By the Petty Crown

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Summary

After fleeing the wreckage of Kirkwall, Cormac Hawke brings Anders to the place he'd always said he wanted to go back to, a little town over the river from Kassel that Anders never thought he'd see again. The peace they find there is disrupted by the fall of Kinloch Hold and the escape of forty mages who cross all of Thedas to find them.
The Port of Hercinia

Chapter Summary

Cormac sucks at sea travel. Anders thinks he's a real wit.

"Port of Hercinia!" Isabela shouted across the deck, as the ship was towed into the docks and bound. "If you're heading for Wycome, Ostwick, Ansburg, or Markham, this is your stop! If you're tired of the sea, go have some stew in the port -- we set out again at dawn!"

The port town was definitely much smaller than Kirkwall, but most things were -- Anders had heard that even Starkhaven didn't have the population or the spread of the City of Chains. But, Hercinia seemed smaller and more comfortable. Not quite small enough that everyone knew everyone else's business, but definitely small enough that the people were probably heard when they spoke. He kept an arm around Cormac, who was dizzy and sweaty, still, as they stepped off the ship and crossed to the pier.

Cormac knelt and rested his head against the pier, patting the wood affectionately. "Anders, Anders, it's not moving. Andraste's blessing is upon us." His hair rose from the back of his head in tight curls, bound back with a cloth that looked almost like a Chantry altarcloth -- red with gold sunburst trim -- and after pressing a kiss to the ground, he raised his beardless face to take in the rest of the town.

"We don't have to be back until morning," he enthused as he stood. "I can eat and sleep!"

"Hopefully not right on the pier." Anders tried not to look too amused, not when Cormac looked so wrung out. Really, they should have learned their lesson the last time they'd put Cormac on a boat. "I doubt that would please the pirates. No, wait, that would probably delight the pirates, after they've stolen your gold and, knowing Isabela, likely your pants." He sighed, helping Cormac back to his unsteady feet. "I've known cats with better sea-legs than you, you know."

"If your cats have better sea-legs than me, why am I here, while they're still in Kirkwall?" Cormac teased, wrapping an arm around Anders's waist and trying to remember how to walk. After a bit of a stumbling start, they made it to where the inns and taverns started, a long stretch of booze and vomit stench to face off the smell of the fish market on the sea-side.

He squinted down the road, considering the options. "I think we go into town and see what we can find. Dockside taverns are great, when you haven't just gotten off a boat."

"You just want to get as far away from the water as you can while you can," Anders replied, resting a scruffy -- scruffier than usual, that is -- cheek against Cormac's head. He didn't point out that they'd only been on the boat for a couple of days and that they had a longer trip than that ahead of them. If the Maker had any mercy, Cormac would find his sea-legs eventually. "But that sounds like a plan. At the risk of sounding like Fenris, I wouldn't mind getting away from the stink of fish."

Anders steered them down what passed for a main road, eyeing shops and windows as they went, checking reflective surfaces for templars he knew wouldn't be there. He suspected they looked like a pair of drunken idiots, the stares lingering on Anders's staff and on Cormac's sunburst robes that marked them as a different set of idiots than the town was used to.

A guardsman stepped out from the shade of a shop, approaching the two of them. "Pardon me,
messeres, but with the trouble in Kirkwall, we've got to be careful who comes into town. Maker, you could see that as far as Wildervale, I've heard. Who are you, where are you heading, and where have you come from?"

"Cumberland," Cormac managed, still clinging to Anders. "From Cumberland -- meeting of the College of Enchanters."

"Forgive my friend," Anders offered, with a heavy Tevinter accent. "He gets very sick, at sea. We are headed for Rivain to see the traditional festivities at Ayesleigh. I am Biggus Dickus of Carastes, and I have come to tour the magical centres of Southern Thedas, to bring our two cultures closer together."

The guard choked, but recovered quickly. "I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you correctly. Could you say your name again, messere?"

"Biggus Dickus, of the Dickus family of Carastes. One of the few, proud families to make it through the Transfiguration, to see Tevinter rise again in the Maker's name." Anders tipped his chin up, proudly.

"Er... yes. Of course. A pleasure to have you visit us, here in Hercinia, Messere Dickus." The guard's eyes were wide and his lips tense, as he tried to hold off a laugh. "And your friend?"

"Brother Malkin Galore, of Hasmal," Cormac muttered, dizzily, eyes on the suspiciously unmoving cobbles of the road. "I'm with the Southern Outreach programme that works the border. Escorting, ah, Messere Dickus on his journey through the Marches to smooth any ... cultural misunderstandings."

Anders nodded sagely. "After what happened to my uncle, Tinius Dickus, we thought it wise."

The guard was holding his breath, face turning every shade of red as he fought not to laugh or sputter. "I see," he said, voice strained. "And where were you two... distinguished personages heading just now?"

"To an inn that doesn't smell so much like ocean so Brother Galore can remember what solid ground feels like." Anders squeezed Cormac against his side, careful not to rattle him too much. He could do without more puke on his boots. "I don't suppose you could point us to such an establishment?"

The guard eyed Cormac, the fine sheen of sweat on his brow, the dazed way he stared at the ground. The guard shifted subtly to the side, just out of Cormac's line of fire, should he lose his lunch. Again. He tipped his head, indicating farther down the street. "That way, take a left at the tailor's. There's a place called the Mermaid's Tail, with the most garish sign you've ever seen. Watch out for the mermaid's tail. It swings, and Bessy didn't hang it properly. Almost took my eye out a few times."

"Sounds great," Cormac panted, as his stomach rolled again. "Sitting down on something that doesn't move. Maker's blessings, serah."

Anders shrugged at the guard with an apologetic smile. "He'll be all right in the morning. Just in time to get back on the boat."

Cormac groaned, loudly, at the thought of getting back on a boat ever again, never mind in only half a day, but he let Anders lead him down the street, and the guardsman shook his head at their passing.

"Chantry boy. Bad at boats," the guard said to a local who was also watching, curiously. "Poor bastard."
The sight of visitors stumbling in from the docks, wobbling and gagging, was a common one in most coastal settlements, and no one else gave them any trouble, as they passed, though a few were quick to dart out of their way, after a single glance at Cormac's face.

"Ah! The Mermaid's Tail! Just like the man said!" Anders gestured to the loosely-blowing sign with his staff, as they crossed the road.

Cormac reached for the door just in time to get clipped across the nose, as the sign swung back down. "Andraste's..." he paused, trying not to swear. "... eternal forgiveness!"

Anders fended off the sign, with his staff, and got Cormac inside with no further incidents. "A damp rag for my friend's bloody nose?" Anders asked, as they passed the bar, aiming for a table in a dim corner. "And two pints of ale and a shot of whiskey. He's had a go with the mermaid, and she won."

Cormac muttered something involving 'a public hazard', as he dropped into a seat and leaned back against the wall. Finally. Nothing was moving, unless he closed his eyes. And then everything was rolling like the ship he'd just got off. This was his punishment for leaving his family behind. Had to be it.

A barmaid hurried over with the wet rag, muttering swears under her breath. "Every night," she said to herself as she pressed the rag to Cormac's face. Anders took it from her with a grateful smile and started cleaning up the blood. "Every night someone bumps into that thing. Some professional advice, messeres. Don't let a dwarf hang your signs."

"It's good luck!" the barkeep called out from across the room, setting their drinks on the counter and snapping his fingers for the women. "Brandon got smacked by the sign last week. Next day he was engaged!"

The barmaid rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful. "I don't think the mermaid had anything to do with that," she muttered, heading back to the counter for their drinks.

"Hear that?" Anders said, nudging Cormac. "Getting smacked in the face is lucky, here. Is that a Free Marches thing? It might have deterred Carver all those times he tried to punch you."

The barmaid slid their pints and their whiskey onto the table, checked to make sure Cormac wasn't bleeding on anything, and let them be.

Cormac reached for the whiskey first, tipping his head back and tossing it down his throat, which, in retrospect, might not have been the best idea he'd ever had. His stomach gurgled threateningly. "Carver couldn't land a hit. Never really mattered."

"Speaking of landing hits...?" Anders trailed off, leaving the rest of the dangerous question implied.

"It's like adding a river to the ocean. I just wanted it to stop for a while." Cormac sighed and rested his head on the table. "It'll come back as soon as I fall asleep. Always does."

"And that's why you sleep on the outside of the bunk," Anders said, with a too-cheerful smile. "I had wondered why it was worse when you were sleeping. I'd give you a potion to help with that, but I don't think you could keep it down."

Cormac muttered something about 'Tevinter rubbish', before he picked his head up. "What've you got that's mostly bread?" he called toward the bar.

"Landlubber special," the barmaid called back. "Whole loaf with a side of sweet gruel and a half pound of roast. Don't suggest getting into the roast until you keep the loaf down."
"That," Cormac decided. "I'd like that, please."

"And for me, your heaviest assortment of meats and cheeses," Anders said, with a smile. "Unlike my poor friend, I love the sea!"

"Fuck you," Cormac muttered, head coming to rest on the edge of the table, again.
Peril on the High Seas

Chapter Summary

Cormac dislikes boats. Dislike may be an understatement, and that's before the trouble starts. Pirates and perils abound!

They'd been stopping every few days, taking a tour of the ports on the Amaranthine coast, but once they got into northern Rivaini waters, that was going to be a bit more difficult. The last stop had been Llomerryn, and Cormac had been wildly amazed by the sights and the relatively free use of magic and oracular talents, amid the stalls of the market. Even dizzily stumbling through the port, he'd been more interested in the place than in anywhere they'd stopped, so far.

But, back on the boat, that joy had fallen away, quickly. The markets had been full of people who looked like his family, from certain angles -- less common in Kirkwall, and extremely uncommon in southern Ferelden -- and he couldn't shake the sense that he'd made a mistake.

"I have to go home. I have to go home right now." Cormac sat on the edge of the bunk, knee bouncing so his heel drummed at the floor, with Anders curled up behind him. "I left my brother behind and I can hear my dad rolling over in his grave. Not that he had a grave. We're not stupid. I have to go back. I'm supposed to be taking care of him. The city's -- Kirkwall, for the Maker's sake. I can't be here. I have to go back. I have to go back now." He sounded hysterical, the words getting less and less clear, as he went on.

"Hey, hey." Anders sat up, sleep forgotten as he reached for Cormac. The blanket bunched under him as he scooted around Cormac to sit next to him, to get a look at his face, his hand rubbing circles into Cormac's back. "Your brother's fine. He's got the cats and Fenris to keep him out of too much trouble. Andraste's ass, he has the whole rest of your family!"

Anders couldn't blame Cormac. He was surprised by how much he missed their band of idiots, and he wondered if this was what it was like to belong to a family.

Anders squeezed Cormac against him. "What is it you always say? Don't let them get you down, or they'll slow you down and catch you?"

Cormac wiped tears and snot off his face with one hand, realising that this and a few other things were going to be a bit easier, now that he didn't have a beard. "I'm on a fucking boat, Anders," he drawled, looking up over his shoulder. "It's not like I can make us go any faster if I'm paying attention."

On a boat -- and almost as soon as the thought hit him, his stomach caught up. He dragged the weighted block that held their chamberpot out from under the bed and put his head between his knees. Better than the trip to Kirkwall, if a whole lot longer. At least he didn't have to hide it from Artie, when he got sick. Artie who should have been... Not here. He should have never left Kirkwall. The vomiting stopped and the sobbing started again, and this wasn't the first night of it.

The next day, Anders coaxed Cormac into joining him on the deck, so that Cormac could get some fresh air and sun... and puke over the railing instead of into a bucket. Anders wished he could say it
was a refreshing change of pace. Between orders to her men, Izzy shot them both a pitying look and shook her head.

"Is... your friend okay?" one of the other mages, a boy with red hair and sunburnt, freckled skin, asked Anders. He watched Cormac heave and curse the sky, and Anders wondered if the worry in his wide eyes was for Cormac or for himself.

Anders shrugged. "Well... despite what he may tell you, he is not, in fact, actually dying."

The sobbing and heaving trailed off into coughing, as Cormac suddenly pointed to a shape that was increasingly clearly not part of the jetty they were approaching. "Ship," he wheezed, before coughing something unspeakable over the rail and trying again. "Izzy? Is there a port over there?"

That was the most coherent Cormac had been since they left Llomerryn, and Isabela followed the line of his arm to the spot where sails and masts were becoming distinct from the trees along the coast. "Ah, shit," she swore, tossing her hair back from where it had fallen forward over her shoulder. "So, you remember how this used to be Castillon's ship? No, there's not a port there. And this is why merchants sail around the other side of Llomerryn."

"What are the chances they think we're Castillon, and--" Cormac retched violently, following with a ragged roar of frustration, before he finished the sentence. "And we can put them off by proving we're not Castillon?"

"If we're not Castillon, they're still pirates. And not being Castillon makes us easy." Isabela shook her head, as she looked around the deck, considering their options.

"Can we avoid them?" Anders asked, though he knew it was never that easy, not for them.

"No," Izzy said distractedly, returning to the helm and turning the wheel a few degrees clockwise, squinting into the wind. "The wind's in their favour, and they're too close. We're fast, but we're not that fast."

"They may have the wind, but you have mages," Anders pointed out, wiggling his fingers in the air. "And if it's wind in your sails that you need..."

"Offering to fill my sails, Sparklefingers?" Isabela said, her inflection making it sound like the filthiest proposition even though she was all business a moment later. "Can you do that, wind all in one direction, without stirring up the water?"

"Ah... well..." Anders watched the boat's distant shape, watched it grow bigger. "I can't say I've tried before." He looked around at the other mages gathered on the deck, but none of them offered up any sailing experience of their own. Not that he expected any different, really.

Cormac sank to his knees, pressing his face against the decorative holes in the rail, for a few breaths. He needed the balance that sitting brought him, if he was going to think this through. "Where are the stormbringers?" he asked. "Stormbringers and force mages. How many of you could hit me, without hitting the captain?" Isabela was a decent distance out. It wasn't a tiny ship. "I need people who aren't going to hit the water or snap the masts."

"Mages on deck!" Isabela shouted. "If you can stand or crawl, get up here!"

"Fire," Cormac suggested, after a moment. "We can set fire to their sails and outrun them."

"You pick this shit up quick for a man who hates boats!" Isabela joked. "But, you're right. Need something more than just fire, though. Fire's not going to be fast enough, alone."
"Grease and lightning. I don't really want to, but they're going to have much bigger problems than you, after that." Cormac rested his head on the rail, gagging and choking miserably. "Still think running's a very good answer, especially if we do just enough damage to let them know they got off easy. If I burn that ship into the sea, we might have bigger problems than Castillon."

More mages poured onto the deck, some of them bleary-eyed, all of them confused. "Captain?" one asked Isabela, brows furrowed as he noted the crewmen scurrying back and forth.

"Pirates," Anders answered. After a pause, he added, "Not her. Other pirates." He tipped his head in the direction of the approaching ship. He could make out more details from this distance, the decorative woodwork along the sides, and he could almost count the number of people on board, all of them, it seemed, armed to the teeth. "Any of you who can control force or wind, over here, by me. The goal is to get away from the bad pirates without accidentally tearing our own ship apart."

"This is a good goal," said the red-haired mage he'd been talking to earlier.

"Fire and lightning by me. If you can do wind and lightning, go to him. We need wind more than we need lightning." Cormac dragged himself to his feet and heaved over the rail again.

"Now, they've got Antivan fire," Isabela said, pointing to the launchers on the other ship. "And they can throw it pretty far, and they will start throwing it once they figure out what we're doing."

"Who's got the longest reach with fire?" Cormac asked, trying to make out the distance between the two ships. "Good aim, too."

A group of mages pushed an elf forward. "Go on, Arielle," one of them said, and she huffed, straightening her robes, and crossed to where Cormac waited.

"Anders? Eyes on the sails," Cormac said, before pointing to the gleam beside the launchers on the other ship. "Arielle, is it? Pleased. I'll shake your hand the next time we're on dry land, but right now I'm going to keep hanging on to the rail. You see that glint over there? Next to the ballista? That's very likely a rack of ammunition, and that ammunition is flammable."

"It's also probably in clay or glass," Isabela added. "You want to catch that, you're going to have to break it."

"You heat anything enough and it'll crack," Arielle replied, eyeing her target.

"Don't I know it," Cormac muttered. "Get us moving, Anders... They're closing!"

Anders nodded curtly and turned to his charges. "Wind straight forward, into the sails. Let the crew do the steering. Ready?" The mages started to cast, holding onto their spells as they waited for Anders's signal. "Now!"

The ocean breeze turned into a howling gale, whipping Anders's coat around his legs and his hair into his face, and the sails swelled, ropes pulling taut, as Isabela shouted commands to her crew. Anders watched the mast, holding his breath, and when he heard the creak of wood, he picked out two of the wind-summoning mages and told them to stop casting. There was such a thing as too much wind, and it was best to have a few mages as back-up if the others ran through their reserves too quickly.

The wind carried them forward, but the enemy ship was still gaining, changing course to intercept their new trajectory. Isabela gauged the distance, pushing her wind-wild hair back from her face. "Looks like we're going to need that firepower, Cormac," she shouted. "Are your mages in range?"
"I have no idea!" Cormac called back, cheerfully, before the next wave of retching hit. "Hit their ammunition first! I want the first three waves low. Take out the ballistae, and then try to get the Antivan fire to catch. Once we've disarmed them, we can burn the sails off."

But, the ballistae were good for much longer distances than most of the mages, and years in Kirkwall hadn't done much for their reach. The first ball of clay exploded across the deck, dropping its wick into a spreading pool of thinned pitch. Cormac slapped a wall of ice across it, before the fire could spread.

"And that's what we're trying to avoid!" He squinted at the other ship, watching one ballista catch fire, finally, as another fired on them again. This time, he caught the grenade in a barrier and dropped the flaming oil into the sea. "I'll keep them off us as best I can. Just get them to stop throwing fire at us!"

"By throwing fire at them first." Arielle sounded a little hysterical as she lobbed another fireball.

Anders focused on the sails, on keeping them moving, face turning grey at the mention of fire. Cormac knew what he was doing. Or at least, Cormac was good at improvising.

All the wind made Arielle's job more difficult than it already was, but her technique shifted to compensate as she aimed for a ballista that looked like it was aimed directly at her. Its last shot would have caught her in the chest, she was sure, if not for Cormac's barrier. "I didn't survive Meredith to be killed by some pirates!" she shouted, throwing another fireball, one that hit just to the side of the ballista... and caught. She couldn't hear the enemy shouting, but she imagined it as their crew fluttered across the deck. Arielle grit her teeth and threw another fireball, aimed for the same spot, for that glint of metal Cormac had pointed out.

Her mage fellows cheered as the flames rose higher. "It's on fire," she informed them over her shoulder.

"Somebody give the lady a potion!" Cormac cheered, clapping Arielle on the back, before he sank to the deck, trying to wait out the next wave of nausea and dizziness. "And then get the sails. Now that they can't fire on us, we just have to make sure they can't follow us."

"Are they all going to die?" A young mage asked, squinting between the carvings on the rail.

"Probably not," Isabela admitted. "Most ships have little boats on them, in case something like this happens. They'll just row back to shore, if they have to. But, they're also on the sea, so the ship's probably not a loss. Probably. Of course, after that much Antivan fire, the deck might be, no matter how much water you can get on it. Ooh, I hope it doesn't get into the hold. That's a really nice ship."

"I like her. She's got her priorities in order," Arielle laughed, finishing a potion and handing the bottle back.

"I like her too," Cormac offered, from where he was curled into a ball. "Quite a bit. Sometimes several times a week."

Arielle blinked and glanced at Anders, mouth opening in a question she eventually decided not to ask. Fire at the sails. That was something she could do.

One of the wind mages started to flag, and Anders switched him out with one of the reserve mages. "Take a breather," he said, squeezing the older man's shoulder and pressing a potion into his palm. There was a joke in there somewhere, about breath and wind, but Anders was too tightly wound to think of one. Out of the corner of his eye, Anders could see orange flames, but the spray of salty air
reminded him how far away they were.

The corner of their mainsail had caught ablaze by then, and Arielle sagged against the rail as her friends clapped her on the back.

"It's working!" said one. "They're not gaining on us any more!"

"I imagine putting out a fire is bigger priority than steering right now," another drawled.

"I'd say we should skip Seere and get out of the Eastern Seas as quickly as we can, but I'm not sure Cormac would like me ever again, if I did that." Isabela grinned down at Cormac. "And I do like the way he likes me."

Cormac laughed, weakly, and Anders shot Isabela a disgruntled look. "I just hope you've been content with what's on this ship, because I don't want to get to Tallo only to discover all your mutual liking has given him a rash. If we're already in Tallo, I'm not going to be able to throw you overboard," Anders complained.

"Oh, but why would I even need to consider dockside taverns, when I'm surrounded by all these charming mages?" Isabela purred. "It's a pity you and glowy-you won't join us."

Cormac rolled over to watch the flaming ship retreat from beside them, as they pressed on, and he missed Anders pointing at his back.

"The more I like him, the less he retches." Anders grinned. "It's a public service."

"The more you like him, the louder he gets," Isabela shot back. "Which is still a public service."

"Not if you're sleeping next door," one mage said out of the side of his mouth. "Or trying to sleep, as the case may be."

Arielle nudged him with her elbow. "Oh please, Gregson," she teased, her smile still this side of manic as she glanced back at the burning ship. "This is the first time I've heard you complain about it!"

Gregson's chin tilted up, even as a flush spread across his cheeks. "Silence does not mean approval." Arielle's answering hum was unconvinced.

Anders cleared his throat and pretended to still be watching the sails. "Right. Wind. Let's keep it coming until the other boat's out of sight, shall we? Just in case." The wind mages nodded and returned to their posts, casting in shifts, while Anders divvied up lyrium potions.

Sauntering over to Arielle, Izzy slung an arm around her shoulders, and together they watched the plume of smoke rising in the distance. "So, Arielle, was it?" Isabela said, sizing her up out of the corner of her eye. "Have you ever thought about being a pirate?"

Arielle's wide eyes and sputtering were answer enough.
Our heroes leave the ship, at last, and Cormac gets his first look at the Anderfels.

"Well, boys, now's the time when you get off my boat. As shapely as it is, it is mine, and I'd like to spend a few weeks without the ever-present smell of vomit." Isabela grinned at Cormac and kissed his cheek. "I'll come to visit in a couple of years. Probably by accident. If you promise not to reek of days-old whatever that was you ate in Carastes, I'll give you a kiss to remember."

"Such a charmer," Cormac drawled, squeezing Isabela's bottom, as he waited for the last of their luggage to be unloaded. "I promise not to reek of something I ate in Carastes, if only because I'd have to have gone to Carastes to get it. Once was enough. If we ever come south, again -- and I'm sure we will, for something -- I'll ride a horse into a port town to meet you. I'm not getting back on this very shapely ship, nor any other ocean-going disaster waiting to happen."

"I hope you're not including me in that assessment," Isabela teased.

"Never." Cormac clapped a hand to his chest in horror, before stepping down onto the gangplank. "Land! Land at last! Almost. Soon."

"We'll be off again in the morning, if you change your mind." Isabela lingered by the rail, watching Anders lead Cormac down to the pier. "You better not die on me. Either of you. I'll be so pissed."

"So will I," Anders called back. "Extremely pissed. And then I'll wonder whose bright idea this was!" Anders's laugh came out a touch more manic than he'd meant. "Try not to get into too much trouble without us, Izzy."

Izzy scoffed, waving them aside with an affectionate smile, and disappeared back into her ship.

Anders's feet met the pier, and he was home. Sort of. Mostly. He was back in his homeland, at least, for the first time since the templars dragged him away a lifetime ago. But it hadn't hit him yet, not really. This pier wasn't much different from all the other piers they'd stopped in on the way, and for the moment his priority was Cormac.

"Welcome to the Anderfels!" he said, an arm around Cormac. "Do you want to kiss the ground here too or would you rather wait until we're off the pier?"

"Let me know when we reach actual ground that isn't suspended above the water," Cormac muttered, mostly watching his feet. "Always said I'd take you home, didn't I? Just didn't expect it to be quite like this..."

He finally looked up as he set his feet on cobblestones, taking in the rich browns of the buildings around them, and the way some towered over them, like giant steeples of mud, with logs, tile, and intricate metalwork jutting from the sides. The usual smells of every seaport were undercut with something else, here -- a sweet and spicy scent like some expensive Orlesian chocolate dipped in that red sauce that Orana liked. His stomach couldn't make up its mind, rumbling even as it rolled, for good measure.
"We'll get something simple," Anders promised, glancing around. "Somewhere around here, there should be a shop that does steamed rolls. I'll get you one with fig paste, and after your stomach settles, we can get some real food."

"Food is an amazing idea. So is sitting down. Also, sleeping," Cormac agreed, amiably, watching people who looked like they knew what they were doing wander past them. "How do you know there's a shop? I thought you hadn't been here in twenty something years."

"Never been here, actually. But there's a shop that has rolls. There's always a shop that has rolls." Anders grinned. "Welcome to the Anderfels."

That time Cormac did drop to the ground, worshipfully pressing his forehead against the stones in the road. "I never thought I'd be so glad to see a fish-guts spattered seaside street."

"I'm just glad to see an end to the puking," Anders said, and then hoped he wasn't speaking too soon. "And speaking of, food and sleep are definitely things we can do, but we should also see about getting some clothes. As sexy as you look in vomit-stained Chantry robes, the material is heavier than you need. The heat's not so bad by the ocean, but it won't be your friend farther inland." That, and blending in was always a good idea, especially when one was wanted in another country for inciting rebellion.

Anders waited for Cormac to stop lavishing the ground with affection and helped him back to his feet, leading him down what looked like the main thoroughfare, following his nose and the press of people. Around them, colorful tile-work caught the light, and Anders nearly stepped on a stranger's toes following the intricate patterns they made.

"Here," Anders eventually called out, indicating a door with a sign and with smells pouring out that made his mouth water. "You request food and sitting, and this looks like it has both. Come on."

Cormac smiled, dimly as he followed Anders into the shop, where the air was somewhat cooler, and the breeze blew through little windows, high in the wall, that weren't visible under the edges of the roof, from outside. People shouted at each other in a language he didn't understand, and then broke up laughing and slapping each other on the back. A low counter divided the room from the kitchen, where a tall, blond man waved them in, saying something cheerful but incomprehensible, and next to him, Cormac could feel Anders relax. The next words might as well have been Rivaini, for all that he understood them, but he recognised the tone -- Anders was making some terrible pun. The man at the counter laughed, and the process of ordering food appeared to begin.

Slipping out from under Anders's arm, Cormac found a table in a tight corner of the room and poured himself into the chair, resting his head on the table. Everything had stopped moving, and this time, it wouldn't start again. Isabela was wonderful, but it would take demonic possession to get him back on a seagoing ship. He let the sound of the words pass over him, as he relaxed. Just had to stay awake until he'd eaten something. Just had to eat real, fresh food, and then he could sleep...

When Anders poked him awake, it was to a plate of those steamed rolls he'd promised and to a mug of watered down beer. "The plan is to eat at a shop and sleep in a bed," he teased, even as he looked Cormac over, this light highlighting the haggard lines of his face. "Though I suppose we could try to reverse that. Sleep here and eat in a bed?" Anders settled into the chair next to Cormac, picking up a roll from the plate. "Though I warn you the food might not be as good."

Anders's teasing ended in a bite of roll. The taste reminded him of the last Summerday he'd spent with his mum, when she'd taken him into town for the festivities. They'd eaten steamed rolls and watched the procession from the window, boys and girls about to become men and women, all in white. Next year, mama had told him, that would be him.
Well. So much for that. "They're not bad," he said, halfway through his second bite. He washed it down with a drink of beer.

"Putting anything in my mouth that doesn't come back up sounds glamorous and exciting," Cormac mumbled around a mouthful of steamed bread and fig paste. "This is good. Should see if it's still good, tomorrow, or if that's just because I'm starving and exhausted."

"Little of both," Anders assured him. "But, I'll take you to the tavern, when we get to town. With any luck, they'll still make these, there."


"River boat," Anders reminded him. "You were fine on our holiday on the Minanter."

"Mmm. Just going to sleep until we get there." Cormac leaned to the side and rubbed his cheek on Anders's shoulder. "Clean clothes. Boat that isn't made of demons. Ridiculously gorgeous revolutionary with a silly beard -- I looked better in that beard, by the by."

"Well, it was nice of you to let me borrow it," Anders said, resting his cheek against the top of Cormac's head. Or his hair, at least. "I'm liking the hair, by the way. Makes for a nice pillow." He shoved the last of his roll into his mouth and licked his fingers, cheeks bulging as he chewed and spoke with his mouth full. "But we're almost there. The demon boat is behind you, which is probably good for both you and the boat. Certainly good for the fish."

And they'd managed to avoid any trouble with the templars so far. They'd had some close calls with local guards and that one pirate ship, but no templars. He hoped the other mages were as lucky, wherever each of them had ended up.

"So, after this, you're going to dress me up in the wild and wonderful local garb of your youth?" Cormac asked, stuffing more food in his mouth. Food. The very concept of it seemed extravagant. "Which is ... what, by the way? We're in a port, so I can't tell."

"Wild and wonderful?" Anders scoffed. "It's not that exciting. Big robes. Lots of draping. Cloth to wrap around your head so the sand doesn't peel your face off."

"Is that a thing I need to be concerned about? I rather like my face." Cormac nearly poked himself in the eye, patting at his own cheek. Maybe a little tired for all this eating and shopping business, but he'd make it through. They meant to be in Kassel by the next day, so they could get a room and start looking for whatever was left of Anders's family.

"Well, not if you dress like the locals," Anders pointed out. "And remind me I want to get a sungold melon, before we get on the boat. It's a little far for Yothandi traders, but this is the biggest sea-facing port in the Anderfels. If there's no sungold, here, I'm going to be so sad. I haven't had one in years."

"Dare I ask?" Cormac devoured the last roll and washed it down with weak beer. "Maybe not. You'll show me when we find one."

Anders grinned. "You know me. Always a fan of melons. And I would be a poor tourguide if I didn't introduce you to Ander melons." Anders drank his own beer, head tipping back, back until he'd drained the mug. Maybe it was his imagination, but Cormac looked better, less drawn, but then eating without puking tended to work wonders. "So, shall we get you that 'wild and wonderful garb' or would you rather eat and drink some more until you fall asleep at the table?"

"Not sleeping at the table," Cormac grumbled. "Tables are not for sleeping." He was tired, but still relatively certain of that point. The last thing he wanted was to make his first impression in a new
place memorable and offensive, especially when they were trying to blend in. Of course, the more he
looked around, the surer he was that 'blend in' was not something he was going to do well, here,
once they got away from the port. "Clean clothes sound like a good plan. Can we have the washing
done, once we get to town? I mean, yes, get something now, but get a laundress, later."

"Depends. How many people do you want knowing what you've got in your luggage?" Anders
asked. "Besides, you're good at washing things. One of the first things you did for me."

"Yes, but I'm tired and lazy, and everything I own smells like vomit," Cormac complained, using
Anders's shoulder to lever himself out of his chair.

"So, we'll buy you something now, and we'll deal with the rest when we get to Kassel. I just don't
want templars knocking at our door because we dress funny." Anders stood and waved to the man at
the counter, saying something presumably pleasant, given the smiling response.

"Fine. I'll do the washing when the room isn't spinning," Cormac conceded, after a few moments'
thought. The last thing they needed was templars. Especially now.

"Sounds like a plan," Anders agreed, slipping an arm around Cormac again. He wasn't tilting as
terribly any more, but it was better to be safe.
A Nation of Sensible Dress

Chapter Summary

The purchasing of clothes that do not smell of sea-salt and vomit.

More wandering down the main road brought them to a clothing shop, which they'd nearly passed before Anders had seen the sign. He was used to being the tallest man in the room -- or the road, in this case -- unless there were Qunari involved, but he found himself walking behind a group of draped figures he assumed were locals and realised he couldn't see over their heads. The Ander people had always seemed to tower in his memories, but he'd assumed that was because he was still a child in them.

Anders greeted the shopkeep with a wave and his most charming smile, offering a polite greeting in Ander he'd almost forgotten how to say. After so many years without speaking it, his native language was coming back to him in fits and starts. If he didn't think about it, it flowed, but some words stuck on his tongue before slipping out.

The shopkeep, at least, didn't hear anything remiss and welcomed them both inside, beckoning them in with great sweeps of her arm.

The shop was full of cloth. Cormac was quite accustomed to clothing shops -- he bought enough dresses for Bethany and questionable underthings for Artemis -- but this was ... he couldn't quite figure out what he was seeing. It all looked like loose drapes. At first, he'd thought of robes, but robes had somewhat more definite shape.

"That's the ladies' section you're looking at," Anders said, nudging him toward the other side of the shop.

"I'm going to take your word for that." Cormac nodded and looked the other way. Oh. Those were definitely robes, this time.

"Men's clothes have detached sleeves," Anders pointed out with a smile. "Although, given what you usually wear, I don't know if you'd look so bad in bunched sleeves."

Cormac made a rude noise and studied the assortment of hooded robes. "Stripes are popular," he noted. "And is that a sunburst? Oh, good, I'll still look like me."

This time Anders made a rude noise. "As you as you look without a beard," he teased, gripping Cormac's chin as though to grab him by the beard that wasn't there. "But let's see..." Anders picked up the robe Cormac had been eyeing and held it up, its shoulders even with Cormac's. The fabric ran long, and Cormac's feet disappeared under the striped cloth. "Hrm. The design suits you, but you'd be swimming in this." Anders pictured Cormac trying to navigate the steppes without tripping over the fabric and chewed his lip in amusement.

Over his shoulder, Anders called out to the shopkeep, who looked up from where she was mending another set of robes. Before he could even ask, she smiled and pointed a little off to the side, where another similar robe hung. The colours of the stripes were slightly different, but there wasn't quite so much fabric to lose Cormac in. Anders grinned and thanked her and picked up that robe instead.
"Oh, thank the Maker, there are smaller people in this land of giants." Cormac held up the smaller robe, which was still quite loose, but looked shorter, at least.

"Yes, there are. We call them children." Anders smirked as Cormac looked at him in horror.

"You're kidding me. This -- there's no way, that is absurd," Cormac protested, even as he drifted further into the hanging racks in that part of the shop, looking for other things that might fit.

"I was wearing that size when they took me to the tower." Anders laughed easily, as he noticed Cormac didn't appear to actually be offended.

"Ridiculous!" Cormac insisted, picking out another in red and gold, to go with the red and black he was already holding. "We're not poor yet, are we? I can afford to get more than one?" It was a stupid question, since he was the one keeping accounts, since they left Kirkwall. They'd have to change the money, soon, though, or they'd stand out every time they bought something. But, the Carta was nearly omnipresent, according to Anders, and that meant there'd be banks and money-changers, somewhere.

Anders shot him an amused look, wandering back over to the adult racks. "Wouldn't hurt to have a spare," he said, pushing fabric aside and assessing his options. "Not that you will need one on this boat, I am sure." He hoped he sounded like he believed that, even if Cormac had been... relatively fine, the last time they'd taken a boat down a river. The red and gold, at least, might better stand up to vomit stains.

Picking up a simple tan and beige striped robe, Anders held it up, assessing the length. The colours reminded him of his old coat, understated and simple. As much as he loved the new coat Cormac had given him, the feathers were just asking for trouble.

"What do you think?" he asked, batting his eyelashes at Cormac. "Or should I go for one in your size and show some leg?"

"I thought we were trying to avoid stopping traffic," Cormac teased, looking Anders over. "Tan? You think? Ah, you're probably right. Less exciting and we know you look good in it." He patted at his pouches, looking for coin. "Oh, you've got all the money. Right. So I don't get my pockets picked falling down in the road."

"I'd look good in a burlap sack, thank you, and I know that for reasons I will not discuss in public." Anders smirked and lowered his voice. "I'm also carrying it because you don't speak the language, and while I'm sure the locals speak Common, I don't feel like paying the stupid foreigner tax."

"Wise man. I knew I--" Cormac blinked. "Ah, turn it down, Justice. You're getting a little glowy around the eyes."

Anders pressed his fingers into his closed eyelids, as though that would banish his eyes' blue glow, but it was enough to remind Justice that this was not the place or time. "Knock it off," he muttered to himself, and he felt Justice pull away, almost sheepishly. "Sorry," he told Cormac, opening gold eyes. "You know how he gets."

With a resigned shrug, Anders pulled out the coin pouch. "Do we have everything? There's still time for you to check out that saucy number in the women's section."

"I thought we didn't want the locals looking at us funny!" Cormac put a hand on his hip.

"Who'd know? Have you seen ladies' coats, around here? They cover your whole body to the waist and then hang down in back. Of course, they'd be terrible for showing off that amazing and
legendary ass of yours." Anders grinned and turned back to the shopkeeper to negotiate a price. They were still close enough to the docks that it would be a negotiation, rather than a solid price, but he looked like he belonged there and spoke the language, so he expected to start from a better point.

Cormac gazed out the shop windows, while Anders haggled, watching people pass with their purchases or their goods. And then something else walked by on a lead. In fact, he'd never seen one of those before. It looked like a small mountain with long legs and a longer neck, with ... was that a picture of Andraste shaved into its fur? He tipped his head, but the change in angle wasn't helping him make sense of the creature.

Anders sidled up next to Cormac, their newly paid for robes tucked over his arm, and followed his line of sight. "Camel," he supplied without being asked. "The word you're looking for is 'camel'. Think of them as Ander horses that spit." The rueful look he gave Cormac said he knew this last part all too well.

"Spitting horses bearing the image of Our Lady? I... I favour not getting spit upon by horses or anything else. Camels included. Are those common, here?" Cormac asked, still eyeing the creature suspiciously.

"They're everywhere. Horses don't do quite as well, once you move away from the river." Anders grinned and handed Cormac one of the new robes. "This nice lady says we can change in the back, if you'd rather avoid walking back out there looking like you've been trampled by goats."

"I'd always rather avoid looking like I've been trampled by goats or anything else," Cormac replied, heading off in the direction indicated.

A few moments later, he returned, checking the display garments to be sure he'd put it on correctly and hadn't missed some culturally relevant buttons or knots. He carried his previous robes bound into a bag and slung over his shoulder. "Do I look less like I've been lying in goat pastures?"

Anders made a show of looking Cormac over, brows knit low over his eyes as he walked around Cormac, pausing to adjust the fall of the robes across his shoulders. "You look much better," he said. "Less like you've been trampled by goats. Now you only look like you've been trampled by the one goat." And they both knew what that looked like, after that unfortunate incident involving the cats and Goatilda.

"Oh, only one goat." Cormac's smile was brittle. "I'm sure that's a great improvement. Don't we have a boat to catch?"

The pinched look around Anders's eyes was apologetic. "In fairness, I probably look like a goat at this point." He ran a hand over the scruff on his chin that was doing impressions of a beard. "And we do." With any luck, Cormac would be able to sleep through this boat trip.
The City of Kassel

Chapter Summary

No more bloody boats. A real sit-down meal.

The most surprising thing about Kassel was not the enormous, gleaming Chantry spire that rose above every point in the city, but the astonishing number of dwarves in the street. Surprising to Cormac, anyway. Anders explained that the dwarves were essential to the Ander economy -- agents, bankers, and merchants. The area inland from Tallo -- and it got worse, the further from the river or the coast one got -- was painfully poor. Primarily an agricultural economy, based on trading food for the neighbours' food, which was a state of affairs Cormac was fairly familiar with. But, in Lothering, they'd been on a major trade route. Everything in Ferelden passed through, eventually, along with things from Orlais or the north. Lothering had been the last stop -- the 'please buy this so I haven't got to cart it home' stop, for most of the merchants working that stretch. But, nearly no one came into the Anderfels from the south -- except the dwarves. So, all the international trade that didn't happen through Tallo, happened by way of dwarven agents. And Cormac could see from the prices on the few things being sold locally that the dwarves were taking everyone for a ride.

"I swear I've seen that guy's work, before. In Kirkwall. And it was going for like ten times that rate," Cormac muttered to Anders, coming back to the inn from the table of carved stone and ivory figures of Andrastian legend, outside.

Anders gave Cormac a weary look. "And if you asked, I'm sure the merchant who was selling it would go on and on about travel fees and transport and all the ways in which Kirkwall was lucky to have such rare and fine examples of Ander craftsmanship, since the journey was so treacherous." He didn't need Cormac to tell him his eyes were turning blue this time. Holding a hand in front of his eyes, Anders could see the Fade glow against his skin. "Which is rather shitty, yes, and potentially unjust, but we can't do anything about it right now." The words were more for Justice than for Cormac, and slowly Justice slunk back, disgruntled but resigned.

One thing at a time, Anders reminded his head's roommate. Right now, Anders needed to find his bearings. The Chantry made for a helpful landmark, but the town had changed so much since he'd last been through here. A few of the aged faces they passed prodded at memories, but none of those faces brightened in recognition when they saw him.

Not for the first time, Cormac wondered if he'd chosen wisely in bringing this enormous amount of crap with them. Admittedly, a great deal of it was rare books, including Danarius's journals, but hauling the trunks up to their room was a bloody nightmare, without a force mage. He'd gotten so spoilit, he realised, living with Artemis -- or even near Artemis. But, the books would stay packed, locked in their trunks, until they had somewhere they could call their own. Not the sort of thing you wanted someone to see when they came to clean the room. The clothes could be unpacked, though. Unpacked and washed. Hung up to air out a bit.

