. I should have… I don't know, reasoned with him. I was just so angry."

"Something get you that way?" Franke asked.

"What doesn't make me angry lately?" Anders picked at a blister on his toe, thinking of Pol, Dec, Beth, Karl. "Every time I get something in this city, I lose something else. I wasn't even in the city this time…"

"Can you get it back?"

"No."
"Then it's gone," Franke said. "You go with it, or you go forward, yeah?"

"Yeah," It sounded like something Hawke would say. It wasn’t absolution, but maybe Anders shouldn’t have been looking for it in the first place. "Thanks, Franke."

Anders stopped by the packaging house to share the news of the Dalish with the Collective. He left out the part about the templars and asked Selby to set up a meeting with Bardel. He couldn't just speculate. He had to know why they were there.

He spent the rest of the day in his clinic with Terrie. The merchant must have made good on his promise, because a few unwitting addicts trickled in, Thom among them. "We thought it would help if I had another attack, in case I couldn't get to you in time. We thought the Friends were different. Should have known a gang is just a gang."

Eventually the patients slowed. Terrie went home. Sunset came and went. Anders stayed in his clinic, warring with himself. He should be rooting out these Friends of Kirkwall and calling them to task on their abuses. Except that was the exact line of thinking that created the Friends of Kirkwall in the first place. If Aveline had just left well enough alone they'd still have the Sharps.

Better the spirit you knew than the demon you didn't. Besides, tonight was supposed to be for him. For Hawke. A man beholden to the very institution Anders wanted to destroy. By Hawke's own admission he would never pick him over his sister, and if their work with the Collective bore fruit that day would surely come. They shouldn't be wasting time with him.

"I know you don't like him," Anders said to himself, pacing new gutters into the floor of his clinic. "I know you don't think I should be in a relationship. I know, alright? But this is different… This isn't like Karl. Hawke can take care of himself. I can take care of myself.

If we don't work, if something happens… it won't be like before. I won't... I won't try again. I have the cause now. I can't just give up on it. And- look, I have you. Okay? I won't leave you."

It wasn't enough to take the tension from his shoulders or the knot from his stomach, but it was enough for him to leave his clinic.

It was all Anders could do to keep from running to the Hanged Man after the day he'd had. He didn't want to draw any attention to himself that wasn't red eyed and rough handed. There weren't any guards that he could see, but in peace, vigilance or something.

Maker, but wouldn't peace be nice. Just one night. One peaceful night. One night with no guards and no guilt and no games. Just him and Hawke and the Hanged Man. Anders didn't know what he was looking forward to more, the bath, the bed, or the sex. Maybe the sex. Or the bath. Sex in the bath? He could compromise.

Anders got Hawke's room from Corf, and wondered if he should knock. The sun had set. What if Hawke had left? What if Hawke changed his mind? What if there were only so many times he could watch Anders slaughter a score of templars in a blind rage before it was too much for him? What if he heard about the merchant?

What if he guessed about Pol?

Anders opened the door. The room almost reminded him of a cabin - small but full. Fresh rush welcomed him; hickory and sage were burning in the hearth. To the left a bath had been drawn, by the wet and warped bilge of the wooden basin. The hint of lye marked freshly laundered towels on the bench beside it, and even a change of clothes.
A bed in the back was framed in candles, or had been, by the piles of wax that remained, and was made with extra blankets. An overfull table to the right held every choice of food and drink the Hanged Man had to offer, along with a neatly bundled parcel on the edge Anders assumed was meant for him.

Hawke was sitting in one of the chairs, spinning a dull knife into the table. He was in a tunic and trousers. No armor. No finery. No nonsense. Just undyed and untied linen, easy to put on, easier to take off. Just a normal man. Anders couldn't decide if he wanted to be him or fuck him.

Hawke looked up and the knife clattered gracelessly to the table. "You're here. Wasn't sure you'd come."

"Justice doesn't approve of my obsession with you." Anders shut the door behind him. "He thinks you're a distraction."

"You obsessed now?" Hawke crossed the floor to him, and stopped just shy of an embrace. His hands went into his belt loop instead. "Since when?"

Since I saw your eyes.

"Since you saved me," Anders said instead, a different splash of red drawing him in by the bath. There was a stand attached to it, filled with soaps and salts, pumice and emery, along with a small bowl of embrium petals. "I thought you said I wasn't getting any flowers."

"For the bath," Hawke explained.

"Which is for someone else?" Anders teased, dancing around him to the parcel. Hawke caught him about the waist and spun him in the opposite direction.

“No,” Hawke gave him a push, “Bath first.”

Anders went with an obedient chuckle, shrugging out of his coat, only to stop when he noticed Hawke wasn’t undressing.

“Just me?” Anders guessed.

“Had one, waiting for you to get here,” Hawke explained.

“So, you’re just going to watch?” Anders grabbed the hem of his tunic, and wiggled his hips to pull it from his trousers, “Should I do a special dance? Anders spicy shimmy?”

“Get in the bath or I throw you in it.” Hawke warned him.

“Promise?” Anders grinned. It was funny at first, but it was too… planned. Too deliberate. Anders didn't do deliberate. He did spontaneity and passion and stumbling with your pants around your ankles. The last person he'd been deliberate with…

It wasn't the same. Anders wasn't the same. He was starved and scruffy and scarred. Hawke had already seen him naked, but not like this. The rogue pulled up a chair and sat at the edge of the bath, like a Blooming Rose patron waiting for a dance, but Anders wasn’t a rose.

“What?” Hawke said, not quite a question.

“Are you- I mean-”

“Throwing you-” Hawke decided and stood.
“Okay, alright,” Anders warded him off and turned around, but his hands felt frozen.

“You need help or something?” Hawke guessed, and then he was behind him, warm hands under Anders’ tunic, running up his chest and over scars to push it up and off and away. They lingered on the mark Rolan had left, when the sword had cut clean through him. “This should have killed you,” Hawke noted.

“The Maker didn’t want me,” Anders joked, but it didn’t feel like a joke.

Hawke kissed his neck, a possessive press of firm lips and coarse beard, “I do,” Calloused fingers walked their way down to Anders’ waist, and undid the laces to his trousers in a few deft flicks. They fell off Anders’ hips, and his smalls followed. “Get in.”

Anders stepped obediently into the bath. The water had gone tepid, and he reheated it with a breath of magic before sliding down to sit. It was just water, really, but it felt like an ocean to lose himself in. Hawke sat on the chair behind him with a wet cloth and a bar of soap, and didn’t so much wash his back as massage it. Anders let him, leaning against his legs, mind as empty as the Void. It was just nice. Just quiet. Just Hawke.

“This isn’t what I expected,” Anders admitted, worried he’d end up falling asleep.

“What did you expect?” Hawke asked, adding a handful of embrium to his bath. Soap and salt hid whatever color the grime from Sundermount had dyed it, and the white foam and red petals felt surreal. Almost Fade born.

Maybe Anders had already fallen asleep. Then again this wasn’t exactly a dream Justice would approve of. “You bending me over the table and fucking the Fade out of me?”

Hawke seemed to consider it. “Still can,” He tangled a hand in Anders’ hair, and tugged him back into a kiss that wasn’t half as rough as Anders wished it was. It stretched, long and languid, barely breaking for breath. Hawke’s free hand mapped Anders’ chest, tracing skin scars pulled taunt and sinking beneath the waters.

Anders clutched at him, his hands a slippery mess in Hawke’s hair, in his beard, as desperate for some kind of purchase as he was some kind of friction. His breath pitched up the lower Hawke’s hand traveled. Blunt nails combed through the trail of ruddy brown hair on Anders’ trembling stomach, running from navel to cock and stopping just shy of either.