Anders said something about food, but Cormac was already filling the bath, and waved him off. "You get food. I'm going to stop smelling like a decomposing goat. We'll eat when I can smell things that aren't the stench of seasickness."

Anders's stomach grumbled its protest at the prospect of waiting, but Anders smiled and bade him
luck in his endeavour, toeing his shoes back on and heading out the door.

Outside, the sun was high in the sky, bigger and brighter than it ever was in Kirkwall... or at least it seemed that way in the late morning heat. It wasn't yet the hottest hours of the day so the stalls would still be open, and Anders pulled up his hood against the sun and followed the road leading to the Chantry. He remembered a market here, somewhere in this direction, and the shouts of vendors soon told him he was right. And it was the right choice, Anders decided, when the first stall he visited had the most beautiful gold melons he'd ever seen.

Anders returned to the inn soon after, carrying the biggest of those melons like a prize, the rest of his purchases tucked in his arms. "I come bearing melons!" he announced. "Or... well, one melon!"

"You know, I usually expect melons from Izzy, more than you," Cormac joked, as he dried his hair with a clean towel. After a moment, he got the towel out of his face and started working on drying the rest of himself. "Oh. Actual melons. Fruity melons of a non-bouncy variety, with no excitable pirate attached. Shame on me."

He dropped the towel on the floor, with a brief flash of guilt, and padded across the room to sort through the goods Anders was carrying, setting each bag or box on the table after a moment's examination. "Something that smells good. Something that smells spicy. Something that smells sweet..." Finally, Anders's arms were emptied of food, and Cormac pulled him close, burying his nose in Anders's robes. "Something that smells salty and sweaty and better than anything on that table..."

"Mm, and you no longer smell like vomit," Anders teased gently, his nose in Cormac's hair, which was still damp and smelled like oranges. It was a smell he associated with Cormac, especially a clean Cormac, and he almost didn't mind that Cormac's damp hair was wetting the side of his beard. Anders pulled his naked body close against him, taking a moment to squeeze that taut ass before he whispered in Cormac's ear, "But you know what I'm really in the mood for?" He paused for dramatic effect. "Melons."

And Anders pulled back, returning to the spread of food.

"I feel like I should in some way be offended by this, but after a month of throwing up, I'm... just not. Food is a wonderful idea, and I should eat more of it." Cormac picked up a clean underrobe from the foot of the bed and pulled it on. "You know you're going to have to tell me what most of this is and how to eat it, if it's more complicated than 'use a spoon'," he said, pulling a chair out with his foot and dropping into it.

"It's good," Anders reassured him, picking through their luggage. "You should probably use a spoon. Maybe a knife for that one, but mostly a spoon should work. If we eat out anywhere, just watch me. Some things you can eat with your hands, and people will look at you like you're Orlesian, if you don't."

"Orlesian? Do I look Orlesian to you?" Cormac scoffed.

"Well, you will if you eat aubergine salad with a spoon, in public. There's bread around here somewhere. It's in paper and it's probably under something. Use that if anyone's looking." Anders finally managed to find a knife and made a bit of a show of carving open the enormous melon, to reveal the juicy, golden fruit under the thick rind. "This, you definitely want a spoon for."

Cormac shuffled boxes of food and paper wraps until he found the roll of bone spoons. "That looks like a lot of melon."
"Is that what you said to Izzy the first time you slept with her?" Anders grinned and reached across Cormac to grab a spoon for himself. "She's probably heard worse."

Nudging a chair out with his foot, Anders sat at the table next to Cormac, shifting aside the food and wrappings to make room for his half of the melon. He took a moment to admire its juicy sun-lit colour before diving into it with his spoon. Now that was a melon, he thought as he took a bite, its sweetness hitting the back of his tongue as its juice dribbled down his chin.

"Oh fuck, this is good," he sighed, digging out another spoonful. "Have a bite. Of that half. This one's my half."

"That is... a rather ... you're going to eat that entire half a melon?" Cormac blinked a few times and then laughed. "Well, good. I've been after you to eat more for years. Maybe now we'll have a chance to do more eating and sleeping, and your gorgeously glowy other half can take a break and enjoy it."

He dug the spoon into his own half of the melon and took a drippy bite. "That... what does that even taste like. That doesn't taste like anything I've ever put in my mouth. It's good, but... I think I just discovered a whole new flavour." Several more spoons of melon vanished into Cormac's mouth as he continued to look confused and contemplative.

Anders grinned around his thumb, licking the juice before it could drip down his wrist. "Of all the things you've put in your mouth, a melon hasn't been one of them? Actual melons, that is. We both know of your experience with metaphorical melons." Though Anders supposed he shouldn't be surprised. He'd only encountered the one merchant claiming to sell sungold melon in Kirkwall, and those had actually been tomatoes. To this day, Anders wasn't sure if something had gotten lost in translation or if the merchant was trying to scam him.

"I've eaten plenty of melons. Just not this kind. Muskmelon, wintermelon... you couldn't grow them locally, it was too cold, but you could get them from the Orlesian traders, or even from the northern coast." Cormac hummed delightedly around another few bites and then reached for one of the paper boxes from the market. "What's this? It looks like it's about to leak."

"Lamb in yogurt and sesame sauce. If you're getting into that, you should probably open...this one, too." Anders shuffled containers and pushed another box across the table. "Groats and round beans. It's pretty spicy, so you'll want to put the yogurt sauce on it. Or dip in it. Or I should've bought plates while I was standing in the market, but I didn't really get further than hungry enough to eat everything there."

Cormac got up and opened one of the trunks. "Didn't bring dishes, but we did bring your potions brewing equipment. Where's the... Ah!" He pulled out a stone grinding bowl and a wide-mouthed measuring flask. "So, we won't eat in style, but it'll be better than eating off the table."

"Very classy," Anders said, a laugh breaking up the words. "But you know, I've eaten off of worse things." Anders inspected the glass and bowl. He was always meticulous when it came to cleaning his instruments, even by Artie standards, but it was best to be careful. If he recalled correctly, he'd last used them to make a lyrium potion, and the last thing Anders needed was Justice getting squirmy over lyrium-laced lamb. Once they'd passed his inspection, he put down his melon long enough to spoon out the rest of the food.

Cormac had a few bites of everything, while Anders was trying to serve it, which meant he got a few bites of extremely spicy sauces that were not meant to be eaten alone. Finally, he returned to something simple and squishy to get the eye-watering burn to stop. "I don't know what this is, but it's really good."
"Crushed aubergine salad," Anders said, looking amused. "And don't eat what's in that box. Your head will explode. It's chicken and barley with Yothandi murder peppers."

"Wait, you mean I haven't already eaten murder peppers?" Horror flashed across Cormac's face, as he turned the plate to get some of the lamb and yogurt. "And you'll eat this, but you won't drink blaand? Seriously?" he asked around a mouthful.

"That's because blaand is disgusting," Anders said primly, balancing his melon next to his makeshift plate. "This, however, is perfectly delicious and perfectly reasonable food." Anders went back and forth between the items on the plate, pausing now and then to savour a few bites of melon. This, more than anything, more than the heat, more than the robes and the language, reminded him that he was home. "You know, one of the hardest adjustments to Kinloch Hold was the food. You'd think the templars were allergic to spices."

"That's not a Circle thing," Cormac pointed out. "Half of Ferelden is apparently allergic to spice or putting more than three bland root vegetables in a single dish. It's why so much stuff has fruit in it -- so at least it tastes like something other than muddy water with a hint of fermentation. Oh, and then there's pickles." And he actually rather liked a lot of Ferelden food. "The Dalish can cook -- or at least Theron's clan has a grip on the idea of flavour. And the Chasind make some incredible and ridiculous things. But, yeah, 'there's mustard on it' seems to be the Ferelden definition of 'spicy'."

"You understand my pain," Anders said, gesturing with his spoon. "Though I might have to disagree with you on the Dalish. They use spices, sure, but in horrifying ways. The fact that Theron liked blaand says it all." He shuddered, cringing around a bite of lamb.

"And lard pudding, which you still haven't tried," Cormac scoffed. "And bag rolls, which you like." He worked his way through his half of the bowl, tasting anything Anders didn't bat his spoon away from. "This is really good stuff. You grew up eating this stuff? Shit, Ferelden would've been traumatic even without the templars. I guess you were pretty close to the Imperial Highway, up there, though. Right out of Orlais. Must've gotten at least some of that, not that I have much favour for most of what comes out of Orlais that isn't dessert food."

"Fuck Orlais," Anders grumbled. He paused to consider that. "Well, all right, their desserts are good, but fuck most of Orlais." He was rather partial to Orlesian chocolate, but that just put him in mind of Fenris and Tevinter sausage.

Eventually Anders cleared his plate, then cleared it again after grabbing seconds. When his stomach started to reach that pleasant sort of full, he sat back, the melon braced against his chest as he scraped up more spoonfuls of the drippy fruit.

"So, besides lying about like hibernating magical bears, what are we doing with the rest of the afternoon? You said something about banking, which honestly might be a good idea, since we've been spending large-denomination foreign coins, and that door doesn't look like it'd hold up to Bethy, never mind an actual thief." Cormac continued to pick at the remains of the food, but just a few bites. He'd never been able to eat like Anders could, but he put up a good show of trying.

"Banking would probably be a good idea," Anders agreed, frowning when his spoon started scraping only rind. "Then again, it was my idea, so it's definitely a good idea. I, uh. I might also want to start asking around about my parents. Make sure they're where I left them." His heart wasn't in the smile he gave Cormac. "Best to make sure they didn't somehow end up in Nevarra while I was gone." Terribly unlikely, but that would be his luck.

"What is the name of that town we're going to, anyway?" Cormac asked, around another nibble of some sort of meat. "You never told me. Just said it was near Kassel."
"It doesn't really have a name. It's called By the Petty Crown, the Petty Crown being the local tavern that somehow caught a village around it. It's not even a town. It's a village. If it's a village. I used to think you could sneeze and blow it all away." Anders shook his head. "Maker, I hope nobody has. Wouldn't that be a tale to tell. Misplaced my parents because someone sneezed."

"We should definitely find your parents. It's amazing to me that you might still have parents, really." Cormac nudged his half-finished melon-bowl across the table. "I think it would be awesome to finally get to meet your mum. I mean, you met mine, when I still had one. I'd feel bad leaving her in Kirkwall, when Dad's ashes got set in Lothering, but Kirkwall was always her place more than his."

Anders finally set down his melon rind after a few more optimistic scrapes. "I think I would like you to meet her, you know. Assuming she's still alive." Narrowing his eyes at Cormac, he teased, "And assuming you behave yourself."

"Yes, pretty thing. I promise not to flirt with your mother." Cormac smirked and got up to clear the table, so he could write a letter to his brother. Artie needed to know they'd arrived safely.
Going Home

Chapter Summary

Anders's family is right where he left them, and little different to the day he left.

Anders pulled the rope on the bell, with one hand, tugging the veil higher on his face, against the dust that blew down from the hills. The arch that once stood at the gate was gone, now -- years gone -- and he hoped that didn't mean his family was, as well, but the townspeople insisted they were right where he'd left them. Cormac stood by his side, robed and veiled as he was, still studying the land.

After some time, a figure appeared at the door of the house, beckoning them closer. The house, itself, was shaped with a covered patio cut into the front of it -- some shelter from the storms, and the wind fell away, to a hollow whistle behind them, as they stepped into that space.

"Mama?" Anders asked, tugging the veil away from his face.

"Jannik?" The figure at the door resolved into a broad-shouldered old woman, and a smile lit her face, as she took a deep breath, as if to ask a thousand questions.

His brother. His brother who had a name. "No, mama." Anders stared down into the space between them, the tops of his cheeks reddening, where they weren't scabbed.

Cormac couldn't follow the rest of the conversation -- the words were much too fast, and a lot of them, he suspected, weren't covered by the basic merchant's guide to speaking Ander. The woman -- Anders's mother, apparently -- seemed both delighted and terrified, in equal measure, to judge by the look on her face.

"Mama, my friend doesn't speak Ander," Anders said, finally. "Common?"

"Of course!" She beamed with pride, looking at the two of them. "Your friend," she scolded. "Is this your wife? Did you take a wife, in that tower?"

Cormac nearly choked on his tongue, still veiled, and looked up at Anders, who nodded. He started to untie the knots that would reveal his face.

"No. No, I -- he's not my wife. Just a good man and a very good friend." Anders smiled awkwardly, and took Cormac's hand. "Cormac, this... this is my mum. Please don't give her any goats."

"Aww! Ruining all the fun up front, like that?" Cormac laughed and held out his other hand. "Cormac Hawke, of the Kirkwall Hawkes. Amells, really. Probably nobody you've heard of, up here."

"A Marcher. My other son went to the Marches, too." She nodded and shook his hand with a surprisingly strong grip. "Ulla Astridsdottr. Definitely no one you'd have heard of down there."

"Not really a Marcher. Fereldan. We just lived in Kirkwall after..." Cormac shrugged, raising his eyebrows.

"Ferelden. Where the Archdemon came." Ulla nodded, barely needing to look up to look Cormac in
the eyes.

"His cousin's the Hero of Ferelden," Anders pointed out, with a grin.

"Can you not tell that story?" Cormac took his hand back and used it to cover his face. "I don't even know her. I only even met her husband once, and you were there for that."

"Whatever I may think of your cousin, her husband..." Anders grinned and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, and his mother belted him in the arm.

"Ket!"

Anders went pale and rigid, eyes landing on Cormac as he inhaled shakily.

"Oh, you must have a new name now! I'm so sorry. When they took you just before..." Ulla shook her head. "Come inside and have something to drink. You both look so tired from the road. Forgive an old woman her folly."

"A new name?" Cormac looked confused, squeezing Anders's hand, as he followed Ulla into the house. "You mean he had a name, before?"

"Well, of course! Don't they have men's names in Ferelden?" Ulla smiled in equal confusion. "We called him Ket, for his first name. Always curious and troublesome and loud."

"Well, he's still curious and troublesome." Cormac squinted up at Anders. "But, loud? You were loud?"

"I wasn't even a year old, Cormac. I grew out of the squalling." Anders blushed harder and stared at a fascinating knot in the floorboards.

"Well, they called me Emmer, first, because I was always crying," Ulla said, with a smile at Cormac, as she flitted around the small room, batting dust turned to mud out of the window-cloths. "Ulla is my ladies' name."

"So, you get a name, and then you get another name, later? Huh. We just get one name, in Ferelden. One name, and you're stuck with it." Cormac looked curiously at Anders. "But, the whole time I've known your son, he's never told me his name. I don't think he's told anyone his name -- any of his names. Everyone just calls him 'Anders'."

"Now, that's foolish! There can't be so few of us in the south!" Ulla chuckled. "I'm sorry I called you by your first name. Tell me your right name, and we'll pretend it never happened."

Anders pulled out a chair and sat, slowly, struggling to find words, as he set down his bag. "They don't have men's names in Ferelden."

"Well, they must have called you something!" Ulla insisted. "The Chantry would never let a child grow into a man with no name!"

"They just called me Anders. I was the only one." Anders shrugged and studied the floor, as if something fascinating would come of it.

"I thought I was kidding when I said you didn't have a name," Cormac said, the horror of it sinking into him.

"No, that was completely accurate. I don't have one. I have an ethnic descriptor. Obvious only in that
I was the only one in Kinloch Hold." Anders continued to stare at the floor, fingers flicking nervously. "I'm sorry, Mama. I just wanted to see that you were okay. We should go back to our room in town. Maybe head for Weisshaupt. I just had to be sure..."

"Don't let him fool you. He still has that pillow," Cormac said over the top of Anders's head. "Thought he was going to die, and tried to give it to a friend of ours, but what are friends for, if not to stop you from doing stupid things."

"Do you really?" Ulla finally sat, putting a tray with a jug and cups on the table. "Drink," she told Cormac. "You'll need it."

"Maker's blessings," Cormac replied, nodding thankfully as he poured a cup for himself, and then, after a moment, another cup for Anders.

Anders didn't take the cup until Cormac wrapped his fingers around it.

"We've had a long trip," Cormac apologised, sipping what seemed to be some sort of sweet, herbal tea. "I'm afraid it's been harder on him than it's been on me." And leaving Artemis had been the hardest thing Cormac had ever done. "We'd have written, but he wasn't sure you were still here. Wanted to see with his own eyes."

"Of course we're still here, Ket!" Ulla reached over the corner of the table and squeezed Anders's arm. "Where else would we go?"

Anders finally looked up, somewhere between furious and terrified. "Papa?"

Ulla nodded. "I lost both you boys, that year..."

Anders understood immediately. Whatever her opinion on the situation had been, without her sons, there was no way to manage the farm without him. Still, he stood. "We have to go. Please don't tell him I was here. Please."

"Anders?" Cormac set his cup on the table, and a spell leapt to his fingertips. "What do I not know about what's going on here?"

Ulla's eyes lit on Cormac's fingers and stopped. "Magic."

"A gift from the Maker, and a terrible sorrow He chose not to give it to everyone." Cormac held out his hands. "It's just for protection. No different than any soldier's shield, except that it's bigger and less heavy. Everyone should have one. Less people would die."

"Don't, Cormac. Not here." Anders tugged nervously at Cormac's sleeve, looking around the room. "He's the one. He called them to take me away."

Ulla said a few things that Cormac couldn't make out, most likely because they weren't in Common.

"To get help? He wanted them to help me?" Flickers of blue darted across Anders's face and hands, as he pulled at his robes. "I'll show you how they helped me!"

"Anders, Anders -- No no no no. This-- Don't--" Cormac wrapped around him, making soothing sounds. "Justice. Don't do this in front of your mum, sweet thing. Not now."

Anders finally put his arms around Cormac and just sobbed, like twenty-five years of everything being wrong would just pour out of him. "I didn't have a name, and they wouldn't let me come home," he finally choked out. "I kept trying, Mama. I kept trying to come home."
Cormac didn't have to see her to know that Ulla was crying, too. He'd had a mother. He knew.

Ulla finally cleared her throat and tried to smile. "Better than your brother, even if he does send letters. Always, 'no, mama, I can't come home this year'. It's good he's successful, but even a thought to his old mother would be welcome. At least you made an effort!"

Anders just kept crying, holding so tight to Cormac that his elbows ached and his knuckles turned white.

"He'd have come home years ago," Cormac said, stroking and patting Anders's back, "but he had to be a hero to our people, first. Almost a martyr, but I wouldn't stand for it. What do you remember about his magic?"

"The poor thing got so scared, and things would just catch fire. It's so hot and dry that we never really thought of it, until the barn went up." Ulla shook her head. "It seemed like the sort of thing that could be useful, if he could just control it."

"He learned that. And so much more. He's a healer, now -- one of the best, maybe the best." Cormac smiled over his shoulder. "He spent eight years, almost, running a clinic for the poor, after the Blight. I was so afraid he'd work himself to death, the way he threw himself into it. The Maker's first children guide his hands."

"Cormac, don't..." Anders choked out, burying his face in the dusty top of Cormac's hood.

"What, don't tell your mother that she raised you right? Don't tell her that you're the kindest, bravest man I've ever had the pleasure to share a meal with? Don't tell her that one day there will be statues of you all across Thedas?" Cormac drawled. "Modest to a fault."

"I gave everything, and none of it mattered in the end." Anders choked up and returned to incoherent sobbing.

"Everything mattered. You saved people's lives. Everything you did struck against a system of corrupt indifference, one of the major parties in which was sadistic and lyrium-mad. And now we just have to wait for the smoke to clear, and everything to level out. It's going to be different, because you were loud enough to be heard, when no one wanted to listen." Cormac held Anders close against him. "You're a hero, Anders."

"It's wrong. I shouldn't be. Not for that."

"You tried all of those, before it got this far. We did this together, and in the end, you saved people -- not just their lives but the fact that they are people. Not just for them, either." Cormac glanced over his shoulder at Ulla. "He fought for the rights of refugees and slaves. I know they say there are no slaves in the South, but they're lying." Now wasn't the time to get into the finer points of Chantry politics -- not in a place like this. Not as a stranger. 'Slaves' would suffice, for now.

"But, how many people did I kill to do it?"

"People who weren't actively trying to hunt you down and kill you? Not that many. And if they didn't take the advice in the Gazette, or the guards running through town rushing people to safety, I'm not sure anything could have been done for them. I don't know how much Ferelden history you read, but forty years ago? Do you think Maric bloodlessly displaced the Orlesians from Gwaren and Denerim? You have done far more good than harm."

"I don't know that," Anders sighed, grimly, face still colourlessly pale, beneath the smattering of
scabbed abrasions on his cheeks.

"You have become so much more than I ever could have hoped, if even half of what your friend says is true. You were always such a gentle child." Ulla reached up, past Cormac, to pat Anders's cheek. "The way you fought those men, when they came to take you away, I told myself I'd be happy if I even learned you made it to the tower alive. Where did they take you?"

"Kinloch Hold. It's in Ferelden," Anders answered, looking down at the wet spots on the top of Cormac's head.

"And you? You said you were also from Ferelden. Is that where you met?" Ulla asked Cormac.

"He's--"

"My family--"

"Kirkwall," Anders said, finally. "We met in Kirkwall."

Cormac nodded. "It's a little complicated. You know he's a Grey Warden, too?"

"Oh, what are you telling an old woman, now," Ulla scoffed. "A Grey Warden."

"You just had to bring that up," Anders sighed. "Yes, I'm a Warden. I served in Amaranthine, under Commander Solona Amell -- his cousin. That was before Kirkwall."

Ulla stepped back, looking from one to the other. "Okay, where is the rest of the joke?"

Cormac laughed. "In the bottom of his bag. He's dragged that armour all the way from Amaranthine. He's the real thing. I've seen him do that creepy Warden thing where he feels them before any of us can see them. We were in the Deep Roads, at the time. And the other time. And the other other time..."

"Can we just not end up in the Deep Roads, again? I hate the Deep Roads," Anders complained, still a little shaky, as he let go of Cormac and picked up the drink he hadn't yet tasted.

"The only thing I mind about the Deep Roads is the darkspawn. And maybe the giant spiders. I could probably do without the golems, too. Golems are scary." Cormac looked a little strained.

"The undead, too," Anders reminded him.

"The undead are a Tevinter problem, more than a Deep Roads problem. You just associate them with the Deep Roads because of the mine." Cormac sat back down and smiled at Ulla. "If there's one thing I can say about Kirkwall, it's never boring... I mean, I could have spent the rest of my life picking apples, and been fairly content with that, but then there was an Archdemon. Points to your god, I guess, for bringing us together, Anders."

"Points to Varric," Anders reminded him. "I should punch that dwarf in the mouth."

"Is that regret I hear? After all these years?" Cormac sounded shocked.

"Who was he, giving out my clinic to some fools looking for adventure?"

"Hey, now, we were Fereldan refugees, and so was your client population!"

"You are certain he's not your wife?" Ulla joked, catching her son's eye.
Anders fingered the amulet he wore, smiling at the floor. "Mage rights before marriage. Breakfast before mage rights."

Cormac laughed and tipped his chair back to press a kiss to the side of Anders's hip. "He's lived as part of my family for six years. Might as well be my fourth brother."

"Large family," Ulla remarked.

"Five of us kids plus this nerd." Cormac wrapped an arm around Anders, without getting up.

"We should still go, before my father gets home," Anders muttered, eyeing the other exit to the room.

"No, no," Ulla said, with a firm smile. "I couldn't see you weren't Jannik, and neither will he."

Cormac choked on his tea, as he remembered Artemis pretending to be Anton, down by the docks.

"You want me to pretend I'm Jannik? Isn't he... going to notice? I'm not coming back with stories of farming apples in Tantervale or... wherever it was he went. I mean, I kind of joined the Wardens and started a revolution. It's a whole other thing." Anders stared at his mother in confusion.

"Your father doesn't read the letters. The first few, he saw them on the table and threw them in the fire." Ulla laughed. "He'll never know."

Anders still looked uncertain, one hand on the back of his chair, his foot pointed towards the door. He would be content to never see his father again for as long as he lived, but this was his mother, and she was looking at him with such heartbreak and hope in her eyes. "We... I suppose we could stay for a few more minutes," he said. "But we should start head back before the... wind gets too bad."

"Back?" Ulla asked.

"To town. We're staying over the river." Anders still hadn't sat back down.

"Like foreign merchants," Ulla scoffed. "How long are you staying?"

"We're thinking about moving up here," Cormac said, finishing his tea and setting the cup aside. "Just getting away from all the madness in the south for a while."

"And you are going to stay in Kassel the whole time? No." Ulla shook her head and patted Anders's cheek. "You don't have that kind of money. You come here. You stay at home, where you belong. Don't pay any attention to your father. He's an old bag of wind."

"I thought we'd buy a house," Anders said, weakly.

"Buy a house?" Ulla repeated, eyes sharp. "Do you have one in mind?"

"I..."

"Then you will stay here until you've gotten it all straightened out." There was no room for argument, and Anders tired 'but' went unheeded. "This is your home, Ket. If you want to pay for your keep, we're in the middle of the harvest, and we could use a pair of strong young men. Your mother would so appreciate the help."

Anders knew that 'if' was less flexible than it sounded, and that pleading look was cheating. He floundered for an argument, for a reason to politely refuse. They had the money, certainly -- at least, for now -- but what if they couldn't reach Kirkwall? What if what they had on them was all they would have? Shoulders sagging in defeat, Anders glanced at Cormac and mumbled, "Yes, mama."
"We've paid the room to the end of the week," Cormac pointed out, tactfully. "So, we can give you time to figure out where to put us. And he can teach me how to harvest whatever it is you grow, here." He cleared his throat. "I used to work orchards in the Bannorn, so I'm not completely useless."

"Yes, of course. We'll come back first thing in the morning to help. I'll help you move the furniture and make space, and Cormac can go out in the fields." Anders nodded like his head was going to fall off.

"We'll bring breakfast," Cormac offered, thinking he might be able to offset some of the expected trouble with Anders's father if they showed up with food. "We'd hate to impose."
Chapter Summary

Anders's father is just like he's always been, and Cormac is constitutionally incapable of keeping his mouth shut.

Anders's father had barely said two words to them since they'd arrived. From anyone else, he would have considered it a snub, but, no, this was just the way he was, older and more grizzled than Anders remembered but just as gruff, and he assured Cormac as much. A silent papa was a good papa, and he had no intention of upsetting that.

But papa wasn't exactly silent today as he led them through the fields, the sunrise a red line across the horizon and sleep still heavy on Anders's eyelids. "Now I don't want any of that lazy bullshit like the last time you were home," his father said without looking at him. "If you're going to stay in my house and eat my food, you'll earn your keep or I'll send you out on your ear."

Anders's eyes flashed -- barely shy of blue, but Cormac squeezed his hand. "Yes, papa."

Really, for all he knew, maybe Jan had been lazy. He hadn't thought so, but papa always had. On the other hand, papa had also always thought he was useless and insolent, which, to be fair, he probably had been. Especially when it came to the barn cats.

"I don't think I've ever seen Jannik do a lazy thing in all the years I've known him," Cormac remarked, jovially. "Why, I've got to chase him to bed, so he doesn't work himself to death."

The old man just grunted, as if to say he'd believe it when he saw it.

After a few days, Anders's father came to them again, as they sat by the well, taking water after a long day in the fields. "The city made you soft," he accused. "Still not as useless as your brother."

"Wasn't your other son only twelve, when he went away?" Cormac asked, between sips.

"You mean when the Maker cursed him for his laziness and he turned into a freak? When he burned down my barn just before the harvest, and we had to call the templars so he wouldn't kill us all?" the old man shot back, fear and anger in his eyes. "I didn't raise my son to be cursed for his heresy. I didn't raise a heretic child!"

Anders turned away, one hand shielding his eyes, ostensibly from the sun, but even through shut eyelids Anders could see the blue glow starting. Not worth it, he reminded Justice. It wouldn't help. Justice wasn't so easy to soothe this time, but Anders was firm, even with Justice's outrage bleeding into his.

"Ket was just a boy," Anders said, relieved when it was only his own voice he heard. "And that's not how magic works. It's not a punishment. Maker."

"Don't talk back, boy," his father snapped, and Anders flinched despite himself. He'd been a boy
then, but he wasn't a boy now. This man was -- should be -- no threat to him. "I see the city's made you insolent too. Is this what I should expect the whole harvest season? More disappointment?"

"If getting the harvest in in a quarter of the time is your definition of 'disappointment', you must be leading a real sad life, Messere Ewald," Cormac drawled, hanging his cup on the side of the well. "Does it matter what we have to say, if we're clearing that many rows?"

"I don't pay my fieldhands to sass me," Anders's father replied, looking like he might be winding up to start a tirade.

"And you don't pay these boys at all," Ulla reminded him, stepping out to draw water for supper. "I've got groats and lemon with some mustard greens and preserved dates. The chicken should be done soon, too," she said, patting Cormac's arm. "You boys need to eat, if you're going to be out here all day. Don't mind him. He's just mad he's not still young enough to do this all, himself."

Anders could see a muscle in his father's jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth, but all that followed was a grunt. It was a dissatisfied grunt, but Anders could live with that.

For all that Ulla tried, family meals were anything but cheerful. The table was small enough that Anders had to tuck in his elbows to keep from bumping anyone, and his father loomed at its head. And that was an odd coincidence, Anders thought, that the words 'loom' and 'gloom' sounded so similar, and that both applied to his father. Ewald loomed gloomily. A small smile tugged at Anders's lips. He wished the rhyming made his presence easier to deal with.

The promise of food helped, and so did the hopeful smile Ulla gave him as she handed him his plate, piled with enough food to make Ewald's eyes narrow. After a long day's work, the green wheat and roasted lamb smelled delicious, but somehow Anders managed not to shovel the whole thing into his mouth.

"This looks good!" Cormac said, smiling at Ulla. He nudged Anders, under the table. "Why'd you leave home, again? Maker, if my mum cooked like this..."

"You lived with your mum until she died, Mack," Anders reminded him. "It's not really a valid comparison."

"Ah, you know how it was, though. Sandwiches and puddings." Cormac took a bite and as soon as his mouth was full, Ewald started in.

"Yes, Jan, remind me why you left home. Family and farming not good enough for you, any more? Had to go to the big city, where you could marry some foreign woman and live among heretics and elves?" Ewald slammed his cup on the table hard enough to make the spoons jump. "Where's that wife of yours now, hm?"

There were any numbers of answers Anders could have given -- that he hadn't married, that he'd left her behind, that she'd moved on -- but he settled on the closest thing to the truth he could manage. "She died, papa. She died and I couldn't save her."

Another grunt from Ewald, this one almost darkly pleased. "So the Maker took your heretic woman," he muttered into his drink, "and you come crawling back with your tail between your legs? Let me guess. You lost the job too? Whatever it was you were doing amid all that filth."

Anders poked at the food in his plate, a bitter laugh punching out of him. "Good to know what passes for sympathy around here," he said with fake cheer.
"So that's a yes."

Anders stuffed more food into his mouth to keep from snapping at him. His father was like a dog with a bone, now, and it was better to not let it escalate. Eyes down on the plate, mouth shut. Anders remembered how this worked.

"So, you're a loser and your brother's probably dead. That's great. Maker, I sacrificed half my life, and this is what I get. A pair of ungrateful ignoramuses. At least I'm not still supporting your brother, too." Ewald snorted. "Knowing him, the templars probably drowned him in the river, before they even got as far as Hossberg. The mouth on that kid."

"Ewald!" Ulla snapped, grabbing a serving spoon and gesturing with it like a weapon.

Anders leapt up from the table, getting caught against the table and on the chair until he kicked the chair out of the way and stormed out of the house, eyes squeezed shut, but somehow not tripping or walking into anything on his way.

"I'd have slit my wrist before I spoke to a child of mine like that," Cormac said, quietly, setting down his spoon.

"And where are your children now? Did your wife leave you, too?"

"He wasn't even mine, but I raised him like he was, and now he's happily married with two cats and a noble estate in the Marches. Kills me to leave him, but Jan needs me more. He's had a rough time." Cormac's lips were pale and every word was stiff. "But, you understand me when I say this. As one father to another, I will turn you over my knee and slap the manners back into you if you ever speak to him like that again. He's a good man, and he's worked hard, all the years I've known him. And his ..." He hesitated, here, but continued to uphold Anders's decision to refer to Karl as his 'wife'. "... wife didn't just die. They were Chantry reformers, and she was tortured. When we found her, there was nothing any man or mage could have done to save her. He came back here to be with the people who loved him, and this is what you give him? Is this what he left behind? It's Andraste's own work he still thinks enough of you to come home."

He caught his breath and Ewald opened his mouth, but Cormac wasn't done.

"And you're not supporting him. Ask your wife." Cormac looked grim. "I am."

Ewald closed his mouth, then opened it again, turning a hard look on Ulla. She didn't flinch the way Anders did at that look, but she did straighten in her seat. "It's true, Ewald," she said. "This young man has been very generous. More generous than you realise and certainly more patient."

"Patient?" Ewald snapped, rising to his feet, shoulders apart and chest out to accentuate his size, the way some threatened birds did. "He comes into my house, sleeps under my roof, and talks to me like this, and that's what you have to say?" As he spoke, he stood over Cormac, close enough to make him aware of their difference in height.

Cormac took another sip of his tea. "Look, see, you're halfway there already. You're already standing. I know it's hard, but you're doing the right thing. Don't let me distract you. Go on out there and apologise to Jan. You can do it."

Ewald sputtered and huffed.

"I know how hard it is to admit you're wrong, especially when you're supposed to be right. When you're supposed to be the good influence. But, what's this going to get you? A son who leaves you in the middle of the harvest, again." Cormac smiled up, grimly, at Ewald. "If you can't admit it to
yourself, at least admit that apologising to your son is the more profitable decision you can make, right now."

Ewald raised his hand and it slowly curled into a fist, before he turned and stormed out the back door, toward the fields -- the opposite direction Anders had gone.
A Breaking Point

Chapter Summary

A time for tales and a time for righteous wrath. Malcolm Hawke is rolling over in his highly theoretical grave at this demonstration of fatherhood.

Outside, the air smelled like rain, and Anders could see storm clouds in the distance, hovering over the horizon. They were miles away still, and from this far away they looked like dyed cotton hanging from the sky. Anders was still watching those clouds when he heard the door open and shut behind him. Likely Cormac, come to check on him.

"Ket." But the voice was Ulla's. She came to stand next to him, and Anders offered her a weak smile.

"It looks just like the old one," he said, tipping his head to indicate the building next to him. "The barn. Like nothing had ever happened." His throat was tight, and Anders wondered if he was the only one who smelled smoke.

"Oh, you know, we just got Juste and Antje's boys to help us. They brought their friends and by the end of the month it was all new. Nothing lost but the wood and straw, a few tools. Your father got most of it out before the fire got so bad. Couldn't put it out, but he saved most of what was in there." Ulla reassured him. "But, you don't remember, do you? Poor thing, you were so scared."

"Still scared," Anders admitted, quietly. "Still happens, sometimes. Never like that again -- well, not quite. I did a number on a friend's wedding, at one point, but the magister started it. He'd have done much worse to the place than I did." He kept the other magister to himself, for the time being.

"And what is this about your wife, hm? Or are you just trying not to have him asking questions you don't have answers to?" Ulla asked, putting an arm around Anders's waist. She didn't discourage his fears. They both knew he was right to be afraid of Ewald.

Anders's lips tipped in the ghost of a smile. "I wasn't married," he said. "It... wasn't really an option in the Circle, among mages. Which was probably for the best, in Kinloch Hold. All of my Fereldan friends proposed to each other with goats."

Ulla chuckled companionably, but she didn't let up. "But there was someone, wasn't there? The look in your eyes when you said it. The look in Mack's. That wasn't all a lie."

And there was the tightness in Anders's throat again, the phantom ache in his chest. At least that's what it had faded to: an ache, a distant pain he anticipated more than he felt. "There was someone. We were in the Circle together, back when there was a Circle. Well. Back before I ran away from the Circle, really. All seven times."

"Do you want to tell me about her?" Ulla asked.

"Ah..." Anders tipped his head back and stared into the sun. "Him."

"I'm not surprised. I see the way you look at Mack." Ulla bumped her hip against Anders and smiled.
"Karl. His name was Karl, and we... He was so smart, mama. And he had this terrible beard -- I swear he grew it out just to annoy me. But, he was sweet and soft and quiet. And he'd write whole volumes on the philosophies of magic and the Circle and why the Circle was good but the implementation sucked. And he was kind of right. It did suck, but I disagree that it was ever a good idea. You know he pushed me out of bed for that, one night?" Anders laughed, weakly. "I was going to save him. I was going to take him away and run off to Tevinter or something. I wanted to go south. He wanted to go north. But... I was too late. Templars didn't like his politics, after they sent him to Kirkwall."

"So, they killed him? For that?" Ulla looked disgusted and more than a little horrified.

"Worse." Anders's thumb drummed incessantly against his thigh as he tried to catch his breath and still make words. "They used him to try to kill me. Mack was with me, helping me, and when we found him... it was too late. What they did to him... I'm a healer, mama. I'm a healer, and even I couldn't help him. I couldn't make it right."

"Oh, my poor boy," Ulla said, heartbreak in her voice as she laid a hand on his back, rubbing circles between his shoulder blades.

Anders's breath hitched, and he leaned into her as she wrapped her arms around him, as tight as she used to when he was a child. She still smelled the same, like oven smoke and the sauces she'd been cooking, with something earthier underneath that reminded him of sage.

"It was years ago," he said, his hand bunched in her robes. "I've had time, and it's... not easier, exactly, but I don't think about it as much. About him." And a part of him felt guilty for that, for going whole days, weeks without thinking about Karl. It was getting harder just to picture his face, when Anders had once known it better than his own.

"I am sorry, Ket," Ulla murmured, one hand still rubbing soothing circles. "You know, it was much easier to hug you when you were smaller. Make an old woman reach."

Anders laughed, despite himself, tears still running down his face as he knelt, not to tower over his mother any longer. "Sorry, mama. How's this?"

"When did you get such big shoulders?" Ulla asked, putting her arms around him, again. "You could carry pretty girls on those shoulders, you know that?"

"It's Mack's fault. I was... sick, when he found me. Sick and poor, and he came and made me eat. Said he wanted to see me with 'shoulders like buttresses', and I will never forget that. Silliest thing." Anders chuckled self-consciously. "Carried a lot of things on my shoulders, too. Dwarves, wardens, pirates... Mack..."

Ulla chuckled, smoothing back his hair now that she could reach. "Seems to me like you've done a fair share of carrying each other, not just on your shoulders." She pressed a kiss to the crown of his head, squeezing him this side of too tight before easing her grip. "He seems a good sort, you know. Cares about you, wants to take care of you. And it's nice to have a young man offer to clear the table for me."

She sighed, pulling back enough to wipe away the tears on Anders's cheeks with her sleeve. "Your father on the other hand," she said with fond exasperation. "You know how he is."

"How do you stand him?" Anders asked.

"I have a wooden spoon, and complete control of the kitchen. I don't think that man could get the pits
out of dates left to himself, but he farms barley, and that's good enough. I can't do everything, myself." Ulla smiled tiredly. "You might want to put your shoe in the door, tonight, when you go to bed. Your young man's gone and stood up to your father more than anyone has since that dwarf who threatened to burn down the house."

"Andraste wept," Anders sighed. "What's he done, this time?"

"Told him if he ever spoke to you like that again, he'd get a spanking." Ulla's voice cracked with laughter. "I thought your father was going to punch his teeth in!"

"He's still got a chance. It's not like he'd have succeeded," Anders choked out. "Nobody actually hits Mack. He's... you know what he is. That's part of what he does. Papa's broken knuckles would have been worth it, but maybe not in the middle of the harvest."

Ulla's eyebrows lifted. "Then I'll be less concerned for your friend. But yes, please don't let your father break his knuckles on anything until after the harvest."

"I'll do my best," Anders drawled. "But that depends on what he's trying to punch and what comes out of his mouth."

Ulla gave the back of his head a teasing swat. "You do still have a smart mouth," she said, but Anders didn't mind the way she said it. She almost sounded proud.

"That's the way you raised me." Anders shot a glance back toward the house, shaking his head. "I should probably go put Cormac's teeth back in, before we have to work, tomorrow. He really said that to papa? In the house?"

Cormac stood alone in the kitchen, when Anders and Ulla returned, carefully weighing sacks of grain and beans in his hands. "Is it a bad time of year for millet?" he asked, hearing the door. "You're almost out."

"Millet grows in the rainy season, when the floods come. Barley goes in after, and then the long beans, when it's dry." Ulla said, coming up behind him. "Turn around and let us see your face. You must have such a bruise."

"He hasn't come in yet." Cormac shrugged and put back the bags. "So, I haven't misjudged? I should have a black eye?"

"You might yet," Anders muttered looking toward the back door.

"Of course, dear." Ulla patted Cormac's shoulder. "He'll come back in and knock you flat -- don't stand too close to the table or the cupboards -- and then you'll be back out in the field, come morning. And hopefully he'll think twice before talking about his son like that, for once."

"I don't think demonic possession could make him think twice about that," Anders grumbled.

"Well, I think I've made my opinion on the subject about as clear as it's going to get," Cormac said, rubbing a hand over his face, and watching Anders flit nervously around the room. "Should I be sorry? Is that something I shouldn't have done? I'm sorry anyway. I didn't think of what this would do to you, if I was wrong."

"Don't be sorry, Cormac," Anders said. "It's done. Not much you can do, now."