Anders arched his hips into nothing at another pass from Hawke’s hand, a sound more whimper than whine swallowed by Hawke’s mouth. Maker, Anders couldn’t take anymore teasing. His skin felt flushed, his pulse burning in his ears, his toes, his cock, and Hawke barely touched him.

Anders bit Hawke’s bottom lip, near to begging when Hawke’s fingers finally wrapped around his aching cock. Hawke moved with an almost painful deliberation, one finger at a time, as if it was important Anders feel everything there was to feel.

Hawke’s slow rhythm was a perfect torture. Tension coiled in the pit of Anders’ stomach with every steady stroke, until he was sweating with the need to drag Hawke into the bath with him. To feel his weight over him, Anders’ ankles on his shoulders, to be fucked until he screamed and the water went cold.

“I’m not-” Anders tilted his head back to speak, and Hawke abandoned his mouth to lavish his neck. He carved a path down to Anders’ collarbone with teeth and tongue that left Anders shaking with shivers, “I’m not getting a table-fucking impression here.”
Hawke’s hand swept up and down Anders’ length, barely rippling the water. “What impression you getting?”

“Something-fuck,” Anders whimpered. He pushed his foot into the rim of the bath, and thrust impatiently into Hawke’s hand. It sent a wave of water over the edge, “Fuck - something slower than that.”

“You want me to go faster?” Hawke gave his ear a questioning tug with his teeth.

“I don’t know,” Anders said thickly. Maybe he wanted to be tortured. To spend the night at the edge of abandon. Hawke pushed wet strands of flaxen hair out of Anders’ face and pressed soft lips to his brow. Anders decided he wanted Hawke to have him every way a man could be had. “That feels - a little faster;”

“Like this?” Hawke’s pace pitched up, a blissful friction that turned the tension in Anders’ stomach to fire, and spread it to his chest, his feet, his hands. Anders’ bit his lip to stop it from escaping out his mouth, but Hawke pushed his lips apart with his thumb. “Talk.”

“Like that,” Anders gasped, a haze of pleasure drowning out every thought in his head “Yes, like that - that’s good, don’t stop.”

“Not for the Maker,” Hawke promised, sliding his fingers into Anders’ mouth. Anders sucked the taste of salt off them until he couldn’t, and his breath turned to broken gasps and desperate pants. Ecstasy wound through him, so tight and tense Anders feared he might snap.

“Fuck, Hawke,” Anders choked. Hawke hummed some kind of response against his neck, the sharp press of his teeth accompanying each kiss. “I’m so close. I need - Maker, I need, just, just - fuck.” Anders covered Hawke’s hand with his own, and found the perfect rhythm to take him over the edge.

He came hard, arching his back and shaking through his climax. It was blinding, breath-taking, release. Waves of pleasure pushed his pulse into his throat, where it tangled up with the breathe Hawke had stolen from him.

Anders rode out his high and crashed like an addict. He sunk into the bath, and suddenly the water was too cold. The sweat on his skin was too hot. The wooden basin was too flat for his ass. His stomach cramped, and he realized he’d been tensing it.

Hawke’s fingers combing salt through his hair grounded him. Anders stretched, popping more than a few overworked bones. A breath of magic reheated the water, cooled his skin, and steamed the air. He leaned back to find Hawke watching him like his namesake.

Anders gave him a lopsided grin, “Thanks.”

Hawke bark-laughed, and left him to retrieve a towel. For the floor, apparently, and not for Anders. Hawke threw it down to soak up the water they’d spilled, and moved his chair to the opposite end of the basin. He picked up the pumice and one of Anders’ feet, and went to work scrubbing Anders’ callouses.

Anders could definitely get used to this.

"Keep it up and I might fall asleep,” Anders warned him. This must have been what it felt like to have a servant. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so quick to judge Hightown after all.

"You'll wrinkle,” Hawke said.
"Give you a look at your future." Anders joked without thinking.

“I’ll take it,” Hawke said. And he smiled. He wore it well, rare as it was, a twist to his lips that carried up to his eyes. It crackled there like like Soul’s Day fire, the kind of passion that could steal the dead back from the Maker.

Anders met his eyes and felt… calm. It was a weight, but he could bear it. He wanted to bear it. Hawke scrubbed at a blackened blister with the same expression, and Anders wiggled his toes at him. “Is this really how you imagined tonight?”

“Like taking care of you,” Hawke said easily.

“What about you?” Anders asked.

“What about me?” Hawke repeated.

“You want a go?” Anders pushed his foot into Hawke’s chest, and the dark hair that showed at his plunging neckline, “I’m worried your mother is going to tear through the Veil like some kind of demon of abstention before you get a turn.”

Hawke chuffed, “Later. Dinner’ll get cold.”

Anders scooped up a handful of suds and flicked them at him for the poor excuse, “I can reheat it.”

“Anders,” Hawke pulled Anders’ foot to his lips once he’d scrubbed it pink, and kissed his toes, “Relax.”

“Never.” Anders said.

“We have all night,” Hawke switched feet. “Didn’t plan on spending it sleeping. Have dinner with me.”

Anders picked up the emery, and went to work on his nails, squinting with mock-suspicion that was only slightly mock. It seemed a bit one-sided, but damned if he didn’t enjoy it. The last time anyone had pampered him… was the last time Hawke had gotten him a bath.

If this was what Hawke wanted… “I’m not getting dressed.”

“Didn’t ask you to,” Hawke shrugged.

“At least take your shirt off,” Anders said.

Hawke’s tunic came off. He looked better without it. Virile. Broad shouldered and strong chested, dark hair covering tanned skin decorated with colorful ink. Anders poked the red anvil tattoo at Hawke’s waist with his toe. “Red Irons? Right?”

“Right,” Hawke agreed.

“What are the others?” Anders asked.

“Get out, and I’ll tell you,” Hawke said, finished with his feet.

Anders climbed out, and Hawke handed him a towel Anders reserved for his hair. Hawke turned around so Anders could see his back, and glanced at him over his shoulder. “Pick one,”

Anders could probably guess, but he traced over the mabari on Hawke’s shoulder with the chantry
sunburst devouring its eye. “Ash Warriors,” Hawke said.

The next was an arrow on the inside of Hawke’s arm fletched with red, which was apparently, “Just an arrow.”

The last was a skull, framed in oars, a slash of red across its eyes that made Anders a little queasy. “Crimson Oars.”

“Any others?” Anders wondered, snaking his fingers into Hawke’s belt.

“A few,” Hawke turned back around and pushed Anders towards the table, overflowing with everything the Hanged Man had to offer. There were more embrium petals, scattered between plates Anders hadn’t noticed before. Just because. Just for Anders. “Sit, eat-”

Anders cut him off with a kiss, running his fingers through Hawke’s beard for the strong jaw beneath it. He had a slight taste of mint, and smelled like clean things, linen and lye, salt and soap. Just because. Just for Anders. “I didn’t need all this,” Anders said.

“Yes you did,” Hawke locked his arms around his waist, and held him like he owned him.

Anders wished he did, “Fuck me.”

“Again?” Hawke asked around Anders’ eager lips. His hands dropped from Anders’ waist to his ass and squeezed, a moan spilling from Anders’ mouth and into Hawke’s when his fingers wandered his backside.

“I’m a Warden,” Anders said.

“Alright.”