As much as he would have liked to have seen the look on his father's face, Anders wished Cormac
had just let it go. Or at least the sensible part of him wished. The other part of him wished he'd talked back himself. But that would have just made things worse. And things were bad enough, Anders decided, when he finally saw the look on his father's face.

Ewald came in from the fields looking grim and calm, his jaw tight. Calm. Calm wasn't good.

"Papa..." Anders started, only for words to die on his tongue when Ewald pinned him with a look.

"What are you two still doing here?" Ewald said between his teeth. "In my house, after what that Marcher said to me?" He pointed at Cormac without addressing him directly.

"Ewald!" Ulla started, moving forward to step in front of the boys, but Anders held her back, shaking his head.

"Saying goodbye to my mother, apparently," Anders breathed, suddenly dizzy with the reality of doing this all again. "And somehow you have the nerve to act like this is a change? Like I've ever been welcome here? Don't worry, oudje, you have no sons, and no one will ever think different. Get the trunks, Mack."

"Where--?" Cormac started.

"Get what is ours, so we can leave these decent people in peace." The air around Anders smelled faintly of the Fade, as he gently squeezed his mother's wrist. Two quick taps -- talk when he's not looking -- and Anders hoped she remembered.

"Here, let me fetch your cart, from the barn," Ulla said quietly, twisting her wrist out of Anders's grip, with a pat on his hand, before she slipped toward the door, as Cormac headed to the room he'd shared with Anders.

That left Anders and Ewald in the kitchen with only the table between them, alone except for the raging spirit shouting between Anders's ears. Anders's fists stayed clenched at his sides, knuckles white with the force of holding Justice back. Ewald saw those fists, saw how tightly they were clenched, and misinterpreted them, his chin tipping up defiantly.

"You couldn't have tried?" Anders asked, throat strangely tight. Talking back didn't matter now, not with Cormac packing their life away again. "Not even for her? I know you didn't want me here, but did you once stop to think about her?"

"You have some gall, invoking your mother, after the way you left her. I could have thrown you both out on your asses the moment I saw you. I should have."

"Would have saved us all time," Anders snapped. Blue flashed across his eyes, quick enough to be a trick of the light.

"Would've saved us all time and effort if I'd just thrown you in the river in a sack, when you were born, but your mother wouldn't have it," Ewald snarled. "Spoilt that woman, but at least I kept her alive. You couldn't even manage that, could you?"

Anders went straight over the table, fast and smooth, like he'd done so many times in the tunnels under the Vigil, and the force of him slammed his father back into the cupboards. "May you never know what I went through in the Maker's name. May you never lose what I have lost."

"And that's just it. You just couldn't live a decent life, go to services, plant and harvest and tithe, like a man should. You just had to go out and make things difficult, and now you've got someone killed for it," Ewald huffed, struggling for breath, in the wake of the impact. "Nothing was ever good
enough for you, and I won't have you bring that curse down on this family again!"

"IT WAS NOT JUST!" Justice roared, electric blue flickers blazing across their face, but in the space of a few breaths, the glow was some dim halo that could've just been spotty vision. "What about Andraste? Did she buckle down and just work as she was instructed? Did she turn her eyes away from the suffering around her?"

"And now you're comparing yourself to Andraste?" Ewald scoffed. "The arrogance..."

"I don't see you doing anything about what's going on, out there! I don't see you fighting the dwarven stranglehold on our money or the way the land suffers from the Tevinter influence in the east or the Orlesians pushing up from the south! I don't see you fighting for the half-sack of your own flesh and blood that got dragged off to some Maker-forsaken Chantry prison. Have you seen the inside of a Circle Tower? Go down to Hossberg and ask. Let them show you. Maybe they still have him, there, and you can see what they've done." Anders grew steadily louder, voice echoing off the thick mud-brick walls. It wasn't like him to get angry, he reflected. He hadn't been actually enraged in more years than he could quite recall. "And what about the Blight? Where were you, then? Did they even come down this far into the valley, here?"

"The Blight. We named those things, boy, and you were nowhere near them, either. The Archdemon came out of southern Ferelden, and you were in some airy Marcher town, sipping tea and getting your wife killed for your blasphemy against the Maker," Ewald spat.

"I was in the Keep at Amaranthine when they came up through the cellar and slaughtered almost every Warden in the fortress." Anders didn't feel his lips move, almost didn't recognise his own voice, which was suddenly much lower, much colder.

That gave Ewald pause but only for a moment. "And now you were in Amaranthine?" he said, lip curling in distrust.

"I was," Anders said, still in that low, cold voice as he pushed his father back against the cupboards. "I was in Amaranthine with the Wardens, because I was a Warden." Still was, he supposed. That wasn't something he could seem to run away from. "I killed darkspawn, papa. I saved lives. But that's still not good enough for you, is it? Even if I had stayed, it wouldn't have been good enough. Even if I had tended the fields and tithed and done all that Makerforsaken shit, it wouldn't have been good enough."

"Get off me," Ewald said, words pushed through bared teeth. He shoved Anders back with a hand on his chest. "Still whining after all these years? How many days have you slept under my roof and eaten my food? And still only complaints!" Anders wondered if the man heard a word he'd said. "Get out, before I drag you and your new wife out."

Anders squinted at his father, dumbstruck by the last sentence. "Mack's... not my wife. That's... what?" The statement was masterfully absurd, really. It wasn't that he and Cormac hadn't made a hundred jokes about it, over the years, but the old man almost sounded serious.

"Take that shaggy Marcher whore you stare at like the sun's shaken the sense from you, and get out of my house. You can leave with or without your teeth, but you're leaving!" Ewald roared, stepping closer.

"Hey, Mack, you've got to hear this! Papa thinks you look like--" The words cut off suddenly as Ewald's fist slammed into the side of Anders's face. Anders staggered back, bumping into the table, as a hysterical giggle started low in his chest. "Really? Is that all you've got? Is that it? Is that what I've been so afraid of?"
The laugh became more hysterical, swelling into whooping and cackling, as Anders's eyes lit up in feral amusement. He held a hand to his cheek, trying to stop pulling at where he'd split the inside against his teeth, but every whooping breath spattered blood across his lips.

Cormac paused at the kitchen door, taking in the set of Anders's shoulders and the unmindful cockiness in the cant of Ewald's chin. "Sweet thing? Come away. You can't fix this. Come away, before you break something." *Like your father's jaw. "Your ma, she's worried about you. Come out and see her, sweet thing."

Mama. The thought of her kept Justice in check, even if Fade-blue cracks kept trying to open up along his skin. Prodding his cheek, Anders paused long enough to spit blood at his father's feet, making a note to apologize to mama for the mess later, if he had the chance.

"Don't worry, papa, I won't darken your doorway again," he said, letting Cormac pull him away, out of the kitchen, out of the house, out of the childhood home he'd been trying to get back to all these years. All the while, he laughed through bloodied teeth at the absurdity of it all.
Cormac and Anders figure out what to do, now that they've been kicked out. The inn isn't a long-term solution for a variety of reasons.

They lay in the same large bed in Kassel that they'd vacated, when they moved across the river. The tourist season tended to focus on the festivals, and between those, the city moved at an entirely other pace, slower and more subtle. But, that meant they'd been able to get the very same room, once again, which looked mostly like they'd left it.

Anders had healed his face, the night before, while they waited for the boat. There was no one to see the brief flash, and they wouldn't leave questions when they returned to the inn. But, now, he stared at the ceiling, wrapped as tightly around Cormac as he could manage without rolling over. "We shouldn't have gone back. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Cormac muttered into Anders's armpit. "Your mum's great. I told her she'd be welcome in our house, but your old man would be eating outside with the camel."

"You want to get a camel?" Anders asked. "I thought you were terrified of camels."

"I'm not terrified of camels. I'm just ... coming to terms with them, conceptually. They look like blightwork." Cormac chuffed in amusement. "Also, I gave your mum a couple pieces of gold. Told her to take care of herself."

"Gold? Cormac, that's years' worth of coin." Anders finally rolled over, untangling himself from Cormac to stare down at the fluffy, darling idiot smiling up at him.

"Nobility with good investments? We're worth easily ten times that, in a year, depending on what Anton's willing to pass on?" Cormac laughed. "She's your mother, and she should have nice things."

"She should," Anders agreed, his tone not quite matching his smile. "She certainly deserves better than she has." Unsaid but understood was the reference to his father. "And you're worthy only ten times that, hm? You are easily worth your weight in gold, Cormac Hawke, or at least the weight of your knob."

And that was, he thought, the upside to being kicked out of his parents' house, the discussion and possible misuse of knobs, or at least it would be if they hadn't been so... enthusiastic the last time they had stayed here. The innkeeper had banged his fist against the door and yelled something about noise and scaring passers-by, and after his insistence that they pay for any damage to the bed, Anders had thought it best to cut their amorous activities short. If 'amorous' was really the word for what they got up to.

The stare the innkeeper had pinned on them when they arrived said he remembered them. Pushing their luck was, Anders supposed, not the best plan.

"Do you even remember the weight of my knob?" Cormac teased, grinding that very thing against Anders's thigh. "I don't think you've weighed it, recently. Certainly not since the last time we were..."
Oh, right." He groaned and twisted around, staring mournfully at the ceiling. "This wonderful nation of delectable foods and fine artistry has no appreciation for us -- for the ecstatic joy of... something, what is it they always say about the Orlesian theatre?"

"And now you're never getting laid again," Anders scoffed, shoving Cormac precipitously close to the edge of the bed. "Orlesian theatre? Orlesian anything? Not in this bed."

"Are you sure? This place is supposedly pretty full during the tourist season." Cormac grinned, as Anders shoved him that last inch, and he dropped heavily to the floor, taking the sheets with him. "So, what do you want to do? I mean, this place is nice, but we can't stay here forever. And we especially can't stay here forever if I'm not allowed to indulge in the distinctly non-Orlesian delights of your gorgeous body."

Anders tugged at the sheets, pulling just enough off of and out from under Cormac to cover his legs and ass. "Well... I suppose we should start on getting a house, if we're to be inviting my mother over. Likely with a place to put our theoretical camel as well. And if my father is going to spending time with that camel, we are investing in a trip to a camel barber finding out how much it costs to shave something insulting and obscene into its fur."

A house. They'd discussed it in the past, but that meant they were staying, if Cormac agreed, at least for the near future. He was starting to ease into life in the Anderfels, into working the harvest. The heat and the grit of sand in his clothes felt like home again, even if his childhood home did not.

"Of course, we're probably going to have to build it," Anders went on. "Consult the Chantry, buy a plot of land that won't get washed away when the rains come."

"What's the Chantry got to do with it?" Cormac looked a little confused. "When we built our house in Lothering... well, I guess we bought a house in Lothering and then built on it, but it was all about talking to the neighbours and figuring out where the property lines were. The Chantry didn't have anything to say about property allocations or even blessing the new construction."

He paused and blinked. "We're building a house. Like, you and me. A house. For us. However we want it to be." Sitting up, he grinned over the edge of the bed. "I want a big library and a nice kitchen, and I know that means we're going to spend a couple months living in a shed, but it's not going to be the first time I've done that. We're rich, right? We can have a nice house. And we can pay people an awful lot to build it for us, too."

"I wouldn't mind a library and a nice kitchen," Anders said, grinning at Cormac across the sheets. "And a sturdy bed. You Hawkes have spoiled me terribly these past few years, you know?" He'd gotten so used to all these little comforts before they'd left Kirkwall. "But, yes, we have to ask the Chantry first, if we're looking for a plot on the other side of the river." He pointed over his shoulder in the appointed direction. "We're not in Ferelden or the Free Marches, any more. The local Chantry is really the closest thing the lake towns have to a system of government."

At least he had fond memories of that particular Chantry. The Revered Mother had had gentle hands and a gentle voice, and he remembered the services being peaceful, if a bit dull.

"So, we talk to the Sisters, and then we have to hire builders. Is there a guild for that? Should I be taking it up with the dwarves?" Cormac asked, glancing around for where he'd thrown his robes, the night before. Sleeping nude had been such an appealing idea, after all this time, that he'd just... thrown clothing and dived into bed. Artie would've throttled him awake, in the middle of the night, but Artie wasn't here. And that was not a happy thought at all. For a moment, he missed being woken up by a bed full of gravel or a dirty sock to the face. "Who builds, and who have I got to bribe?"
Anders caught Cormac's attention with a snap of his fingers and pointed his thumb at the room's opposite corner, where Cormac's robes lay in a mess of fabric. It seemed he wasn't the only one who had been spoiled these last few years. "You, Messere Hawke, have spent too much time in Kirkwall. 'Who builds' are whatever able-bodied men aren't in the fields working the harvest."

Cormac smiled gratefully. "Should I be offended at how willing you were to tell me where I left my clothes?" he teased, pulling them on. "So... huh. Right. Like Lothering, again. I guess I just figured with all the dwarven merchants that they'd have established some kind of stranglehold on traditionally dwarfy parts of the economy. You'd think Varric would've cured me of that."

Another moment, and he'd found his boots under the table and sat down on the end of the bed to pull them on. "So, ah... What do you know about building houses? I mean, besides the 'cut some wood and nail it into a box shape' part? Wood. That's... Not a lot of things are made of wood, here, are they? How do you...?" He stared at the wall, contemplatively. "What is that made of? Stone and plaster?"

"Mud-brick," Anders answered, pressing his cheek into his pillow. While Cormac was finishing his quest for clothing, Anders stretched diagonally across the bed, enjoying the warmth Cormac had left behind. *He* knew where his clothing was, and after a minute more of savouring this horizontal state, Anders stretched like a cat and finally pushed himself up and off the bed. "Cheap, light, durable. Anyone can make it." Those memories were gathering cobwebs by this point, but if he brushed them aside, he could remember the process, could remember Jan -- the real Jan -- prodding his hands and helping him shape the brick. "As for the building, uh. I suppose it would be too much to hope that you have a hidden talent for designing buildings? Preferably buildings that won't fall on us?"

"Can't say that was ever on my list. Maker, I almost wish Carver was here. After all the work he did on the alienage, he'd have at least sort of a clue." Cormac laughed nervously. "I know not on that side of the river, but over here, is there ... I don't know, a city planning office? Records? Something? I mean, somebody probably built something about the size we need at some point and left the drawings for it, right? And people who actually grew up here -- I mean, longer than you -- would've done this kind of thing before, right?"

"That's the assumption," Anders replied. "Another possibility is that these buildings sprang out of the ground, fully formed, like massive sandcastles." That made him think of the day Izzy had dragged him and Artie to sun themselves on the beach. He didn't give himself long enough to consider that memory or that he might miss his life in Kirkwall. "I don't know about a city planning office, but we do have a library. There's a chance that someone who knew what they were doing left something there." Anders pulled his robes towards him with his toes.

"Right. That sounds almost like a plan, you know. We go get a clue, then we get land, then we get builders. We can do that, right? Of course we can. We're heroes." Cormac laughed, as he took a moment to adjust his hair in the mirror. "We've killed and eaten dragons. This can't be that hard."
The lower levels of the library were cool and dry, and the archives of contracts and city meetings stretched in all directions from the long table piled with bound architectural proposals -- one year to the volume. Anders lay sprawled across the table, one eye closed, as he squinted at something that was, presumably, the plans for a building of some sort, and Cormac dropped another book onto the pile on his chest.

"For the record, I liked dragons better. Things that run around roaring and breathing fire are apparently much more my thing," Cormac groaned, opening another volume and trying to decipher the headings on the next set of plans. Some of them were written in Ander, some in Common, and a not ignorable amount in Tevene. But, there had to be something in here, somewhere. Still, he'd sort of gotten the idea of how corners worked, at least.

Anders refrained from making comparisons between himself and anything fire-breathing. "I might prefer the dragons, myself." He tucked in his chin and tried to read the spine of the book Cormac had placed on his chest. "But, here. Take a look at this." Holding the book open to the page he was on, he placed it flat on the table, sliding it in Cormac's direction. Cormac wouldn't be able to read the labels, but the drawings were, he thought, reasonably clear. "The design is fairly simple when you break it down. We start with the large room in the middle and camp out in there while we build outwards."

Anders shrugged. He'd seen similar structures go up when he was a child, and it seemed something not even he and Cormac could screw up.

"If we do it right, we can even cook inside, while we're waiting for the kitchen. Of course, I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing, cooking inside. It's a bit warm for that." Cormac laughed. "I have to stop thinking I'm in Ferelden. I haven't been there in years, but it's still... I don't know, I keep thinking things still work like they did, before -- the last time I had to do something like this."

Cormac pulled the book a little closer, studying the finer details. "So, the roof is... basically reeds, straw mats, and pitch? That doesn't seem too bad. I mean, as long as we haven't got to melt any magisters. It might become bad, at that point. But, the walls won't burn, so I think we're probably all right. And this will stand up to the rains? I don't doubt it, if you say it's true, but I've never really seen things built out of mud, before."

"If it's made right, it should," Anders assured him. "This stuff's more durable than it looks, as long as you're not right by the water. Rains, yes. Floods, no. Still, we'll need enough wood to reinforce the walls and roof, which should be... less easy to find than down south but certainly doable. We plaster the walls... set up the backyard for the camel... Do you have any names in mind for this potential camel?"

Considering how much they spit, Anders's first thought was Oghren, but he doubted that would be as funny to Cormac, no matter how many Oghren stories he'd been subjected to.
"I thought I'd worry about naming it after we actually had it," Cormac admitted, still uncertain about coming into regular contact with a mutant spitting horse. "Let's get through the house part, first, then we can worry about the camel part. Unless we need the camel for the house. We do, don't we. We need to be able to move the materials to... wherever we end up building. I mean, unless they're local materials. You know, I'm going to leave that to you, since you actually grew up here, and I'm still getting used to the idea that everything is made of mud." He paused and considered the images again. "It's nothing about your parents, but I don't think we should build in the village. We're ... a little unusual, and my brother's probably going to visit, eventually. I'd rather not get caught by the templars for breaking the neighbours' dishes."

With the designs for their future house tucked under Anders's arm, they made for the Chantry. Again, Anders would have preferred facing a dragon. Two dragons, even, and he'd almost liked this Chantry growing up. He'd liked it as much as any twelve-year-old boy was bound to like a place his parents dragged him to.

Still, climbing the familiar steps, seeing the way time had aged the paint on the Chantry's walls, Anders hadn't quite been prepared for the tightness in his chest. He remembered the last time he'd walked these steps, or rather the last time he was supposed to walk them, but he shook off the memories before they led to fire and templars and the cold look on his father's face. That last image was still fresh in his mind.

Cormac squinted at the edges of the windows and the way the tile was set around the bottom of the building. How did these things go together? He wondered if there was some deeper religious meaning to the choice of tiles, in particular, and if that was something they could have in a less-religious design on their own home. Would it be appropriate? Would it be difficult to maintain? Would magic make it easier to care for?

The inside of the building reminded him of the Chantry in Lothering -- the same shape, the same scenes from the life of Andraste. The art was different, here, though, and he started to understand the price paid for Ander works, in the south. Even in the most magical moments, there was a sense of looking through a window, that even the most unreal things gained a certain weight. Hessarian's guilt needed no label, nor did Maferath's uncertainty. Knowing the stories made the statuary immediately recognisable in a way the stylised images so common in the south weren't.

While Cormac took his time admiring the art, Anders approached the statue of Andraste and the Mother praying in front of it. The heavy drape of her clothing made it difficult to make out her shape or even her age until she lifted her head and rose creakily to her feet. Joint pain in her hips. He could read it in her posture, and it would be an easy fix, if he were still the Kirkwall healer.

"Excuse me, Mother, but do you have a moment?" Anders asked, and she turned at the sound of his voice. He pulled up short, recognising her. She had the same gold eyes and round face, but her hair had greyed, the lines around her eyes and mouth deeper than he remembered, joined by a dozen new lines when she smiled. "Ah. Revered Mother, I should say."

"Of course, my son," she said in that gentle voice he remembered. "I have as many moments as you need."

He struggled for a minute to -- Yotte. That was her name. Revered Mother Yotte.

"I've been away for many years, Mother Yotte. I came back to build a home. Maybe settle down here." Anders took a few long breaths, trying to quell the dizziness that seized him and quiet the memories and fears battering at his consciousness like a swarm of Fen'Din's infernal bees.
"Oh, I do know you, don't I?" Yotte smiled warmly, reaching up to turn his face into the light from the window high above Andraste. "You're one of Ewald's sons. The handsome one, obviously."

Anders chuckled and looked away. "Jan," he said. "The one who could come back. Do you know what happened to Ket? Is that even still his name? I heard ridiculous things, that the templars came and took him down to Hossberg."

"Your brother was touched by the Maker's hand, Jan. For good or ill, I do not know." Yotte's eyes were sad, for a moment, but her smile never faltered. "But, you've come for land, haven't you? Let's get you something nice." She called for a young lay sister, working in the office to the side of the altar. "Ingill! Come help this nice young man find a place to build a home!"

"Young," Anders scoffed, rubbing at the dark hollow under one eye.

"Don't you start, Jan Ewaldsson!" Yotte scolded. "I'm as old as your mother."

"Kasselmann," Anders corrected, reflexively, then tried to explain. "I needed a name that said something people understood."

Yotte opened her mouth as though to respond, only to close it again with another smile, this one a little more puzzled. She was a bit like Cormac that way, always smiling, even -- especially -- when she had no reason to. "Kasselmann, then. But my point still stands, young man."

"Of course," Anders said. Distantly, a part of him knew this was where he was supposed to say something charmingly cheeky, but the words didn't come. He kept seeing a younger Mother Yotte in her smile, and that put him in mind of the white robes his mother had bought him that had never been worn. He was almost relieved when Ingill called him into the office. Andraste's sculpture didn't loom here, with her red robes and piercing eyes, and the paperwork Ingill placed in front of him was real and solid and in no way directly relevant to those memories.

If Yotte was all smiles, Ingill was humourless as she pulled out a map of the town and its surrounding lands. "We have some plots available here, here, and here." She gestured accordingly with her quill. "All out of the floodplain and reasonably close to town. Do you have a preference?"

It wasn't labelled, but Anders found the bit of map showing where his parents' land was. He brushed that thought aside and chose the land farthest from the town. Ingill named a price and Anders counted out the coins -- some Marcher gold, some Fereldan, but none of them locally minted. Ingill looked surprised, at first, which settled into a sort of tired exasperation, as Anders signed the papers. He knew what she thought -- just another foreigner who would starve himself out in a year. He hoped she was wrong.

As he left the office, map in hand, he smiled at Mother Yotte, before making his way over to where Cormac seemed completely absorbed in a painting of the Battle of Valerian Fields. Letting a faint charge precede him, Anders wrapped his arms around Cormac from behind, resting his chin on Cormac's head. "You bought me a home," he mumbled, almost contentedly. "Now, all we need is a house."
Cormac examined the earth, as he paced out the edges of the first wall and drove spikes into the ground. "Andraste's flaming unmentionables," he sighed. "Are you sure we can grow anything in this?"

"I grew up here. My parents have been growing barley since before I was born. It's not the best thing to plant in, but it's not too terrible, after the first season or two." Anders shrugged and looked around. "What do you think of beans and squash? I think we could manage that."

"Buy hulls and leavings, if anyone will sell," one of the workers suggested, passing with another tray of bricks. "Break up the ground and add it in right after the harvest, and you might be able to live off of what comes up, if you plant in the spring."

Anders cocked a thumb after the woman. "She's right. The same as making bricks, oddly, but with less straw. The more plant bits we can't eat that go back in, the less trouble we're going to have later. The worst's just making sure the ground doesn't..." He gestured at the beginnings of the wall.

"We can cheat it, I think," Cormac said, with an inquisitive look, rubbing his fingers together in the way that had come to mean magic, when they couldn't say as much.

"Probably." Anders nodded. "I didn't... I don't have any of those techniques, but you do, don't you?"

"Some. Better for trees, though. I can do trees without even thinking. It'll be a little harder without my brother, of course, but I'm sure we can manage something."

The spikes went in easily, for Cormac, in a way they wouldn't have for most people. He still made a point of stomping on them, so it wouldn't look too easy, but he could play with the water in the ground, using it to change the density of where he was trying to put a spike. It was difficult and really precise, especially with people all around him who'd be happy to hand him in as a mage, but it was still easier than trying to drive the damnable things in with a mallet, without cracking himself in the hand.

Soon, the inner wall was shoulder-high for Cormac, and it was possible to drape a cloth over it at night, tied to yet more of those spikes, and sleep in the corner of their not quite a house. It would be small -- at least compared to the estate in Kirkwall -- but larger than the wagon Cormac had spent half his childhood living in, which was a little smaller than the room Anders had shared in the tower. But, it would be theirs, and they would finally be free to wind around each other in as little as they liked, which really hadn't been an option, these last months.

And the first night they slept on the hard ground beneath the cloth that kept the dust from skinning
them when the wind blew, Cormac was insatiable, lips and hands on any skin Anders would bare for him. "Please, please, please," he begged. "I missed the feel of you, even with you in my arms."

This had been, as it turned out, the longest Cormac had gone without sex in his entire adult life, and he was rather displeased with the situation. And while Anders had gone longer, it wasn't really something he enjoyed, however much Justice preferred the lack of interruptions.

"When the walls are finished, no one will hear you scream," Anders promised, a faint smile flickering across his face. "But, we're out here in half a tent, and knowing you, the whole village will hear, even if the nearest house is a mile away. There aren't trees and stone to break the sound, here."

"Then what about just you? You're quiet. Let me taste you. Let me touch you. Let me give you as much as I can," Cormac pleaded, hands clenched tight in the outer robe Anders wore, so common in this place.

Anders could see so much more, when Cormac's eyes opened again. "Not just overcome by my dashing good looks, are you?" he asked, pulling Cormac closer. "You--"

"Don't. Don't say it. Don't remind me." Cormac had also never been this long without Artemis beside him. It had hurt terribly when they weren't sharing a bed any more, worse when Artie had moved in with Fenris, but he'd still been there. He'd been just the next road over. And by then, things were different between them. Every touch meant more and lasted so much longer. But, he'd been months without the man he'd devoted his entire life to, months without even a lay, months lying awake half the night beside Anders in the room Anders used to share with his own brother and then in an inn they were much too loud for.

"We'll build this house, and then we'll send a letter. It's going to be all right." Anders kissed Cormac's forehead.

"That's my line," Cormac complained, wondering how far he'd slipped that Anders was comforting him, instead of the other way around.

"I thought I'd try it on for size. See if it looked as good on me as it did on you," Anders teased, hands wandering Cormac's still-clothed body.

"And? What do you think? I still think you'd look better in nothing at all. Even with that ridiculous beard."

"It is ridiculous, isn't it? I'm half as handsome with no chin. It's terrible." Anders sighed dramatically, both hands kneading Cormac's ass. "But, I think the line looks better on you. Might borrow it, now and again, when you're not using it, but it's not something I see happening regularly."

"I don't care how ridiculous the beard is. I know just how devastatingly gorgeous you really are, and I want you. I want you so much." Cormac's hands skimmed stiffly over Anders's body.

"Say it again," Anders breathed.

"I want you. I want to fuck." Cormac's fingers put off just enough of a spark to feel like static in Anders's robe. "I want to smell like your sweat. I want to feel you come."

"Yes. Maker, yes," Anders panted, pulling Cormac tight against him. "I want you to make me come until I can't."

Everything Cormac thought of that suggestion was contained in the raw noise that tore out of him, before he could manage words.
"You're not going to be able to manage quiet, are you?" Anders smiled against Cormac's forehead.

"I'm about to find out how much of this robe I can fit in my mouth." Cormac's voice was high and breathy.

"Thought you didn't like gags," Anders teased.

"I like not having you shoved so deep I can feel you when I swallow even less." Cormac tore at his clothes, unwilling to become quite naked -- they had no door to close, yet -- but certainly willing to remove what he had on under his outer robe. After an awful lot of twisting and pulling, he wore only a single layer of cloth.

"I don't know if I've said it, but I'm pretty sure I've never been with anyone who wanted me quite the way you do." Smiling again, Anders loosened his own trousers and writhed out of them, kicking them off. "You don't just want a fuck, you actually want me."

"Of course I want you. You're gorgeous, and listening to you talk politics turns me on. When I was young, I thought I wanted to be you, when I grew up. Now, I get the privilege of doing you, which is even better, because it means there's two of us." Cormac said it like he said so many strange things -- like his crude sentiments were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Yet another thing I like about you," Anders teased, nibbling under Cormac's beardless chin, "that hopeless sentimentality."

Cormac laughed and pulled himself into Anders's lap, pulling what felt like acres of cloth from between them, until he could feel skin on skin. "Yeah, that's me. Sentimental, romantic, a genuine sap. I'm hopelessly in love with your knob, and all the things you can do to me with it. Bunch of things you can do to me without it, too." He squirmed closer, crossing his ankles behind Anders's back, as he rolled his hips demandingly.

"And yet, you always step in front of your brother, and not me..." Anders cut himself off. That had passed pretty far into not funny, and they both knew it as soon as the words left his mouth. Even the rest of the thought wouldn't have dragged it back out.

Reaching up, Cormac grabbed Anders's ridiculous plaited beard and pulled until their foreheads touched. "I've seen your scars. I trust you to survive without my help. I have faith that you can look after yourself, and if you need me, you'll tell me." He left the rest implied. No good would come of questioning Artemis's survival skills, especially while he was too far north to do anything about the situation they'd left behind. "You will live, with or without me. I just like the part where if it's 'with', we both have a lot more sex."

"I can't find it in me to argue against that benefit." Anders's voice was a little too light, but he leaned back against the wall and lifted Cormac, with both hands on that amazing ass, casting as he kneaded it. "I know you think you'd rather I didn't, but it's been months. Live with it."

"No, I... you're probably right, this time." Cormac laughed as he reached between them, caressing Anders's knob as if it were some sacred artefact, before he tucked it under him, grinding the tip against his hole, where Anders held him spread.

"Take it," Anders breathed. "Take me."
Chapter Summary

Cormac finds another reason to hate lube. (Half this chapter is porn. Skip to the double line, to avoid it.)

Cormac saw stars as Anders slowly started to bring him down. Anders was huge, and intellectually, Cormac realised that, but what he hadn't realised was what several months out of practise would do to him. It wouldn't fit. He knew it would fit. He'd done this a couple hundred times, in the preceding years, but he had to actually get it in, first, which was suddenly a lot more difficult than he recalled it being. He took a few deep breaths and tried to relax, bringing up memories of why he wanted this and how good it had felt, as he rubbed another grease spell along Anders's length.

Finally, he started to slide down, his every breath ending in a choked off sound of pain, for the first three inches. And then he clamped down, arching back with one hand clinging to Anders's shoulder, and a long, low, liquid moan poured out of him.

"Miss me?" Anders panted, as speckles danced before his eyes.

"So much," Cormac groaned, rolling his hips around what little of Anders he'd taken in, before he started to work his way down again. His body ached wonderfully, even as Anders's healing trickled through him, to keep the damage from getting serious. The pain crawled up his bones, and he thought his hips might split apart from the pressure inside him, and as he settled at last into Anders's lap, he buried his face against Anders's neck and wept.

"Fawning or fucking?" Anders asked, moving his hands to wrap his arms around Cormac's back.

"Both," Cormac choked out. "So good... Missed you so much. Just relief. Thought I might never fuck again."

A breathy laugh slipped out of Anders. "Terrible feeling, isn't it?"

"Let's never do that again," Cormac suggested, as his breathing levelled and the tears slowed.

"There's no joy in it." Anders nipped the top of Cormac's ear. "Justice missed you, too, even if he doesn't like me saying it. I swear he gets a little more human, every year."

"He doesn't miss me," Cormac scoffed. "He misses this." A few deep breaths, and Cormac's hands settled on Anders's shoulder blades, before the indigo light crept in along his fingers and into his palms.

Anders's breathing quickened at the touch of the Fade against his back. "It's your hands that give us this. He misses you."

Cormac rolled his hips again, grinding down onto Anders. "When we have a home that won't glow in the dark, I'll make it up to both of you. Like that night by the docks, but just the three of us."

"Shit, don't. If you do it wrong..." Anders shook his head and rocked his hips, colliding with Cormac in a way that set a rhythm with a bit of a bounce in it, Cormac jerking up a sudden inch at the end of
every little thrust.

"I won't do it wrong. I'm better at it, now. All those nights back in Kirkwall you left me alone with myself, I had to do something..." Cormac gave up words and mouthed at the side of Anders's neck, feeling the pounding of Anders's pulse against his lips. "Harder," he demanded, driving his hips down and leaning back, to give himself more room to move. "Talk later. Fuck now."

Anders took advantage of the shift in balance and leaned into it, laying Cormac back onto the floor and stretching out over him. "Like this?" he asked, slamming down and in as Cormac's ankles crossed behind him.

Cormac gasped and arched as Anders cast another grease spell into him, to ease the way a bit. They were out of practise, after all. It had taken months for Cormac to convince him to stop using pints of grease, the first time, and he was sure it would be much the same, this time. Cormac writhed, near-constant moans interrupted only by the occasional gasp for air and Anders knocking the breath out of him with every slow, bone-jarringly hard thrust.

"Please," Cormac begged. "Oh, please. Hurt me. Hurt me like you mean it."

"No," Anders breathed, eyes squeezing shut as he curled forward to rest his forehead against Cormac's, one hand moving to cup the back of Cormac's neck, fingers flickering with electricity and healing. "Not tonight. Wait until we have a door. Until it's just you and me. Until I'm used to touching you, again." He moved his hand, dragging his fingertips along Cormac's neck and shoulder, down onto Cormac's chest. "Wait until winter, and I'll turn you into raw meat."

Cormac arched under him, eyes wild, desperately trying to contain the screams and pleas building in his chest. Anders kept a merciless pace, but grabbed a layer of Cormac's robe, from where most of it lay in a heap beside them, and tucked a fold of cloth into Cormac's mouth. Even with his teeth clenched around a plum-sized wad of cloth, Cormac was loud. But the sounds were good, and Anders was happy to go for more, slowing down every time Cormac started to get a little too loud.

"I missed you," Anders forced out, barely a whisper. "Missed your body wrapped around me, missed the way you squeeze me, missed the way you want me. Missed how tight and hot you feel inside. You keep me warm. You always keep me warm." His breathing slowed, perfectly timed, ragged breaths nearly soundless, even in the emptiness around them. The time for words was over, and there was nothing more he could say, however much he might have wanted to, as the old habits stole his voice. Cormac filled his senses, the air thickening with the scent of him, every desperate sound lashing along Anders's nerves, as Cormac's thick, hot body writhed beneath him. So close, everything almost right again, after so long.

As Cormac bucked, intently pounding himself against Anders's hips, heels digging in just above Anders's tailbone, Anders stretched, slow and lazy, hands sliding up along the dirt floor, hips tilting up, face pressed to Cormac's shoulder. Lips pressed to Cormac's neck, Anders came, and parts of his body flicked through his awareness like a flipbook, a different sensation in each, never quite fitting together, and the throaty tones of Cormac's desire underlying it all. He'd forgotten how unsettling it was to want this badly, and to be wanted and welcomed after so long without. And just like the last time, here was Cormac, still, just as mad, but hardly as stupid as Anders had first thought.

Still voiceless, still listening for the sound of footsteps, for anything out of place, Anders rolled his hips and picked up a brutal pace. There was no time to be lazy and sweet -- the construction would start again at daybreak, and however much he could rely on Justice to keep him awake, Cormac couldn't.
In the morning, Cormac was not wearing trousers under his robes. It didn't seem like a very trousery sort of day, and he avoided them whenever possible anyway. The whole point of robes, he thought, was to avoid wearing trousers. Local fashion seemed to disagree, in some cases, but he hadn't yet figured out which. It was fine -- he was obviously the dumb foreigner, and people tended to take his quirks as stupidity rather than malice.

Today, in particular, he was very glad he'd chosen not to wear trousers, as he had second, third, and fourth thoughts about the amount of grease Anders had used, the night before. Apparently, it had taken a few hours to catch up with him, which meant not only that Anders had used too much, but that his aim had been off. Or he'd been expecting that to take a lot longer than it did. Either way, Cormac had spent a bit of time trying not to let this affect his work, before giving up and sprinting for the reed-screened latrine trench, by the edge of the property. This was the third time, since the builders arrived, and he noticed a few concerned and amused looks as he bolted past them again.

One of the builders called out to Anders, a hand shielding his eyes from the sun. "Hey, Jan!" He spoke in Ander, likely in case Cormac could hear them. "Is your friend all right?"

Anders considered the path Cormac had blazed on his way to the trench, considered the number of builders who had turned an ear to the conversation. He could guess why Cormac kept taking off running but neglected to feel sorry. "Food poisoning," he assured them. "He'll be fine." He waved them back to work and wondered how loudly Cormac was going to be cursing him later.

After a while, and some discreet use of magic, Cormac made his way back to where Anders was spreading mortar. "This is entirely your fault," he hissed, jabbing a finger into the middle of Anders's chest. "Maker, how much oil-- Even my brother doesn't need that much! What were you thinking!"

He stared pleadingly up at Anders, expecting ... something, anything. The man was a healer, which was probably the only reason Cormac was standing at all, this morning, and there had to be something for this.

Off to the side, the workers started joking about what they imagined he'd eaten, which devolved pretty quickly into jokes about Jan's nether regions. Fortunately, Cormac's grasp of the Ander language was still fairly limited, and consisted mostly of the names of foods and coins -- things he'd need to know in the market -- and for the most part, the workers could have been discussing lunch, for all the words he couldn't make out.

"I was thinking 'better to be careful,'" Anders replied, trying to look more sympathetic than amused. Over Cormac's shoulder, Anders caught one of the builders illustrating his commentary with a gesture that transcended language barriers, and he glared hard at said worker until the gesture turned into a wave and the man went back to work.

Anders lowered his voice. "Stop giving me that face. I can fix this, but it's not going to be pretty." His eyebrows tipped up, and Anders trusted Cormac to understand what he meant.

Cormac's eyes squeezed shut and he groaned at the thought. "Fine. Just... make it stop. I'm going to go back over there, and try to get my robes out of harm's way. Give me a few minutes and then... do whatever it is you do, preferably not in front of these cads. I'd rather not have to execute a siege on the Hossberg Circle to get you back."

Anders looked a bit ill at the thought of another Circle. Here, in this place, in this village, and the threat of templars always looming... He shook it off to find Cormac watching him, clearly concerned. "Hm? Go, go. I'll take care of it. Just looking for the right one. There's a few answers."

"Oh, Maker. A few. That's less encouraging than you make it sound." Cormac offered a sickly smile and made his way across the field, again, to vanish behind the screen.
Anders kept track of Cormac out of the corner of his eye, adjusting his grip on his trowel and counting the minutes as they passed. The motion of the tool as he spread the mortar, hid the abbreviated gesture that charged the spell, and Anders angled his body so as not to let any spark or glow show. Trowel still moving evenly, Anders held his breath, waiting, expecting for someone to accuse him of magery, but the workers simply kept on with their work.

Anders listened for sounds by the latrine. There were no sounds of someone falling to the ground, which he took as a good sign. "Cormac?" he called out over his shoulder after sufficient time had passed. "Are you dead?"

"Why, were you trying?" Cormac called back, sounding a little aggrieved after a few small ice spells that didn't go quite the way he'd intended. These things were so much simpler to deal with indoors, with proper sanitary measures. "'Cause if you were, I think you missed!"

The workers along the wall cackled and whooped, and Cormac remembered he wasn't just outside, he was in the middle of a construction site.

"Oh, yeah, laugh it up!" he scoffed, adjusting his robes as he made his way back around the screen. "Just be careful what you let him put in your guts!" There were a couple of obvious ways that could be taken, of course, and Cormac was counting on it. Of course, he rather meant it the one way they wouldn't have considered -- magic.

Head ducked against a smirk and reddening cheeks, Anders kept working.
Anders is maybe a little too useful for his own good -- as tends to happen.

It was Makersday, and as with every Makersday, the village was at the Chantry, including their builders. But, Anders didn't go. He hadn't gone since ... well, since they bought the land. Instead, he spent the time in a sheltered corner of their almost-a-house, brewing potions for the builders. He was, he told them, an herbalist -- he'd learnt it in the cities of the coast. And they asked no questions, once they saw the effect of his potions and salves -- wounds closing, bruising disappearing. Not as good as a real healer, he said, but good enough for now. Definitely better than nothing at all.

"You should take some of that back salve to the Mother, after services," Cormac suggested, wandering over, half dressed and freshly awakened. "I saw her in the market, last week, and she looks a little stiff. And Hankyn says his son's sick. Probably nothing you couldn't fix with a quick spell, but better if you hide it behind a potion. Maybe give them something that'll actually help the kid, if he gets sick again, so it's not this bad, but ... the way he's talking, the boy needs a healer. And this village doesn't need another funeral."

"That bad?" Anders asked, concern in his voice even as he was distracted, mixing. This, at least was familiar. He missed his rooms at the Amell Estate, missed his clinic and his stock of reagents, missed the patients who knew who and what he was and never gave him up. But he still had his healing and his potions and the ability to help.

"You're not just trying to kick me out, are you?" he teased, stoppering his latest potion and setting it aside. General healing, a good place to start, and it should take off the edges of whatever was ailing Hankyn's kid. Next to it, Anders set a salve and a second potion, both for arthritis. Anders had been itching to heal her joints since he came back.

"Now, why would I do a thing like that?" Cormac purred, wrapping his arms around Anders, from behind. "If I were to give in to my astonishingly base urges, right now, I wouldn't be putting you out. I'd be stripping you down to figure out how many holes I've got that I can put you in. I might've forgotten in all those months we had to be quiet and still."