Hawke lifted him into the nearest chair and knelt between his legs, like a disciple come to worship. He sucked on his fingers almost leisurely, one at a time, wetting his lips at every pass. Anders squirmed in anticipation, watching him. Hawke raised an eyebrow at him, and Anders whined, his cock stiff and throbbing and leaking down his shaft.

”Hawke,”

”Relax,” Hawke swept his fingers up the inside of Anders’ thigh until he reached his cock. He traced ridges and veins, gentle and unhurried, making Anders twitch and shiver.

”Hawke, I swear-”

”Relax,” Hawke bent to him, following the path left by his fingers with his tongue.

”Maker, Hawke, I want-” Pleasure coursred through Anders, a moan catching in his throat when he tried to speak. Hawke wrapped a slick hand around Anders cock and pumped, turning his words to breathy whispers, “I want you to fuck me so bad.”

”Am fucking you,” Hawke mumbled, breath warm on wet skin. His lips stretched over the head of Anders’ cock, and slid slowly along his length. Anders had to fight to keep from thrusting up into his throat. Hawke took to him with vigor and looked like desire. Raven hair swayed with every bob of his head, hiding eyes Anders was sure would end him.

He clutched at Hawke’s shoulders, lost to the pace, the pleasure, the heat, the scratch of Hawke’s beard on his thighs and the wet slide of skin on skin.
“Oh fuck, oh fuck, Hawke-...” Anders whimpered. He writhed. He felt like crying. Hawke hummed encouragement on his cock, a gentle vibration that tangled up with the slick friction of Hawke’s tongue and sent spasms of pleasure through him.

“Oh fuck - yes - I'm going to - I'm right there,” Anders grabbed the chair, afraid he’d slip off it. Hawke didn't change his pace, saliva escaping around his lips and dripping down Anders’ cock. Anders dissolved, a mess of gasps and shivers, until Hawke found his hand, and tangled their fingers together.

It ended him. Anders’ climax burned through him, so hot the Fade burned with him, fire crackling along his veins and up his throat. He exhaled smoke, and tears of release turned to steam at the corners of his eyes.

Hawke was resting on his thigh when Anders came back to his body, beard wet with saliva and cum. He watched the rise and fall of Anders chest as he recovered, his face uncharacteristically soft.


Hawke shrugged a shoulder, “You look good.”

“Yeah?” Anders aimed for a smirk. Only half his face complied.

Hawke ran a hand through the red-brown hair on Anders stomach. “You are good. You make me better.”

“That's…” Anders didn’t know what to say about that.

He hated himself for his hesitation, but Hawke didn’t seem to care. Like he’d said it just to say it and to the Void with what Anders thought. It was real. He was real. Hawke stood up and grabbed two cloths from the table. One cleaned his face, and the other he dropped in Anders’ lap. “You hungry?”

“Always,” Anders grinned.

“Eat,” Hawke ordered, moving to sit in the chair across from him.

The longer Anders looked over the choices littering the table, the more deliberate they looked. It was all on purpose. All for him. There was no ale, only cider, and not everything was part of the Hanged Man’s menu. The jellied pigs feet, sure, but the pickled eggs were a Ferelden recipe. The nordbotten fruit stew an Anderfels one.

Anders picked up a fork and poked a plump apricot with it. His mind filled with unbidden memories of his mother, and the jar of coins they’d kept in the kitchen for when the traders came in with fruit from Antiva. The way she’d grab his hand, and he’d grab the jar, and they’d run full tilt through the village for dried apples, prunes, or whatever else was in season.

Anders set his fork back down and scrubbed a tear out of his eye. He pushed the fruit stew aside, and ate pigs feet instead.

Hawke eyed the scorned dessert, “There’s no brandy in it,”

“No, that’s not-...” He’d explain another time… maybe. “I think you cured it.”

“Cured what?” Hawke asked around a mouthful of pickled egg.

“That condition where you open your mouth and you’re an asshole,” Anders explained.
“Doubt it, but I’ll take your cock over my foot,” Hawke said.

Anders laughed, “You really think I look good? Not like… what did you call me once… vulture shit?”

“Skinny,” Hawke said, ignoring the barb, “I’ll fix it.”

“Promise?” Anders grinned.

“I take care of what's mine,” Hawke said seriously. Maybe too seriously. That was the second time Hawke had called him ‘mine’ and Anders was afraid of getting used to it, “Do what you need for the city. I'll keep you safe from it.”

“Can you just fuck me now?” Anders asked, and was rewarded with the wrong kind of pounding. The door rattled with the force of whoever knocked on it, startling Anders out of his chair and into a fighting crouch. He summoned a suit of rock armor, in lieu of his clothes, and webbed electricity through his fingers.

“Hawke!” Aveline’s voice called through the door. “Are you in there? We need to talk!”

“Relax,” Hawke said, standing, “It’s just Aveline.”

“Aveline, the Guard-Captain of Kirkwall,” Anders frowned, but let the spells disperse. He debated the need for pants. “You’re not seriously answering her, are you?”

“Hawke?” Aveline called again.

“I’ll just tell her to come back later,” Hawke waved him to the opposite side of the door.

“You damn well better,” Anders went, but he pouted, arms folded and frowning, foot tapping for good measure.

Hawke opened the door enough for himself, and no one else, “What is it?”

No guards or templars burst through, so Anders supposed he counted that a win.

“We need to talk,” Aveline said from where Anders couldn’t see.

“Talk,” Hawke said. “I’m busy.”

“Not here,” Aveline said, “Downstairs. Put a shirt on and meet me there in five.”

Hawke shut the door. The heavy thud of metal on hardwood grew fainter as the guardswoman departed.

“Is put a shirt on code for get the fuck out of Kirkwall?” Anders wondered, while Hawke went to find his shirt, “Should we jump out the window?”

“It’s code for put a shirt on,” Hawke said, dragging his tunic over his head, “I know you two don’t get on, but before we were anything, Aveline and I were close.”

“Close…” Anders repeated slowly, wringing a finger in his ear to check for water, “Close as in speaking strictly proximity? As in I am close to the bath because I am in its general vicinity?”

“We were something,” Hawke explained. “Not sure what, but something.”
“How?” Anders lost his neck. His head recoiled into his shoulders in disgust, “Why?”

“You’re a lot alike,” Hawke said.

“I’ll try to forgive you for that,” Anders said.

“She’s strong,” Hawke shrugged, “Does good work. Doesn’t put up with my shit. I like that in a person.”

“What happened?” Anders asked.

“You,” Hawke said. “Was already south. Wouldn’t have worked anyway.”

“Why not?” Anders asked, “I mean, aside from the obvious guard falls for mercenary problem. Not that I want to share, but she doesn’t really seem very…” Anders tried to find the right adjective, but most of the ones that came to mind also applied to Hawke. The longer he thought about it, the more it made sense, and the more his head tried to sink into his spine.

Hawke didn’t answer, at first. He stopped, hand on the door knob, and tensed like he was going to say something rough. It wasn’t Anders business, it didn’t matter, don’t pester me. Anders watched him soften out after a great deal of effort. “I killed her husband. Meant it for mercy. He had the Blight, but we should have tried to do something. To find a Warden. To find a healer… To find you.” He smiled, but this one he didn’t wear well; it was too heavy. Too full of rue and regret. “Instead of killing an innocent man. But I live with it, so she doesn’t have to.”

Hawke left.

Anders sat at the table, waiting for Hawke to get back and considering what he'd said. Anders thought of all the things he'd learned to live with. The things that weren't fair. The things he didn't deserve and the things he did, and wondered if he even knew which was which anymore.

Anders eyes slid to the package, and his hands followed, and before he knew it was open.