He laughed, sliding his hands over Anders's body, squeezing and teasing wherever his fingers passed. "But, no, I really am just worried about Hankyn's boy. And if you're out that side of the village anyway, it's a good opportunity to get a hand in the Chantry. If the Mother likes you, which this nearly guarantees, she'll be a lot more likely to blow off harmless rumours about us. And I'm sure there are rumours, since no one ever sees us at services. They're going to start saying we're Tevinter witch-demons or something."

"Tevinter witch-demons, you say?" Anders said with a fake gasp. "Why, that is worse than any regular witch-demon! We can't have that." He swatted aside Cormac's wandering hands. "Save it for later, or no one's getting any potions. Except maybe you, for when I'm done with you." He bit the air in front of Cormac's nose, teeth clicking together.

Services were over by the time Anders made it to the Chantry, a satchel slung over his shoulder with
one hand steadying it against his hip. Inside, the bottles were padded so as not to clink, but he held the satchel tight just in case.

Inside, the Chantry's colourful tiles glittered in the sun, and this time Anders could take a moment to appreciate their beauty. There was still that tightness in his chest, but it wasn't as suffocating as the last time. Maybe, after weeks, months, years, that tightness wouldn't be there at all.

Anders found Ingill and Yotte dousing the candles from the last service.

"You've missed the service," Ingill called out, as she heard the footsteps on the tile. As she snuffed the last candle in the set, she looked over her shoulder and recognised the man in the aisle. "As you have every week. Have you come to plead forgiveness for your oversight?"

"Ingill," Yotte scolded, "there's no need to be rude. I've known him since he was a child. Jan's a good man, and I'm sure he has a good reason, like going to the Chantry in Kassel. It's much larger and more like what a man expects after a life in the city." She shuffled up and smiled at Anders. "What can we do for you, Jan?"

"Actually, Mother, I..." Anders cleared his throat and intently rifled through his bag. "It's not about what you can do for me, this time. I've been an herbalist, by trade, for many years, and when I saw the way you walk..." He shrugged and handed Yotte a bottle, eyes still on his hands. "I thought it was the least I could do."

Astonished, Yotte turned the bottle over in her hands, the red liquid inside refracting the morning sunlight and adding another splash of colour to the Chantry's floor. "What's this?"

"A simple potion," Anders said. "It's mainly elfroot, and it should ease some of the discomfort in your joints and back. If it works, I also have some salve to be used regularly to help with the swelling." Rifling through his bag again, this time Anders came up with a smaller canister.

Yotte's surprise into something grateful. "May I?" she asked, and Anders nodded, motioning for her to try the potion. Ingill helped her uncork the bottle, and then she drained it in one draught. Neither woman noticed the subtle movement of Anders's fingers, and the blue glow they blamed on the shifting sunlight and the coloured tiles.

As Yotte lowered the bottle, her whole body seemed to ease with the motion. The lines on her forehead smoothed over while the line of her back straightened. She looked at Anders with wonder in her eyes. "That is marvellous!" she said. She twisted one way, then another. "I feel twenty years younger. Ingill, do I look twenty years younger?"

Yotte's smile was impish, and Ingill snorted.

"Well, you definitely stand twenty years younger!" Anders grinned. "If it works that well, I'll make sure you don't run out. If it starts hurting again, just send a runner, and I'll come see what I can do for you. Sometimes it takes a body a little while to get used to the change. Might need some stretches to help you, as your bones settle. Just let me know, and I'll do my best to get you right."

"I definitely appreciate it, but..." Yotte paused, brow pinching as she tried to find a tactful way to make the point. "What about the rest of the village? It doesn't seem right that I should be the only recipient of your excellent skills."

Anders's smile grew even wider. "You're not. Didn't Andraste teach that the Maker's light would shine upon all creation, if we were strong enough to carry it? Well, that's what I do, Mother. I keep the people strong, in body. This place would do so much better with a real healer, but I do what I
can. In fact, I'm on my way to see about Hankyn's son. I wish someone had told me, sooner...

Yotte's eyes lit up at that. "Oh, that poor boy. You think you could help him?" Her touch was feather-light on his shoulder.

"I haven't seen him yet, so I do not know, Mother," Anders admitted, "but that is my hope."

"I hope so. The Maker has given you a lovely gift, Jan. I am glad that you are choosing to use it so selflessly."

She wouldn't approve of him missing services, Anders knew. She couldn't approve of that. But this was, at least, reassurance that he still had her approval even when he didn't attend.

"Thank you, Mother," he said with a respectful bow of his head as he pressed the canister into her hands. He bid the women goodbye before making for Hankyn's.

Finally, the roof went on, but the construction didn't stop. The second wall -- the one that would provide the rest of the rooms -- was next on the list. But, for now, they had a room with shelves in the walls and a fire in the centre, large enough to heat the room and properly ventilated through the roof. The sounds of construction were muffled, when they weren't taking part, which Cormac nearly always was. Anders, though, spent most of his time brewing potions. They'd left most of the ready stock he'd brought with Isabela, and they were long overdue to replace what should always be in the house. It was the lyrium he had the greatest concern about, but that would be the most difficult to replace. There was no reason to have lyrium without runes, mages, or templars, but he might be able to set something up with the dwarves over the river. Later. When they'd gotten a few payments from Anton in the bank, and the dwarves recognised them as notable potential investors.

"Jannik?" Cormac's voice cut through Anders's reverie. "Get the door!"

"Get it yourself!" Anders called back, adjusting the flame and knowing he was going to end up doing it. But, no one had knocked, yet, so he had a moment or two.

"I'm not getting camel-shit mud on the latch!" Cormac laughed, audible through the open side door, where their bedroom would soon take shape. "It's someone from town coming up the walk! Maybe that Sister who hates you? I can't tell."

With an amused snort, Anders snuffed the flame and set down his tools and ingredients in such a way that he'd be able to pick up where he left off later. "Now, be fair, Mack," he chided. "Sister Ingill hates everyone, not just me." He wiped his hands on a rag and unlatched the door, squinting into the sunlight until the dark shape coming towards them turned into a person. He didn't realise at first what -- or who -- he was looking at, but his blood went cold anyway.

Gold and red. Sisters and Mothers wore gold and red. But these robes, with the sunburst symbol at the bottom, were black and red, a sword's hilt poking out of the fabric near the man's hip.

"Mack," he called over his shoulder, swallowing the first half of Cormac's name. Distantly, he heard himself speak and marvelled at how calm he sounded. "That's a templar, not a sister."

"Well, shit!" Cormac sounded extraordinarily calm as layers of mud slipped easily and suddenly off his hands, and he made his way around the side of the building, still holding his trowel. "My mistake! I wonder what a templar's doing all the way out here!"

"Ho!" the templar called across the space between them. "I am Ser Peryn of Hossberg, and I seek
"The fuck's he doing here, then," Cormac muttered, under his breath.

As the templar drew nearer, it became obvious that his hand lingered by his sword not because he meant to draw it, but because there was something wrong with his arm. "I have heard of an excellent foreign herbalist past the edge of the village. Are you that man, or need I go on?" His grasp on Common was a bit stiff, but serviceable.

"No, ser, you've come to the right place," Anders said, and that wasn't something he ever thought he'd say to a templar. He could feel the telltale crawl of his skin that meant Justice was holding just far enough back to keep from turning them blue. "Come on out of the sun."

Anders held the door open for Peryn, who ducked his head politely before entering. "You have my thanks, herbalist," he said, still with that accented Common. "I sought to end a fight at the tavern and found myself in its midst instead. My arm bends a way it should not."

Anders agreed as he eyed the way Peryn held his injured arm. The injury was, at least, something to focus on other than the fact that there was a templar in his home, an Ander templar.

"It looks broken," Anders said, gently taking Peryn's wrist and examining the shape of the arm. "I can set it for you and give you something for the pain and swelling."

"I give you my thanks, again, and coins, when I can reach them. My hand does not obey me, now."

"Ser, please sit," Cormac interrupted, pushing over a trunk of about the right height. "What my friend means to say is that this is going to hurt a great deal more, before it hurts less, and we'd rather not have another accident."

"You are kind." Peryn smiled weakly and gingerly took the seat. "What name is yours?"

"I'm Mack, and this is Jannik." Cormac tapped his chest. "Eyes on me. He's going to fix your arm, and you probably don't want to watch that happen. It's going to hurt, but it'll be over in a minute, and then we'll get you something to make it stop hurting and heal faster."

Peryn nodded slowly in a way that said he understood most of what Cormac said. The important parts, at least, judging from the intent way he stared at Cormac. Anders turned over the arm in his hands, prodding at the break and steadying his grip. Despite a wince, the templar was loose and trusting. "One… two…"

With a wet sound, the bone twisted back into place, amid garbled swears in the back of Peryn's throat. Anders could feel the seam of the break, knew how to seal it over as though it had never existed, but instead he set down Peryn's arm and offered him a potion off the shelf.

"It should smart for a bit," he told the templar with his most reassuring smile, "but at least you'll be able to feel your fingers again."

"You have my thanks, again, herbalist," Peryn said after draining the potion.

"Do we have bandages?" Cormac asked, digging through a trunk. "Tell me we have bandages, Jan."

"We don't," Anders assured him. "I keep meaning to do something about that, but with the construction and the potions…" He threw a hand out in frustration. "Cut that tacky bedsheet we wrapped the glass in."
Cormac nodded and dug out the sheet. He’d rolled enough bandages at the clinic to know the size Anders wanted, and his work was quick. "Sorry they’re orange," he joked to Peryn, bringing the long strips of cloth back.

"The Maker is generous with his golden light," Peryn replied, getting enough of what had happened.

"Maker’s generous with his golden something," Anders muttered under his breath as he started wrapping. "Go get two reeds from the builders, Mack. Like this." He held up a finger.

In a few moments, the templar’s arm was braced and bound, and he pushed himself to his feet, with the other arm. "It is good. The village is so small and the people so poor. I watch all the sickness and the breakings, and I always wonder why no one will come to fix it. Andraste had to borrow you from somewhere else, and I hope they do not sicken with your loss."

"Oh, I’m sure they’re making do without me," Anders said with a wry shrug. A templar saying he was sent by Andraste... He would have a good laugh about that later. "I am glad you knew to come to me. I had not realised my glowing reputation had spread so far."

"Mother Yotte says good things of you," Peryn said. "I trust her words, and so I trust you."

Anders ushered him to the door, with a few parting words on how long to keep the brace on and what he should watch for. He assured the templar he would be here, if needed. Peryn left with one more sunny smile thrown over his shoulder, and it was only after his back was turned that Anders sagged against the door-frame and allowed himself to breathe. Blue light flickered across his skin before going out.

Cormac’s arms were around him at once, the Fade gentle on the tips of his fingers. "I think that went well," he said, as he stroked the back of Anders’s hand, knowing the hint of his magic would distract Justice. "A little surprised you didn’t take the opportunity to tack the bone a bit. I made sure he’d be expecting something excruciating, so you could hide a bit of healing in it. But... a templar, still. I know."

"Hey, when you lovebirds are done chirping at each other, we could use the extra hands again!" One of the builders called out, having spotted Ser Peryn leaving again.

"Who says our hands aren’t already busy?" Anders called out, earning him an answering cackle. Still, he squeezed Cormac’s hand and ducked out from under his arms and back into the sun.
Chapter Summary

The house is complete at last. Letters are sent to important people about interesting things.

Anders picked up his quill and eyed the page in front of him. He was packaging up the first volume of things he'd learnt about magical farming, to send them to Solona. The Commander would see that the information ended up in the right hands.

Amell:

You smell.

*coughcough* I guess we're not young assholes trapped in the tower of despair, any more. I should probably stop opening all my letters with the same fistful of unflattering rhymes, but hey, that's what you like about me, isn't it? It certainly wasn't any of my better features.

But, I'm not here to talk about me, or the 'good old days'. I'm sending, as you may have noticed, a manuscript I think you'll find of some use. When the revolution comes, I'm counting on you to make sure our people are safe.

And don't worry about me. I'm about as safe as I'm going to get, from your headlocks and from templars. It turns out it's much easier being anonymous when you don't have Oghren's smell giving you away. I'm sure there's a poem in there somewhere, about Solona Amell and Oghren's smell...

As for the manuscript, it also serves as some lovely padding for the figurine I'm sending you. A figurine which is no doubt in your hands already as you're reading this. I couldn't resist when I spotted one at the market the other day. Well, I suppose I could have resisted, but I didn't. You will no doubt recognise your own likeness? Is it like looking into a tiny, better-endowed mirror? There are no little heroic figures of me or Nate. Just those crazies you went after the Archdemon with. Which means that yes, there is a Wynne, but I'm keeping that one. I miss her, sometimes.

Anyway, things are... working out, let's say. A slow beginning, but at least it's a beginning at all, which is more than we've gotten in nine hundred years. And let me know, would you, if Creepy and Creepier ever figure out how to make the Calling suck less blazing bronto shit through a wide reed. I had some interesting experiences with it. I'm sure Nate filled you in. It's not something I really want to repeat, and it bothers me that the very thing that makes us effective can be used as a weapon, like that.

Slap Zevran's ass for me, and tell Nate to stop moping, before his face sticks like that. XOXO to Sigrun. Please don't burn down the keep on any drunken escapades, Amell. Keeps are expensive.

Yours in eternal toxicity,

Warden Buttz
"It's... is that the last wall?" Cormac asked, smoothing over a spot where the plaster had shifted in the night with mud and magic for a seamless fix. The house had been nearly the whole of their lives, since they started building, and the very idea of having that time to spend on something else just seemed extravagant. In the back, the date saplings were doing well, and they'd marked off a space inside the courtyard for Anders to put an herb garden. But, the hard part was over -- the walls were up and the roof had been laid in the day before. Aside from a few minor touch-ups, they were done. They'd built a house. And not just any house, but a house for themselves. A house just the way they wanted it. Cormac still had trouble wrapping his mind around the idea, some mornings.

He glanced over his shoulder at Anders, eyes gleaming gleefully. "So, does this mean we can buy a bed, now, and stop sleeping on piles of straw? Can we get a featherbed? Can we get a bed big enough that I'm not going to roll over and knock my brother out of it?"

"I suspect it would be more likely he'd knock you out of it," Anders teased. A feather bed, large enough and then some for his long limbs? That sounded decadent. "But we could do that. We could make the entire room one big bed, if we wanted to. It's our house."

It was hard not to smile at that declaration. They'd made this. This was theirs in a way the estate back in the Kirkwall never could be.

"I want to pass it down the generations. Leave it to our... uh... cats, I guess." Cormac paused. "That's really only a concern for me, isn't it. You're going to live forever. To the Void with our small, furry descendants, I suppose. It should be what you want." Turning, he shook the mud off his hand and wrapped the other arm around Anders. "Let's just enjoy it, today. Get a giant bed and some of those cheese wraps from the Yothandi place over the river. A big bottle of that pink wine you like. And we can just stay in our fluffy new bed until I have to get up and water the dates in the morning."

Anders wrapped an arm around Cormac's shoulders. "Just you, me, and our clowder of cats? We are going to need a giant bed. I guarantee you the cats will take up the whole of it anyway." A bed, pink wine, and cheese wraps sounded delightful. He patted Cormac's rump. "Why don't we get cleaned up and head into town? Careful where you put those muddy fingers," he added with a wink.

Cormac bound the slats of the new bed and its outrageously thick feather mattress to the camel they'd rented for the day. Bed first, they'd decided, and everything else after -- there was no sense in buying food and then carrying it through the market, trying not to spill it.

The side of the Chantry was shaded by the stalls of the usual crafts vendors, and he checked, when he passed, to see if anyone he knew showed up as a statuette. This time, he'd picked up a little Zevran to go with Solona and that Enchanter whose name he never remembered, on the bookshelf beside the bedroom door. That elf was recognisable anywhere, and the ridiculous 'Crow helm' made it instantly obvious who it was supposed to be, even if the rest of his face looked a bit like a potato. That he'd tucked into the pocket of his sleeve, to be sure it made it back across the river, safely.

"Since we're on this side of the river, do you want to go check the post box? Maker only knows what we've got waiting -- a little something from Anton, perhaps, or maybe one of my other siblings has decided to take up writing letters. I have to wonder what Bethy's been up to. I wonder if I can get a copy of her last publication sent up." Cormac climbed down from the small steps beside the camel and brushed the camel's nose appreciatively.

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," Anders said. He grinned as the camel turned after Cormac, snorting and trying to grab a piece of his robes. Anders playfully swatted its face away. "And you know, now that we have a house of our own..." He loved being able to say that. "...we could write another letter, one to your charming and wholesome family, and ask if anyone fancies a vacation in the Anderfels. Well.
Not Anton. As much as I'm sure he wants a vacation by now, the viscount needs to stay put." With one hand up to shield his eyes from the sun, Anders gave Cormac a rueful smile. "I know you miss him."

He didn't mean Anton.

"Every single day," Cormac agreed, squinting up at the sun. They had plenty of time. "Are we in a position to deal with the dwarves, yet? I know you need some ... rare ingredients for your work." One didn't say 'lyrium' in the middle of the market, here. "Might be something to investigate, soon. Your other half's been getting a bit short, lately."

He crossed the market, leading the way to the messages office. The huge building kept letters and packages for every resident of Kassel and the surrounding villages. It was possible to pay a copper and leave a message for anyone in the area, or a few copper to send letters elsewhere. Transit out of the Lattenfluss River Valley was dangerous and expensive, particularly out toward Weissaupt or south to Orlais, but someone would always be crazed enough to do it for money, and the messages office paid well.

Anders greeted the postmaster when they entered, and the elderly man responded with a smile and a wave. They were on a first name basis by now -- Jannik's first name anyway -- and Anders didn't even need to ask Klaus if they had any mail.

"Ah, one moment, Jannik," Klaus said. "I know I saw something with your name on it just this morning. Let me fetch it for you."

The 'something' turned out to be a letter, written in handwriting he knew. He'd tried to copy off of enough of her tests to recognise the angry swirl of Solona's s's. He never thought he'd be so relieved to see them.

"Family?" Klaus asked, noting Anders's smile.


"If I marry you, she'll never forgive me that insult, I'm sure," Cormac joked, slightly saddened that there was nothing for him. Easy enough to fix, he supposed, fishing out a few copper pieces to pay for postage and a folded note. 'Lord Hawke, whose lips are sweet with lemon, and whose smile shames the sun,' he began, playing the part of an utterly entranced Antivan lover, as he tended to, when writing to Artemis. No one would ever connect these letters to him. The very idea would be outrageous.

After a few small paragraphs of flattery and praise, he glanced up to where Anders was smirking at Solona's letter. "So... we have a house. We have some very dear people in need of a holiday, I'm sure. I'm... I'm going to do it," he decided, terrified the answer would be that his brother was too busy to visit. 'Our holiday in the Anderfels has run overlong, but if you'd like to meet us in Kassel, we'd be ever so pleased to show you the sights and introduce you to the delights of the far north. I look forward to introducing you to the new bed we've purchased. Perhaps you'd like to help us try it out."

Anders chanced a peek at what Cormac was writing over his shoulder. He wondered what terrible rumours Cormac's letters might have started and was disappointed that Izzy wouldn't be around to exploit them.

"I'm sure Messere Hawke will be pleased to hear from you," Anders said as he folded up Solona's letter and stashed it inside his robes for safekeeping. She had been particularly droll in her insults and
in her summation of recent events, and the letter would bear several repeat readings. The news about Nate had been surprising. Anders had assumed the idiot had gone back to the Wardens, but a part of him was grateful that he was keeping an eye on Sebastian. The other part worried for his sanity. "He always is."

Anders considered sending her a Zevran figurine in retaliation, but that would likely get him assassinated, once Zev got a good look at it. Anders wouldn't blame him either. The transition from stud to spud really was tragic.

"I'm sure Messere Hawke is going to shred this letter and burn it in the garden," Cormac laughed, taking a disc of sealing wax from the dispenser on the counter and trying to walk it across his knuckles, while he waited for the ink to dry. Trying being the operative word -- Anton had always been much better at it. After dropping the thing on the floor a few times, he folded the note along the lines and affixed the seal. He'd gotten a lovely Antivan-style drake stamp, specifically for the purpose.

"So, the real question is whether we can assemble that bed before the food gets cold," he said, with a smile at Anders, passing the note and the coins to Klaus. "We bought one of those Tevinter-style ones. I hope they go together as easily as the merchant said..."

Klaus chuckled. "I hope you have a craft hammer."

"Why, that doesn't sound ominous at all," Anders said, looking askance at the postmaster. "We just built a house. I think we can handle building one bed."
It's Never As Easy As You Think

Chapter Summary

This bed has three extra screws and a long beam that makes no sense. More letters from afar.

"Why can't we handle building one fucking bed?" Anders groaned, one hand fisting in his hair as the other flipped through the instructions. It didn't help that they were written in Ander bad enough to make Peryn's Common sound eloquent. The paper had already implied he do something shameful and possibly illegal to one of the long pieces.

"This shouldn't be that difficult. Legs. Beams. Slats." Cormac shrugged eloquently. "But, we had to get the fancy Tevinter one, because it was the only one big enough for four of us -- probably five even -- and there's all this... decorative crap. I think the perched dragons are supposed to brace the long beams? I can tell they've got peg holes on one side and not the other, so I think they go over the ends and then the pegs go through them and the beams. And then the short beams don't go all the way through, so what am I missing? What holds those-- oh, the slats. I think. The slats? Okay, sure. Yes, the slats get pegged in... There's holes in the long beams for that. And if the slats are pegged in, then the short beams aren't going anywhere. And... then... where the fuck do these other dragons go?" He held up a pair of small dragons with pegs jutting from them.

Anders groaned and folded the instructions over his head. "Pictures," he said. "Pictures would be so much more useful than bad Ander. Drawings with arrows even a child could understand." Crossing his legs, Anders gave the instructions another flip through. "Ah, hang on. It's written in Tevene on the back. Good Tevene, thank the Maker, though I'm not sure what a 'paxillus' is, and an 'assiculus' just sounds dirty... Het is worst voor mij. I'm afraid my Tevene vocabulary has some holes in the area of furniture assembly. I blame Kinloch Hold's woeful educational standards."

He squinted between the instructions in both languages and the mess of materials laid out around them. "I think you have that all set up exactly backwards."

The next week, Klaus had a package for them. Anders turned it over in his hands and looked quizzically at Cormac. "Were you expecting something?"

"Not unless it's Bethy's latest book..." Cormac plucked the package from Anders's hands and studied it. "It's from my -- from Lord Hawke, and it's the right shape. I wonder if he did... He would."

He tore open the edges of the parcel wrapping and slid out the book -- Death Cults in Kirkwall, by Lady Amell. "Yep. Bethy's new book. This is great. I'm so proud."

Anders tilted his head to read the title. "About time someone wrote a book about that," he said. "She could probably turn it into a series. '101 Reasons Why Kirkwall is Fucked Up' by Lady Amell. Has a nice ring to it." He paused, taking a closer look at the pages from the side. "Hold on. I think there's something in the book."

"Shit--" Cormac held out a hand, and a hydrangea blossom drifted down and landed in his palm. He blinked at it. "What!? No! I am not, and I object to being so characterised!"
"Open it to the rest. Are there more in there? There have to be more. He wouldn't--" He looked a bit grey around the edges.

"Breathe," Anders reminded him. "I'm sure there's more. Unless you wrote something extra terrible in that last letter that I missed..." He cupped his hands under the book, catching petals as Cormac looked through it. "See? Look, a few more. This one looks like lavender, which... could go either way, and this other one is a carnation." A purple one. Oh dear.

"An untrustworthy dick. I'm an untrustworthy dick." Cormac froze in the middle of the messages office, staring at the pressed flowers in his hands. "What did I say? What did I do? Did I do something? All I did was invite him for a visit! Did I say it wrong? Did... this..." He looked like he'd been kicked. How could Artie... no. No, there was something else in here. The carnation could have brought it around, but not in that colour. Carnation, lavender, hydrangea... it rattled in the back of his head. This was familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He could see the bouquet... when was that? Where was that?

"Cormac?" Anders stepped in front of him and waved a hand in front of his eyes. "I'm sure he didn't mean it literally." He kept his voice light and calm and tried not to look as concerned as he felt. "Maybe it was for his, uh, Antivan friend?"

"No, there's something..." Cormac's eyes shot wide, suddenly. "Fenris. It was Fenris." He paused and looked up at Anders, who looked even more confused. "Okay, you weren't there for that. I'm still not sure about why, but I do know what. When we were... I don't think you were talking to me at the time, but I went to see him, and he got some flowers, while I was there -- these flowers. And he got pretty upset for all the obvious reasons, but Fenris had missed the subtleties and picked purple because it would look better with the rest. Something about 'untrustworthy dick flowers' and putting them on the mantel, after that. It was rather humorous, after the fact. But, I still don't know why I'm holding the untrustworthy dick flowers, now."

Anders pursed his lips against a laugh. That was terribly sweet of Fenris, in the same way that getting Leandra a goat had been terribly sweet. And hilarious. "Little brothers are assholes," Anders said with a shrug. "This is a fact. He's probably teasing you and expecting you to remember that. If he were actually upset, I doubt he would make such an obvious reference to something funny. Would you like to send back something just as affectionately rude?"

"I think I'll just lick him, when he shows up." Cormac grinned wickedly. "We're Fereldan. Arf arf."
A Venture for Questionable Gain

Chapter Summary

or: Another Chapter Which is Pornographic in Nature. Anders tries to shake off some things he learned in the tower, but it's not as easy as Cormac makes it look.

"Cormac?" Anders's voice was thin and quiet, as he rubbed his cheek against Cormac's ever-so-fluffy chest. "How in the void are you so loud?"

"Is that a complaint? You've never complained about that!" Twisting his head to get a clearer look at Anders, Cormac wound his fingers in Anders's hair. "We don't even have neighbours any more!"

"What? No, no... It's a real question." Anders nibbled along the thickening lines of Cormac's chest. "I don't remember how. I don't know if I ever knew. I want to be able to do it if I want to -- it's just one more thing mages didn't get to have."

"You want me to teach you to get loud?" Cormac made a tiny sound of amusement.

"Not that loud. I don't need to deafen the camel," Anders scoffed. "Just remind me I have a voice, when I get quiet."

"If I help you with this, will you teach me to be qu--"

"No." The word was sudden, hard, and hollow. "No, I won't. The only way -- I don't know how-- All I know is things that shouldn't be done again."

"Anders, I'm teasing. Everyone knows you're quiet and I'm loud. It just sounded funny the other way. Nothing more than that." Cormac ran his fingers through Anders's hair, gently. "Bad joke. C'mere and I'll make it up to you."

"I'm already pretty here." Anders's eyes gleamed as he raised himself up on his elbows. "How much more coming do you think I need to do?"

"All of it," Cormac replied, laughing, as he tried to half-sit and kiss Anders. It sort of worked, if not quite in the way he meant, and he landed a firm smooch on the top of Anders's head. "Are your feet sticking off the bed?"

"Not as far as you'd think. This bed is great," Anders declared, crawling up until he knocked Cormac flat and stealing a warm, slow kiss.

"I think we surprised that merchant, though. Not really where he expected to sell the largest bed in his inventory, from the look of it." Cormac's hands gently kneaded Anders's back.

"Tevinter," Anders reminded him. "It wasn't about the size, just the origin. There's not a lot of Tevinter goods that sell here, excepting some essentials that are cheaper not to ship in from the south. No one would have something that looked like this in their house, except for us."

"We're rich," Cormac muttered. "We're allowed to be eccentric."
"People like us, so we're allowed to be eccentric," Anders corrected, slipping a hand between them to tuck it between Cormac's thighs, balls rolling against his palm. "We're not in the Marches, any more."

"Mmm, none of them like us enough to get eccentric with us." Cormac ground against Anders's palm, tipping his head back so Anders could nip at his neck. "Almost miss that."

"You do miss that," Anders mumbled around the flesh in his teeth, biting hard enough to bruise. "You miss watching me fuck your brother -- helping me fuck your brother. Maker, I love those little noises he makes."

Cormac gasped and writhed, as Anders squeezed harder. "How about you roll over and we see what kind of sexy little noises you can make?"

"Yeah? You want to start that now?" Anders flipped himself onto his back, and the bed squeaked sharply. "Are you sure we put this together right?"

Cormac froze, eyes wide, before shifting his weight and waiting for any more unusual noises from the bed. "Those instructions were in exactly no languages I could read. I have no idea."

Anders laughed and pulled Cormac toward him. "If we're going to die in a bed collapse, at least I'll die a happy man."

"Not as happy as I'm about to make you," Cormac chuckled, kissing between the scars on Anders's chest as he made his way down to nuzzle Anders's unscarred hip. "First lesson, just talk to me. Tell me what you like--"

"You know what I like," Anders huffed, nudging Cormac with his knee.

"Yeah, but so do you. You've got less trouble with words. I've only heard you make noise twice, but you whisper sometimes. And you say the filthiest things when you're trying to wind me up." Cormac grinned up along the long line of Anders's body, and then pressed a kiss to the tip of Anders's knob, which was just starting to take an interest. "So, tell me what you like, tell me what you want, tell me if I've done something you don't like."

"That last one isn't going to happen. You know that. Slapping your hands is hard enough." Anders huffed and dragged his hands over his face. "Your

"That last one isn't going to happen. You know that. Slapping your hands is hard enough," Anders laughed and shook his head, hair tangling against the pillow. "But, what I want? Maker, Cormac, I want you to suck me."

"Mmm, keep going. Tell me how it feels." Cormac wrapped his lips around the very tip of Anders's knob and lapped at it.

"You're a fucking tease!" Anders groaned, fingers clutching at Cormac's thick hair, but Cormac simply made a smugly inquisitive sound. "Your mouth's warm and wet, and I want more of it on me." He was doing all right. It was still easy; he hadn't gotten lost, yet.

Cormac's lips slid down, his tongue caressing the thickening flesh that passed over it, and Anders tried for another sentence. "I want you. I want ... that. Keep doing that. I want ... You know what I really want? I really want some good words for what I want, because all I have right now are words for something else entirely, and it's only vaguely related."

Cormac pulled back, a hollow pop punctuating the gesture. "What, the fact that I set a joint in the bed with nothing but my tongue and a spell?"

"That was impressive, but... no." Anders huffed and dragged his hands over his face. "Your
"Okay? I'm not seeing the problem, there." Cormac paused, turning a concerned eye on Anders's chin, where it jutted between his palms. "Assuming, of course, that you're talking about Artie."

"No, I've secretly been boning the obnoxious templar in the family," Anders drawled, hands unmoving. "Of course I mean Artie."

"Yes...? You do that. I like that. He likes that in reverse, last I checked." Cormac shrugged and nuzzled Anders's hip. "It's words. It's sexy. It still counts."

"The way he rolls his eyes at me, when he's got his mouth full, and I ask if he's sure..." Anders laughed, kneeling Cormac's increasingly plush rump with his toes. "You know what I mean. Right before he starts pulling. I'm always so afraid he's going to actually choke, one of these days... That's not sexy." He laughed again, hands still covering his face. "I've never had anyone take me that deep, and he's so demanding about it, dragging me down his throat while he dribbles thick spit onto the ground between us. He's so clean and perfect, but not when he's polishing my knob. Andraste's knickers, he's just raw. It's incredible."

"And this is the reminder that I'm not half as adventurous as my brother when it comes to choking on the massive chorizo." Cormac cleared his throat and squinted up at Anders, hands still stroking the sausage in question.

"What, no, see? I said it was only tangentially relevant. I don't mean you. If I meant to get you all raw and ragged, I'd dice you like an export ham, and you'd still taste better." Anders tossed his hands to the side, letting them thump against the bed.

"Yes, because I don't usually taste of despair, when you're doing that." Cormac kissed the tip of Anders's knob and took it back into his mouth.

"Do you remember the time I taught Artie to cut you? How he looked shuddering, in your lap, covered in your blood? I wanted it painted for the wall between the bedroom doors. I got to feel his hands get steadier after every slice. And your face, as you watched him do it... I could've bludgeoned someone with my knob and done more damage to them than it. I tell you you're not beautiful, because you're not, but you're a thousand other things I could spend my entire life looking at and never get tired of it." Anders could feel Cormac squirm against the bed, pressing up against his foot. "And like this -- I don't have to look, because I know exactly what you look like -- I can tell from the way you hold your lips against me. We've done this so many times, and I'm not sure there will ever be a day I don't look forward to your mouth on me. You, yours. I would follow you to the ends of Thedas for this, I just want you to know that."

Cormac laughed with his mouth full, and Anders made a tiny choked sound. The words didn't start again, but Cormac kept going. As Anders had pointed out, Cormac knew what he liked, and Cormac proceeded to deliver quite a bit of that, in rapid succession.

The first one never took as long as the fourth, and after a few faint, hissing breaths, Anders's body went loose, except his hands, which clutched at the sheets as he spilled down Cormac's throat. For a long moment, Anders lay still, panting quietly. "Schijten op de hond," he hissed, sitting up, suddenly, and untangling himself from Cormac. "I'm sorry. It's... I don't think this is going to work."

"Doesn't have to work all at once." Cormac shrugged, the movement enhanced by how he was propped up on his elbows. "Doesn't have to work at all. We're doing this because you wanted to try, and whatever you decide is fine. I don't mind being the loud one. And I don't mind listening to you remind me that my brother's amazing in bed, either."
"Gives me chills. It doesn't feel right, and then I can't do it at all." Anders shook his head and wrapped his arms around his knees.

"We have a very large, very warm blanket folded at the foot of the bed," Cormac pointed out, reaching back to pull it up and untangle it from his legs. "And I wouldn't mind spending a few hours under it, with you. Keeping you warm. There won't be room in there for chills. I'll start a fight with any that try to get in. Preserve the sanctity of your hot body." Somehow he managed to get through it all with a straight face.

"Maker, Cormac," Anders wheezed out on a breathy laugh, as he pulled the blanket over himself as well, still sitting. "You're an idiot."

"Maybe, but I'm your favourite idiot, and I'm charming when I'm dumb." Cormac inched up until his feet weren't sticking out the bottom and bit Anders's toe.

Anders blinked into the semi-darkness beneath the thick quilt and then grabbed Cormac's nose with his toes. They nearly rolled off the bed twice, whooping and flailing at each other, laughing like fools, before Cormac came to rest under Anders's chin, gently nibbling at his collarbone.

"So... you want to do that again, but warmer and quieter?" Cormac asked, nuzzling the fluff on Anders's neck.

"Might take a bit of effort, but I could probably be convinced."

"Maybe some other things, too?"

"Definitely some other things, too."
Visitors from Afar

Chapter Summary

Fenris and Artemis decide it is time to visit. This is 2-3 weeks after Chapter 33 of Assing it Up.

"We made it!" Artemis assured Fenris as though that fact weren't obvious to the elf. The boat was still pulling into port, but Artie was so eager that Fenris half expected him to swim the rest of the way. But, then again, the water was too filthy this close to town.

"Finally," Fenris grumbled. At a nudge from Artemis's elbow, he scowled and added, "I will share your enthusiasm when I've forgotten what fish smell like. I suspect that will take many years."

Fenris wondered whose bright idea it was to meet in the fish market. It was close to the docks, sure, and easy to get to, but Fenris suspected it had more to do with Anders spiting him than anything else.

"At least we're not dead," Artemis reminded him cheerfully. "I held my breath a bit back when we were rounding Rivain." And Seheron, but for other reasons he didn't mention. "But we're not dead. With any luck, we will stay not dead at least from here until the fish market."

"I make no promises," Fenris drawled. But once off the boat, it was, he admitted, a relief to walk on steady ground again.

In the streets, Artie looked around, distracted, while Fenris kept an eye on the crowds, and occasionally Artie would tug on Fenris's hand and point out a landmark he recognised from Cormac's letters Fenris stayed close by Artemis's side, walking half a step ahead of him and clearing a path with his scowl alone.

Cormac turned around, gourd-bottle full of some local fruit and yoghurt concoction raised to his lips, when suddenly he spotted them, and nearly dribbled the stuff down his chin. "Jan, Jan, there they are!" He tugged at Anders's sleeve and waved to his brother before slowly realising he might be completely unrecognisable. He wasn't the wall of meat with neat plaits and a well-kept beard any longer. Well, no, he was still a wall of meat. And at least his taste in fashion hadn't changed colour.

Anders finished selling a potion to a tired-looking sailor, before he looked where Cormac was pointing. He whistled loudly, before calling out, "How's my favourite chocolate-covered Vint?"

The reaction was immediate. The crowd in front of him cleared, shoving and laughing among themselves. He'd made a spectacle of all of them, but he'd also misdirected the local expectations of their visitors. Tevinter wasn't the best thing to be, around here, but in the river towns, they were most often tourists, like any others.

Fenris's stare, when it landed on Anders, was murderous, but it was Artemis who got to them first, darting past his husband and any staring locals to grab Cormac's robes and pull him into a bone-crushing hug. "Your hair is ridiculous," Artie said in his brother's ear. But it still smelled like oranges, like family and home.

Anders shook his head fondly at the two of them and turned, arms open wide, to Fenris.
Fenris eyed those arms distrustfully. "No."

"I missed you too, Fenris."

"I'll have you know my hair looks just like dad's and that was good enough for mum," Cormac protested, sweeping Artie off his feet with one hand on each buttock. "Jan, be a dear and make sure I haven't just grabbed a demon by the ass, would you?"

Anders glanced over and choked out a laugh. "I'm pretty sure that's your brother and this is the very same grumpy elf we left on the docks down south." He turned and tossed an arm around Fenris's shoulders only to have it land on nothing as the elf sidestepped. "And on that note, last boat of the day is the ferry across the river. Down the stairs, a moment or five, and it'll stop smelling like fish."

Cormac breathed in that same lemon and lye scent his brother always carried and purred warmly against his neck. "I already did the shopping. Supper will be delicious. And then you can enjoy the many rooms of our brand-new house."

"I'm sure I'll find a way to enjoy all of those rooms," Artie purred, rubbing a scruffy cheek against Cormac's. "I have more beard than you do. Anders has more beard than you do. I'm not sure how I feel about this." Pressing a kiss to the corner of Cormac's jaw, Artie finally managed to get his feet back under him and pulled back from the hug, still standing closer to Cormac than strictly necessary.

"Supper, you say?" Fenris asked. "Just please tell me it's not fish."

The ferry ride was pleasant, as was the walk through the town, despite the curious glances cast their way. Maybe it was still too far in the distance, but Artie thought that their house looked smaller than he'd expected. Which was silly, really, since Anders and Cormac had built the thing by hand, but Artie had gotten spoiled these last years in Kirkwall. Still, it was standing and looked solid, and it was certainly bound to be more spacious than their cabin on the boat.

"I thought you said it was made of brick?" Artemis asked, arm in arm with Cormac, as they drew near.

"It is," Cormac replied. "Mud bricks, covered in mud. There's not a lot of things to build with, out here, and the dwarves control most of the stone, I gather. So, it's huge blocks of mud with some straw mixed in, like everything else in town."

"The Chantry's made of the same things, but with more tile. Actually, most things have more tile. We haven't really indulged the local fetish for complicated flooring and Andraste on every wall. Lots of room for books though, and a whole room with a real window in it, for me to brew potions. I'd almost forgotten what proper ventilation felt like." Anders rambled on as they came up the walk, and then into the vestibule at the start of the wall around the property. "There's two doors to get inside, but they're further up. This is just here to keep the wind off. Impolite to let your neighbours get caught in a sandstorm at your door."

In front of him, Cormac opened the first door, leading into a small coat room, and then the second door, leading into the large main room, with the raised fireplace in the centre. "Welcome to the joys of northern living."

Artemis still hadn't quite wrapped his head around mud and dirt being used as a building material -- how did he clean it? -- but he marvelled at what the two of them built. "An intriguing layout," he said, circling the fireplace. "Is this a common design up here?"
"Common enough for us to find the plans for it," Anders answered with a shrug. "And easy enough to build that we managed to do it without anything falling on us."

"He has been all but redesigning the city," Fenris said of Artemis, equal parts proud and exasperated. "Amatus, you are not redesigning the Anderfels."

Artie huffed, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm getting ideas, in the general sense. Not getting ideas. It's different. I'm curious."

"Are you sure you're not getting... ideas...?" Cormac asked, barring the door, behind them. It was a bit much, but he felt better about a templar knowing where they lived with the door barred. "I mean, we could always start early and get to supper after."

"Yes, Mack, except you have to cook supper, so that would make it even later." Anders groaned, ducking into the pantry for some things he'd set aside earlier.

"I'll go stoke the fire in the oven again. It should be almost done. The rest is in the cold chest. It's already done." Cormac grinned and rubbed his cheek against Artemis's shoulder. "So, redesigning the city, hmm? Come tell me all about that while I check on the meat. Give these two some time to settle their differences over some date wine and melon."

"Checking on the meat, you say?" Artie teased as he followed Cormac almost close enough to step on his heels. "I can see why you'd want me with you."

"They're bonding over meat," Anders sighed, "and we're bonding over melon? I suppose that seems about right."

"And wine," Fenris reminded him as though Anders weren't already in the process of pouring him a cup. "I feel like that is an important distinction." Anders's lips twisted in a smirk, and Fenris wasn't used to watching the way his chin fluff moved with the motion. "And... all has been well here? Cormac's letters were understandably brief." That, and he suspected that Cormac would have simply lied to Artie if anything had gone terribly wrong.