It was a book. Darktown's Deal by Varric Tethras. Well… not everyone could be good at giving gifts. Anders flipped through a few pages disinterestedly, skimming passages about the Carta and the Coterie. Well written, sure, but it wasn’t The Search for the True Prophet, or Phylacteries: A History Written in Blood. Anders closed the book, and a leaflet flew out and onto the floor.

It was a note, scrawled in near perfect penmanship.

For the man who changed my life
And became a better part of it
May the Maker judge him whole
For the world left him broken.
Until the Last Dog is Hung

Chapter Summary

In which the last dog is hung.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. I sincerely appreciate any feedback, constructive or otherwise. If you are interested, I have started a new side-story to follow along with Accursed Ones about Fenris/Isabela/Merrill's relationship. It will be updated as their relationship in AO progresses.

9:33 Dragon 23 Pluitanis Late Evening
The Hanged Man

Anders tried to read it. He genuinely tried. He started at the table, and wandered to the bed, and after several contortions ended up on his back, one leg in the air, Darktown's Deal balanced precariously on his foot. The words were bent at impossible angles, but he could see them, sort of, so that had to count for something.

It wasn't his fault. Kirkwall's gangs were the last thing Anders wanted to think about. The vial of oil he'd found by the bed was infinitely more entertaining. Anders rolled it between his fingers, watching the liquid slide back and forth behind the glass. There was something wonderfully torrid about it, even corked instead of cocked.

He couldn't wait to use it. Hawke had been so quiet. He'd made almost no sound, even with his lips stretched and straining around Anders' cock. Anders wanted to hear him, to see him, to feel him. The way Hawke's raven hair had swayed as his head rose and fell in Anders' lap had been beyond captivating. He'd seemed so attentive, so focused, like he couldn't afford to fail. Like it was possible to.

Anders took a hand to himself for the memory, trying to recapture the way Hawke had felt. The way he'd held him in the bath, each slow stroke paired with a swipe from his tongue or the press of his teeth on Anders' neck. His harshly whispered, "Talk," as he'd forced Anders' lips apart.

Anders rolled his hips, and the book fell off his foot and onto his face.

"Ow," Anders sighed and set the book aside. Whatever it was shouldn't have been taking Hawke this long.

Anders dressed in the change of clothes Hawke had brought him. They were Hawke's clothes, with Hawke's smell. Dog, dirt, hints of lye. Anders wondered if he could get away with keeping them. It would be nice to have something of him. The gift was a gift, but it reminded him of Varric, not Hawke. Anders didn't lay awake at night for want of the storyteller. He wanted the one about whom the stories were told.
He snatched up his scarf and wrapped it lazily around his head on his way out of the room. Light steps took him down the crumbling hall and warped stairs, to the tavern floor. Hawke was by the bar, still arguing with Aveline about something. A few guards and patrons were involved in whatever it was, and seemed to be taking sides.

Anders didn't make it more than a few steps before Hawke locked eyes with him. The archer gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Anders stopped. Hawke flicked his eyes up, so back up Anders went. He hovered at the top of the stairs, the wrong kind of tension building in his stomach.

Had the merchant gone to the guard? Had someone reported seeing him? Had the possessions started back up, or was it just another job?

Anders didn't know. He had to know. He went back into the hall to think and to pace, and succeeded only in the latter. The third time he passed Varric's door, he decided patience wasn't one of his virtues. Anders knocked, rattling the wood so violently a cloud of dust fell off the mantel and onto Varric’s head when he opened it.

Flaxen hair stuck up on one side, as if freshly peeled off a pillow. Varric frowned, "Blondie, if I ever want a midnight snack, you'll be first on my list, but-

"I'm a whole meal, thank you," Anders interrupted, anxiously wringing his hands, "What's going on? Aveline is downstairs with Hawke, and something’s up. Do you they're planning to arrest me?"

"What?" Varric woke up. He threw his jacket on over his night frock, and hurried downstairs.

Anders followed him, hiding in the large shadow cast by the small man.

Crowds of patrons and guards alike parted for him, and Varric clambered up onto a chair.

"Gentlemen, not-so-gentlelady, to what does this humble establishment owe the honor?"

Aveline shot Varric a look. Thin lipped, furrowed brow, sidelong eyes. It was the sort of look that said you shouldn't be here, this isn't for you, but I can't make you leave. She wore it often around Varric, but rarely with such sorrow. When she spoke, it was with the voice of the Guard Captain of Kirkwall, and not Aveline Vallen.

"Hawke is under arrest for the murder of-" The uproar from the patrons cut off the rest of Aveline's accusation, but Anders didn't need to hear the rest.

His blood went cold. Bartrand. It had to be Bartrand. It had to be Anders' fault. He should have known he couldn't wipe away Hawke's debt so easily. But why just Hawke? Why wasn't Varric under arrest?

The patrons rioted. The guardsmen quailed. One caught a tankard of ale on his shield. Another took a pig's foot to the face. One of them drew their sword, and a patron shattered a glass in response.

Anders grabbed the hem of Varric's nightfrock and tugged to get his attention. "Do something!"

Varric stood on the chair in a daze, as if he wasn't sure if he was still sleeping. Anders wished he’d wake up. "Okay, shit, let me think."

"Think faster," Anders hissed.

"You guards are a bunch of stinking road apples!" Someone yelled, "No way we're letting you arrest Hawke!"

"Arrest him!" Someone else suggested, "Good riddance, fucking Hightown trash, think you’re so
much better than us now!"

“Piss on that!” Yet another someone spat, “Hawke owns the mines! I can’t go back to working for that Orlesian! My wife is dead because of him!”

“Aveline’s an Orlesian name!” One of the patrons seemed to realize, “No wonder she ain’t done shit for Fereldens! Thrice-cursed whorespawn.” They picked up their plate and whipped it at Aveline’s head. The Guard Captain ducked, and the ceramic shattered on the wall behind her, narrowly missing Corf behind the bar.

Hawke grabbed the hand of the man who’d thrown it, and twisted it behind his back when he went for a second. “Enough!” Hawke roared. The Hanged Man went silent, save for the awkward clatter of a few plates and mugs, “She’s just doing her damn job!”

"That's right!" Varric said. He must have had an idea. Please let him have an idea.

Varric waved his arms for the attention of the crowd, loudly projecting his voice through the Hanged Man, “Our dear Guard Captain is just following orders. So who gave them? Who beside the Viscount has the authority?” He paused theatrically, but no one offered up any suggestions. Not even Aveline, though Anders hoped she knew where her own orders came from. Anders didn’t know what her silence meant, and couldn’t tell fact from fiction as Varric continued.

“Magistrates. Magistrate Vanard, if we're being specific. The magistrate’s son Keldar was the Demon of Death, and Hawke happened to be there when he died. So now he's falsely accused Hawke of whatever Hawke is accused of. Falsely.

Now, I’m sure we all remember what the magistrate's son was doing to elves. And I'm sure our dear Guard Captain wouldn’t let the magistrate use the guard to fulfill his own personal vendetta. Why don’t we all-”

“Fuck elves!” Someone yelled, “Who cares about knife-ears? Quarter of Lowtown was quarantined after that stint with the poison gas. If not for the Darktown Healer I’d be dead. If Vanard’s son was killing them-”

“Shut the fuck up, Marco, you racist arse. Knife-ears ain’t the problem, it was them oxmen gave them the poison gas!”

“You’re both stupid!” Norah chimed in, “Ain’t the point. Hawke was one who saved us from the poison gas, not the guard. None of you cravens were out in the streets, sealing off that mess with him, were you? Varric's right. We oughta go to the Viscount, tell him what we think of his Magistrate messing with Hawke.”