"We're alive, we have a home, and I haven't blown up any Chantries, if that's what you're asking," Anders replied cheerfully. "So, reasonably well, I'd say." As long as he skipped over that episode with his father. Just the thought of him made Anders's stomach turn.

Fenris spotted the flicker of tension in the corners of Anders's eyes. "Reasonably well, aside from the thing you're not talking about. As usual." He took a sip of the wine and flinched. "What... is this? I thought you said it was wine!"

"It is wine. It's date wine, not grape wine. Stop thinking of wine, and it's actually very good. It's just not fine Orlesian frou-frou in a bottle. Or that Tevinter stuff you like. There aren't really grapes, here. Not worth the field space, even this close to the river." Anders set a half melon on a low table that faced the fire and poured himself down onto a deep cushion, beside it, before drawing his knife and slicing the melon inside the rind. "This, on the other hand, is not going to be like anything-- well, you're from Tevinter. Maybe you can get them, there. Sungold. You like apples? I like melons." He speared a bit of melon on the knife and offered it.

With a sceptical look, Fenris helped himself to the melon. "I know these. They come in pink, too. Sometimes I would be granted an unfinished piece of one."

"The Yothandi grow them on the mountain. The yellow ones only come from one place, I guess, but there are a lot of them. Enough that they're not too hard to buy, even if they are a little expensive."
Anders sipped his own wine. "So, you? He's been redesigning Kirkwall and you've been... playing with the cats? Tripping Carver on the stairs?"

"It's the cats that have been tripping Carver," Fenris replied, "when they are not using me as a playground." He hazarded another sip of his date wine, prepared this time for unexpected taste. His nose scrunched, but he didn't complain again. "Purrcy is very good at helping me mark my place in my reading when I am finished, which he decides."

Anders chuckled, cutting out another piece of melon. Company meant using the knife to slice up the melon instead of just taking a spoon to it until he hit rind. "Oh, I remember. At least he doesn't chew the book corners like Assbiter. Drove me nuts. And yet here I am, missing it."

"I could chew on your books while I'm here, if you like."

"So sweet of you to offer," Anders replied, consonants disappearing around a bite of melon. He paused to swallow. "But, that's telling me what the cats have been up to. What about you?"

"I've been cleaning up the Wounded Coast. Hunting slavers. Beating Varric at Wicked Grace. My hobbies have not changed." Fenris grinned. "I am... also still working my way through the Hawke's extensive library, a task made more difficult by the furry obstacles we've already mentioned."


"And what about yours?" Fenris asked, making the assumption in the most half-assed possible way.

"Haven't got one. If you mean the delightfully trouser-free magical bear I live with, however, he's also very cuddly." Anders grinned around another slice of melon.

"I meant what has he been doing, besides you," Fenris huffed, ears askew, trying to rinse the thought out of his mind with more of that thing that pretended to be wine, but was actually quite tasty, once he stopped expecting it to be wine.

"An awful lot of theory involving groundwater and magical irrigation, actually. But, mostly shopping and cooking and reminding me I've forgotten things. You'd think there would be enough wit and sense with Justice and me, but you'd be wrong."

"I'd never have imagined that to be the case."

"Ha. Of course not." Anders flung the next bit of melon at Fenris's face, which the elf stretched up to catch in his teeth. "And I hear Anton has been made viscount. Is that true, or is Artie having us on?"

"He made it by one vote," Fenris assured him. "Considering Varric was the runner-up, I am unsure which was the better option, but... Anton has been getting things done. All while pissing off the Orleans."

Laughter drifted in from the other room, and Fenris shook his head with a small smile. Artemis had been getting twitchy before they decided to visit -- twitchier than usual, that is -- and it was good to see him more at ease.

"Pissing off the Orleans. It's the national pastime of Kirkwall, isn't it?" Anders laughed, shaking his hand against a flicker of blue light that crept across it. "Justice missed you. I mean, I missed you too, but he'd very much like me to express his affections by climbing into your lap and rubbing our face all over you. I keep telling him we're much too large to be kitteny."
"I appreciate your, ah, lack of cattitude. As opposed to your cattiness, which is right where I left it, and apparently currently aimed at Orlais." Fenris raised an eyebrow.

"Does this mean I don't get to curl up in your lap, after supper?" Anders teased, helping himself to more melon, before slicing the next layer down.

"After supper you can apologise to me at length for the whole of that fish-foul journey from Kirkwall," Fenris grumbled into his glass, "in whatever ways you feel best express the depths of your contrition."

"Ah, that is a relief, as I am so very contrite," Anders said with a lazy grin. "Shall I beg for your forgiveness on my knees, then, like any good penitent?"

The nonchalant way Fenris sipped his wine didn't hide the twitch of one ear. "I have heard worse suggestions." He drained his glass. "Is there any more of that not-wine?"
A Family Supper

Chapter Summary

A great telling of tales and eating of foods.

In the kitchen, Artemis was more distracting than helpful, pressed to Cormac's back and stealing bites of still-hot food. He sucked in a breath to cool the bite still in his mouth. "That's hot," he informed Cormac, as though his brother couldn't tell from the look on his face. "But good," he decided once he could actually taste anything. "And different. I take it this is a local recipe? I've never seen you cook anything like this before."

"That's because you've seen me try to make Fereldan food with what's available in Kirkwall." Cormac laughed and twisted around to steal a quick kiss, licking a tiny smear of sauce off Artemis's lip. "This is... I stopped trying to make Fereldan food in the first week we were here. It's not happening. But there's yoghurt and mint in almost everything, and it's delicious. And if Anders says something's spicy, don't eat it. Your face will melt off. There was something with mutton and aubergine, and I tried to steal a bite, and then there was nothing but pain. If I'm cooking, it's probably food. If he's cooking, it's either edible or it's just for him, and that's not something you want to try to figure out on your own."

"You know I might just take that as a challenge," Artie said with a teasing bite to Cormac's ear. He was used to his husband's pointier, twitchier ears and half-expected a swat across the nose in return. "Yoghurt and mint, hm? Not at the same time?" That seemed like an odd combination to him, but then Cormac always had a better grasp of cooking than he did. "And I take it you're my dessert?" He reached for another bite.

"I was thinking of maybe candied tamarind, but you know I never object to you tasting me."

Fenris perked up at the sight of Hawkes bearing food, and he saluted them with his drink. "How odd, I thought I'd be saving this Warden-stomached mage from you!" Cormac laughed, setting out platters and bowls, as he unstacked things from his arm and his brother. "Really, though, I cook for four, when there's no one but us to eat it. I'm pretty sure his mouth is a direct route to the Void."

"Better the Void than the Fade, in this instance," Anders joked, spooning a heap of food onto his
own plate, first. "I'd hate to see what the spirits thought of my slightly-used sustenance. Justice would like you to know your cooking is very good on its first use, not that we've had the opportunity to appreciate it in reverse."

"That is... really quite disgusting when you think about it," Artemis said as he settled onto the cushion next to his husband, "which I'd really rather not. But thank you."

Anders poured date wine for each Hawke as plates were passed around, looking anything but apologetic. "No, I suppose food spirits aren't something we want to run into, especially partly digested food spirits."

"And there you go, making me think about it despite my wishes." Artemis took a drink from his mug for effect, only to pause and take a second look at the mug's contents. "That is not wine. Or, that is not the wine I expected."

"Date wine," Fenris informed him. "It is rather good once you get used to it." He prodded at the food on his plate and nodded in satisfaction when he found no trace of fish.

Cormac offered a bowl to his brother. "Aubergine salad? You should take some before I eat the entire bowl. It's exceptional, even if they do still make it better at the tavern."

"I am hearing something about a vegetable in a salad that Cormac likes. This isn't going to be a repeat of the cabbage salad, is it?" Fenris asked, drily, helping himself to a heap of what looked like some kind of grain and minced vegetables.

"That problem seems to be confined to the cabbage salad of Kirkwall." Anders shrugged and laughed, swiping a shred of meat from Cormac's plate, before serving himself a bit of it. "Trust me, if it was going to be that kind of problem, it wouldn't be on the table, tonight, and he'd be sleeping in the courtyard more often."

"Oh, that's a relief," Artie laughed, taking the bowl from Cormac and heaping some aubergine salad onto his plate. "And I lived with him for most of my life. It's not just the cabbage salad of Kirkwall." He shared an aggrieved look with Anders and passed the bowl onto Fenris, who was already stealing a spoonful. "I like the beard, by the way, Anders."

"Oh good!" Anders cheerfully replied. "I don't!"

"I don't either," Fenris grunted. "He looks less like a magical bear and more like a magical goat."

Artemis tried not to laugh around his bite of food. "Okay, I was just being polite. You have a nice jawline, and the beard hides it."

"I just keep getting food in it. It's quite annoying."

Fenris shook his head and bent over his food, the huffy comment on humans and mages implied.

"That's the point of the beard -- not getting food in it, but that it hides his very nice and rather memorable jawline," Cormac pointed out. "Also why I... look a little different. Not much for the tattoos, though, but I'm sure I could convince people they're traditional barbarian decorations, and I look like two hundred other Fereldans from down by the Wilds. You start talking about Fereldans and people will just believe anything."

"Like that poor woman at the market that you managed to convince mabari were essential to Ferelden romance, and that courtships could be initiated by barking appropriately at someone."

Anders rubbed a hand over his face and gave Artemis a pained look. "He does this, sometimes. Has
he always been like this, and I just didn't notice?"

"Yes," Cormac answered. "Pass me the mint sauce?"

Artemis passed him the dish. "Woof," he said as seductively as he could manage.

"No," Fenris replied without inflection.

"Do you prefer catcalling?" Artie teased.

"No," Fenris said again in the same tone. "No dog, cat, or dragon noises at the table, please. Or anywhere else." He reached for more aubergine salad but fumbled the plate with a soft curse. Artemis was righting the dish before he even realised he'd dropped it, heaping the spilled salad onto Cormac's plate.

Fenris met Anders's frown with a tight smile. "Perhaps I should not have started on the second glass of that wine-that-is-not-wine before dinner."

"Were you getting my husband drunk over melon?" Artie asked. "Naughty."

"If I was getting him drunk, it's because he's suddenly turned into a lightweight. I turn my back on the two of you for a year, and what happens?" Anders chuckled and rolled lamb slivers, a bit of the spilled salad, and mint sauce in bread. "It's probably just because you spent weeks on a boat. That'll make you forget which way is down for a couple of days."

"The only sense of direction I had on that boat was which end the chamber pot went on, this time," Cormac grumbled, around a large mouthful of salad. "I'm sure neither of you had this problem. Lucky gits." He paused and studied Artemis, for a moment, before deciding what he saw was acceptable.

"No, thankfully, we did not. This doesn't change the fact that the entire journey stank of fish, fish guts, and deep-fried fish. Also, seaweed-wrapped raw fish." Fenris shuddered and successfully helped himself to more aubergine salad, this time. "I thank you again for the distinct lack of fish in this meal."

"I only wish we could have gotten apples, but it's a little early. Cormac shrugged. "They're not like the apples in the south. Mostly small, hard, and a little sour. There's a local dish that's pretty good though. You pickle them, and they suddenly become edible."

"Pickled apples?" Fenris replied with the quirk of one eyebrow. "I had never thought to do such a thing. Honestly, that sounds like something Theron would do." His face twisted as he considered Dalish food and whether or not he would prefer it to fish of any kind.

"Theron's taste in food is questionable at best, and sometimes so is my brother's," Artie said. "But, this is good. It tastes kind of fantastic, actually, though again that might just be the weeks on a boat. Ah, but, speaking of Theron, did I tell you the Dalish set down roots? Metaphorically speaking. I mean, we know Merrill could do that literally too."

"Finally stopped pining after their lost halla?" Anders asked with a mouth full of food.

Fenris coughed into his fist and bit back a comment about Theron and pining after halla. Artemis caught the look on his face and elbowed him in the ribs. "Don't say it."

Cormac looked at one and then the other of them. "Did somebody start that shit again? About the halla? Theron's friend, what was his name? He was such a shit about it, every time the two of you
wandered off into the woods on another of your ... adventures."

"Wait, what about the halla?" Anders asked, looking first at Cormac and then Artemis. "What did I miss about halla?"

"Nothing. Elves being elfy." Cormac snorted and shook his head. "Not everyone there liked us. And some of them had some... interesting ways of expressing it."

"What my husband means to say, of course, is that he and Merrill and Master Brosca, as they're calling Natia, these days, have built the beginnings of a city on Sundermount," Fenris cut in, to divert the conversation from the halla question.

Artie opened his mouth, ready to ask Cormac how long he had known about the 'halla-fucker' nickname, only to close it. He didn't want to know, and he didn't want to think about it. "I... yes. A small city. A small elfy city. It's got some of the nobles all puffed up, especially after all the construction going on in the Alienage, but it's coming along. Some of the force mages have been helping with the construction. Not... me so much for obvious reasons, but I think you would have liked to see it. Dwarves, elves, and mages all working on creating something together. It's... it's kind of fantastic, really."

Something in Anders eased at that, some tension he hadn't realised he was still carrying. Artemis had kept them reasonably up-to-date, but with each letter, he'd expected to hear of some disaster. He wondered still if Artie were only telling them the good that had happened, but for the moment, over this meal, he was okay with that.

"Hey, Artie? You know how I used to tell you to loosen up a bit, because you'd be amazing one day?" Cormac asked, pinching his brother's knee, under the table. "Yeah, it just happened. I hope you were paying attention, so you can tell Carver's kids about it, some day."

"He's always been amazing," Fenris argued.

"Yeah, but not in public," Cormac shot back. "Now, everybody knows my brother is amazing, and he can freely be amazing in public places. There are people who aren't just you or me telling him he's amazing."

"Is it just me, or did that sound a lot kinkier than you meant it to?" Anders asked.

"It's... I don't know how much credit I can take for that," Artie said, eyes a shade too wide. "I helped. Natia helped more. The mages who can move things without breaking them helped more."

Mid-word, Fenris stoppered his mouth with a piece of bread and kissed his cheek before Artemis would look offended. "Take the compliment, Amatus. It is deserved. But you can remind us all the other ways in which you are amazing after dinner, if you like."

Artie grumbled something around the bread before he chewed it properly. Fenris wasn't fazed by his husband's scowl, not when Artemis shifted to lean against him the next moment.

"You really are that excellent, you little shit. Just so you know." Cormac grinned over the top of his mug. "I wish dad had lived to see it."

"Better your dad than mine," Anders breathed, reaching for another roll of bread.

"Your dad lived to see you become a hero, and he's still bloviating that fine fart-wind about you and your brother both being useless and ungrateful. I don't know your brother, but I know you're about as useless as a full box of tools with twenty sovereigns tucked down the side, and I cordially invite
him to take a flying fuck at the next Archdemon." Cormac didn't raise his voice at all, but just
punctuated the sentence with a few gestures with a meat-filled fork. "Your mum's great, though. I
love these chairs she made us. They're so... the opposite of chair, and so comfortable."

Fenris peered down at his not-chair and wriggled his rump against what wasn't a cushion as he
understood the word. Comfortable, yes, but odd. "Are they full of... tiny rocks?"

Artemis frowned across the table, first at his brother, then at Anders. "I hadn't wanted to ask," he
said. "Cormac spoke very highly of your mother in his letters, but all I knew about your father was
that he existed." He paused to take another bite of sauce-soaked bread and noted the grimacing smile
Anders gave the table. "I'm sorry. Does he need a gentle nudge into the stinky part of the river?"

"Let's not punish the poor fish," Anders replied. His plate had his full attention.

"He's... let's just say I wouldn't be too terribly upset if some accidents befell him, but we're not
producing enough food, yet, to support Ulla, if anything happened to him. We're really kind of in the
equivalent of the Bannorn, if you can believe it. With the river and the lakes, this is as wet as it gets.
Best place to grow food, but full of tiny villages just making it by. There's more food being sold than
eaten around here -- someone has to produce the food for the artisans, the templars, the wardens...
The Chantry takes its tithe, and the tithe is kind of huge, here, because there's so much more to take." Corman shook his head. "I'm not explaining it properly. The economy here is weird. We're in the
absolutely best place to grow food, surrounded by people who are hungry, and the dwarves control
all the money. I don't understand any of it, but it's traditional, and Justice is offended."

"I'm offended," Fenris muttered.

"Point is, as much as I'd like to see him get thrown through a tree, now is not the time." Cormac
shrugged. "Or maybe even the place."

"That is... disappointing," Artie said. "Not being able to throw him through a tree, that is. The
general economic system is not disappointing. It's appalling."

"Tell me about it," Anders grumbled. "Or maybe don't. Justice is starting to get huffy, and I think the
blue light would ruin the ambiance."

"On the contrary," Artie replied with a wink at Fenris, "I like a little Fade light in the evening. But...
not if it's because Justice is agitated." His own plate cleared, Artemis stole the last bit of Fenris's
bread, which he had left, unfinished, and stacked their plates, one over the other. Anders was still
wolfing down his second helping.

"Agreed," Fenris grumbled before finishing his wine. And then Artemis's, when it was left
unattended. Artie huffed and stole Cormac's in turn.

Cormac reached for the bottle only to find it empty. "Well. So much for that idea." He stretched a
hand out to Anders, finger glowing dimly. "Shall I see to our glowy blue companion?"

"Our glowy blue companion has his own thoughts on what he'd like to be doing, this evening."
Anders pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead. "Most of them involve overthrowing the
dwarven stranglehold on the national economy, but I think he can be convinced to settle for the
company of old friends."

"We'll get there, Justice," Cormac sighed, running his glowing hand through Anders's hair. "Men's
troubles in men's time. You can't go charging in to fix everything at once. You know that."

"He's just frustrated." Anders sighed, scraping the last bit of sauce out of one of the serving dishes
and licking his fork clean.

"I believe we are all frustrated, at this point," Fenris noted.

"I really hope we designed that bed big enough," Cormac laughed. "And if we didn't, there's the floor. And the guest room."

"I'm sure we'll make do," Artemis said with a slow smile, while Fenris debated whether he should mention that wasn't what he meant at all. "The question is whether the place is earthquake-proof." Looking around at mud-brick walls, Artemis wasn't too sure.

"I'm not really sure, but we built them the traditional way, and there are traditional buildings that have been standing for centuries." Cormac shrugged. "For what it's worth, I doubt you'll do any damage that can't be fixed with a bucket of mud and a trowel. The walls are nearly a cubit thick. I'm ... reasonably sure you're not going to drop them on us. And if you do, that's why I have barrier spells."

A bucket of mud. Artie cringed at that image. "That is... not the most reassuring thing you've ever said to me, but I suppose we'll find out one way or another." He grinned at his brother, his foot prodding Cormac's leg under the table.
A Reunion of the Flesh 1/3

Chapter Summary

Artemis decides what he wants for dessert, leaving Fenris and Anders to fend for themselves. (Which is to say, 'porn'.)

As they spoke, Anders gathered up the rest of the plates. "Shall I take care of dessert," he asked, noting some sort of movement under the table, "or have you two already started?"

"I can be dessert. That works." Cormac grinned lazily up at Anders. "But you might want to get something anyway, because if I'm dessert I don't think Fenris wants any."

"That would be correct, yes. I have no desire to lick the magical bear. In fact, that sounds like a completely disgusting idea." Fenris squeezed Artemis's shoulder. "If you have any somewhat less beary desserts, I might be willing to consider them." He paused, making no move to get up, yet. "Amatus, would you mind terribly if I went to explore other dessert options? I trust the two of you can keep from accidentally murdering each other for a bit longer?"

Artemis chuckled. "Afraid I'll be mauled by the magical bear? I might not mind." He squeezed the hand on his shoulder and turned it over to kiss Fenris's palm. "By all means. I'm sure you and Anders will decide on something delicious." His grin was mischievous as he let Fenris's hand slip out of his.

"Do not give the other magical bear ideas, Amatus. The magical goat, rather. He already has them." He climbed to his feet and grabbed a few plates to help Anders carry back into the kitchen. Before Fenris and Anders even made it out the doorway, Artemis was curling up in Cormac's lap.

"I missed you. Every day, I woke up without you, and you weren't just in the other room or across the village." Cormac's hands were hesitant as he smoothed them over Artie's rumpled clothes. "Tell me what you want, beloved. Anything." He buried his face in Artie's neck, breathing in that same scent of fresh cleaning solutions that Artie always smelled of. "All I want is you. Tonight, I'm yours. Well, I'm yours whenever you want me, but I think glowy and glowier are keeping each other occupied in the kitchen, right now, so it's just us."

A blue glow lit the kitchen doorway from somewhere further into the room.

"And that's Justice," Cormac joked.

Artie breathed a laugh across Cormac's cheek. "I guess they've settled on a dessert option," he said. One hand traced Cormac's jawline, thumb pausing at his chin, where his beard should be, and he tipped Cormac's face up into his. For a moment, Artemis let himself luxuriate in the kiss, in the knowledge that this was Cormac, his Cormac, and that they were together again after all those long months. "And I'm yours for the taking, love."

Artemis was fresh off the boat, unshaven, smelling of sweat and brine, in a house built out of mud, but all that mattered in the moment was Cormac. Mostly.

"Want to show me this new bed of yours or do you plan to test the durability of Ulla's not-chairs?" Artie purred, hands mapping out his brother's body through his robes.
"Considering that I'm going to have to have supper with Ulla sitting in one of these chairs in the near future, I think the bed is the better option." Cormac laughed and swept Artemis into his arms as he stood, cracking both of them soundly on the table as he stood up. "I might be a bit out of practice at this carrying you off thing. Clearly, I'll have to get back into practice." Pathetic trickles of healing crept from his fingertips toward the parts of Artie he thought might have hit the table.

Artie clung to Cormac more tightly than usual. "Ow," he drawled. "Is this vengeance for all the times I threw you through a wall?"

Cormac laughed again, carefully making his way into the bedroom. "Sorry," he said, laying Artemis on the bed and kneeling beside it, "you're just so much lighter than Anders, I leaned back too much and much too fast." He made his way down to the end of the bed, without standing, and worked Artemis's boots off, before gently kneading Artie's bare feet. "It's been a long day for you, hasn't it?"

"A long few weeks," Artie replied, humming at the feel of soft hands on his skin, "and I don't hate boats as much as you do. Or I suppose they don't hate me as much. Worth it, though. We can change and rebuild as much of Kirkwall as we like, but it still doesn't feel right without you." Artemis pushed himself up onto his elbows to better see Cormac at the foot of the bed. "Maker, that was sappy. See what happens? You move to the Anderfels, and I turn into a sylvan too."

"Well, someone's got to do it," Cormac teased, stretching up over the bed to unfasten Artie's trousers. Trousers that opened -- there was something Cormac missed from the south. "Where would Kirkwall be without a Hawke dribbling sap on everything?" He hooked his fingers into the top of the trousers, lifted, and pulled, spilling Artemis's legs out of them. Folding the trousers, he tossed them onto a pile of books that sat on what should have been a vanity, and kissed his way up the inside of one of Artemis's legs.

"Dribbling 'sap'," Artie replied, hooking that leg over Cormac's shoulder. "Is that what we're calling it now?" He sank his fingers into Cormac's hair. It was fluffier than he was used to, but that made it easier to grab. As much as he teased Cormac for it, he could see the appeal. "Maker, I've missed you. Have I said that yet? I don't care. I've missed you."

"Say it again. Tell me what you want. I just want to hear your voice," Cormac breathed deeply, burying his face against his brother's crotch, which, in retrospect, might not have been the best idea. There was definitely the distinct scent of having spent a day dressed improperly in the deadly heat of the Anderfels. But, he pushed that thought aside and tugged at Artie's tunic, eventually untangling it from his brother and tangling them together even more closely. "How much water have you had, today?" he asked, patting at Artie's forehead and chest. "I just want to make sure I'm not going to accidentally kill you."

"I can think of worse ways to go," Artie huffed, the skin around his eyes crinkling in a smile. "Stop worrying about me, brother-dear. I know you think it's your job, but I'm all right, aren't I?" He kneaded his fingers in Cormac's hair, fingertips massaging his scalp. "And I've been drinking plenty of water, mum."

Freeing his fingers from Cormac's hair, Artie pulled at Cormac's robe, rucking up the fabric until he could get his hands under the cloth and pull it up over Cormac's head, folding it as best he could from this angle with all that fabric. His hands returned to skin after, mapping out all the little changes in Cormac's once-familiar body. His brother was softer than he remembered, especially around the middle, but he was still a warm and welcome weight after all this time.

"I haven't seen you in nearly a year. Yes, I'm sure you're all right, but all of that worrying that I've been doing for a year just caught up with me. With you," Cormac's hands squeezed and kneaded the taut lines of his brother's body, and he nuzzled and nipped at Artie's neck. "Can't believe you're here. 
Can't believe you still want me like this."

He lost himself in a kiss, in the feel of Artemis pressed against his body, in every little squeak and stuttered breath against his lips. "Have Fenris and Theron been taking good care of you?" he asked, fingers slipping into the crack of Artie's ass, to toy with the edge of his hole. Just a tease, never quite enough pressure. "Have they seen to your pleasure? I wonder, what could you possibly want, still, from your loving brother, with these two elves already bent on satisfying you?"

A shaky breath stuttered out of Artemis at that touch, at those words. He arched back against Cormac's fingers, remembering even a year later how they felt inside. "You know me, always greedy," he murmured, toysing his fingers in, hoping the sudden slick rush would get Artie thinking of something else. "And no, I didn't actually just do what you think I did. I cheated. But, you love it when I cheat."

"I like my bed much better when it has you and an insatiable Warden in it. Maybe that makes me greedy, too, but my bed is always better with you in it. Always has been," Cormac's voice cracked at the last, and he tried to cover it with a grease spell, sliding his fingers in, hoping the sudden slick rush would get Artie thinking of something else. "And no, I didn't actually just do what you think I did. I cheated. But, you love it when I cheat."

He stretched up for another kiss, fingers stroking and massaging Artemis's insides. "Tell me what you want me to do to you, beloved. Tell me how I should use your beautiful body. Beg for me. The walls are thick, and we don't have neighbours. Only Fenris and Anders will hear you."

Artemis groaned against Cormac's lips, breathed in Cormac's words. He was distracted for a long moment by the wet slide of those fingers, squarer and rougher than Fenris's or Theron's but touching him just as he remembered. "I want you in me," Artie breathed, heels digging into the small of Cormac's back. "I need you to fuck me until I can't remember what it's like to not have you in me. I need you to fuck me until Anders and Fenris can feel it in the other room." He hoped their construction was up to the task.

Cormac's breath caught, and he fumbled his own knob, the first time he tried to push it in. Stupid, he was sure, but this was supposed to be perfect and impressive, something out of one of those horrible Fereldan romances about being ravished by barbarians. But, here he was, with the brother he loved like a god begging to be fucked stupid -- which wasn't a new idea -- and he was shaking. Finally, he got himself lined up and eased in, slowly, shivering.

"I love you," he breathed, when he could push no further, taking a moment to cup his brother's cheek, to study those pretty blue eyes. He ground in deep and hard, before picking up a rough, jarring pace, ramming himself in savagely, again and again, as he licked at Artemis's lips.

Artemis panted against Cormac's lips, every other jarring thrust punching a shaky sound out of him. He held on tight and just felt, nails biting into Cormac's back and shoulders as he tried to meet each shove of Cormac's hips. "Cormac," he breathed. "Cormac." His smell, his name, the hot weight of him inside assured Artie that this was real, that this was his brother with him, in this moment.

One hand reached over his head to tangle in the sheets, knuckles white. "Please," he panted, unsure what he was begging for. "Please."

Cormac chewed his own lip, not to just give in to this sensation -- the feel of Artemis wrapped around him, again, pleading for more. It was something he'd honestly wondered if he'd ever have again, and here they were, like nothing had changed at all. "Please what?" he purred against Artie's
ear, slipping a hand between them. "Please hurry and make you come?" His hand wrapped around Artie's knob, offering a firm squeeze and a few quick strokes. "Please make this last until you're aching for release?" His fingers tightened around the base of Artie's knob. "I almost like that second one. Satisfy myself inside you, tease you while you beg for more, maybe call for Fenris and Anders. I'm sure Anders could make good use of you for a long time, before we let Fenris finish you off. And then maybe I'll lick you clean. Do you want that? Do you want my tongue in the mess the three of us could make of your hole?"

Artemis let out a long, anguished sound at that. "Maker, yes!" He'd missed this. He'd missed the absolute filth his brother could pour in his ear and the lovely images that came with it. But he wasn't going to last, not with Cormac pounding the breath out of him, not with that hand tight on his knob, and not with those words in his ear.

The sheets didn't give him enough purchase under his fingers, and Artemis reached up without thinking, reached for a headboard that wasn't there. He scrabbled against the wall for a moment, its texture distracting, only to remember suddenly that he was groping mud in brick form. Artie went back to clutching Cormac instead, but that feeling of filth, real or not, stayed on his skin.

"Come for me, brother-dear," he panted instead, returning to the moment. "Fill me up."

Cormac whimpered at the thought, trying to hold out just a little longer, but the sound of those words rattled against every nerve in his body. His beautiful, holy, little brother wanted just one thing. Asked for it. Commanded it. There was nothing to resist -- Artemis wanted.

His body tensed as he spilled deep inside that tight warmth, little sounds of pleasure and relief slipping from his lips. But, his hips didn't slow at all; even as he shivered and shuddered with pleasure, he still slammed himself into that slickness, listened to every little gasp from Artie's lips. His hand slid slowly along Artemis's knob, until he could wring the head in his fist, sliding the foreskin with the base of his thumb.

"I'm yours. Always."

Artemis shivered, magic bubbling under his skin, stoked to a roiling boil as he wound tighter still around his brother. The sight of his brother coming apart was everything he needed and more, and his toes curled, muscles tightening as he spilled into his brother's hand. He felt the spillover of magic, as always, but not the shaking of the ground. Maybe it was because he was shaking hard enough on his own, panting for breath and trying to see through the glittering spots in front of his eyes.

"Cormac," Artie panted as he slowly unwound, limbs loose as he sank back into the bed, still wrapped around his brother. "Fuck."

"Think we just did," Cormac teased, rolling onto his side and pulling Artie with him. He was still shaking and by now, he knew it would be useless to try to pass off his wet face as sweat, so he ducked under Artie's chin, cuddling closer, as he slipped out, knob sliding down the warm curve of Artie's buttock. He was going to have to apologise for that, he was sure. Messy.
Chapter Summary

No earthquakes, but Artie's magic has struck in another unexpected way.

"I missed you," Cormac choked out, making a mess of his brother's chest, too. Tears, snot -- he was going to owe Artie a nice hot bath, after this, but fortunately, that was something he could provide, and the bath had been built large enough to fit Anders. "I missed you, and I was so afraid I was never going to see you again -- there would be an Exalted March or we'd get killed by templars for being Tevinter witch-demons, and I'd never see your face. I'd never see you become all the great things I always said you'd be, not because you couldn't be them, but because we'd be dead." He buried his face against Artie's neck and sobbed with relief. "I'm sorry. Making a mess."

Artemis hushed him gently, stroking back his hair and pulling him as close as their bodies would allow without magical intervention. He buried his face in Cormac's hair, his own tears falling silently. "It's all right," he said. "I'm here. You're here. Everything's all right, right now." He'd been so afraid of all the same things, had laid awake some nights thinking too much until Fenris would soothe him with a touch or a word. The building and rebuilding had been a needed distraction. "And don't worry about the mess. I'm too tired and relieved to care. I'll care in the morning, and then you could either draw me a bath or I will push you through a wall."

"Mmm, definitely draw you a bath. I'll even take that bath with you. And then we can dirty up the bathwater and just... get out of it, like smart people." Cormac managed a raspy chuckle, throat still a bit thick. "I still can't believe you're--"

A long ragged moan echoed in from another room. "Oh, Fenris, yes please!"

Cormac twisted around to glance at the doorway, something light and amusing on the tip of his tongue, and then he saw the gleam of light off the wall, from the lamp by the vanity. "What...?" He dropped back down, not to have to get an arm out from under Artie, and reached for the wall behind them, which was fantastically smooth.

Artemis was more focused on the sound. "Who was that? Process of eliminations says it's Anders, but Anders is not that loud. Is there someone else in here to whom my husband is doing wicked things?" And then Artemis noted the confused look on Cormac's face and the movement of his arm, which Artie followed to the wall. The gleaming, waxed-smooth wall. Artie's face turned red, the flush spreading from his neck to his ears. "I... that... Was your wall like that when we came in?"

"That's definitely Anders. He's been trying to work himself out of the quiet thing. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but it sounds like it's working now!" Cormac grinned wickedly and snuck a quick kiss. "The wall, though... The wall was not shiny. It was like every other wall in the house. Kind of gritty. Like dried mud." He paused. "You know, speaking of working out of things, I'm noticing a lack of earthquakes in this room. Did you stop doing that for some reason? I always liked it."

"Oh. Well, not exactly..." Artie ran a hand through his hair, twisting the ends around his fingers, and settled back down against the pillow. "I spoke with some of the force mages from the Gallows about
controlling my magic in general. They had some pointers, and I've been practising. Using magic to
make sculptures. Ha. Turns out I'm a terrible artist, but you know what? It helps. It helps with more
delicate spellwork, and now my aim is... slightly less shitty. The earthquakes still happen, usually,
but I've been able to manipulate the magic a bit more. I think, subconsciously, I was worried about
bringing the house down, and your walls are made of mud?" He shrugged helplessly. "Either way,
this is a new one."

"Well, I'd ravish you outside, next time, but that's hideously unsafe. Sandstorms, darkspawn,
wandering merchants..." Cormac made a few small strangled noises before giving up and cackling.
"Really? I fucked you until you waxed the floor? And... the walls, apparently. I wonder if it was just
this room..." He squeezed Artie's bottom, as another desperate sound of delight poured in from the
other room. "So, we both know how long Anders can keep going. You want to go sit in the kitchen
doorway and lick fig paste off our fingers while we watch?"

Artemis purred, nuzzling under Cormac's chin. "Just our fingers?" he teased. And now he hoped the
mage-walls had been confined to the bedroom. The earthquakes were so much less embarrassing.
After leaning in for another long, lazy kiss, Artemis rolled to his feet, pausing when he felt the effects
of gravity.

"How bad is it?" Cormac asked, peering over the edge of the bed, like the cats used to do. "Should I
put down the blanket so we can avoid falling on our asses between here and the door? Why am I
even asking that? Yes, I should put down the blanket. Here." He untangled the blanket and leaned
over the foot of the bed to waft it onto the floor, mostly straight, in a way that covered a majority of
the space between the corner of the bed and the door of the room. Carefully, he eased himself onto it,
hoping the rough weave would provide some traction. At the least, he didn't go sliding across the
floor, which had to be worth something.

Catching himself reaching for a nightrobe he glanced at Artemis. "Did... you just offer to have fig
paste licked off you? Or were you meaning to do the licking of things other than fingers? In which
case, should I or should I not put something on, to spare your husband's eyes?"

"I mostly just wanted to see your eyes cross," Artie teased, padding across the blanket. He
considered pants, only to decide against it. It was ungodly hot, and no one in this house had objected
to his ass yet. "Please do not put any paste on my person, no matter how tasty. I do recall you
promising some other licking, however." Artie grinned, walking backwards out the door and turning
the step into a glide when he hit more waxed floors. "And put on the robe. Fenris will thank you, but
I can still get to you just as easily."

"Oh, are we going to have that sort of tasty licking things party? I might just forego the fig paste
entirely." Cormac grabbed his nightrobe, an unexciting but enormous quantity of jade-green cloth. It
wasn't that he thought he looked good in the green, but it was the least offensive shade and it...
reminded him of Artemis, if he was honest, and how good Artie looked in green. Tugging it on, he
followed Artemis through the door and promptly fell back, catching himself on a bookcase. After a
moment's deliberation, he dragged the blanket out and used it again, covering not nearly enough of
the distance to the kitchen door. This was, he thought, ridiculous. He could walk on solid bubbles of
magic, but he couldn't walk on a waxed floor?
Fenris and Anders put on quite a show.

Somehow, he made it across the room, taking the last bit on his knees, which made it much easier not to fall, and gazed into the profoundly-glowing kitchen from beside his brother. Anders lay sprawled across the centre island, one foot up on the cupboards and the other wrapped around Fenris's shoulder, as Fenris pushed something into him, over and over, with one hand and traced glowing fingers across his scars, with the other.

"I can't see," Cormac whispered. "Can you tell which one that is?"

Artemis leaned to the side, peering around moving limbs, and promptly coughed into his fist, fighting not to smirk. "The... black and white marbled one. The smaller one, obviously." He met Cormac's look with a pointed one of his own. Fenris was already intimately familiar with that particular toy, and Artie wondered if he'd picked it up by coincidence.

Fenris looked up at the sound of voices, his hands never slowing as he wrung a few aching sounds out of Anders. He looked his naked husband up and down and didn't ask why Cormac was kneeling. "No earthquakes? Or did I not feel them?"

"Oh, magic happened. In more than one sense." Artie offered him a shrug and a crooked grin. "But don't let us interrupt. Pretend we're not here. Unless you want us to be." He winked at Anders.

Anders opened his mouth to say something potentially relevant, but Fenris's fingers dipped below the skin of the ragged scar in the curve of his hip and anything he might have meant to say was lost in a raw howl of delight. His eyes lit blue, before they squeezed shut.

"Justice," Cormac pointed out to Artemis. "Justice is loud, all the time."

"You and your magical bear are welcome to watch," Fenris said, with a small smile, as Anders panted and writhed at the feel of fingers beneath his skin. This was only the second time, in the years they'd been... doing whatever this was, that he'd been invited to touch Anders, and the reactions fascinated him. He knew he was also pleasuring the spirit -- he'd intended that, since it seemed Justice had such an attachment to the lyrium lines, and Anders seemed willing to play along, to keep things from getting out of hand. But, he'd never expected quite... this -- for Anders to get loud like he had in the Deep Roads. Fenris had thought that was some special talent of Messere Howe. He considered saying something about it, later. After. A comment now might make it stop.

"You are too kind," Artemis replied, his smile wide as he watched Anders's face, mouth open as he panted for breath between shouts. Artie knew how those fingers felt under his skin, and just the thought made him shiver. He wondered if it felt the same for Anders, for Justice. Leaning back against the wax-smooth wall, Artie addressed Cormac without turning his head. "You said something about fig paste?"

Anders's knuckles were white where he clutched the island counter-top, toes curling into the cabinet door for purchase. Fenris's fingers teased around the knot of scar at his hip, fingertips stroking under
the skin, edging closer and closer until finally they traced the full line of it, down his thigh. Anders's hips jerked, but Fenris held him down, grinning at the ragged noises Anders didn't even know he was making.

"Oh Fenris, yes!"

Fenris couldn't tell if that was Anders or Justice speaking -- possibly both, the way their voices wove together around the words.

Anders writhed, blue light flickering across his skin, as Fenris's fingers tugged at the scar that wound around his leg, caressing it inside and out. His toes tugged at Fenris's hair, encouraging a repeat of one particular motion.

"You're watching this and you actually care about fig paste?" Cormac asked, watching Anders arch, knob twitching and throbbing, under Fenris's touch. "Pantry. Third shelf on the left wall. It's got a label. You and your magical not falling down can go get it if you still want some."

As Anders started gasping out little desperate sounds, Cormac realised that Fenris had stumbled into one of those fantastic Warden talents he loved to exploit. He could see Justice pushing forward as Anders lost himself in the waves of pleasure, clotting spend from earlier still sliding across his skin. "MORE!" Justice demanded. "AGAIN!"

"You are demanding, spirit," Fenris said, tone only playing at chastising. He twisted the toy in deep and traced one glowing finger along Anders's still pulsing knob, just to turn Justice's next response into garbled nonsense.

"You are no fun," Artemis said, distractedly, never taking his eyes off the entwined pair. "I just wanted you to waddle around the kitchen floor on your knees." He nudged Cormac's thigh with the side of his foot and flashed him a smile.

Artie knew Anders was tireless once he got going, but Fenris was making a good show of it himself, if only with the toy and his fingers. Behind the smug grin, Fenris had the determined look of someone intent on completing a task, and that task seemed to involve wringing Anders dry. It was an... inspiring sight, even if Artie could still feel the shape of his brother's knob inside of him.

A small flicker of motion beside him caught Cormac's eye. "Really? After all that? I guess I'm getting old after all," he joked, nudging Artemis a little further into the kitchen so they'd both still be able to watch as he closed his mouth around Artie's knob, just letting the soft flesh settle against his tongue as he sucked at it gently.

Anders had likely lost any concept of the fact he was being watched or anything else outside the sensations that had him squalling and wailing, writhing as Fenris continued to engage with his scars. His head tipped back over the edge of the island -- he didn't quite fit on it, even from shoulders to hips -- and one hand rose from its death-grip on the countertop to tangle in his hair, which hung much, much longer than it ever had in Kirkwall. Justice's presence through it all was unquestionable, the blue light progressing from bursts of slithering lines of light to a full-body glow that seemed bluer as Anders's voice caught that peculiar echo.

This close, the blue glow was blinding, and Fenris closed one eye and looked to the side until the Justice-shaped afterimage had faded. "All this at my touch, spirit?" Fenris rumbled once his eyes had adjusted. "I'm flattered."