“We oughta fix these bootlicking bitches, is what we oughta do. You guards are in here trying to arrest the only champion Lowtown’s ever had, when you oughta be out there looking for the Butcher!”

“This isn’t a negotiation,” Aveline bellowed over them all, “This is an order, straight from-”

“What are you doing about the Friends of Kirkwall?” Someone interrupted her, “Why don’t you ever patrol past the markets!?”

“Go back to Ferelden if you don’t like it in Kirkwall,” Suggested one of the patrons on the side of the guards. A Marcher. “No one will miss a few base-born jackals. And take Hawke with you - his family’s a bunch of robes and robe-fuckers.”
“Mals, you say one more bad word about mages I’m gonna kick your ass so hard the next thing out of your mouth will be my boot.”

“You’d know a thing or two about having shit up your ass, Marco. You see the Healer so much I bet he’s fucking you like the little bitch—”

Fighting erupted again. Patrons threw cups, plates, and food, attacking guards and each other with chairs, benches, and the occasional fork. The few guards Aveline had brought with her kept their shields up, save for the one who'd drawn his weapon. His sword slashed madly back and forth in the air before him, despite Aveline’s orders to sheath it. Someone knocked into someone, who knocked into someone, who knocked into Varric.

The dwarf fell, the guardsman flailed, and the sword skewered him.

It wasn't clean. It wasn't easy. Varric pitched off the chair, and the sword thrust through his heart and lung. Blood ran like wine down his chest, more than seemed dwarvenly possible. The weight of his fall twisted the sword out of his inadvertent assailant’s hand, and the guardsman struggled to catch him. They toppled together, Varric’s blood painting the guardsman’s uniform in all the colors of the sunset.

Time slowed. Time could be funny like that. Tankards, cups, and plates dropped from patrons’ hands, and didn’t fall so much as float. Guardsmen twisted sluggishly toward their fellow. Avenline’s knees bent as if to lunge, her hands outstretched, but the air had turned thick as water, and not even Hawke was fast enough. His hand snatched out and fisted around the collar of Varric’s jacket, but the jacket was all he saved.

“No! Don’t you dare!” Someone screamed. Someone who sounded like Anders, but couldn’t have been, because Anders couldn’t be here, in this moment, watching this happen to his friend.

Varric’s made a sound half a gasp, for he had only half his lungs to make it. He had one breath left in him. Maybe two. In a mortal world, with mortal constructs. Time. Life. Death. They caught him. The magic was an extension of them. A hand that ripped from the Fade and through to Varric’s heart, beating it despite the sword that pierced it. The weapon didn’t rip from Varric’s body so much as flow free, and melt into a lifeward on the floor beneath them.

It burned through the hardwood floors, a wall of flame erupting from the molten metal. It encircled them in an aurora of blue and green veilfire, shutting them off from the world and any who would dare to interrupt.

Anders gathered Varric into his arms, a hand to his friend’s chest pulsing with all the benevolent energies the Fade had to offer. Varric grabbed feebly for Anders’ hand, and tried for another sound. Only blood answered him, frothing at his lips, dying his teeth a bitter pink.

“We are here,” Anders promised, knitting the rent muscle and tissue back together. Slowly. Carefully. Varric’s body couldn’t take the shock of coming apart and snapping back together all at once. It would have broken him. Anders was sweating with the effort, with the heat, with the fear of what awaited him outside the wall of flame when they were done.

“Don’t let me die, Blue,” Varric whispered when he could whisper. “Not ready to go just yet.”

“We are here,” Justice promised - Anders relaxed into his presence, in a way that didn’t feel so much as his mortal withdrawing as he usually did, as tangling together in trust. “You will not meet an ignominious end.”
“Ignominious,’ Varric repeated weakly, “Good one. Remind me to use that,”
“I shall endeavour to do so, should we speak again under better circumstances.”
“Cards?” Varric offered.
“A diversion I play poorly.”
“You’ve got to be better than Blondie,”
“... So I am told,” They smiled.

Varric mended. They were meant for it. For death - or its deterrence. Justice traced the scar left on
the dwarf’s chest, a shade lighter than the rest of his skin, smooth and void of hair. “Now we match,”
Anders joked. The flames receded with his spirit, and the world was waiting for him, and what he’d
done.

It was like waking to a demesne within the Fade. The Hanged Man had changed, like the aftermath
of an earthquake. Tables had been overturned, blocking windows and exits. The night’s patrons
were huddled behind the bar, the staff and some of the guards blocking them from leaving. The rest
manned the door, save for Norah, Hawke, and Aveline, who sat patiently waiting outside his
lifeward.

Well… maybe not patiently. Hawke’s hand was burned, and loosely wrapped with a wet bar towel.

“Thank the Maker,” Aveline sighed.

“Maybe thank Blondie?” Varric suggested, rubbing at his chest. Dried flakes of blood came free of
his frock and dusted the burnt floor beneath him. “Let’s… not do that again. I’m not ready to meet
my ancestors.”

“Tethras,” The guard who’d stabbed him called from his place at the bar, “... Varric, I swear I never
meant-”

“Quiet, Wright,” Aveline cut him off.

“I could stand to hear it,” Varric stumbled to his feet with a hand on Anders’ shoulder. The
guardsman erupted with apologies. Anders stayed on the floor, trying to think of his exits.

All of the patrons and guards had seen him for what he was - an apostate. To the keener, an
abomination. The doors and windows were blocked. It left only the stairs. There’d been a window in
the room he shared with Hawke. He could fit through it, but only as a crow.

Did he change back into his clothes? Did he leave without them, knowing he could likely never
charm another set without risking death until he got Amell’s grimoire back? What about Hawke and
the arrest? Was that still happening?

Someone touched him. Anders jumped up and away from the contact. He felt the presence of his
spirit just beneath his skin, waiting, ready, but it was just Hawke. His eyebrows were raised, his
expression tense. The look said something in a language Anders didn’t speak, but desperately
wanted to. When Anders didn’t react to it, Hawke put himself between Anders and the guard,
pushing him gently back towards the stairs.

Run. That was what it said. But how could he? Anders couldn’t just leave him.
Justice must have agreed with Hawke. Anders didn’t recall casting anything, but the burns on Hawke’s hand cooled and receded as if of their own accord. As if in thanks. Or as if in goodbye.

“This never happened,” Aveline was saying to the patrons they’d herded behind the bar like sheep. A few bleated back in protest, and Aveline shouted over them. “We came. We arrested Hawke. We left. No one was hurt. Are we clear?”

Silence. Nervous glances.

“Are we fucking clear!??”

“That’s him, ain’t it?” The one named Mals guessed, pointing at Anders. “He’s a fucking mage.”

Someone, drunkenly, "Varric's a mage?"

“He’s the one what’s on all the posters,” Mals continued, “The arsonist! The Terror of Hightown!”

The same someone, slurring, “Varric’s an arsonist?”

Aveline looked at one of the guards in her group, “Melindra.”

“Aye, Captain,” The one name Melindra nodded. She was a petite woman, all but swallowed by her uniform. The pauldrons came almost up to her ears, and framed a soft face, with soft eyes, and a soft smile that turned deadly when she drew her sword, and stepped behind the bar.

“What are you-” Mals took a step back, as did all the patrons.

“I’m sorry, Mals,’ Melindra said; even her voice was soft, gentle and genuine. “It was an accident. There was a brawl. I fell out of formation and you attacked me.”