Fenris's hand moved from one scar to another, moving its way up Anders's torso, to his chest, rising and falling with each rapid breath. Fenris remembered the one scar in the middle, the one over
Anders's heart, and the reaction he'd gotten the first time he'd touched it. Fenris traced its edge first with skin on skin, feeling the body under him shudder, and then he pressed one Fade-blue finger into it. The deeper that finger sank, the louder Anders -- Justice -- yowled until, body coiled, he throbbed once more.

Artemis let out a shaky breath at the sight, one hand bracing himself against the wall and the other tight in Cormac's hair. He tried not to obscure Cormac's view, not when the view was that, and tried to keep still no matter how... distracting Cormac's mouth and talented tongue were.

Cormac's eyes kept drifting back to the fingers plunged into that scar. The angle wasn't the best, but Fenris seemed to be caressing Anders's breastbone through the scar. And as far as Cormac could recall, Anders hated having that scar touched. But, then, Artemis was also very much enraptured with the glowy fade-fingers, so maybe... Of course, Cormac realised, he also had the glowy fade-fingers, and he'd been putting them all over Justice for a long time, but never there. That was something to hang on to, for later.

His tongue stroked Artemis's knob, trying to tease it back to interest, as he watched. Fenris eyed him and raised the hand from Anders's chest, flashing a full hand and then a thumb and a horrified look. Cormac looked as smug as it was possible to be with his brother's knob in his mouth.

Anders's foot slid off the cupboard and slammed into the counter beneath. The blue glow flashed brighter and then vanished. "Ow! Shit! New position. That's my leg cramping," he panted, shifting uncomfortably.

"Not just your leg," Fenris huffed, sliding the toy out and setting it aside so he could shake out his arm.

Anders shifted himself awkwardly onto one elbow, still catching his breath. "Sorry," he said with a grin that said he wasn't. "Can't keep up?"

Fenris's chin tilted up, ears flattening against his head. "I didn't say that."

Artie's fingers massaged the back of Cormac's head as he listened, amused. "If either of you need a hand," Artemis said, voice tightening when Cormac did something wicked with his tongue, "I would like to point out that there are four between the two of us. And more than just hands, besides."

Fenris snorted as he got out of the way of Anders's legs. "And here I thought you two were--" He paused and rubbed his toes against the ground. He gave his husband a pained look. "Mage floors? Really?"

"His fault," Artie said, sheepish as he pointed at his brother.

Cormac snorted and leaned back, giving Artie's foreskin a tiny nip. "It is not my fault! You didn't tell me you replaced the earthquakes with floor wax!"

"He what?" Anders asked, staring confusedly at the Hawkes, his free hand rubbing a healing spell into his thigh.

"He has learnt to stop the earthquakes," Fenris explained, offering his arm to Anders. "He just... doesn't, usually. And I have no idea where floor wax comes into this."

"Better than that time your brother greased the undead, out on the coast," Anders joked, eyes still on Artie as he took Fenris's arm. The feel of the raised lyrium lines caught his attention. "You all right?" he asked Fenris, struggling to sit up without kicking the elf. "Has it been like this, since I left?"
"What? No, no. It's just the dry air." Fenris shook his head and gave Anders a sharp look.

Finally getting his weight off the other arm, Anders raised a spark across his fingers. "A little bit of a spark to take the edge off the healing. Let me see if I can get the swelling down a little, and I'll give you a cream to put on it, to keep the skin moist." He knew Fenris was lying, and likely because he didn't want to worry Artemis, but that was something he could work with. A couple small spells and a cream that probably would help a bit, and he'd get another look in the morning, while the Hawkes were busy with the inevitable bath Artemis was going to insist upon.

Artie frowned at the exchange, but if Anders wasn't worried, then neither was he. Perhaps he should have made sure his husband was drinking enough water too. "It is ridiculously hot," he said, "and not just because I'm surrounded by such gorgeousness. Perhaps we pause for some water, and then take this to the bed? It's horizontal and cushioned, whereas the counters are horizontal but not cushioned."

"You make a compelling argument, Amatus," Fenris said, something easing in the set of his shoulders at the touch of Anders's sparking fingers. Even with the runed bracelets, he sometimes forgot what it was like to not be in pain.

Justice grumbled in the back of Anders's mind at the idea of pausing no matter how briefly, but Anders suspected it was probably a good idea, particularly the soft bed part.

"And the earthquakes do still happen," Artie muttered, toying with Cormac's hair. "I can just... divert the magic a bit. This is... not usually the result, but watch your step, Anders."

"I am watching it," Anders said, eyeing the floor balefully, "but I suspect I will still end up on my ass."

"If you really want me to do it, I can bubble-walk you back to the blanket," Cormac sighed. "Actually I should. I should at least get you down from there, before you fall and break something. Like Fenris. Don't break Fenris; you just fixed him." He stretched a hand toward Anders. "Feet on the counter. We're going out into thin air, and I'll walk you down from there. The edge of the counter's in my way."

"Mages," Fenris huffed, easing himself toward the door and his husband.

After a bit of fidgeting and magic, Anders met the floor, knees-first. "I could probably walk on this, but not right now," he admitted, grabbing his robe and trousers from where they'd landed on the other side of the room. "And I am going to be a lot more fun, if I don't have to heal my own skull fracture, before we get to bed."

"His fault," Artie reminded Anders, pointing a thumb at Cormac.
Whose arm is that? Whose ass is this? And then, Fenris and Anders have a serious conversation about lyrium.

Nightfall found the four of them in bed, a tangle of sweaty limbs and sweaty sheets. Justice had fallen asleep clutching Fenris like a security blanket, and the pleased rumble in the back of his throat sounded like Purrcy on those mornings he sat in the sun. On Fenris's other side, Artemis lay nestled between his brother and his husband, ensconced between the two men he loved, and he slept more soundly than he had in months.

Sunrise found them much the same, but it was Anders curled around Fenris when he woke, smothering a yawn with his palm and rolling onto his back to continue dozing. Minutes later, he felt the bed shift -- one of the Hawkes -- and opened his eyes in time to catch Artemis's ass as it was leaving the room. Anders could guess where he was headed and considered getting up to show him where the bathroom actually was, only to remember mage floors. If Artie could navigate them even half asleep, he could find the room in question unaided.

Fenris didn't quite wake up, but the lack of Artemis pressed against him registered, even in his sleep, and with a small frustrated sound, he stretched an arm across the empty space, before colliding with a hip. That must be Artemis. He squirmed out of Anders's grip and inched closer to the other warm body.

On the other edge of the bed, Cormac felt the hand clutching at his hip and assumed it was Artie coming back to bed. He rolled over to get closer, even as something nagged at the back of his mind, insisting there was something wrong with the sensation. But, then there were arms wrapped around him and a leg tossed over his hip, and he shrugged off the strange sensation and pulled the slim, warm body closer, rolling his hips as he drifted back off.

Anders watched all this happen, holding his breath, and he sat up as slowly, as quietly, as he could manage. That had been Artie he'd watched leave, right? It was hard to be sure, now, since he and Cormac had the same ass. But, they certainly didn't have the same hair, and that was definitely Cormac's hair Fenris had his face in. That, in turn, made it Cormac's legs Fenris had his wrapped around.

Anders pinched his nose to hold back his snorting laughter, and when Artemis shuffled back into the room, Anders caught his eye and motioned for him to be quiet. Bleary-eyed, it took a moment for Artie to register that gesture and another moment to register why. And then he saw Fenris and Cormac, wrapped up like lovers, Fenris's cheek rubbing Cormac's hair in his sleep.

Artemis sucked his lips between his teeth, shoulders shaking with silent laughter, and turned a helpless look Anders's way.

Anders purred, hand sliding up to meet the ass of the warm body pressed against him. He kneaded it, gently, dreaming of Artemis and how wonderful it felt to be in his brother's arms, again. As that warm body ground against him roughly, another sound of pleasure slipped between his lips, and then, "Mmm, yes..."
And that was not the voice Fenris was expecting. At all. Either of the voices Fenris might have been expecting. Untangling himself from what was suddenly very obviously Cormac, he leapt to his feet, only to encounter the mage-waxed floor. Struggling to regain his balance, he slid across the room, flailing, only to finally lose his footing, fall backward, and slide into his husband's feet. "How long were you going to let that go on?" he demanded, breathless from the impact.

Artemis wiped tears of laughter from his eyes as he bent to help up his flailing husband. "Please, it was barely a minute, and I thought it was cute! And hilarious. Don't worry. I knew one of you was going to wake up before it became a problem. Are you all right?" There was genuine concern in there under the voice shaking with suppressed laughter.

Fenris hissed and spat like an angry cat, but he let Artemis pull him to his feet and then clung to him, ears straight out and vibrating. "Damn mage floors. And your mage brother. I am never sleeping in the middle again. It is hot and sticky, and there are too many elbows. Where were you?"

"Where one generally ends up after drinking that much water," Artie drawled. He steadied Fenris with a hand under each elbow. "Which way are we going? Back to bed? I promise to get in first to act as a barrier."

On the bed, Cormac sprawled in dazed confusion, still trying to figure out what Fenris was yelling about and why his brother was all the way on the other side of the room. "What?" he murmured, hefting himself up to lean against the waxed wall that stood where the headboard he'd been too lazy to build should have been.

Beside him, Anders was still whooping with laughter, as he eased himself out of bed, lowering himself to his knees to avoid falling on Fenris. "You hold him up, and I'll make sure nothing's broken," Anders said to Artemis, as he cast a quick spell to stop the bruises before they could start.

"Wait, what?" Cormac sounded just as confused, if much more awake, this time.

"Fenris mistook you for Artie," Anders explained, pausing to take a closer look at Fenris's elbow.

"I was asleep at the time!" Fenris protested.

"I think that's obvious," Anders reassured him. "So, why don't the two of you take your matching asses to the bath, while I finish putting Messere Elf back together. It's nothing serious, but you can't fuck around with elbows."

Still chuckling, Artie feathered a kiss across the bridge of Fenris's nose just to watch his ears flutter. "I think Anders just implied I'm filthy, which I am. This way you won't have to worry about accidentally cuddling Cormac again."

The sound in the back of Fenris's throat was more whine than growl, but he let Artemis steer him to the bed, sitting on it and tucking his feet under him the first chance he got.

"Come on, my bleary-eyed brother," Artemis said, holding a hand out to Cormac and wiggling the fingers. "You and Fenris can spoon later." He helped Cormac to his feet, too, not even wobbling at the shift in weight.

"Bless you. This is definitely why you're the godly power in this relationship, just so you know. This not falling down thing is fantastic." Cormac let Artemis lead him out of the room. "Still feel like I should be carrying you, but not until the floor stops being terrifying."

Anders realised he was still on the wrong side of the room, and Artemis was no longer here to help him get to the bed. Nor was Cormac. Sighing, he crawled back across the floor, carefully, until he sat
below Fenris. "Tell me what's going on, Fenris. I can't help, if I don't know."

"It hurts, again. All the time. The bracelets make a difference, but they don't change anything else, and they don't help enough." Fenris just watched his own hands, resting motionless in his lap. "I'm tired. Not all the time, but it happens so much faster." He laughed, hollowly. "I'd think I was getting old, but to Theron's clan he and I are still young. 'Young enough to be stupid,' his mother says. And getting old wouldn't make me stop feeling my hands, sometimes. Hands, thighs, feet, face... It doesn't seem to matter, and it's only one or two things at a time, but one of these days, I'm going to drop my sword when I actually need it, and then what's going to happen to Artemis?"

Anders tried not to let the concern show on his face as he reached for Fenris's hand, turning it over to inspect the lyrium lines and the swollen skin around them. Anders wondered how long it had been this bad, wondered if he could have helped if he'd still been in Kirkwall, only to toss that thought aside. It did neither of them any good.

"I think, sometimes, you and Cormac worry too much about Artie," Anders said, running a healing spell along the tattoos. "He is just as capable of protecting you as the other way around. Does this feel any better?"

Fenris's ears were low and twitching. He grimaced at the feel of magic. Healing didn't hurt, but it was never as pleasant as the sparks. But in the wake of the spell, the dull ache around the lines eased along with the swelling, and he wondered if it would be this easy. "Yes," he finally said. "It helps with the pain. All this... You don't suppose this is still from that sword wound, do you?"

"I don't know." Anders shrugged. "I've been reading the journals, looking for something that would explain this, but I'm still working on understanding the theory involved. I'm very good at what I do, but that is not what I do. And I can't tell if he did it right or by what standard I should even judge 'right'. What I can see is that you're not infected -- if that's even the word -- with the red stuff. None of what's on you looks like it's changing colour. You don't seem any crazier than usual."

"You're the one who doesn't sleep for a week at a time, and I'm crazy?" Fenris shot back, with a half-hearted scowl.

"I didn't say I wasn't; I just said you were." Anders chuckled, before looking serious, again. "There are two things that I'm considering, and they're what I'm going to focus on. One is that this is the first time you've had lyrium in your lyrium -- that is, the first time one of those lines has been split by something made of lyrium -- am I right?"

"As far as I know." Fenris shrugged and shook his head. He couldn't be sure of that, but this had definitely never happened.

"Okay, so, there's a possibility that this ... changed something in the way your magic is moving through your body. I know, I know, you don't have usable magic, but it's still in there, somewhere. And hitting it with more lyrium -- with other lyrium -- may have screwed it up, somehow." Anders ran a hand through his hair and huffed. "The other thing we have to consider is that this is a trap. That he did something to you to make sure you wouldn't survive him, just in case you did kill him. I don't know how to fix either of these things, but I do know how to repair flesh. I'm going to do my best to keep you healthy, while we figure out what this is and what to do about it."

"Thank you," Fenris said as Anders continued to cast, a light blue-green glow suffusing his skin. "I did not think you would have an answer, at least not a new one. I would be lying if I said that second option had not occurred to me." He gave Anders a tight, unhappy smile. "Danarius was just that vindictive. Yet, considering the number of his failures before me, I... wonder if I'm simply not meant to exist. Not in this fashion, at least. Perhaps it has simply taken me this long to react negatively to
these markings. I do not know."

Once he had healed what he could, Anders's healing glow changed into that sparkling blue that Fenris found soothing. "I would be careful of using these, for the moment," Anders said, his words followed by a dry laugh. "Advice which is... perhaps a bit laughable, considering yesterday."

Fenris shrugged. "You did not know, yesterday. And I am always careful."

"I'm sure," Anders drawled in a way that said he wasn't.

From the other room, the latest revenge of the mage floors could be heard. "Shit!" followed by a thump and several clatters.

"I'm buying rugs!" Cormac announced, loud enough to be heard in the bedroom.
The Necessary Number of Rugs

Chapter Summary

A market day and the buying of rugs.

The market was relatively brightly coloured, amid the expanses of mud-coloured buildings in the middle of the village. Tattered banners hung from poles, and the mosaic tiles of the ground could almost be made out under the dust. On one side stood the Chantry, the towering structure providing shade to one corner of the market, and the rest of the square was lined with canopies and tents, much as in any small market in Thedas. Vendors shouted trades to each other across the square, setting aside boxes and baskets for the end of the day.

Cormac led the camel that drew their cart, as they entered the market. From time to time, it would nibble at the point of his hood, but it knew the market meant good food. "So, we need rugs. I am buying rugs. I may have to go across the river to buy rugs, but it's going to happen. Also, we're getting you some clothes. You're going to be here for a while, and mine don't fit you. I'm not even going to suggest Jan's. We should probably buy some food, and I need to drop off what's in the cart at the Chantry, and then get the camel settled, so we can shop."

Artemis was still getting used to calling Anders 'Jan' and Cormac 'Mack', but then they almost looked like different people with their long robes and their changed hair. Long robes they expected him to wear, it seemed, which was a good idea, judging by the stares he and Fenris were attracting.

Eyeing the stalls they passed, Artie stepped on Anders's heels once or twice, but it was the stall closest to the Chantry doors that made him pause. The vendor greeted him in Ander, and Artie offered him a friendly if awkward smile in reply. "Hey, C-- Mack," he said, picking up one of the figurines and turning it over in his palm. "I remember these. Didn't we have a couple on a shelf, in Lotharing?"

"I think we did. That looks like Hessarian. Jan, is that Hessarian?" Cormac glanced over his shoulder.

"Maferath after the betrayal," Anders corrected, before leaning closer to whisper in Artie's ear. "And that one, over there, is your cousin, with her mabari. The dwarf near her is Oghren. The old lady is my teacher, Wynne."

"I'm kind of sad there's no Shartan," Cormac sighed, nudging the camel away from his hood, again. "Hang on. Let me just go tie the camel on the other side, so I can unload this stuff."

"What, and none of you?" Artie whispered back as he picked up his cousin's figurine. He glanced about but didn't see any freakishly tall figures that could represent Anders.

"No, just the people who helped her with that archdemon business," Anders replied, "which is awfully silly. After that business with the Mother, I deserve my own figurine!"

"Why?" Fenris rumbled, poking at one of the figurines sceptically. "So you could get one and play with yourself whenever you wanted?"
Artemis cackled. "Justice might object. So, does this look like her? Solona? I've never met her. None of us have." He held up her figurine, wiggling it under Anders's nose. Dark-haired, like the rest of their family, but fair-skinned, which made sense on the Amell side.

"Not as faithful a representation as Oghren," Anders replied, "but maybe you should buy one and bring it back to Cullen. See what he thinks."

"Give Cullen chest pains," Cormac muttered, passing them again, this time with a large jar of dates held on his head. "That sounds like a great idea. And speaking of great ideas, can one or more of you strapping gents help me with these? They're heavy enough I can only move one at a time."

Fenris moved first, and Anders caught his eye with a questioning glance. Fenris shook his head, dismissively, almost imperceptibly, and went to help carry the huge jars. "What is all this?"

"Dates. We have an enormous orchard. I could sell them, or we could just donate them to the Chantry." Cormac reached out to heave the door open. "We have our investments. I'm not worried about whether we have enough."

"You're willing to trust the Chantry?" Fenris asked, nodding as he entered. "He's willing to trust? After what happened in Kirkwall?"

"It's different in the villages. Lothering was nothing like Kirkwall. Here, the Chantry actually helps people." Cormac turned to the side and led the way into an alcove that opened up into what looked like a storeroom. "Ah! Brother Derek! Eight jars of dates and two crates of general healing tonics, today."

"The Maker's blessings upon you, Mack," said Brother Derek. "You know where to put them. Do you need a hand with...?"

"We're fine, brother, thank you," Anders replied, appearing through the door with a jar of his own, Artie following with another. They placed their jars next to Cormac's and went back for the rest while Brother Derek jotted something down in his ledger.

"It's beautiful," Artie said, again distracted as he walked through the Chantry.

"Colourful, isn't it?" Anders grinned. "Mack and I have talked about putting tile down in select places, back home. I rather like the way the blues and greens catch the light." He waited for Fenris to set down his jar before placing his next to it.

"Just tile?" Fenris drawled. "A statue of Andraste might also look nice in your vestibule." He tipped his head at the looming statue at the end of the nave, paint making it no less colourful than the tiled walls, complete with fiery red robes.

"Where would you fit a statue of Andraste in our vestibule?" Anders asked, with a laugh, heading out for another jar.

Fenris followed. "You could use her to hold coats," he teased.

Cormac wrapped an arm around his brother's shoulders. "This place is incredible. And in a little village, like this. You should see the Chantry in Kassel. We had nothing like this, in Ferelden. I don't think even Denerim was this bright. But, the Disciples are in everything, here. The tiles, the camels, little shrines -- Orlais has the Grand Cathedral, but I wonder if it's got a tenth of the shits to give."

"It's nothing like the Chantry in Kirkwall, and -- hold on, camels?" Artie squinted at his brother. "Is that why your camel has those shapes in its fur?"
"Those shapes are a picture of Hector, who leapt in front of Andraste to protect her from the Betrayer." Cormac stuck out his tongue. "But, yes, that's why Harellan has one of the Disciples shaved into his fur."

"That is bizarre and incredible, and I'm telling Anton Goatilda needs a new look."

A few more trips, and the jars and the crates were settled, among smiles and profuse thank-yous from Brother Derek. Before leaving, Anders poked his head into the office to give Sister Ingill a smile and wave. She ignored both and continued her work.

"I think she's warming up to me," Anders told Cormac, approaching the brothers from behind to wrap an arm around each set of shoulders. "So! Shopping. Rugs, clothing, and an Andrastian coathanger. Anything else on the list?"

"Did you get a number for the camel barber? Harellan's looking a little shaggy." Cormac slipped an arm around Anders's waist. "How about some lemon oil and mint extract, so my brother can stop smelling like spiced orange and purple sedge? Might have to cross the river for that. After lunch, then."

"What are we having for lunch?" Fenris asked. "And where? This place looks small to support a restaurant."

"There's a tavern," Anders pointed out. "Did he not mention it? The whole town is named for the tavern. It's called the Petty Crown, and the food is excellent. All local, though. It's not much of a tourist place, really, but it's the most important place in the village other than the Chantry."

"So, it's an Ander version of the Hanged Man," Fenris joked, as Cormac ducked out from under Anders's arm to lead the camel toward the stone edge of a niche filled with water that extended back to the river. He watched Cormac pay a man carrying a bucket, and after some nodding, the man handed back something small, and tied the camel to a post by the water. Under a large canopy, on the other side of the water, three women sat, tending a camel. Fenris thought they might be the camel barbers in question.

Cormac returned -- or half-returned anyway, before waving and gesturing to a rack of extremely complicated-looking rag rugs. They were as colourful as the Chantry interior, and Fenris wondered if all the bright decorations were there to offset the muted palette of the desert.

Artie followed, the weight of Anders's arm still around his shoulders when something caught his attention. He sniffed the air and then Anders's shoulder and turned an amused look the healer's way. "You smell like flowers," he said. "Since when do you smell like flowers?" Artie sniffed again, trying to find the smells he was used to, ground elfroot leaves... and lemon oil, after Artemis had taught him a modified version of the mage floors spell.

"It's the beard," Anders said, faking serious rather convincingly. "It lets off its own flowery scent. The darkspawn could smell it for miles away. It's why I used to shave it."

Artemis shoved his bearded face away.

"If you think he smells flowery," Fenris grunted, "you should try smelling more magisters." His face twisted, either at the memory or the smell. Possibly both.

"Do you want me to?" Artie drawled, finally ducking out from under Anders's arm to inspect the rugs, running his hand over the fabric.

Fenris tilted his head, considering. "Allow me to kill them first, Amatus. Then you may smell them."
"Sounds romantic."

"So, what do you think, Jan? The rose one for the entry, this blue and green one for the bedroom... Maybe something in soft mint for the main room?" Cormac asked, lifting rugs out of the way of other rugs on one rack.

"Get a few in mint and rose for the main room. You're not going to manage with just one, in there. The room's shaped wrong and it's too big. And don't... blue in the bedroom, please. Please, please no blue in the bedroom." Anders shuddered. "How about this nice sunburst one? You like red. I like gold. It goes with the walls."

"Everything here goes with the walls. It has to. Every wall in the entire village is the same colour, except where they're tiled." Cormac shook his head and laughed.

"Yours will be a darker shade as the wax sets in," Fenris pointed out. "No blue, or just no blue in the bedroom?" he asked, holding up the edge of a blue and gold rug. "I was thinking of the kitchen."

"We're probably going to buy most of your stock," Cormac apologised to the rug merchant. "My brother decided to wax the floors, like they do in the south, and ... now we need rugs."

"In my defence, the floors look great," Artie said, ears reddening. "It's not my fault you have the sense of balance of a tailless fish." He plucked at the mint green rug Cormac had pulled out. He could guess why his brother had gone with that colour. "Mint is a lovely colour. Warm colours would go well in the bedroom, with the morning sunlight, but cooler colours might work better in other rooms you're more likely to use during the day." He shrugged and grinned. "Trick your brain into thinking it's cooler than it is? I could also be making that up. I just like the green."

Anders laughed and rested the end of the sunburst rug on Artie's head so it blocked his face. "Mint and rose for the main room," he assured Cormac. To the vendor, he pointed at the sunburst rug and said, "We'll take this one. And those two over there. And, Fenris, as much of a smartass as you're being, I actually rather like those colours for the kitchen. Something to remember you by?" His smile was sharp.

Artemis said something agreeable under the rug.

Cormac counted out coins, as the merchant called out prices, coming to the same total a moment afterward. "A pleasure doing business with you."

Anders translated, and the merchant smiled and nodded, amazed at having done quite so much business, all at once, but since that asshole Ewald's son had come back to town, everyone had been selling much more than usual. She figured the man had to furnish his house somehow.
Adventures in Purchasing Local Attire

Chapter Summary

Perfumes and robes, necessities for a holiday in the blighted lands.

Cormac folded the rugs and piled them onto Anders, before handing him a carved section of reed. "Go put those in the cart. Here's the number to prove it's ours. We'll be over at Helewyse's, checking out her oils."

"Make sure you get the oils and not the salves. I make better salves!" Anders called back, over his shoulder.

"Helewyse disputes that!" Cormac laughed. "Come on, I'll take you to meet the lady who'll keep your skin attached. You'd think a place this small wouldn't have a perfumer, and you'd be wrong. It's a whole other thing, up here. It's not as much about smelling good -- I mean, you will smell good -- but these will keep your skin from drying out. Pick three or four things you think would go together, and we'll have Jan mix something tonight, so you can stop smelling like us in the morning." He paused and leaned closer to Fenris. "Actually, you don't smell like either of us. What did he put on you?"

"It's for my skin," Fenris said, before realising that much was obvious. "A disinfectant and something for the swelling. Travel has been oddly unkind to me. Perhaps I am getting old." He smiled teasingly at Artemis. "Or spoilt. Terribly spoilt by the noble life."

"Do I indulge you too much, dear husband?" Artie tweaked one pointed ear. "And if you are getting old, then I am getting old, so clearly that can't be it." He eyed what he could see of Fenris's tattoos, relieved to see the swelling had gone down. He'd forgotten how nice it had been, living so close to a healer.

"Clearly," Fenris agreed, wrapping an arm around Artie's waist. His smile froze, his expression twisting to something more quizzical as he sniffed the air around his husband. "And you smell like your brother," he sighed.

"I don't mind, but I'm surprised you do, considering how cosy you two were this morning."

Fenris gave Artemis a flat look. "I don't know what you're talking about. That did not happen."

"Oh, it happened," Anders singsonged, gesturing for them to follow Cormac. Fenris shot each of them a look of betrayal.

"Lemon?" Cormac asked, offering a sliver of reed soaked in it to Artemis. "I know you like lemon, but maybe with something other than lye, this time."

"Lemon and mint are very nice together," Helewyse noted, looking the two obvious foreigners over. "You going to introduce me to your guests, Mack?"

"Ah! How dreadful of me. Helewyse, dear, this is my brother..." Cormac paused for a nearly undetectable breath, and made a decision. "Arthur. Artie's an architect, if you like puns, from Kirkwall, out in the Marches. And this is his husband--"
"Leto," Fenris cut in, the name tight in his teeth. "A mercenary, also from Kirkwall."

Helewyse looked between Fenris and Artemis in surprise, but she didn't say what Fenris knew she was thinking: he was married to an elf? "Ah, Kirkwall," she said instead. "That is a long way! All to visit your brother?"

"And to make sure he's staying out of trouble," Artemis replied, leaning in conspiratorially. "Has he been behaving?"

Helewyse cackled. "Around me, he has," she said. "Him, on the other hand." She pointed a reed at Anders, who smiled innocently.

"I have no idea what this charming and gorgeous woman could possibly mean."

"Sorry, I can't help you with him," Artie replied, waving a hand at Anders. "He's a lost cause. Lemon and mint, you say? I never thought to put those two together."

"Lemon and mint is even better in food, but I bet it would smell good on you. Maybe some almond to hold it together?" Cormac eyed the bottles, speculatively.

"Lard or olive?" Helewyse asked Anders, with a knowing look.

"If he picks almond, it'll be that, lard, and wax," Anders said, obviously looking for a particular scent. "Without the almond, probably still lard. Stability. It's skin salve, not perfume."

"Ah, good. Definitely lard, then, for that delicate southern skin." Helewyse held a hand out to Artie, obviously wanting a closer look at his hand.

"Cedar and sweet rush," Anders said to Fenris, holding out the reeds. "Maybe some myrrh to tack it down."

"Myrrh and not musk?" Cormac asked.

"Right. You two try not to smell each other." Anders laughed. "Trust me, it's myrrh."

Fenris took the reeds and gave them a whiff before shrugging and making a generally agreeable sound. As long as he didn't smell like oranges, he was amenable to their suggestions.

Artemis leaned in for a sniff. "It suits you," he said around a smile, and that was all the convincing Fenris needed.

In the end, after some debating and some half-hearted flirting with Helewyse, Anders found himself again laden with everyone's purchases. At least the bottles weren't as heavy as the rugs, though stacking them proved more of a challenge. They joined the rugs in the cart.

"It's like having a second camel," Fenris teases before frowning and pointing a finger Cormac's way. "I know there's a joke in there about camel humps. Don't make it." That finger moved to point at Artie as well.

"I'd insult you like that. I might even insult myself like that. But, I would not insult my brother like that, and anything I could say on the subject would apply to all three of us," Cormac pointed out.

"I think I might be more insulted than all of you!" Anders complained, getting his bearings and heading off toward a canopy decorated with bright drapes of cloth that fluttered in the wind. "I am not a camel! I am a man!" he pronounced, before stumbling over something small in his path --
something that let out a loud yowl and a sharp hiss.

"Did you just trip on a cat?" Fenris asked, confusion clear on his face.

Anders scooped the protesting creature into his arms and soothed it with dim healing, hidden by his voluminous robes. "Sand cats. They mostly live out in the hills past the lakes, but they come into town because they know they can steal chickens." The cat made a suspicious sound, and Anders set it on his shoulder. "Isn't that right, you fuzzy little chicken-thieving bastard? Yes it is!"

"This just happens," Cormac said with a shrug. "They sneak into the house, sometimes, and I'll find them licking a frozen ham I put out to thaw or marauding all over his desk. Never my desk, always his."

Artie shook his head in amazement. "Are you sure this isn't just summoning magic?" he asked Cormac out of the corner of his mouth. "Summon cat. That sounds like something Anders would learn just for such an occasion."

The cat settled on Anders's shoulder, perched as though surveying its kingdom, its narrow eyes making it look like it was judging them and their attire. Its ears were big, bigger than what Artemis was used to between Assbiter and Purrcy, but the way they twitched in annoyance was familiar. Artie looked between the sand cat and Fenris and bit the inside of his cheek to keep from making any associations aloud.

As Anders cooed at the cat, his fingers gentle in sandy fur, Fenris risked one finger under the creature's chin before turning pointedly to take in the selection of cloth on display. He would deny missing his -- Anders's -- pair of fur-beasts. "Are these... blankets?" he asked, taking in the drape of the cloth, which hung longer than he was tall. He eyed the cat-adorned giant. "Tell me these are blankets."

"Do blankets usually have sleeves?" Anders drawled, pulling at one piece of fabric and showing Fenris where an arm was supposed to go.

"Oh, if it's got sleeves, then at least it's men's clothing!" Cormac chimed in. "I know that much!"

"And I don't summon cats. They just like me because I'm adorable," Anders teased, leading Fenris to a different rack. "You'll find things in your size instead of mine, back here."

"He means kids' sizes," Cormac filled in, rifling a rack a bit over from the one Fenris stood beside. "Apparently, I'm the average size for a grown woman or a mid-teen boy. A little wide for either, but not by that much. You're in the land of giants, now."

"That is ridiculous. I may be small for a human, average sized for an elf, but I am not the size of a child," Fenris huffed, watching Anders pull out a bright green and yellow robe.

"I think this will fit you better than anything Cormac's got," Anders said, holding it out to Fenris. With his other hand, he pulled out a plain white robe with light grey embroidery. "This would also be your size, if you'd like to come get a real name in the Summerday procession."

Fenris's smile was tight. "Will you be joining me?" The next moment, he found the white robe draped over his face.

"I don't know if I should be amused or horrified that we're shopping for my husband in the children's section," Artemis laughed, helping Fenris disentangle himself from the cloth. He smoothed out the robe and neatly put it back. "For the moment, I'm going with amused. And you should be used to shopping in the women's section, Cormac. I remember the Chantry sister robes."
Artie looked entirely too smug until Anders pressed a green robe with silver trim into his chest. "And are you used to shopping in the teenage section? Because you'll need to, while you're here."

Fenris cackled at the horrified look on Artie's face and turned back to rummaging through the clothing in his size, looking for something more subtle than the bright green and yellow robe Anders had picked out.

"What are you laughing at?" Artie huffed, ears and cheeks red. "At least I've hit puberty!"

"I am not wearing women's clothing. I am not even wearing something that could be mistaken for women's clothing." Cormac picked up his arm. "See? There's a space between my arm and the rest of the robe." He crept up behind Artie and slipped an arm around him, holding up a green women's robe, with the sleeves gathered and stitched out of the circle of the main body. "And are you sure you should be saying things like that about your husband? Someone might get the wrong idea..."

"Oooh, that's a really nice colour for you, Artie." Anders tried to hold back a smile, as the sand cat climbed onto his head and batted at the strings that held the top of the canopy on. "Isn't that the same colour as your -- as the -- Didn't I find something in that colour under my pillow?"

Fenris choked on a laugh and held up a black and silver robe. "This is very nice. Simple."

"It's also a templar initiate's robe. It's what you wear if you're going down to Hossberg to devote yourself to the Order," Anders pointed out.

The red on Artie's cheeks had filled in the rest of his face. "You both might end up with something else under your pillow, if you're not careful," he grumbled, pushing the woman's robe and his brother's arm away. "And, Fen, please don't dress like a templar. You will be sleeping with the ham-stealing cats if you dress like a templar."

"Well, no one wants that," Fenris said dryly, replacing the black and silver robe. "Least of all, the cats."

Still sulking, Artemis picked out a blue robe with gold trim. Blue was more his sister's colour, but he'd been told often enough how much they looked alike. Then again, comparisons with his sister were something he would rather avoid for the moment.

Fenris pulled out a steel grey robe with black embroidery. "Will this suffice?" he asked Anders. "Or will wearing it confer unto me the status of Knight-Commander?"

"Because we often give children Knight-Commander status," Anders deadpanned, quirking one eyebrow.

"He means it would look great on the floor of his bedroom," Cormac teased, not even looking at what Fenris was holding. "You know Jan thinks you'd look best in nothing at all."

"That is a lie," Anders declared, his head turning so fast the sand cat slipped and tried to catch itself on his cheek, before jumping to the top of the rack, instead. "Don't talk about your brother's husband like that!" He held out his hands, trying to lure the cat back down, before it decided to nest in something.

"Well, whatever Jan likes, I usually prefer wearing clothes," Fenris muttered, examining other styles of robe.

"Get a few of those plain looking thin ones," Cormac said, pointing. "They go underneath. The hooded ones are what you wear outside, in case of sandstorms."
"Why would I wear two layers in this heat?" Fenris asked, ignoring the part where he was already wearing leather and everything available seemed to be so much lighter.

"Because the underlayer keeps you from sweating all over the outer layer. It also dries faster," Anders said, picking up the cat again and getting poked in the face a few times. "And you're wearing leather, anyway, so what do you care?"

"On the one hand, it's more fabric for me to take off him later," Artie said, head tilted as he considered Fenris's garment choices. "On the other hand, robes. Won't need to take them off."

"I might want them off," Fenris muttered. "It still just seems... heavy." He wouldn't admit that Anders had a point about the leather. Heat and sweat just glued it to his skin, and peeling it on and off in this heat had been no mean feat.

When Fenris and Artie approached with their respective bundles, the vendor was as delighted as the others had been. This time, however, Anders refused to be their camel. Arms folded across his chest, Anders turned his face snootily away.

"No. Nope. It's your turn to carry. I prefer cargo of the fuzzier variety." And he went back to trying to coax the unimpressed cat down from the rack.

"See?" Artie shook his head at Fenris. "This is what happens when you insult the camel."

"Better than having it spit on me."
"Let's get lunch," Cormac decided, sweeping the bundle out of Artie's arms. "If you want to wear something that's not stifling and sweaty, you can change in the bathroom at the tavern. It's closer than walking home. Still, whatever you don't mean to wear should probably go back to the camel, so nobody ends up spilling beer on it. It's not a festival day, so that's less likely, but why take chances?"

"Are you going to spend way too much on cakes and date sweets?" Anders teased, carrying the sand cat perched on one arm, like a falcon. "Because if you are, you should buy me a plate of pickles."

"Pickles?" Fenris asked, debating changing out of at least some of the leather -- what of it he could get out of without strange acrobatics.

"If it exists, you can get it in pickle form," Anders reassured Fenris, crouching down, outside the canopy, to set down the cat, which still circled him, bumping its head against him, possessively. "Salted and pickled just about anything. It keeps through the summer."

Fenris hummed in consideration, eyeing Anders with more suspicion than the cat had. "I suppose your taste in food is generally less questionable than his." He tipped his head in Cormac's direction as they all headed for the tavern. "But the last thing pickled I tried was from Theron, so I am dubious. I will, however, reserve judgement."

"You're assuming I will let you share," Anders replied, bumping Fenris with his elbow and getting an ear twitch and a growl in response.

"The camel is getting cheeky," Artie teased. Then, seeing Fenris's hesitation over the robes, he said, "Take a set with you. We'll try them on. And if you need some, ah, 'assistance', I'd be happy to help." Artemis had seen him dress and undress often enough to know the amount of effort it took to get in and out of those pants in the best circumstances.

Fenris took a subtle step forward, putting Anders between him and Artemis. "Please don't mage wax my legs."

Artie blinked as Anders guffawed. "That is... not what I meant. At all."

"Andraste's blazing ass," Cormac marvelled, "what a horrifying idea. Mage waxed legs. I'd say you wouldn't be fluffy any more, but that's not really a problem for you."

Anders pulled open the tavern door, still laughing. "Welcome to the Petty Crown, the only place to get a drink, around here, if you don't make your own."

"Suck my pickles, Jannik!" the bartender shouted, winging a rag at Anders's head, from the other side of the room.

"Well, it's true!" Cormac cut in, grinning as he led the way to an empty table. "An understatement, but no less true for it. It's the only place to get a drink, this side of the river, but it's also going to be a
very good drink!"

"I take it you've settled in well, then. Friendly with the locals -- or at least as friendly as you ever get," Fenris teased Anders.

"Oh, believe me, that's not the friendliest I get," Anders said with a suggestive smile.

"No, indeed," Fenris amended, "or I suppose he'd have asked you to 'suck his pickles' in a different tone."

"Careful what you say about the man serving your drinks, stranger!" the bartender said, shaking a finger at Fenris, but the grin on his face said he was more amused than offended. Fenris still suspected he would have ended up with a rag in his face if the man hadn't already thrown the one in his hand.

"I think he was saying more about him," Artie said, pointing a thumb at Anders and earning a bark of laughter from the bartender. He took the bundle of cloth his brother carried and held it up. "Bathroom?"

The bartender hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the bathroom door.

"Thanks!"

"So, what should we get?" Cormac asked, leaning back in his seat as Anders pulled out the chair beside him. "I suspect we're stuck choosing. Pickles for you, of course, and date sweets for me, and bread, obviously. Figs and honey? Pork ribs? Stewed questionable meats from yesterday's leftovers?"

"Beer with a side of beer and some beer, to start," Anders called over his shoulder. "Mixed pickle, mixed sweets, and whatever meat's still hot. Spice bread and some preserved cheese."

"Only if you bring back that rag," the bartender replied.

"What, so you can throw it at me again?" Anders scoffed, pressing a hand to his chest.

"Or at the next poor sod through that door. Kind of depends on who it is." The bartender laughed and started filling a jug from one of the casks behind the bar.

Dropping the rag on the counter with a flourish, Anders tipped his head at the bathroom door. "You're welcome to throw it at the poor sods coming through that door, once they come out." He was sure Artie would protest, since it was, in fact, a dirty rag, but that's what the man got for mage waxing his floors.

Messeres Fartemis had shuffled out of the bathroom by the time the bartender had brought over the beers and food. Even in children's clothes, Fenris was swimming in fabric, or perhaps it just seemed that way compared to the tight leather he'd walked into the room wearing. Artemis had the fabric of his robes clutched in his hands, rucking up the cloth so he wouldn't step on it by accident.

"I think this is the most clothing I've ever worn at one time," Artie declared, taking the seat next to his brother and propping his feet in Cormac's lap. He reached for a bit of bread and cheese while Fenris went straight for the beer.

"Is not," Cormac retorted, grabbing half a fig with honey drizzled on it. "Don't you remember that coat dad got you, when we were staying in the Wilds, that winter? You were the one of us that looked like a bear in that thing. It was like three inches thick and went down to the ground. You kept
tripping on it."

"That sounds oddly adorable," Anders said, eyeing Artie contemplatively, as he helped himself to a slice of pickled lotus root.

Fenris hummed in agreement and eyed all the food suspiciously. Bread, at least, he could recognise easily. And... that was some kind of meat. He piled meat and a few slices of cheese onto a piece of bread and rolled it up. That looked like it might be food, as opposed to whatever it was Cormac was eating.

"Well, you know Artie -- always the adorable member of the family." Cormac shrugged and sipped his beer.

"And then I passed the bear mantle onto you," Artemis said. "I'd almost forgotten about that. Not sure how I could." He had been rather vocal in his dislike of the cold, and dad had stepped in to fix it, as always. Between dad and Cormac, Artie supposed he'd always been spoilt.

Artie considered the beer in front of him for a long moment. One drink. One drink was certainly fine. As Fenris tried to puzzle out what Anders was eating, someone else came into the tavern, someone the bartender greeted brightly but didn't throw a rag at. Fenris first noticed the sword at the man's side and subtly shifted his new robes to make sure his own weapon would be easily accessible. He doubted the man was a threat, not with the friendly and familiar way he smiled and waved at Anders, but years as a bodyguard were difficult to shake off.

"Good to see you, Ser Peryn!" Anders greeted him, wiping his hand on the edge of his robe before offering him a wave. "How's the arm?"

A piece of bread nearly got stuck in Artie's throat. "Ser?" The man was in robes, not plate, but... that was a familiar sunburst symbol on the bottom of his robes.

"Much better! You are so kind to ask. Once I got back to Hossberg, the healers fixed the rest. They were very ... they had many goodnesses to say about your work." Peryn smiled and approached the table. "These are more friends from far places?"

"My brother, Arthur, and his husband, Leto." Cormac introduced them. "This is Ser Peryn, our occasional templar. He's only here for a few days at a time, but he's pretty good in a bar fight! What ever happened to the guy who broke your arm, by the way?"

"Oh, he paid a fine to Mother Yotte. Damaging Chantry property." The sly grin on Peryn's face suggested the last was a joke. "So, Jan, I thought I knew your name. I looked at it and you are the brother of a mage, yes? Do you know what happened to him?"

"Mama told me the templars took him away. Down to Hossberg, she thought." Anders shrugged uncomfortably. "I was gone, so... Do you know him?"

"I looked for him. A favour for a good man, yes?" Peryn smiled and pulled over a chair from another table, putting himself between Fenris and Anders. "But, he was not so easy to find. I know that we sent him to Ferelden, but Ferelden lost him somewhere, in the Blight. He is maybe still alive, and they are still trying to find him. I hope he is well and you can send him a letter when he is found. That poor man shouldn't be alone in the world. I hope Ferelden finds him soon."

Anders knew he was supposed to say something here. As Jannik, he should say something kind and grateful. As Anders, he could say something ironic or misleading to get Peryn to stop looking. But in the end, the words didn't come. He was almost grateful when Fenris cleared his throat and drew
Peryn's attention away from him.

"So, you are a templar," Fenris said, to which Peryn nodded. "You must know quite a bit about mages. What are they like? I've never met one." He supposed he deserved the kick his husband dealt him under the table, but his expression never moved from politely interested.

Anders gestured for the bartender to bring Peryn a drink.

"Oh! Yes, mages!" Cormac turned a delighted grin on Peryn, as he reached for a pickled... whatever that was. He hadn't quite figured all of them out, yet. "Tell us all about mages! Obviously, my brother and I have never met any. Our father raised us in the Chantry, and that doesn't much lend itself to consorting with apostates. Or Circle mages, really. Can they really do all those things in the legends?"

Artie kicked him too. He was going to kill them both later. He'd gotten used to the templars in Kirkwall, the ones who had stayed and helped their mage charges, but this was different. This was sitting across from a templar who didn't know them, who would turn them in if he knew. This was their old life on the run, just in a different country.

This was... a drink in his hand. At least drinking gave his fidgety hands something to do.
Ser Peryn introduces his new foreign friends to a traditional beverage of the Anderfels. A traditional extremely alcoholic beverage.

"Ah," said Peryn with a soft smile, "that depends on what legends you mean."

"Oh, you know, the exciting ones!" Cormac laughed between swigs of beer. "The ones where they fight dragons with lightning from their fingertips or slay hordes of darkspawn with waves of flame!"

"The history of the Second Blight is filled with stories of mages fighting darkspawn," Peryn said, accepting his drink with a sage nod. "Those stories may even be true. It is said the mages who marched with Emperor Drakon formed the first Circle in Orlais, and they were allowed it because they were great heroes. I have heard that there is a contract that dates back to that time requiring all Circles to contribute mages to the Wardens in a time of Blight. They sent us a letter from Weisshaupt, and some of our mages went away. The blight was over so quick, but they never came back. There are whispers that no one ever comes back from being a Warden. That is true dedication."

"No one ever comes back from being a templar, either," Cormac muttered under his breath, thinking of Cullen and Carver.

"I wish that were true," Peryn sighed. "But, as there are good men and bad men, so there are good templars and bad templars, and the bad ones are removed from our service."

"So, is it true that mages always wear robes?" Anders asked, coughing to cover the squint, when Justice surged at the thought of 'bad templars'. "Is that really the fashion in the Circles?"

"He asks, at a table full of people wearing robes," Artemis muttered.

Peryn chuckled politely. "It is the fashion at Hossberg," he said. "But, as you say, it is the fashion here too. I cannot speak for other Circles outside the Anderfels, but I have not imagined different."

"Hear that, Leto?" Anders said. "In your new clothing, you and Artie are both dressed like mages too!"

"Amusing," Artie deadpanned. He was tempted to kick Anders too but suspected he'd accidentally hit Peryn. That would be awkward. "Though Leto here almost chose the templar initiate's robes by mistake. I suspect he'd make as terrible a mage as I would." He stared down at his drink, frowning when he saw how much he'd drunk and how fast. Still, the templar showed no signs of leaving, so Artemis ordered another. Two drinks weren't bad. It was only beer.

Cormac pointed at Peryn. "Of course, robes seem to be templar fashion, too. That's a really nice one, by the way."

"Thank you!" Peryn smiled. "It is the normal robe for a templar. We wear them for the same reason anyone wears them. The sandstorms are truly terrible. But, I have been meaning to ask, are you a brother with the Chantry?"
"It's the robe, isn't it?" Cormac sighed, apologetically. "I'm a scholar, big fan of Genitivi and Petrine. It's such a struggle to dress appropriately, in this line of work."

Artemis bit his tongue against a comment about dressing inappropriately. And another comment about Cormac's tattoos and Cormac calling himself a scholar the first time they'd met Marethari. "Back home, he dressed like a Chantry sister. I think they envied how much better the robes looked on him."

"Maybe that's why Sister Ingill hasn't warmed to you yet," Anders teased Cormac. "Robe envy." He nudged the plate of pickles in Peryn's direction and gestured at it invitingly.

"I do not know if the robes make a difference," Peryn said with a grin. "Not unless she envies my robes as well." He reached for something on the plate that Fenris couldn't identify but hoped was a vegetable.

"The robes always make a difference," Cormac said, around a mouthful of mutton with mint sauce and spiced bread. "It's a rare individual that would want to see me without them."

Anders choked on his beer and fell to cackling like a fool. "A rare individual indeed! One enamoured of thick middles and fluffy rumps!"

"I have always thought Mack looked like a magical bear," Fenris drawled, before realising what he'd said. "What do they call those in the south? Bereskarn. I have always held that he looks like a bereskarn."

"You are not from the south?" Peryn asked, after an awkward moment.

"I'm not from anywhere," Fenris said. "Too many years travelling. I like the Marches, though. Tantervale, in particular. They have the most wonderful apples, in Tantervale."

"He doesn't like Orlesian chocolates, but Tantervale apples he loves," Artemis added, reaching for the pickle plate at the same time as Peryn and drawing his hand back a bit too fast.

"I apologise," said Peryn, pushing the plate his way, but Artie waved him off.

"No, no, go ahead," he said with a sheepish smile. "I'm not even sure what most of this is, really, but I had the same experience with what Mack made for dinner last night. Tasty, either way. Can't say I've regretted anything I've put in my mouth yet."

Anders opened his mouth to say something only to stuff it with cheese instead.

"I'm sure," Fenris drawled, looking entirely too amused. "I am not surprised that Mack has picked up the local cuisine so adeptly. He always was a fan of Ander culture."

Even watered down beer burned when it came out through the nose, or so Artemis discovered.

Cormac choked on a fig roll. "Not as big a fan as he is of elven culture, or so I'm told." He shot a pointed look at Fenris and wiggled his eyebrows.

"You have known elves?" Peryn asked, glancing at Fenris. "Not elves of the city, like your friend, but ... how do they call themselves, the Dalish elves?"

"My brother has known a fair number of Dalish elves. They like him. He's funny and cute. Mostly harmless." Cormac winked at Artie and tossed him another napkin. "We lived near a camp, for a while, when we were young. We traded with them. Nice people."
"I had heard of them being wild and murderous! That they do not like the human people, like us!" Peryn looked back and forth between the brothers, in amazement.

"Like I said, he's cute and I'm... a scholar. We were unarmed, and we didn't make trouble." Cormac shrugged easily. "They're just people. Not so different to the human tribes in the far south, really. Insular and not particularly welcoming, but they don't make a point of going out and just killing people."

"I knew one elf who was like that," Anders said, after a moment, "but her clan threw her out for it. She never did get around to liking humans, much, but she'd admit we were useful, after a couple of months in our company."

Artie daubed at his chin and robes with Cormac's napkin. "Of course," he muttered. "New robes that I've barely worn five minutes, and they're already stained. Well done, me." He glared half-heartedly at Fenris. "Your fault."

"It is," Fenris said, more smug than apologetic. He considered his drink and Artemis's. "Shall I earn your forgiveness with another round?" He bit back the 'Amatus' that waited on the tip of his tongue. Outing himself as Tevinter would cast aspersions on his comment about not knowing mages.

"It would be a good start," Artie conceded. "A better start would involve stronger alcohol."

Fenris hesitated. Drinking heavily around a templar was not a good idea, worse when they were in a strange land using names that weren't theirs.

"Please," said Peryn, "I will get the next round. You have been generous and good company."

Anders nearly dropped his beer when he heard Peryn call out for the next round -- it wasn't beer at all. "We're surrounded by foreigners," Anders reminded him.

"And you think they cannot drink it? I think you must have more faith in your friends." Peryn clapped a hand on Anders's shoulder and laughed.

"What... are we drinking, here?" Fenris asked, after a moment, when the wide-eyed look didn't fade from Anders's face.

"Anijswater," Anders replied. "You know the drink the Orlesians call pastis? Or Nevarran ouzo? This is like that. We drink it with a bit of water, so it turns white. You should eat more before you try to drink it. It's very good, and if you don't eat, you'll be very drunk -- especially after the walk home."

Justice was already displeased with the beer, and the thought of adding strong liquor on top of it sat poorly with him. In the years they'd spent with Cormac, Anders hadn't gotten drunk -- actually drunk -- very often at all, after those few months right at the start, but Justice could feel the memories of drunkenness creeping in around the edges. Oddly fond recollections of having been too drunk to see and laughing hysterically from the bottom of a flight of stairs while someone else drawled barely comprehensible comments from above.

"Jan, the look on your face both intrigues and concerns me," Artie said. The bartender returned to their table with a tray of drinks and set the cups down one at a time. Artie peered into his cup curiously.

"Do not look so concerned, friend," Peryn said to him, laughing. "I think you will like." He picked up his cup and held it up. "A toast. You do that in the south, yes?"
"It has been known to happen," Fenris drawled, eyeing his drink askance before lifting his cup as well. "What are we toasting?"

"A toast to not being on a boat any more?" Artie suggested with a one-shouldered shrug.

"A toast to having rugs for my waxed floors?" Anders countered.

"I was thinking, a toast to friends," Peryn said, looking dreadfully amused, "but rugs. That can work too. Friends and rugs." He saluted them with his cup before taking a long drink.

Several drinks passed, with no one willing to be outdone by this templar, and by the bottom of the bottle, Anders seemed to be the most upright of any of them. Justice, really. Justice had no intention of being drunk, and resisted it on Anders's behalf, insofar as Anders could be said to have a behalf, and maybe that was the anijswater speaking, after all. Any way the table could be observed, though, Anders was not listing in any direction.

"So, Anders," Fenris slurred, jabbing a finger at Anders as he spoke. The combination of the heat and a drink that was almost entirely alcohol had caught up to him quickly.

"Which one?" Cormac asked, resting his forehead on the top of his beer mug, waiting for the sensation of having been kicked in the forehead to pass. "You're in the Anderfels, you dick. They're all Anders, here."

"The obvious one," Fenris huffed, leaning heavily on the table.

"He means you," Cormac teased, elbowing Peryn, who brayed with laughter and said something in Ander.

"Yeah, he probably means me," Anders agreed. "What do you want, Marcher?"

"Which one?" Artie asked in turn, voice muffled by the table. He lifted his head so that his chin rested on the table instead of his face and groped about for his drink, accidentally smacking Fenris's arm in the process, only to find it empty. "Got another round in you, Anders?" he asked Peryn. He smacked his lips. Was his tongue always this heavy? How had he not noticed it?

Peryn squinted back at him. "Sorry. I heard 'got' and 'Anders'. Could you... ah, which one are you? Leto?"

Artie said, "Yes," at the same time Fenris said, "No." They exchanged a look, and Artie slumped to the side to hide a snorting laugh against Fenris's shoulder. "Excuse you, Artie," said Artie. "I know my own name. M'not that drunk."

"I'm not Artie," Fenris huffed, nudging his husband with his elbow so that he slumped in the opposite direction. With an impish smile, he added, "I'm Mack."

"I'm confused," said Peryn.

"Hello, Confused!" Anders said, cackling. Justice disapproved. Anders wasn't nearly drunk enough to justify that awful joke, but Artemis seemed to find it hilarious.

"Is Confused, over there, going to be all right when we go home?" Cormac asked, after a bit, the rim of his mug still digging into his forehead. "Or are we going to have the aftermath of another bar fight?"

"I think that depends on whether Madame Elf decides to take a swing on behalf of mages
everywhere," Anders joked. "What say you, Varania?"

"I am not an elf!" Fenris declared, then paused, a look of horror on his face. "No, no. I am an elf. I am an elf, not a lady mage. I am neither a lady nor a mage." He stared at the empty bottle in utter bafflement and then shot a dirty look at Anders. "Shut up, Theron."

"I am transcendental!" Anders shouted, laughing. "Don't mind us, we're drunk," he told Peryn, and then repeated himself in Ander.

"I had noticed," Peryn replied, though his brow had smoothed over in understanding. His Ander accent thickened with each drink.

This time Artie's cackling face ended up pressed against Cormac's arm. "I'm still not a halla," he said. A bit of drool dripped out that he wiped off on Cormac's sleeve. "I'm a Ferelden parsnip. Right, dad?" The words caught up with him a moment later, and he sat up too fast, nearly swaying backwards off his chair. "Not dad. No. Sorry, Carver."

Cormac shot straight up in his chair, the ring from the rim of his mug clear on his forehead. "I do not look that much like dad, Bethany."

Artemis's mouth fell open, and he punched his brother in the arm, hard enough to be felt through the layers of robes. "Shut up, Bran!" He stole his brother's drink.

"I think you've had enough to drink, Bran," Fenris said to his husband, taking Cormac's drink from Artie.

"So have you, Bran," Artie countered, taking Cormac's drink and Fenris's.

Anders relieved Artemis of the drinks, finishing them, himself. He and Justice could handle a few more. Obviously, the rest of the table could not.

Fenris squinted across the table at Anders for a long moment. "One Bran, two Bran," he said pointing at Anders and Peryn. "Red Bran, blue Bran," he finished, gesturing at Cormac and Artemis.

"Elf Bran has had enough," Cormac declared, after a bit of staring.

"It's funny!" Fenris insisted. "Master Brosca has been teaching me dwarven poetry! It's only not funny because you're not dwarfy enough -- and you're pretty dwarfy for a human. What is it she calls you? A tall dwarf?"

As bickering broke out over whether or not Cormac was a dwarf, Anders turned to Peryn, explaining in Ander that 'Bran' was a very common name in Ferelden, much like 'Jan' in the Anderfels.

"Oh! That is funny!" Peryn decided, loudly, patting Fenris roughly on the back. "I would say we are all Jan, but Bran is much more funny. There is real Jan at this table. There is no real Bran here."

"Well said, templar Bran," Artie agreed. He looked around and frowned. "Which of you Brans took my drinks?"

"One Bran," Fenris replied, pointing at Anders with a swaying finger. In a loud whisper, he added, "Though maybe he should have been Blue Bran."

Artie hummed in agreement, leaning towards Fenris until his head flopped against Fenris's shoulder. "Elf Bran is less spiky than usual," he said, rubbing his cheek against Fenris's shoulder.
"Thank you, drooly Bran," Fenris replied. He blinked down at his husband. "Or sleeping Bran."

"We might need camel Bran for these idiots," Anders said. He took a second look at Cormac and added, "Including this Bran."

"A Band of Brans!" Fenris declared before slumping over the table again, Artie falling with him, lightly snoring.

"It's been lovely, but the Brans and I must be getting home," Anders explained to Peryn, repeating himself in Ander after a blank look. Farewells followed, amid a great deal of back-slapping and jovial shouting, and Anders called for paper to wrap the rest of their meal which had been a bit large even for four of them -- five. Six, if you counted Justice, which Anders did, if only to excuse the fact that he ate enough for two men by himself.

"You should fetch the camel," Cormac said to Anders, slipping a few coins into his hand. "I'll stay here and keep an eye on Bran and Bran. I promise we won't be any drunker by the time you get back."

"Please don't do anything stupider than usual," Anders implored, heading out to find their camel so they could get home.
Drunk Bran and Drunker Bran

Chapter Summary

Two drunkards in a camel cart. A generally explicable amount of mayhem, vomit, and cats.

"M'not that drunk," Fenris insisted for the third time, this time addressing Anders's ass, as he tried to decide which way was up.

"Sure, Elf Bran," Anders replied, adjusting his grip and resettling Fenris's weight on his shoulder. Fenris continued to grumble things Anders either couldn't hear or couldn't understand, which Anders ignored either way. Elf Bran's husband was loud enough for the both of them, sprawled as he was across the cart and singing off-key at the top of his lungs. "He's not that drunk, either, I'm sure."

"Nah, he's shitfaced," Cormac laughed, leading the camel down the road. "And that means someone's getting laid, tonight. Hopefully the correct someone."

"I'm not sure he's going to find an incorrect someone in our house, Mack," Anders pointed out, shifting his grip on Fenris. "Look, do I need to put you in the cart with Singing Bran?"

Fenris growled something in Tevene, that was utterly incomprehensible to Cormac, but obviously tart.

"Hold the camel," Anders called, and Cormac convinced Harellan to stop.

While Anders rearranged the contents of the small cart to make room for Fenris beside Artemis, Cormac leaned over the drainage ditch beside the road and emptied his stomach into it. It took a few tries to get all the liquid out and a few shoves to keep Harellan out of the way -- the camel was as bad as a cat, some days.

"Do I need to do something about that?" Anders asked, draping a rug over the couple in the cart.

"Nah, that's just so I'll stop being drunk some time before morning. With any luck, I'll be able to carry Artie into the house, by the time we get there." Cormac stretched and made his way back around the camel, as Anders got out of the cart. "You know, it's a good thing they're wearing robes. At least we're not going to have to find any clothes they might've decided to take off on the way home."

"Making it easier for them may or may not be a good thing," Anders laughed. "Those are new rugs."

At least the horrible singing had stopped. He glanced back at the cart to see the pair curled up with and around each other, Fenris making soft purring noises against Artie's neck. Their feet poked out from under the rug and over the edge of the cart, Artie's hooked over Fenris's.

"So what do you think?" Anders asked Cormac as he coaxed Harellan forward. "Do you think they'll fall asleep or start making the Bran with two backs?"

"Oh, oh, no. You need to stop with the Bran jokes, now, because that was a little vivid, and it had nothing to do with those two and everything to do with the Seneschal." Cormac shuddered. "I mean,
he's a good looking guy, but no. And no twice to two of him."

"Really? No to Seneschal Bran?" Anders recoiled in surprise. "I'd take a bit of that in a heartb— yes, Justice. Thank you, Justice." He raised his eyebrows at Cormac. "That's an official declaration of disinterest from us, I suppose. Bran's not sexy because he's not dipped in lyrium or burning for better conditions for mages."

"The man's the civil leadership behind the city guard. He passes judgement. You could say he's a ... force for justice," Cormac pointed out.

Anders tipped his head. Justice had a few grumbling remarks, but he sounded more amenable. "It seems Justice would rather talk politics with him than climb into his bed. I've assured him we could multitask, but he seems dubious."

Out of the corner of his eye, Anders caught movement in the cart. He glanced back to make a smart comment about the couple only to realise that the movement was another sand cat, climbing aboard for a ride. Well. Some of the movement. The cat didn't seem to mind the way the rug it was sitting on moved.

Anders clicked his tongue and rubbed his fingers together, trying to summon the furry beast, but it just stared at him as though trying to puzzle out his secrets. "Looks like we've been joined by Cat Bran," Anders said, followed by an immediate, if insincere, "Sorry. I'll stop."

The cats continued to gather, as they continued down the road, and by the time they reached the camel gate in the garden wall, an abundance of fur-demons had settled around the intertwined lovers, purring contentedly. Fenris had ducked under Artie's chin, at some point in the journey, but three cats were curled around the back of his head, one with a tail twitching firmly against Artie's forehead.

"You take the cats," Cormac suggested, leading the camel around to the open shelter his food was kept in. "I'll take the camel. Meet you back here to unload the rest of the cart."

"Why do I always end up with the cats?" Anders asked, leaning over the side of the cart to pick up the one that had discovered their leftovers, and was currently helping itself to a mutton shaving. It purred loudly at him and poked him in the nose.

"Is that a serious question?" Cormac asked, unfastening the camel from the cart. "I'm pretty sure that's not a serious question. You know they'd be in your way, no matter what you meant to be doing, so why not just make it your business to attract them to something other than our rugs?"

"Like my hair?" Anders sighed as the cat in his arms climbed out of his arms and scaled him like a tree, settling in Anders's hair to lick its chops. It was a balancing act, shooing cats while one curled on his head and others bumped his leg and tried to chew on his toe.

The tail against Artie's forehead migrated, twitching against his eye instead, and Artie's face scrunched, a whine starting in the back of his throat. A whiskered face replaced a twitching tail, a sandpaper tongue scraping the tip of Artie's nose. "Purrry," Artemis grumbled, sluggishly pushing the cat face away from his human face.

Anders scooped up that cat next as Artie's eyes blinked open. Fenris grumbled in his sleep and tightened his arms around Artemis.

"Good morning, Drunk Bran!" Anders greeted Artie, patting his cheek, with a cat in one arm and another still on his head. Drunk Bran blinked back at him in bleary-eyed confusion and responded with syllables Anders couldn't translate.
The sounds of Cormac feeding and brushing the camel filtered across the yard, and the cats took a sudden interest in the rustling, some of them rushing off to trip someone else, instead.

Fenris squinted against the light of the setting sun, taking in only the curve of Artie's cheek, for a bit. "Drunk," he muttered, seeming almost surprised. "Potion?"

"Sorry, Elf Bran, we haven't had much need for them, so I haven't been keeping up stock. I'll make some, tonight, though. Just in case you two decide to repeat this experience." Anders set a cat aside and picked up a pile of rugs. "Think about sitting up. I'm going to go make sure nobody falls down between the door and the guest room."

The sound of Cormac cursing at great length filled the yard as he tripped on a cat and splashed a bucket of water on himself.

At the sound of his brother swearing, Artie sat up. Too fast, he realised too late, scrambling for the edge -- any edge -- of the cart and introducing the ground to the contents of his stomach. Anders sighed, finally extricating the last cat from his hair as he threw healing Artie's way. At least he didn't get anything on the rugs.

"Are we all right, Drunk Bran?" Anders asked.

"Templars are evil," Artemis groaned, still hanging over the edge of the cart as Fenris tried to find the rest of his legs under the rug. He found his legs and his ass but only as they were falling out of the cart.

Fenris stared dazedly up at the sky. The clouds were rather pretty, he decided, the way the setting sun painted them so many different colours. He was okay with lying there for a while until his stomach recognised that he'd stopped moving.

"Cormac," Anders called out, "I'm going to need a hand with Drunk Bran and Drunker Bran."

Cormac stopped poking the cats with hay and made his way back to the cart, robes still a bit discoloured from being splashed, but mostly dry. Magic was good for that. "Artie, I love you, but just keep sitting here and throwing up for a bit. I'm going to help Fenris inside, and then I'll come back for you. Anders is going to sit here with you, and try to get you a little less drunk."

"I've got a few spells that reduce the effects of poisons." Anders shrugged. "Might not be the best, but it should help."

"Okay, first things first. Fenris, are you going to throw up on me, if I move you?" Cormac asked, grabbing Fenris by the ankles and preparing to pull him close enough to pick up.

"It is unlikely," Fenris decided. "I like the likelihood of not... Like is a practical word. I like 'like'."

"Shitfaced," Cormac breathed, shaking his head at Anders, as he dragged Fenris toward him. After a small struggle with the loose-limbed elf, Cormac gathered him up and headed for the house -- two cats already watched from the door.

Artemis spent the next few minutes hanging there like a limp rag, groaning at the ground.

"I tried to warn you about the anijswater," Anders said, a glowing hand rubbing Artie's back. It had been a while since he'd had to treat this, but he supposed he should have prepared, considering their company. "You should always beware booze-bearing templars."

After a bit of wrangling and a blessedly minimal amount of vomit, they managed to get the pair of
drunkards inside and into bed. Their sand cat visitors were every bit as helpful as expected, and one took up its earlier post at Fenris's head. Another decided that every rug needed inspecting. And mauling, apparently.

"And I thought Assbiter was wild," Anders said, trying to toe the cat off the nearest rug. But rug moved with cat, attached by teeth and claws, and the cat wriggled in protest, folding the rug around itself in the process.

"That's a problem I didn't anticipate," Cormac muttered, standing on one rug and attempting to unroll the cat, so he could cross the room with mugs of lime-water for the drunken couple. "Is this why you didn't have rugs downstairs?"

"Rugs just didn't occur to me," Anders admitted, after a moment. "We didn't have rugs here, either, until Messere Mage-wax over there had his way with our house."

"Actually, he had his way with me. The house was just in the way." Cormac finally got the rug unrolled, to reveal a sand cat, ears back, tail twitching, glaring up at him. He tapped his foot sharply, and it ran off, yowling, to assault the iron grates on the bookcase, while Cormac kicked the rug straight and inched across the room to set both mugs on the nightstand.

"They're going to fall down, aren't they," he sighed. "Well, Fenris, anyway. I don't think Artie can fall down. Or at least not in a way that his feet leave the ground, which is twice as bizarre. Do we have to sit up all night and watch them?"

"Well, to be fair, I was going to sit up all night anyway." Anders shrugged. "Things to do. Apparently I need to adjust the potions I keep on hand."

"I'll keep you company for a while, after I put things away. What do you need cut?" Cormac brushed the hair out of his brother's face, and just marvelled at having Artemis within brotherly hexing distance again.
Summer in the Anderfels is unbearably hot. An early arrival for supper makes things unbearably awkward, too.

Even with the new clothing better suited for the weather, Artie found the Anderfels's intense heat barely tolerable. He had never been this far north, and after a few days, he was beginning to hope he never was again.

"You know what would be wonderful right now?" Artemis asked Cormac, his face pressed to one waxed wall, which felt deliciously cool against his cheek. "Snow. Giant heaps of it. Right on my face. I will never take snow for granted again. I will never take not melting to death for granted again. If I ever complain about the cold again, remind me of this moment and punch me in the face."

"You know I would never punch your delightfully adorable face," Cormac reassured his slowly-melting brother, as he draped a damp rag from the icebox over Artie's head. It hadn't been frozen when it went in, so it was only a bit stiff with the chill, and definitely much cooler than anything else in the room. "It's ... well, it's summer. This is really pretty close to the hottest it gets, here. And in the middle of summer, they make all the kids earn their names by walking across the village in this heat, to hear a speech in front of the Chantry. So, you know, it could've been worse. We could've grown up here."

Artemis straightened at the shock of blessed cold on his head. He dragged the cold rag down over his face and groaned. "I would have stayed nameless like Anders," he said, "and I would have been fine with it. The Maker did not intend for humanity to live in these conditions." The rag went to his neck then and stayed there.

"It's the Blight, you know," Cormac said, quietly. "There's stories of what used to be up here -- not so different to Tevinter, but Tevinter didn't get blighted like... this. Almost a thousand years, and this is as far as they've come." He shook his head. "But, the Blight didn't make it hot. Just made sure there was no nature to get in the way of all the hot. Which is why we have the latest in magical dwarfy shit -- an icebox. Just like the one at home, if a whole lot smaller. Just keep a couple of rags in it and swap them, when they get warm. Or I can go ice the bathtub, if you want."

"Thank you, magical dwarfy shit," Artemis said, giving the icebox a grateful pat. "I might take you up on that in a little while. For the moment I think I'll just whine at the wall and pray for a quicker death."

"Are you still being dramatic, Amatus?" Fenris said from the doorway, bare to the waist, if slightly less melty. He grabbed another rag from the ice box and wrapped an arm around Artemis, who whined and shoved him back.

"The elf furnace is not allowed to mock me."

Anders stepped into the room, in a lightweight robe, hair twisted into a knot on the back of his head.
"Is the elf furnace feeling any less dehydrated?" he asked, taking an onion down from a basket hung in the corner of the kitchen and peeling it.

"Yes, thank you." Fenris ran a hand over his arm, where nearly all of the swelling had finally subsided, and only a thin trace of red marked the edge of the lyrium lines. "I am feeling much better than I have since I got on that boat in Kirkwall. I do not like the sea."

"You and Cormac, both." Anders laughed and chopped onion, sprinkling the pieces into the layered casserole Cormac had started.

"I love the sea!" Cormac protested, mixing a bowl of groats with seasoning. "Swimming is great! I just... don't like sailing on it."

"I am eternally grateful I have never had to spend time on a boat with your brother, Amatus," Fenris mumbled, nuzzling Artie's ear. Anders dumped the rest of the onion into the pan and wiped off the counter. "You have no idea how fortunate you are."

"May you never learn," Cormac said, shaking his head and pouring the contents of the bowl over the onions. He picked up the pan. "Just need to put this on before it gets any later. Is the tea up?"

"Tea's sitting on the garden wall," Anders told him, picking up a flat pan covered in rounds of dough. "Don't burst into flames, you two," he said, pointing at Fenris and Artemis, as he followed Cormac into the garden, where the cooking parts of the kitchen couldn't heat the rest of the house.

"So, I've been meaning to ask you something..." Cormac said, sliding his pan into the clay oven. "The other night, with Fenris. I thought you didn't like being touched, there. Was I wrong?"

Anders slid his pan in next to Cormac's and resisted the impulse to touch the scar in question. "I don't," he said. "Not normally, anyway. It's different when Fenris touches it mid-glow. I don't know if it's the lyrium or if it's because his hand is partly in the Fade, but..." He trailed off with a shrug, pausing to remind Justice that it was too hot for Fade-glowy touching just now, whether he was suddenly interested or not.

"Well, if it's the Fade..." Cormac took a deep breath and wiggled the suddenly indigo tips of his fingers at Anders. "I'd be happy to experiment. I'd hate to leave you wanting when Messere Lyrium Elf goes home." He smiled up at Anders and traced the blue glow along the line of one high cheek.

And Justice was suddenly very interested. Anders eyed Cormac, checking to make sure he was serious, before turning his head and clicking his teeth in the direction of that blue-glowing hand. "There is a very good chance that could end badly," Anders said, the 'but' left unsaid but implied. "And we are not trying it right this second." The last thing he needed was to throw up all the water he'd been drinking.

"Mmm, no, we probably shouldn't. I'm sure that's the last thing your mother needs to walk in on." Cormac grinned and tugged on Anders's beard, teasingly, stealing a quick kiss.

Inside the house, Fenris heard the sound of footsteps, as he stopped rubbing his head with an icy towel. He looked up just in time to see an elderly woman the size of a Kirkwall guardsman stop in the kitchen door, with a basket of fruit and a couple of bottles.
"Jannik? Why is there an elf in your kitchen?" she called out, sharply, taking in the heavily tattooed elf sitting on the counter with a towel, and below him, a robed figure lying with its head in one of the cupboards, a cloud of mist billowing out around it.

Artemis banged his head on the ice box while trying to pull it out, pouring himself out onto the floor instead, a hand to his head. He looked up... and up and up at the towering woman in the kitchen. Assuming that was a woman under that mountain of fabric. "Um. Hello. You must be Ulla."

Without moving from the counter, Fenris poked his head out the window and yelled, "Jan, your mother's here!"

Anders scrambled into the kitchen moments later, and the dubious look on their visitor's face bloomed into a smile. "Mama!" he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek as he took the basket from her. "You're a bit... That is, we weren't expecting you quite so soon."

With both hands newly free, Ulla pulled her son's face down to kiss his cheek as well. "Am I too early?" she asked. "Apologies. But you need to go through no special effort for me. Please. Introduce me to your... other guests?" She eyed the unfamiliar pair, but at least the robed idiot had found his feet.

Cormac lingered by the door. "The tall one with the frozen hair is my little brother," he said, covering a smile. "I'd come in, but I'm watching the bread."

"And the brother's husband," Anders said, gesturing to Fenris. "Speaking of which, elf-husband, you might want to put on some clothes."

"Yes, the lack of magisters does discourage me from serving supper in the nude," Fenris joked, sliding down from the counter and heading for the guest room.

Ulla watched him go and then leaned closer. "Tevinter?" she asked, quietly.

Anders nodded, face twisting in a wry smile. "Formerly. It's a long story."

Artemis ran a hand through his hair, checking to see if it was actually frozen. He wished, now that his face was back out in the stifling heat. "I'm Art-- Arthur, though most everyone calls me Artie. In case you were wondering who I was beyond 'the tall one with the frozen hair'. The be-toweled elf is Leto. It's lovely to finally meet you. Your son and my brother both speak highly of you." He glanced at the ice box and debated how rude it would be to stick his head back in.

Ulla caught that glance and tried to hide her smile. "This is your first experience with an Ander summer?"

"Yes," Artie sighed. "My brother warned me, but I was not prepared. It's making me miss Ferelden."

"And in Ferelden, you wanted to move north, because it was so cold and your precious little toes were freezing," Cormac teased. "Like that story about the Nevarran princess who wanted everything just so." He laughed and ducked back out to check the bread -- as thin as it was, it only took couple of minutes to cook. One of these years, he wanted to learn to cook it on the wall of the oven, like most people did, around here, but he hadn't gotten the consistency quite right, yet, so he was stuck using a pan.

"Mack, if your brother blacks both your eyes because you called him a princess, I'm not healing
that!" Anders called out.

"Why would he punch me for calling him the dainty and delightful heir to a medium-sized nation?"
Cormac called back, peeling the bread onto a dish with his knife.

"Brothers," Anders said to his mother, with a shrug. "Speaking of which, have you heard from
mine? I'd hate to think of him coming back to town only to find he's already here."

Ulla huffed, waving one hand in the air. "I received a lovely letter from him before the harvest," she
said, "and in it was another lovely expression of regret that he could not visit this year. The same as
last year." Her smile was sad. "I do not think you need concern yourself, Ket."
A Family Gathering 2/3

Chapter Summary

'Not in front of my mother', a comedy, starring Anders.

Fenris returned in more appropriate attire, which was to say he returned wearing attire. "Hello again," he said tipping his head in Ulla's direction. "I trust my presence was sorely missed." He padded over to Artemis, pressing himself to Artie's side just to hear him whine and mumble something else about elf furnaces.

"Your husband says your name is Leto?" Ulla asked, her expression somewhere between amused and bemused as she regarded him.

"Then it must be so," Fenris drawled.

"It's what his sister calls him, among other things I wouldn't repeat in public, never mind to my own mother." Anders cleared his throat and glanced around the room as Cormac returned with the bread.

"Casserole's going to be a bit, yet." Cormac said with a shrug. "Jannik, why are you still holding a basket?" He shook his head and edged through the crowded kitchen. "It's officially a party. Everyone is in the kitchen. And now, everyone can get out of the kitchen, and we can have some fresh bread and fruit, while we wait for supper."

"You should hear the things his sister calls him," Fenris muttered, cocking a thumb at Cormac. "Or worse, their youngest brother."

"How is Junior Templar doing, anyway?" Anders asked, leading his mother back to the main room and the low dining table.

"Still picking fights with authority figures," Fenris responded, lowering himself into one of the sack seats. "He's convinced Cullen's going to do something terrible to Merrill, for obvious reasons. I've never been sure how those obvious reasons haven't gotten her killed or possessed in the first place, but she does seem to have a handle on it."

"He should know better than anyone that Cullen isn't going to do something terrible," Artie muttered, flopping onto the sack seat next to his husband. "But he does have to do something, and I think he's being more than fair about it." He wasn't sure how much detail to give with Ulla around. She seemed understanding enough when it came to her son's magic, but blood magic tended to be a touchy subject.

"And speaking of authority figures Carver likes to pick fights with," Anders replied as he poured drinks for everyone, "how is the viscount?"

"Sick of being viscount, I think," Artie sighed. "Orlesian nobles will do that to the best of us."

"That's the benefit having a desert between us and Orlais," Anders said, earning a chuckle from his mother. "Almost makes it worth the heat."

"It's so nice of you to come visit your brother!" Ulla said, reaching across the table to pat Artie's
hand. "What is it you do, when you're not travelling across half of Thedas for the sake of family? And did you come through that desert? I've never been sure how the Orlesians managed it, but they certainly made a nuisance of themselves, once they did."

"We took a boat," Fenris answered, helping himself to fruit as fast as Anders could cut it, and piling it onto a piece of bread. "I might have preferred the desert. Weeks of that... smell." He shuddereded and rolled the bread, taking a large bite.

"Fenris and I don't agree on much, other than my brother and seagoing ventures," Cormac admitted, wrenching the cork out of a bottle and pouring a peculiar pink wine. "The important things, you know?"

"I didn't think the boat was so bad," Artemis said with a one-shouldered shrug, stealing a slice of fruit poking out from Fenris's bread. "But then, Leto is much more pleasant to sail with than he is." He pointed a thumb at Cormac. "As for coming here, ah... well. Someone from the family had to make sure Mack wasn't embarrassing us too much in the Anderfels." He reached for another slice of fruit from Fenris's sandwich, but Fenris swatted his hand away.

Ulla chuckled, helping herself to a bit of bread. "I would say Mack has been comporting himself well, but I can't speak to what he gets up to when I'm not around." She looked at Cormac with an impish smile. "You have a large family? It is good that you are so close, or as close as you can be at this distance."

Cormac laughed and rubbed a hand across the bridge of his nose. "You remember when your husband almost punched me in the face? This is that brother. We're... yeah. We're pretty close."

Artie paused, fruit halfway to his mouth. "Punched? Ulla, I thought you said he was behaving." He shot Cormac a questioning look.

"Just a little disagreement on the raising of sons. I take it you were the example." Ulla smiled beatifically. "Ewald had it coming, anyway, but you can't tell that man anything."

"I told him I'd sooner slam my dick in the door than talk to you like he talks to -- Jan." Cormac stumbled on the name, among friends. "He took offence. I was expecting to get punched in the face. Planned on it. Instead, he threw us both out of the house, and now we have a better house." He shrugged and rested his head on Artie's shoulder with a cheesy grin. "You know I love you."

Artemis stoppered that cheesy grin with a slice of fruit. "So I am the son in this equation," he said without inflection. He wasn't sure how to take that, and he wasn't going to think about it right now. To Ulla, he shrugged and said, "Back home, Mack made it a habit of getting almost punched. Mostly by our youngest brother. He has the lack of bruises to prove it."

"I see," said Ulla, eyes twinkling over her cup. "And it seems to have worked out well enough for him and Ket. The rugs are a lovely addition, by the way. That shade of green looks nice against that... rosy colour."

Anders cleared his throat and tore off a piece of bread. "The rugs are a new addition, inspired by our guests."

"By which he means that guest," Fenris said with a smirk, pointing at Artemis.

Artie flushed and pinched his thigh out of Ulla's line of sight.

"By which he means 'made requisite by this guest'," Cormac laughed. "My brother thought it was a bit too... rustic. Decided to wax the floors for us. It's still soaking in, so we've got the rugs."
"Wax...? On floors?" Ulla looked confused at the idea. "Why would you do that?"

"It's for wood, mama," Anders answered. "It's so the wood doesn't get dry and splintery."

"Oh, how interesting!" Ulla nodded and smiled at Artie. "And how is that working on the dirt floor? I know the boys oiled it to keep it stable, but wax is a new idea!"

Fenris snickered into his wine, the laughter bubbling through the liquid as he tried to drink without choking.

With luck, Artie could blame his red face on the heat. "It's... uh. Well, it's smoothed out the floors, but there have been some complaints. From them." He pointed at Cormac and Anders accusingly. "Apparently the floors are too slippery. I was inclined to disagree until I watched a sand cat try to run off with their food. Have you ever seen a cat run on a wax floor? It's..." He pantomimed a cat's flailing paws. "Incidentally, my husband looks very similar."

"I am not a cat," Fenris said primly, ears turning back against his skull.

"Of course, dear." Artie ran a hand through Fenris's hair and scratched his scalp.

"You know, I had a friend who used to insist that humans were all animals -- he was an elf, you see," Anders started, dipping a sliver of bread in his wine. "He used to say it was the fur that proved the point, until I called him a nug. Stopped that right quick."

"I am not a nug, either," Fenris growled.

"Of course you're not, Wolfy," Anders shot back.

"Goat," Fenris retorted.

"Halla-fucker," Anders scoffed, mouth full of bread.

"They're just like this," Cormac apologised to Ulla, pouring her a bit more of the wine.

"I am not a halla!" Artie protested. He considered lobbing a piece of fruit at Anders, only to remember they had a guest. "Watch it, or your floors won't be the only thing waxed."

Anders coughed, nearly choking on his bread. "You wouldn't dare."