Mals took another step back, bumping into a patron who shoved him forward. “I didn’t-!”

“You had a glass,” Melindra explained, picking a bottle up off the bar and shattering it against the counter. She dropped it at Mal’s feet, the air thick with the scent of spiced wine, blood, and burnt hardwood, “It was a weapon. I had to defend myself.”

"I don't- No! You can't-” Mals panicked, running in a small circle like a lamb that finally realized it was sacrificial.

He threw himself at Corf, and was promptly pushed away. “He was always angry,” The bartender added, “Never paid his tab.”

“Wright saw,” Melindra said, with a glance back to the guard who’d more or less done what she was describing. Wright looked to Varric, then to his Guard Captain, and ultimately nodded, “I didn’t mean to kill you-”

“I was drunk!” Mals screamed, flinging himself down on the floor where Anders’ couldn’t see him. “I’m drunk. Don’t know what I saw. Didn’t see anything. Blacked out, before you got here.”

“Is that right?” Melindra asked.

“Yeah,” Mals said from somewhere behind the bar, “Yeah, that's right.”

“Did anyone else see a mage?” Melindra asked, sword leveled at the crowd.

Heads shook.
It was disgusting. Anders was disgusted. Even meant for him, it was too practiced. Too perfect. Too corrupt. To the Void with Varric’s book, the Coterie, the Carta. The real gang in Kirkwall wore orange.

“The magistrate sits in judgment next week,” Aveline said in the silence that followed. “You have concerns, you bring them then.”

“Red—... Aveline,” Varric found his courage, when no one else could. He straightened his torn night frock, and smoothed back his bedridden hair, “This is Hawke. Look, come back to my room, let’s just sit down and talk—”

“This is the law,” Aveline interrupted. “... Come to the barracks, in the morning. We can talk then, but Hawke comes now.”

F*ck this. This wasn’t the law, and if it was, the law wasn’t just. Anders wasn’t about to let them almost kill Varric, threaten innocents, arrest Hawke, and get away with it all. “If you think for one second—”

“Stop,” Hawke locked an arm around the back of Anders' neck and pulled him aside in a rough sort of embrace, "Magistrate's a puppet. Carta doesn't get their coin if I die. Aveline knows what she's doing. She has to make a show. That's all this is. Not like with the Knight Commander. I'll be fine. You have to run."

He was too trusting. Anders had seen his like before and couldn't bear to see it again. He fisted his hands in Hawke's shirt, as if he could hold him so easily, "Run with me."

Hawke fished a key from his pocket, and closed Anders' hand around it. The brass cut with how tightly Anders clutched it. "Keep it. Tell Mother I'll be home soon."

Hawke went with Aveline. Anders didn't remember going back to their room. He didn't remember changing back into his own clothes. He didn't remember flying to Hawke's estate, the brass key clutched in his talons, but he remembered being there, for a moment. He sat on the edge of Hawke's bed, staring at the key in his hands.

It wasn't fair. Hawke wasn't a monster. Anders might have been. He was the mage. The maleficar. The abomination. Hawke was just Hawke. He hadn't killed Bartrand or even Keldar. What did he have to answer for except his relationship with Anders?

Anders couldn't stay here. What if someone from the tavern told the templars, and they found him here? What would they do to Hawke and his family the second time they were caught harboring an apostate? Anders left the key on Hawke's writing desk, and flew away.

Anders didn't know what to do or where to go. He felt Justice's presence like a pull upon his skin, as if all of him had scarred and his spirit was the only thing holding him together. He'd promised. He'd promised not to come undone.

He had to be sure. Hawke had to be safe.

A crow flew through the highest part of Hightown to the Viscount’s Keep. It was a massive, gilded thing, rivaling the Chantry itself in size. It practically glowed, illuminated from within by fires kept alight by court mages, on special dispensation from the Circle and attended always by templars. It wasn’t a safe place for the crow to be, and it kept to the rafters when it found an open window.

Interminable chains hung from an equally interminably high ceiling, holding lanterns of magelight. They illuminated violent violet banners embroidered with the symbol of Kirkwall’s Viscount:
winged swords. Swift justice that seemed apt for the crow, if not the Keep. It flitted from banner, to chain, to banner, down to the south wing that housed the barracks of the Kirkwall City Guard, and beneath the barracks, the prisons.

The crow didn’t actually need to go to the prisons. Past the barrack’s foyer was the common room, where Hawke sat at a table with Aveline, talking casually and breaking bread. No shackles. No chains. The crow found a potted plant, and hopped up to hide beneath the fern.

“We have to play this smart,” Aveline was saying, “My men will attest to Keldar’s death at his own hands, but Bartrand is difficult. Varric can’t just get up there and talk. Even if he hadn’t benefitted from Bartrand’s sudden… disappearance, there aren’t enough words in the world to convince the magistrat to let go of his son’s death. Varric will need to bring the Guild. Vanard can’t ignore them.”

“Arrest him - abuse of power,” Hawke suggested around a mouthful of bread. “The Viscount can’t have signed off on this. He owes me his son’s life.”

“He won’t support you publicly,” Aveline countered, drumming her fingers on the table. “Ever. Not now that you’ve had dealings with the Qunari.”

“At his behest,” Hawke muttered, “Doesn’t mean you can’t arrest the magistrate. Not that he’d fit in the cells.”

Aveline laughed, “One gang at a time. When are you going to leave Meeren, by the way? You don’t need to be with the Red Irons anymore. You have the coin. You own half the bloody mine, for Maker’s sake.”

She didn’t know about Hawke’s debt, the crow realized. Hawke shrugged, and didn’t tell her, no matter how close he claimed they were.

“Did I see right back there?” Aveline asked. “Are you and Anders…?”

“Not your business,” Hawke said.

“Fair enough,” Aveline backed off, and so did the crow. It flew from the Keep, and circled High and Low before ducking into Darktown. It found its roost crawling with men of metal. Templars. Betrayed. Always betrayed. The patrons had reported him.

The crow couldn’t find any from its roost. Terrie or Evelina or any of the mages, and hoped they were safe with the Dogs. The crow flew back to the Hanged Man, and landed on the window to a room filled with carved stone, crimson throws, and flickering wax candles. A dwarf was within, speaking with a familiar human, and the crow tapped until the dwarf opened the window.

The crow hopped onto the floor. It stretched, and snapped, wings unraveling into arms, talons exploding into feet, beak breaking apart into a jaw. Anders dusted off his feathers, and Varric locked his door. He’d changed out of his night frock, and into a pair of tunic and trousers, apparently abandoning sleep and any evidence of the evening.

Isabela was there with him, dressed in a shirt and her smalls, and nothing else. Her eyes were lined in the dark circles of an interrupted sleep, and contrasted sharply with her skin. She’d paled, watching Anders’ transformation, and covered her mouth to swallow what was probably not just a burp. “So, I heard I slept through the fun?”

“Fun?” Anders repeated incredulously, trying not to shout. He didn’t want to alert anyone else to his presence, “Do you even know what just happened? Hawke was arrested! By Aveline! Some
magistrate is out to hang him for what Fenris - your lover - did! He’s the one who murdered the
magistrate’s son, and Bartrand isn’t even dead, but Hawke is going to be if someone doesn’t do
something! Are you all really-

“Oh Varric, do something before he hurts himself,” Isabela cut him off. She wandered over to
Varric’s low-bed and threw herself down in it, as unconcerned as Hawke and Aveline had been by
the entire ordeal.

Anders sputtered and ran his hands through his hair; they came away with a few stolen strands of
blonde, and Anders locked his hands behind his head to force air into his lungs. He’d promised.
He’d promised not to fall apart.

“We’ll figure something out, Blondie,” Varric said, pouring himself a drink from his liquor cabinet.
Anders wished he could have one, “I don’t think many people heard in the riot downstairs, but the
official charge is that Hawke killed Bartrand, which is sadly untrue but hard to disprove. I wouldn’t
be surprised if the Magistrate found a few Winters ready to testify after Hawke stole their contract out
from under them saving the Viscount’s son.

“So, unless we can find a witness that isn’t you, me, or Broody, we’ll have to change the narrative.
We make it about Keldar and a corrupt magistrate, bring a mob up to the Viscount’s Keep, and ta-da,
free Hawke.”

“The big girl’s arrested me at least a dozen times already,” Isabela chimed in, “It’s nothing to make a
big deal over. Now you going full Justice in front of a dozen witnesses, that I would make a big deal
over. Varric was just telling me about how you saved his life with the power of friendship and
magic. You’re a regular hero, Sparky.”

Anders forced himself to breathe. It came out as more of a sigh. He found a seat for himself on the
bed beside Isabela, and stared longingly at the liquor cabinet. “I don’t think anyone thinks of me like
that,” Anders said.

massage? Inheritance from House Tethras?”

“I want Hawke,” Anders said without thinking, and changed his answer to something that might be
more immediately achievable. “I want there not to be templars in Darktown. I’m not saying Aveline
was right to threaten everyone down there, but I honestly thought they would listen. I can’t believe
they reported me that fast.”

“There’s always templars in Darktown,” Varric countered. “No one said shit, Blondie, trust me. You
walk down there, and you’re getting a royal welcome. Norah’s got everyone ripping up the
floorboards as we speak to get rid of that little rune thing you made.”

“Lifeward,” Anders said wearily.

“Sure,” Varric said. “Look, since you clearly aren’t staying at Killer’s, why don’t you sleep here?
Rivaini’s going to help me pen up some things for the Guild, and get ready for the judgment.”

“I don’t think I can sleep,” Anders said, but he stayed.

The week passed. Anders didn’t remember how he spent it.

They found their mob. Varric brought half the Merchant Guild. Merrill most of the alienage. Half of
Lowtown showed up, Fereldans and Marchers, with nobles sprinkled here and there among them.
Above them all, a crow. It sat in the rafters of the Viscount’s Keep, anxiously plucking out feathers
as it watched the proceedings.

Magistrate Vanard was a bitter old man who looked like someone had pickled him. His skin was wrinkled and warted, and his brow hung heavy after having spent too many years furrowed. He wore a bright red doublet, embroidered with gold trim, that resembled gold over spilled blood a little too well. The crow hated him.

He wasn't the only magistrate, but he did look the most important. Vanard sat in the Viscount's throne like he owned it, one leg draped over the arm of the chair. A half dozen other magistrates lined the throne on either side of him, and the day's prisoners were brought out one at a time for judgment.

Hawke was first, and justice was swift, though not in the way that anyone expected.

"Garrett Florian Hawke," The words dripped from Vanard's lips like wine into the glass of a drunkard. He sighed contentedly, once they were spoken, and seemed to sip them back up on his sharp inhale, "The formal charge today is the murder of Bartrand Tethras. The sentence is death. Next prisoner."

"Magistrate, with all due respect, there’s nothing to indicate Hawke’s guilt in this matter," Aveline interrupted, projecting her voice over the roar of protests. The guards in attendance eyed each other anxiously and raised their shields, a thin line of orange protecting the gathered magistrates from the angry mob. A few of the magistrates backed away from Vanard. One fled the proceedings entirely. "Bartrand’s brother, Varric Tethras, has found a witness-"

"Next prisoner, Guard Captain," The magistrate ordered.

Aveline squared her shoulders, balled her fists, and... turned on her heel and left.

Left? She just left? Where in the Void was she going? How could she just leave?

Anders- the crow- he was a crow-

The crow exploded, coming apart in clicks and clacks of broken wings and twisted talons. It snapped apart into a human, and left Anders stranded on the rafters. A few dark feathers drifted to the floor below at his shift, unhurried and unnoticed. Anders might have joined them if he hadn’t caught himself. The rafters creaked at his weight, but held steady.

There was a banner he might be able to grab, but Anders had no idea if it could support him. There was only one safe way down, and Anders had lost it.

A guard led Hawke out of the throne room. Anders had to follow him. Anders had to save him. But he couldn’t save him because he couldn't follow him because he couldn't get down. He had to calm down. He had to be a crow. But he couldn’t calm down because he couldn’t be a crow because he couldn’t calm down.

“I can’t do this,” Anders hyperventilated. His lungs seemed to shrink, smaller and smaller until they couldn’t hold any air at all. Justice forgive him, he was wrong. “I can’t do this again. I can’t go through this again-”

The next prisoner was an old man. Decrepid and dirty, he seemed to crumple in on himself with every step, until he was practically crawling on his hands and knees.

Like a dog.
“Conall of Redcliff,” A different magistrate announced him, “The formal charge is racketeering, larceny, destruction of property, and being a known affiliate of the ‘Dog Lords.’ The sentence is death. Next prisoner.”

The next prisoner walked like he’d won a fight and looked like he’d lost it. His ruddy complexion was muddied with bruises, his red hair matted with blood, and all of his teeth were rotten or missing, but he walked cock first, shoulders back.

Like a lord.

“Cor Blimey, alias ‘The Bastard.’” The same magistrate announced, “The formal charge is racketeering, larcency, destruction of property, murder, and being a known affiliate of the ‘Dog Lords.’ The sentence is death. Next prisoner.”

They were all Dog Lords.

The sentence was always death.

Anders couldn’t get down.

Anders couldn’t breathe.

Anders blacked out. He fell off the rafters, and into the skin of a crow. Justice held it for him. It was simple magic. Justice wasn’t a crow - he was an ideal. He was formless, genderless, raceless. He simply was, and if the form of a crow could aid in his pursuit of justice then it was the form he would wear.

Justice surveyed the crowd below, and how they had split. The Fereldens stayed for the Dog Lords, rallying in protest of their sentencing. The elves and the dwarves had split for Hawke. Divided, their forces were ineffectual, and easily held back by the Kirkwall Guard, who seemed at a loss as how to proceed without their Captain.

Justice flew after Hawke. It served no justice to see him condemned for no crime. He was a distraction Justice felt no affection towards, but Anders did. Anders had need of him - and mortal things. Mortal comforts. Mortal pleasures. Mortal company. To have such things offered and then lost was an injustice he did not deserve.

Justice was reminded of why he had once pitied mortals in the Fade when he found Hawke. Their concept of justice was primitive, and offered no room for atonement. Hawke and all the others condemned by the judgments were in the eastern courtyard, corralled like cattle into a stockyard. The courtyard which held a different sort of gallows than the ones he and Anders so strove to tear asunder.

A hangman awaited them, defended from the mob by guards, a few Circle mages, and their templars. Elves and dwarves threw rocks, rubble, and rotten food in protest. The crowd swelled with humans as more Dog Lords were sentenced, until their number overtook the guard. It was a war they could win, had they only someone to lead them.

Perhaps this was the change the city needed. To remove the magistrates and unseat the Viscount beholden to the Knight-Commander. As Justice considered it, he felt the Veil thin, and one Circle mage sent a pulse of lightning ricocheting into the hand of the other. It was a florid bit of magic, little more than bright static, but the mob scattered all the same.

Chaos and cowardice won out over courage and composure. Some citizens yet lingered, but their numbers had dwindled, and their courage had been cowed. All of Hawke’s companions remained, as
did several mortals Justice recognized for friends and allies of Anders, among others. One of them recognized him. The one who sang. Fenris.

A distraction, but a beautiful one. He was still as radiant as Justice remembered, singing with all the chorus of creation in his veins. The lyrium-imbued mortal stopped by the statue upon which Justice was perched, and held out a hand for him. Justice stepped onto it. Perhaps he would fight with him.

“... Justice, yes?” Fenris said, his voice so low it was hard to hear around the song, “We have this. If they cannot be convinced to free Hawke, Bela will pick the locks, and we will see him from the city as we planned once before. ... If you would help Hawke, leave.

“There are yet more guards within the Keep, who will come if this turns to bloodshed. The rest... these dregs are justly convicted of the crimes they stand accused. Look who lingers.”

Fenris held out his hand, and Justice looked.

For most, there was righteous anger, but not for all. Justice looked at the others. The Marchers. The ones who weren’t Fereldan. Honest, decent citizens, decrying the crimes the Dog Lords had committed. A widow, whose spouse had walked the wrong way home. A shopkeep without a shop, who hadn’t the coin for a bribe. A mutilated dockworker, who hadn’t taken one.

Fenris set him back on the statue, where he stayed, conflicted.

Did their victims not deserve vengeance?

They brought out the Dog Lords first, perhaps at some prior order from Aveline. One desperate soul shoved through his fellows, and tried to run when they opened the stockyard. He was speared by a guard, his body left to bake on the cobblestones. They took the next, an old man who struggled to step over the body of his fallen comrade, but took the stairs to the scaffold with dignity.

“Last words?” The hangman asked, slipping the noose over his crooked neck.

“Get on with it,” Conall said, “Void’s waiting for me.”

His neck snapped on the fall, stretching it straight. The crowd screamed, some in shock, some in sorrow, some in satisfaction. The hangman unhooked the noose, and Conall fell beneath the scaffolding into the pit below. Justice didn’t hear the thud over the screams of the next man they brought out.

“Fuck you!” Cor screamed, his confidence gone with Conall. He dug his heels into the dead Dog to fight off the two guards dragging him. The body rolled, leaving a smear of blood and entrails until they managed to heave him over it. “Last words!? I got fucking last words!” Cor continued as they struggled to get him up the stairs, “Fuck you! Think you’re so safe now, you got the big bad Bastard!? Think the guard is going to protect you from what’s wrong with this city!?

“Where was the guard when the Friends of Kirkwall emptied your pockets!? Where was the guard when the oxmen kidnapped your sons!? Where was the guard when the Demon of Death was raping your elves? Where was the guard when your elves poisoned half of Lowtown!? Where was the-Get the fuck off me! The guard is what’s wrong with this city!

“Extortion! Fuck you! It’s a fucking tax ‘cause I’m the fucking law around here! When you’re starving, when the chokedamp gets you, when some other fucking gang rapes your wives, you don’t go to the guard! You don’t go to the Chantry! You go to me! My Dogs! My healer! You think the guard is going to save you from the Butcher!? Fuck you! You’re all dead without me, you hear!?
“You’re dead! You’re fucking dead! You’re fuc-nght!”

His neck didn’t snap. He swung, bound hangs clutching at the thick rope about his throat, feet scrabbling madly at the hatch door, trying to pull himself back onto the scaffolding. The crowd cheered, some for him, some against him. The Dogs howled in their cage. The rope pushed his neck fat up into his jaw, his bloated face turning red, then purple, then almost black.

He kicked until he didn’t.

They went through three more Dogs in a similar fashion before Aveline finally returned with a dwarf and a human in tow. The human seemed a noble of small stature and high status, by the gold filigree decorating his collar and the oil slicking back his auburn hair from matching eyes. He tapped a quill impatiently at a clipboard holding a collection of leaflets he didn’t take his eyes off, even when he called out to those gathered.

“Let it be known that Magistrate Vanard has been found to be in abuse of his station by Viscount Dumar, and his judgment has been voided. Garrett Hawke is free to go, on the testament of…” The nobleman flipped through his leaflets, frowning.

“Bodahn Feddic,” The dwarf volunteered. His pale blonde hair was braided into his beard and hid a ruddy complexion, made ruddier when he smiled.

“Yes… well… Guard Captain, as you were,” The nobleman nodded and left.

“Get him out, Maecon!” Aveline called to one of her guardsmen.

Hawke was freed. Some of the crowd cheered. Some of the crowd booed. Several came forward to clasp his hand or clap his back, and many more simply left. Behind them, the guards brought up the next Dog Lord.

“Boy am I glad business brought me and my boy back to Kirkwall,” Bodhan was saying to Hawke, “Messere Tethras tells me they were saying you killed the … older Messere Tethras?”

“Bodhan,” Hawke gave the dwarf a nod, casual and conversational, as if he had never considered the prospect that he might share a fate similar to the one carrying on behind him. “How did you get here?”

“Been here for a while now, actually,” Bodhan said. “It might have … slipped my mind to register with the Guild when I came back. Taxes are no trivial thing you know. But when I heard through the lyrium vein Messere Tethras was fixing to take the Guild up to the Viscount’s Keep, I just had to know what for, and well… here I am! Strange charges, these. Hard to kill a man who’s not dead.”

“You know where Bartrand is?” Varric clenched his good fist. Behind him, another Dog died.

“Rivain!” Bodhan said cheerily, “Or so he told me that’s where he was headed when we got back. You know, we were told it was you all who died down in that thaig. Felt terrible, losing everyone on the way back up… We went back to Ferelden, for a while. The boy had a commission to work at the Circle there, you see-”

Bodhan continued his tale, but it was one meant for mortals. Justice had no place among them, nor did Anders without his scarf. Justice flew them back to Darktown, and landed easily outside their clinic in Anders’ form, though he still lacked his mind. His mortal was curled up in the dark recess of his memories of warm Anderfel desserts, dried Antivan fruits, and the rattle of copper coins in glass jars.
“He is well,” Justice assured him, tracing gentle fingers over Anders’ palm to stir him to the surface. “He is freed. His companions pulled through for him, though not the Dog Lords. You must see to the Collective, and ensure that no similar fate has befallen the mages we freed.”

Anders stood outside his clinic, emerald veilfire flickering in the broken lantern beside the rotting door. He felt nothing. No sensations. Not the warm wool of his tunic, the smooth leather of his coat, the hard sole of his boots. He didn’t feel the wind on his face, smell the acrid stench of the sewers, taste the cotton in his mouth.

Hawke was safe.

No thanks to him.

Cor was dead.

No thanks to him.

Anders pushed open the door to his clinic, and realized only belated he hadn’t unlocked it.

It was crowded.

Pale and pockmarked faces looked up at his entrance. They were all the same or similar: mismatched armor, jaunt cheeks, sunken eyes lined in shadow. Dogs. Maybe a dozen, huddled by his fire, sitting on his cot, curled up in his corners. One of them shuffled forward; her face flush beneath her freckles and the veins in her eyes sharp and glossy with unshed tears.

“Anders…” Bree stumbled into his arms, “What do we do?”

Works inspired by this one:

Amell’s Mabari by Kyirah, The Best That Dust Can Be by Kess, Legionnaire by mevipodfic (mevima), [podfic] Accursed Ones by TheThirdAmell by Dolceael, Draegaa, ilyahna1980, itsxandy, Kess, mevipodfic (mevima), redredred, TehLotteh, un-shit-yourself (fenix_down), winebearcat

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