"Watch me."

Ulla thanked Cormac for the wine and sat back as though to watch the entertainment. "Ket and Jan -- the real Jan -- were a bit like this when they were kids," she said to Cormac. "I don't know if he remembers." Her smile didn't drop, but she looked incredibly sad then, for a moment.

"Of course I remember, mama!" Anders laughed, tucking some loose strands of hair behind his ear. "I tell them all the time I used to have a brother."

"He does," Cormac agreed. "'Oh, brothers are like that,' he says. 'I know. I had a brother.'"

"I wish you could've met him before he grew up and turned into an asshole," Anders scoffed, and Ulla swatted his arm. "What? He did! I didn't visit for twenty-five years, but I was locked up for most of those! What's his excuse?"

"Oh, you know how it is. He has a family, now." Ulla gestured dismissively, with a piece of bread.
"He already had a family! We're sitting right here!" Anders shifted to lounge a bit more sideways, resting his head on Cormac's shoulder. "I just want you to know that if Karl and I had run off to Minrathous and got married, we'd have come to visit. Because I'm not an asshole."

"Says the man who comes back to town and steals his brother's name," Fenris pointed out, drily.

"It's not like he's here to use it!" Anders protested.

Cormac held up his glass to Artie. "Proving once again that he knows exactly how brothers work. Particularly the sorts of brothers who pretend to be each other and start rumours in dockside taverns."

Artemis pointed at Cormac with the bit of bread he was eating. "That was only the one time!" he protested. "And... that other time! Not like I knew he was going to end up in politics."

Anders gestured at the Hawkes. "See? Brothers. I think I am completely in line with that asshole little brother tradition."

"Try not to spread too many terrible rumours about your brother, Ket," Ulla teased, her look only mildly scolding.

"Why not? It might give him more incentive to come home, set the record straight. Might make things a bit more difficult for me, but at least I'd get to see the ass."


"No!" Cormac was on his feet, knocking Anders to the side. "No, there will be no ass-touching moments between brothers. I'm ... going to go get the casserole." He swept out of the room, in a flutter of cloth.

"There were some problems in their family," Anders muttered, from where he'd landed face-first in Cormac's seat. "I still think your little brother spent way too much time thinking about that. Wouldn't have been any of his business anyway."

Ulla looked concerned, paused mid-bite through a piece of fruit.

"Accusations were made, fists were thrown." Fenris shrugged. "Carver never could mind his own business. Always lurking in his brothers' shadows, making trouble."

Artie considered following Cormac to make sure he was okay, but he wasn't sure that would give the right impression considering the subject matter. "Please stop talking about this, both of you," he muttered, stealing Cormac's wine. "Though I suppose it is on the subject of asshole little brothers. My littlest brother -- who isn't so little -- is the biggest asshole of us all."

"Is that how it works in large families?" Fenris asked. "The younger the brother, the bigger the pain?"

Anders finally pushed himself vertical again, brushing his hair back from his face. "I think Varania would agree that older brothers have their moments too," he said, to an agreeing nod from Artemis.

Cormac leaned around the kitchen doorway, hands busy elsewhere. "Older brothers are the worst. Youngest brothers are only second. I am the biggest pain in the ass in this family."

Fenris smiled like the cat that ate the canary and pointed at Anders. "Wouldn't that be him? I'm reasonably sure he's a much bigger ... pain in the ass."
There was a thump and some swearing as Cormac vanished from view again. "It's not blood or law! I'll fight for that title!"
Chapter Summary

Slanderous banter and surprise olives. Anders would still rather not be having this conversation in front of his mother.

"All the times he said I was family, he takes it back for this," Anders chuckled into his cup, a solid blush creeping up his cheeks. "And not in front of my mother, Fenris."

"I'm sorry," Fenris apologised to Ulla. "I'm not used to the idea that he has a mother -- that he didn't spring fully-formed from some ancient Tevinter latrine pit in the cellar of some Fereldan Circle."

"Are you saying I'm shitty or that I'm full of shit?" Anders asked, finally giving in and bouncing a melon ball off Fenris's forehead.

Fenris tipped his head back and caught the melon in his teeth, as it rolled off the end of his nose. He shrugged wryly at Anders.

"You see this? Leave me alone for five years in a sewer in Kirkwall, and I end up with an elf for a brother." Anders shook his head in exasperation.

"We found him in the sewer," Fenris explained. "You can see where my presumptions about his origins arose."

"A sewer?" Ulla asked, only looking more concerned. She eyed her still blushing son. "What were you doing in a sewer?"

"His best, I'm sure," Fenris cut in.

"Do I need to remind you of your living conditions when I met you, Ser Elf?" Artie drawled. "What were the names of your, ah... 'roommates', again? Was Marcus the one in the foyer or the dining room?"

"Foyer," Anders replied. "Severus was the one in the dining room."

"Ah! Of course."

To his mother, Anders said, "I was in the sewer because that's where my clinic was. Out of sight of the templars but nearby the people who needed help most." He shrugged, picking apart the last piece of bread. "It stank something awful some days -- most days -- but it worked well enough for long enough. Until I met these idiots, anyway."

"This idiot who gave you a perfectly lovely cellar right next to that clinic, but that didn't reek of farts and death," Cormac called from the kitchen, before finally returning with two more large dishes of food, the casserole and a salad.
"No, instead it smelt of cats and drakestone," Fenris drawled, picking a preserved olive off the side of the salad.

"My cats are perfectly delightful!" Anders insisted, reaching for a spoon to serve the casserole. "Don't slander my cats!"

"And where did you live, that you could offer this... cellar?" Ulla asked, carefully.

"Oh, by the time I had room to offer, my family had moved back into our ... what would you call it, Artie? Ancestral estate? That's a good word for it, I think. Too many rooms. But, he wanted something safe, so the last level of the cellar was the best choice. Had a strong door out into the undercity and another up into the house." Cormac smiled wistfully and rubbed his cheek on Anders's shoulder.

"And the temperature was stable. Perfect for potions and books -- never too hot or too cold." Anders kissed the top of Cormac's head -- hair, really. "You really did take good care of me, you know. In case you ever doubt it. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"Starved to death because you never remember to eat, probably," Cormac teased, glancing at Ulla. "That's really all I do around here. I make sure he eats."

"I'm sure that's not true," Ulla insisted. "But, in fairness, there is rather a lot of him to feed."

"The Warden part does not help," Anders said with a dry laugh. "Mack has his work cut out for him."

"Well, you're both still alive," said Artie as he helped dish out the salad, careful to make sure the salad didn't touch the casserole. "I'd count that as a victory. The way my brother is with boats, I wasn't sure you'd both survive."

"We had a pool going, at the Hanged Man, about how long you two would last," Fenris added. He stole an olive off Artie's plate. "That was the first time I lost a bet to Carver."

Artemis pointed at his husband. "What were you saying about older brothers and assholes?"

"He was saying things I'm not repeating in front of our honoured guest," Cormac muttered, helping himself to the salad and spooning a massive pile of casserole onto it, before drizzling dressing over the entire thing. He and his brother had always had somewhat different approaches to food.

"Clearly he's enough of an asshole to have survived this journey," Fenris remarked. "And I am enough of an asshole to have left my sister in the company of Dalesmen, at least one of whom seems to understand that if anything untoward should happen to her, in my absence, I'll be carving new assholes into all of them."

"Oh, come off it," Cormac said, around a mouthful of food. "You know Paivel wouldn't let anything happen. And it's not like Theron wouldn't step in front of a varterral, for the glory of it." "Theron would do it for the glory and then write a song about it and teach it to every child in the clan." Anders laughed and scooped some more fruit onto the side of his plate.

"He would," Artie agreed with a pained nod. The pained nod turned into a pained look in Cormac's direction when he saw the state of his brother's food. "Sometimes I think you do that just to piss me
"Theron is a Dalish friend of ours," Anders explained to his mother, who looked on in polite amusement. "A bit nuts, but he tells good stories. And bad stories. He has the best and worst stories about these two." He gestured at the Hawkes.

"Oh, I'm sure by now you and I have collected better and worse stories," Fenris said with a wolfish smile.

Fenris tried to steal another of Artie's olives, but Artie got to it first, popping it into his mouth out of spite. Artemis's face twisted, eyes bugging and shoulders scrunching. That. That was salty. And lemony. And very much not as olive-y as he'd expected. "What did you do to this olive?" he said, the olive on his tongue turning most of the sounds into vowels. "Torture it for its secrets?"

"Well, how do you keep them in the south?" Ulla asked, adding another olive pit to the small pile on the side of her plate.

"Usually pickled, not preserved," Anders said, chuckling. "Sorry, Artie, I should've warned you. They're packed in herbed salt and then rinsed in lemon."

"My -- That is D-- I knew a magister who preferred them this way. When I came south and bought the pickled kind, I was so confused that they came in jars of fluid instead of little boxes of salt. And without layers of yellow peppers between them, too." Fenris laughed and swiped another olive from Artie's plate. "Are these made here, or are they Tevinter imports?"

"They're from further up the river, by Hossberg," Cormac answered. "There's another lake, there, and I had to listen to how it made the climate 'much more similar to Val Dorma, where the best Tevinter olives are grown'."

"The best Tevinter olives are from Vyrantium," Fenris argued, shaking his head. "But, if he means to say they're not blighted, Val Dorma works just as well."

"'Not blighted' is usually a good place to start with food," Artie teased. He snatched up another olive before Fenris could steal it.

"I thought you didn't like it?" Fenris asked. "The face you made said as much."

"I just... wasn't expecting it. Now, armed as I am with this new olive knowledge, I should like to try again." Artemis brandished the olive before popping it into his mouth. His face twisted again, but he ate the olive without incident. "I am still not used to that," he said, carefully setting the olive pit aside from the rest of his food.

Fenris chuckled and kissed Artie's cheek. "Perhaps with practice."

"Assuming he doesn't steal all your olives, first," Anders said, reaching across to steal Artie's last olive before Fenris could. He grinned at the offended look on Fenris's face. "How is the casserole, mama?"

"This is good!" Ulla replied with a smile. "Not the way I grew up making it, but still good! Did you learn this from Trude, the brewer? She used to make it like this."

"No, actually, I learned it from Hans and Maty. I was over helping them fix the fence, the other
"week." Cormac took a bite and shrugged. "Not quite as good as they make it, but I'll learn."

"Oh, Maty's Trude's daughter! That explains everything!" Ulla nodded at Anders. "You remember Maty, don't you?"

"I see her twice a week in town?" Anders blinked in confusion, sure that wasn't what his mother meant.

"She's only a few years older than you. She's the one you said used to threaten to feed you to the crocodiles, if you didn't leave her alone." Ulla laughed and poured a bit more dressing onto her plate. "You always used to try to bring her kittens."

Fenris cackled between sips of wine. "A cat mage, even then? No wonder."

"That's Cat Enchanter to you," Anders sniffed.

"Oh, are you still trying to befriend the sand cats?" Ulla asked, reaching over to pick a bit of lint off his robes. "I swear you learned to walk trying to chase after them!"

"I think he's done more than try," Artemis said. "They follow him like he's their Cat God, descended from the heavens."

Anders waved his hand, speaking between large bites of casserole. "Nah, they're just after my food. I suspect they're actually secretly following Fenris. He's twitchy-eared and hissy. They probably think he's one of them."

"Is that why we keep ending up with cats on Fenris's pillow?" Artie asked in mock surprise. "Explains so much."

"We have been over this. I am not a cat. Cats are small and fluffy and they do not give--" Fenris cut off suddenly, with a glance at Ulla. "-- you things we should not discuss in front of company."

"You're right. That's what magical unicorns are for," Cormac said, cocking a thumb at Anders.

Anders turned red enough it was almost a glow, and Fenris wondered if it would become one. He'd never actually seen Justice embarrassed.

"Yes, yes, not in front of your mother." Cormac chuckled and shook his head. "Different embarrassing subjects, then, that don't have anything to do with whiskey, sewers, and the breakfast you should've eaten two days before I brought it to you?"

"What is it with your family and delivering inedible foodstuffs?" Fenris asked, squeezing the pits out of olives to mix them into the casserole on his plate. "Carver showed up with days-old bread pudding, trying to convince me to come out on some venture of your other idiot brother's, once."

"It wasn't inedible food. The food wasn't two days out, he just hadn't eaten in two days."

Anders cleared his throat. "I'm still not the one of us who lived with the corpses of their enemies."

"At least they deterred unwanted guests." Fenris paused. "Except for Carver with days-old bread pudding, apparently. Your family was very difficult to deter."
"Not even corpses and mushrooms growing out of the floor could keep me away," Artemis said, patting Fenris's cheek. "Which... okay, the way I said that almost makes it sound like the corpses were growing out of the floor along with the mushrooms. Which they were not."

"Thank you for clarifying," Anders said, shovelling some more casserole onto his plate.

"Um, excuse me, but," Ulla said, leaning over the table, "why in the Maker's name were you living with corpses?"

"He's Tevinter," Anders said with his mouth full.

"The corpses were my home's previous tenants," Fenris replied. "It seemed rude to kick them out."

"I kicked them out," Artemis assured Ulla. "Along with the mushrooms. We cleaned up the place and closed over the hole in the roof." He looked up at the ceiling above them with its circular opening. "The hole which... wasn't supposed to be there, unlike this one. It stopped raining in the kitchen."

Ulla patted Anders's arm, her smile bemused. "You have very interesting friends."
A Taste of Local Culture

Chapter Summary

Yothandi food and shopping for souvenirs. Not all of the locals approve of Fenris's accent.

Anders ordered, at the Yothandi restaurant in Kassel. He knew the food better than Cormac did, and how to avoid handing Fenris something with fish in it, which was a serious concern, this close to the river. As they waited for the food to be cooked, Anders introduced Artie and Fenris to drinks that would never pass, in Orlais. Cormac was a fan of the thick, white beer -- it wasn't really beer, as there was no grain in it, but there wasn't a word for it in Common, and his pronunciation of the Yothandi word was embarrassing -- but he encouraged Artemis toward a spicy chocolate drink, instead. Fenris chose a sweet drink of fermented maize and citrus rinds, and finished it quickly, before ordering another.

The food came out about the same time as Fenris's second drink, thick piles of beans, maize, and unidentifiable vegetables and meat, doused in avocado sauce and melted cheese, and piled onto thick, fluffy rounds of fried bread. As the contents were checked and the bread passed, until each of them had the meal they ordered, Anders glanced around the tiny shop.

"It's tight in here. Let's go back out to the market. We can sit on the Chantry steps to eat. There's this shop -- we told you. The stand with the little heroes. I want to see if they've got one of Sister Nightingale or Izzy. Probably not Izzy, sadly. She didn't hang around much during the Blight." Anders laughed and nibbled at a piece of meat, drink still in his other hand.

"Probably for the best," Fenris said, trying to get his hand under the bread to fold it without spilling too much of its contents. "I'm not sure the Blight could handle her. In the unlikely but amusing event that there is a figurine of her, I am buying one for Varric." He grinned before stuffing his mouth with food.

Artie had a little more difficulty transporting his food, trying as he was not to lose so much as a shred of lettuce. "Only one? We'll buy him an army of Izzys. He can line them up on his dresser and pretend they're having naval battles." He took a tentative bite and whined when some of its contents spilled to the ground. "There is no graceful way to eat this, is there?" After a second bite, however, Artie decided that it was good enough to justify the mess.

Cormac demonstrated, folding the bread in his palm and using two fingers to hold up the back of it. It was too thick to roll up, but with large enough hands, it could be managed relatively well, with only one hand. Anders had it down to an art, but Cormac was learning.

"An army of Izzys, to go with the stallion. You know, I've heard that's still mounted on the wall, in there, decorated with Cullen's smalls." Fenris chuckled, spilling lettuce and cheese into his sleeve. "It seems no one wanted to touch the thing. It's become a facet of Kirkwall history -- remnants of the infamous pirate queen."

"That sounds just like Izzy, somehow." Anders laughed, licking a bit of sauce where it dribbled out the back of the folded bread. "No one will ever forget her. I know. I tried. Alcohol does not help."
"Why would you do something like that?" Fenris recoiled, speaking with his mouth full. "Is she so terrible you needed to drink away her presence?"

"Well, no. Not in Kirkwall. Much. But, you weren't there in Denerim." Anders laughed harder, dropping a bit of meat. "Maker, at least she paid well. But, when Justice and I... and I realised he could see... I tried to drink some things away. Didn't work. Of course, he wasn't so big on the drinking, either."

Artemis's eyebrows crept towards his hairline. "Were you embarrassed?" he teased. "I didn't know you had enough of a sense of shame to be embarrassed." As he spoke, he eyed what Anders and Cormac were doing with their food and tried to copy it. His meal was shedding lettuce and cheese as he walked, still awkwardly trying to manipulate the bread with only one hand. Fenris watched his struggles and growing frustration and tried not to smile.

"I do too have a sense of shame," Anders said. "I have a sense that shame exists. I just prefer to go without." With the hand holding his drink, Anders pointed out the stall next to the Chantry steps. "There we are. Oh, looks like there might be new ones!"

The vendor waved as they approached, recognising Anders as he bid them a good day. At least, that's what Fenris assumed he was saying, judging by the cheery tone of the Ander he spoke. He could be insulting Anders's mother in an unusually cheery fashion, for all Fenris knew.

"This will always make me think of our home in Lothering," Artie murmured, setting down his drink and picking up a figurine like one Leandra had kept on the mantel. He nudged Fenris. "Think I could make one of these?"

"I think the ears are much smaller and have a far lesser chance of flying away by themselves," Fenris teased, noticing amid the Warden figures one of an elf with a griffon. He pointed with the hand holding his drink. "Who is that one?"

"Garahel. Hero of the Fourth Blight." Anders eyed Fenris in surprise. "You really don't know?"

"I am only acquainted with one Warden, and I have not had a reason to peruse the literature." Fenris shrugged and took another bite, enjoying the combination of flavours. He spoke with his mouth full. "There are elves in the Wardens?"

"Yeah, lots of them. I worked with an elven Mage-Warden, for a while, in Amaranthine. Dalish, actually. Not even a city elf. There's a lot of Wardens from the alienages, historically. Right of Conscription helped with that. The easiest thing to do is walk into a city and relieve them of whatever people they don't want to deal with, which is usually elves and criminals." Anders sipped his drink, the bright red of it concealed in the hollow gourd he drank from. "But, that guy, right there, killed Andoral. Big deal. Huge hero. And this close to Weisshaupt, Wardens are really popular."

"Even elf Wardens? Interesting." Fenris considered that as he took another bite. He wondered if being conscripted by the Wardens would have been better or worse than staying on the run from Danarius. He wondered if they'd taken in any other slaves fleeing south.

Artemis set down the piece he'd picked up and reached for the Garahel Fenris had pointed out. "Would you like him to guard our mantel back home? I can't offer you a griffon, but we can get one of these."

"Why would I settle for griffons when there are dragons?" Fenris said with a slow grin. "And... I think I would like that, yes."
"I think someone's been playing too much Wicked Grace with Anton," Anders said, poking through the figurines. More of Andraste and her disciples; there were always a bunch of those. One of Solona... Two of Oghren, which was a frightening thought...

"Would I be better off riding into battle on a camel?" Fenris asked, eyebrow quirked.

"The camel would throw you, if it had any pride, Vint." One of the locals had come up behind them, while they were examining the goods. "You think you can just come here and make fun of us in the road in front of the Chantry, while your shitty Vint friends back in Minrathous plan another invasion?"

"Spies, that's what you are, right?" his friend asked, jabbing a finger at Fenris and Artie. "Coming here to find out how to break our city, when you come back. Well, it's not going to work! We kicked you out once, and we'll do it again!"

Anders reached up and pushed back his hood, with the hand holding his drink. "Easy, easy!" He followed with a few words in Ander, obviously offended.

One of them spat a word at him, and the other translated it for the supposed Vints. "Traitor."

"Why in the Maker's name would anyone want to invade the Anderfels?" Fenris asked, quite sensibly. "I'm sure it's a lovely place to live, but it wouldn't be worth the effort of an invasion."

"What my friend means to say," Cormac cut in, realising all the ways that could be taken exactly the way Fenris meant it, "is that you don't start a war with the nation that eats darkspawn for breakfast."

"I like this one. The dark one." One of the locals said, chuckling. "Why do you have friends with asscracks for hats? You will come to the pub with us. We'll show you a proper Ander good time."

"Sorry, I got all the Ander good time I can handle right here." Cormac cocked a thumb at Anders.

"The Vint is still shit," the other local insisted. "Probably from that new cult that's getting big there. The ones that want to bring back the Old Gods and take over all of Thedas. Well, you're not starting here, Vint."

"Yes, you've got me," Fenris drawled. He didn't bother setting down his drink or food to reach for his sword. He wouldn't need it with these two idiots, if it came to that. "Eating your food and shopping for souvenirs is all part of my dastardly plan to take over the world." Unconcerned, he took another bite, making a point to hum his pleasure at the taste.

"You think you're funny, don't you, Vint?" said the first local, taking a step forward in what he surely meant to be an intimidating manner, the way he towered over Fenris. Fenris merely raised an eyebrow and kept eating, unconcerned. "You know, I might find you a whole lot funnier after I've kicked your vulture ass."

The man made as though to knock the food out of Fenris's hand, only to find his way blocked by the elf's other companion, the scrawny one. "Back off, or I'll make you," Artie said through grit teeth, glaring up at the asshole of the day. He'd set his drink down on the vendor's table and laid his food carefully on top of his mug.

The local blinked down at Artie before he and his friend burst out laughing. "Okay, but this one is funny," said the second local, the one not standing directly in front of elf and mage.

"Oh, I'm hilarious," Artie sneered. "Now, apologise to my husband."
"Husband?" the man in front of him scoffed. He tried to look past Artemis at the hooded Vint, catching an amused look under white hair. "Is that how it works? You get the old man's seat if you marry him, and he gets your seat until he dies?"

He was still laughing when Artie's fist hit his teeth, hitting him with the force of a hammer. He fell back before he fell down, landing with a solid thud at his friend's feet.

"I think that's the first time I've ever heard anyone figure out which one of you is on top," Anders joked, mouth full of meat and bread. "I mean, he's still wrong about everything else, but that's a first."

"That's my brother," Cormac pointed out to the local who still had his feet under him. "We're not magisters. We're Fereldan."

The standing local said something to the one still blinking at the sky and bleeding from the mouth, but the only word Cormac could make out was 'barbarian'.

"That's us. Southern barbarian goat-herders. And we're all stronger than we look, but my little brother, here," Cormac wrapped an arm around Artie as he smiled between words, "is the strongest of all of us. He didn't even hit you that hard."

"The little one's still a Vint," the guy on the ground swore.

"The little one's from Seheron," Anders corrected. "Of course he speaks Common with an accent."

"But you're welcome to keep arguing if you want to lose a few more teeth," Artemis said, all but bristling like an angry cat.

The man on the ground levered himself up gingerly, muttering a few things in Ander to his friend as he helped him to his feet, propping him up.

"You should be careful who you associate with," said the non-bleeding member of the pair to Anders. He started to shuffle his wobbly friend away.

"Now where's the fun in that?" Anders asked, earning one last scowl from the retreating pair.

Fenris finished off his food, licking sauce from his palm and fingers before washing it down. "Well, that was today's entertainment," he drawled. "I'm so glad I chose a trophy husband who knew how to throw a punch." He grinned at the offended look Artemis threw him over his shoulder and bent forward to kiss his cheek.

Cormac turned back to the merchant, licking avocado sauce from his fingers. "We'll take Andraste and Justinia, for my brother, that Warden Garahel, for his husband, and Warden Oghren, for our collection. We're not missing any others from this week's set, are we?"

Anders shook his head. "Oghren's the only one out that we don't have yet. I can't wait to see what else this guy comes up with." He looked at the sculptor. "Your Wardens are the best. Everybody does the heroes of the Blights, but yours ... I knew some of these people. Yours are fantastic, and Commander Amell agrees with me."

"You have sent my statues to the Hero of Ferelden?" The sculptor blinked and smiled widely.

"She says you made her boobs too big, but the face is perfect. I think she just doesn't want to admit her boobs are that big." Anders grinned and turned over the little clay griffon. "These things are so cute. It's such a shame there aren't griffons any more."
"It's probably for the best," Artie said, ducking out from under his brother's arm to retrieve his food and drink. "Anton would want to add one to his menagerie, and I have a feeling it'd be a little more destructive than a goat."

"I don't know," Anders said, setting down the griffon figurine. "You've clearly never had Goatilda steal your underwear."

Fenris blinked. "Your underwear? How did--? Never mind. I'm sure I don't want to know."

"I do," Artie said, words muffled by bread as he tore off a bite.

"No, you don't," said Fenris. "And this nice vendor doesn't want to, either."

The vendor smiled politely as money and figurines changed hands. He offered no opinion either way.

Cormac slipped the man an extra ten silver. "A bit more. Just for putting up with us. If you don't feel like you've earned it yet, you will soon enough."

Fenris huffed. "Nobody ever paid me extra for putting up with you."
A Traditional Gift

Chapter Summary

While Anders is out introducing Fenris and Artemis to traditional summer events of the Lattenfluss valley, Ulla teaches Cormac to cook an essential meal.

Ulla brought in a sack from the market, glancing around carefully, and grinning broadly, when she only spotted Cormac. "They've gone out, yes?"

Cormac nodded, eyeing Ulla curiously. "What's so secret that we couldn't cook it with him in the house?" He never really called Anders anything to Ulla, if only because they both knew he had no name and anything they could call him to each other would be weird in some way.

"It's a secret dish passed down in my family. Something he'll like very much, and he'll be very surprised you made it for him." Ulla smiled warmly and patted Cormac's arm, as she made for the kitchen. "You have cassia and yellow bread, right?"

"Of course. Wouldn't be able to make breakfast without." It was a bit of an exaggeration, but butter and cassia on yellow bread was one of the best things to have, when it was hot -- like it was now.

"A round pan for the oven," Ulla said, unpacking the bag onto the centre island of the kitchen, while Cormac tried not to remember what Anders had looked like bent over that very surface, just the night before. Ulla held up two fingers, a bit apart. "About this deep. And a mortar. I brought milk, because I know you haven't been to the market, today."

Cormac assembled the requested items, as Ulla unwrapped a slab of meat.

"You have a grinder, yes?" Ulla asked, gesturing at the meat as she started shelling a bag of nuts and dropping them into the mortar.

"Of course we do. What's a kitchen without a grinder?" Cormac paused, bringing it down from a cupboard. "Probably my brother's kitchen, actually. I feel so bad that I could never quite teach him to cook."

Ulla chuckled, hands moving with practised ease. "You mean the brother I have met, yes? The one visiting? Is that why he's so skinny?"

"No, that's just all the exercise he gets, I think. Unlike me." Cormac patted his belly, and started putting the meat through the grinder. "He has a cook. I pay her. His husband can't cook, either."

"Then it is good he has a big brother who takes care of him," Ulla said, the laugh-lines around her eyes deepening as she smiled. "I wish my sons could have been so close."

"No you don't. Trust me. We were twice as much trouble than any of the others." Cormac cackled and moved the bag of eggs out of his way, so he could put down the bowl of ground mutton. Whatever this was, it was going to be enormous, if all these ingredients went in it. Still, he thought, it would want bread and a salad. It wouldn't be a meal, without.
Anders was the first in the door, the three of them still joking about the summer play, at the Chantry. The entire story of Andraste was performed in several plays over the course of a week, every summer, and every year, the shows would be a little different to the year before. The one this afternoon had been Andraste making peace with the elves, so Anders had wanted to take Fenris to see it, even if he'd spent the whole time translating. Cormac had volunteered to stay home and cook, not much wanting to face the crowds and the heat of the market.

"I'm ... I don't know, maybe it's just because I'm older, now, but I wish they'd gotten some real elves." Anders shrugged and held the door for Fenris and Artie. "It's not impossible. Kassel has elves, if not an entire alienage."

Fenris shrugged. "It would have been better, yes, but I am not surprised. The fake ears didn't need to be quite so large, however."

"And this is where you draw a comparison to my sculptural attempts, isn't it?" Artie sighed, pushing his hair back from his sweaty temples.

"I didn't say a word," Fenris said, the picture of innocence. "Anders can attest to this."

"Just for that, I'm making the ears bigger next time."

Anders shook his head at the couple and followed the smell of food into the kitchen. "Something smells delicious in here!" he called out to the cooks, leaning his hip against the doorway. He craned his neck to try to see around them to the dish on the corner. "What did we make?"

"Something I can't pronounce with fifteen eggs in it," Cormac replied, sprinkling a handful of crushed cheese over the top of a large salad, before handing the bowl to Anders. "Take this out to the table, would you? We'll be right out."

"Small beer with figs," Ulla called out from the other side of the room.

"Yes, mama," Anders replied, going to set the table and fetch the beer. This was going to be something fantastic, he was sure. One of those dishes his mother used to make, when he was young, but never taught him. 'Not yet,' she'd say, 'Let your mother have a few secrets.'

In the kitchen, Cormac took up the main dish and Ulla followed with a platter of bread and dip. As he stepped out into the main room and set the casserole on the table, Fenris's eyebrows arched in surprise -- something people ate in Tevinter, too, Cormac assumed. "I haven't tasted it yet, but it smells great, and I hope it tastes as good," Cormac said, lowering himself into a sack seat between his brother and where Anders would sit, when he returned from the pantry with the beer.

Ulla settled in on the other side of Anders, her smile small but her eyes sparkling with humour. "It is an old recipe," she said. "I think you will like it."

Anders returned carrying mugs of beer. "An old recipe, Mama?" he said. "Are you teaching Mack all your secrets?" It was as he was setting down the beer that he finally got a look at what was on the table. Salad, bread, and... that wasn't what he thought that was, was it? The colour drained from his cheeks only to rush back a moment later in a bright and splotchy scarlet. He rounded on Cormac. "Are you serious?" he hissed. "In front of my mother?"

Fenris failed to hide a snicker behind his mug of beer. He shook his head and smirked at Artie's questioning look.

Cormac stared like a nug in torchlight. "What? It's... she brought the recipe and half the ingredients. She said you'd like it! Why...? What did I do?" This was the absolutely last reaction he'd expected,
and he couldn't figure it out -- the dish tasted pretty good, all the times he'd stolen a bite while cooking it, but...

"You really don't know, do you?" Fenris asked, eyeing Cormac in amusement. "This is... not a dish you serve to someone's mother."

"No! I really don't know!" Cormac looked around the table at all the eyes on him. At least Artie still looked as confused as he did.

Anders looked in danger of bursting into flames if his cheeks turned any redder. Considering who and what he was, that was a very real concern. He turned his look of betrayal onto his mother instead. "Mama?"

"This is a recipe my mother taught me after I married his father," she explained to the Hawkes, voice quavering with a chuckle. "It is meant to, shall we say, help with matters in the bedroom." She patted Anders's arm. "Come, Ket. Do sit down."

"No, thank you," he said, voice higher-pitched than usual. "I think I'd rather go outside and bury my head in the sand until I die of embarrassment."

"Well, at least now 'Mack' might have a chance to keep up," Fenris said to Artie in a loud aside the whole table could hear.

Artemis sucked his lips between his teeth to keep from laughing as Anders glared at them both. Clearing his throat, he asked Ulla, "Just to be clear, it's the casserole we're talking about?" When she nodded, Artie considered the three attractive men at the table and shrugged, spooning a healthy serving onto his plate.

"Are you telling me this is some kind of ... aphrodisiac?" Cormac cocked his head and squinted at the casserole. "Should I be concerned? I mean, nothing in it tasted like orichalcum, but..."

"There's no orichalcum," Fenris assured him. "At least, there's not supposed to be orichalcum in the Tevinter version. I have known magisters who would slip some in, just to see what would happen. It's just a folk tradition. Something about eating meat and eggs making you strong and virile, or that's the impression I always got. On the other hand, Tevinter, so who knows what the magisters were really up to."

"Seems harmless enough, then. Come sit by me, sweet thing. I'll protect you from any wandering hands." Cormac shrugged and grinned, patting the sack seat beside him.

"Nobody's hands had better be wandering at this table! This--!" Reminded Anders a bit of the better times at Kinloch Hold, actually, but with the sudden introduction of his mother. "Mama! How could you--? This is--! And you're staying for dinner?" He looked like he might faint.

"Your father's going to have quite a surprise, when I get home," Ulla said, serving herself a bit of salad.

"You should listen to your mother and your... Mack," Fenris said, "and have a seat. You look like you might fall over, and I would rather it not be in the food." He passed Artemis the salad and started dishing himself some of the casserole, pausing to give his husband a suggestive eyebrow wiggle.

"That's-- I..." Anders didn't so much sit as slump into his seat. "There are things a man does not need to know about his parents, Mama." His stomach growled traitorously, and Ulla patted his hand and passed him the casserole.
"You exist, and you have a brother," she said. "If you didn't know it by now, it was about time you did."

"I like her," said Fenris, grateful, for the moment, that he didn't have a mother to embarrass him like this.

Cormac carried Artemis into the bedroom, in his arms, having avoided smacking any of anyone's body parts into the table or any other furniture, this time. Carefully, he laid his brother on the bed and then sprawled beside him, as Anders finished cleaning up after the meal. Ulla had left them to their own devices after the first helping, claiming she had some nice young men to see about some tilework, and Anders had looked pained at the implications.

Stretching, Cormac petted Artie's face. "You holding up? I think if I ever eat again, it'll be too soon."

Artemis rolled over onto his stomach, Cormac's touch prompting a whine in the back of his throat. "My stomach is what's holding me up. It is one giant ball of... something round and solid and heavy that I'm too nauseous to think of." Slowly, he shuffled along the bed until he could hang his head and arms over the side. "Forget what I've heard about Ewald. Ulla is the true evil in that family. It's too late for me. Save yourself." He blinked at the side of the bed, staring at the beams that held it together. "And your bed is upside-down. Why is your bed upside-down?"

"My bed is not upside down. My bed is fine." Cormac paused, squinting contemplatively at the decorative dragon on top of the bedpost. "Of course, it's also Tevinter, and we got it in pieces. And none of the instructions were in Common. They were in Tevinter and bad Ander. Terrible Ander from the look on Anders's face." Cormac laughed. "I'm pretty sure I learned some new words that night, and none of them should be repeated in front of anyone's mother."

Slowly, as though all his joints creaked, Artie looked up at the bedpost Cormac had looked at, then back at the headboard. "The pieces... they don't make sense. The beams under here are bevelled on the wrong side. They're made to sit flush with the crossbeams, but they don't. Your bed is upside-down. Or part of it. And it is distracting and woeful. And distracting. Where is Anders? My stomach hates me, and it's your fault."

"Hey, I'm not the one who took a triple serving of boner casserole to start the meal," Cormac huffed, before calling out for Anders. "Sweet thing? Leave whatever's left for morning! My brother's eaten himself into a death wish."

"As long as he's not dying of ruptured internal organs, I think I'm going to be okay with it. He might not be. Especially if it's the same as the answer to too much lube." Cormac cackled, face darkening a bit, at the memory.

"It is!" Anders sounded all too cheerful.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Artie groaned to the side of the bed. "He sounds much too happy about it. That is never good."

Fenris appeared in the doorway, looking perfectly healthy and entirely too amused. "I admire your... enthusiasm, Amatus, but perhaps moderation would be better for next time?"

"Fuck you," Artie groaned, still hanging limply half off the bed.

"Yes, that did seem to be your plan." With a soft chuckle, he perched on the edge of the bed, rubbing
Artemis's back between his shoulder-blades. Another whine started in Artie's throat.

"It's a plan I still thoroughly support... after Anders solves that problem, and my very favourite brother has had a moment to recover from that solution." Rolling onto his side, Cormac pressed a kiss to the top of Artemis's head. "If it's any comfort, I survived this just fine, with no serious injury to anything other than my pride. Remember that time when you were mad at me, so you ate that whole basket of raspberries by yourself? No worse. Probably better, really. I mean, at least you'll come out of this feeling better. And, you know, I'm not going to sit here making fun of you for half a day while you pretend you're not having problems."

"Take a note, Fenris," Anders said from the doorway, his sleeves rolled up and tied, "my brother was exactly that kind of asshole. This is what you missed out on, growing up, and it's probably what your sister remembers about you."

"I hate you," Artie grumbled, presumably at Cormac though he was facing the other way. He turned his head slightly to address Anders. "Wanna do your thing, Sparklefingers?"

"I will certainly do my thing, but you're not going to want to be in the bed when I do it." Anders didn't move from the doorway. "Come on. Bathroom's this way."

Slowly, Artie put his body into motion again, dragging himself across the bed and somehow landing on his feet. "I was hoping it wasn't one of those solutions," he groaned. "Has anyone invented time travel magic yet? That would be better. Then I could just go back in time and stop myself from eating so much. Or at all."

"I promise the salad was perfectly benign," Anders said, stepping out of the doorway to let Artemis shuffle through it, following close behind to make sure he wasn't about to fall on anything.

Fenris watched in amusement, knowing Anders could take better care of his husband in this case than he could. He considered the other Hawke still sprawled across the bed. "You have no plans to throw up on anything, do you?" he asked.

"Absolutely none. I stopped eating at some point, unlike my unceasingly delightful brother. I'm not going to throw up or rupture any organs rolling over." Cormac laughed and half-sat, propping himself on an elbow. "Well, Ulla's going to be happy she got him to eat so much. She thinks he's too thin. I tried to convince her he actually does eat, but I don't know if she believed me until she saw him start packing in that casserole."

Fenris chuckled. "Orana feeds us far too well for that," he said. "The trouble isn't to get him to eat so much as to sit still, as you well know."
Chapter Summary

Artemis is feeling much better, and he's much more prepared to enact the lusty visions that encouraged him to indulge in foreign aphrodisiacs.

Minutes later, Artemis shuffled back into the room, looking pale and disgruntled, a still-cheerful Anders trailing behind him. "I am... that... Never again," Artie decided, crawling back onto the bed. "This is your fault," he assured Cormac even as he slumped against him. "I will never trust Ander cooking again."

"Rubbish," Cormac assured him. "You're having it for breakfast. You've been here for how many days, and you've been fine. Just stop... gorging yourself on it. I know it's good, but there is such a thing as too much."

Fenris snorted and pointed at Anders. "Yes. There absolutely is."

"I can't believe my mother taught you how to cook that. I'm still..." Anders covered his eyes and laughed. "And yes. I'm usually too much. I say that all the time, and it never seems to stop any of you from taking advantage of your favourite parts of me."

"My favourite part of you is all of you," Cormac argued, smiling smugly. "Have I been showing a favourite? I'm going to have to catch up on all the parts I've been slighting."

"Well, my elbows have been feeling neglected," Anders said, sitting at the foot of the bed. And he was doubly sure that this bed had been a good purchase on their part, confusing instructions aside, the way it handled the four of them easily. He stretched out his legs, nudging Artie's thigh with his toe. "You'll hate the world and your brother's cooking less in a minute. Give it a sec."

"Your bed is upside-down. I'll still hate the world." For all his whining, Artie was starting to sound more like himself. He snuggled closer to his brother, throwing an arm across his chest.

Anders threw a questioning look at Cormac. "How can it be upside-down? We're sitting on it, aren't we?"

"Maybe we're upside-down too," Fenris drawled.

"He says the beams are bevelled he wrong way, so we must've put them in backwards." Cormac shrugged and pulled Artie onto him, gently rubbing and kneading his back. "And Anders is right. Just give it a moment to settle, and you'll feel a lot less horrible."

Anders reached out and squeezed Artemis's bottom. "Feels pretty good to me. But, what about my elbows? They're feeling terribly neglected and lonely."

"Well, if you bring them closer, I'm sure I can find a way to express my wholehearted and genuine lust for them," Cormac replied from somewhere under Artie's shoulder.

"If the bed is assembled wrong," Fenris remarked, after a moment, with a concerned glance at the heavy dragon-topped post beside him, "should we be more concerned about the four of us potentially
engaging in ... enthusiastically lusty appreciation of elbows and other things on it? I know it hasn't fallen yet, but..."

"It's put together solidly enough," Anders said, hoping that was true. He shrugged one shoulder. "I can fix whatever we break. The bed or us."

Fenris hummed, still eyeing that post and weighing whether the risk was worth it. It wasn't a long deliberation.

Artie nuzzled lazily under Cormac's chin, nipping at the soft skin there. "I still keep expecting there to be a beard here." He rubbed his cheek against the smooth skin. "It is distracting."

Fenris and Anders exchanged wry looks. "He must be feeling better," Fenris said. "He has stopped complaining about the food."

"I'm allowed to discuss other things between complaints. Excuse you." Even as he spoke. Artie reached out a hand behind him for Fenris to join them.

"Can I complain that you haven't given us a clue what you'd like, tonight, since you started stuffing your face with boner casserole? That's something to discuss. A nice long chat about what you want where," Cormac suggested, trying to keep Artie's mind off of the bed and anything else in the room that might not be ideally aligned.

"As long as you leave Howe out of it, I think we're good," Anders joked, holding up a hand until he saw Fenris's eyes light on it, before running a finger down the bottom of the elf's foot.

"I wouldn't mind a bit of Howe, you lucky git," Cormac scoffed, leaning to the side to pinch Anders's thigh, his other hand still rubbing weak healing between Artie's hips.

Artie hummed, the healing a warm glow at the base of his spine. Cormac's healing wasn't as strong or as focused as Anders's, but there was still something comforting in it in a way that made him think of the word 'home'.

"It's sweet that you always ask what I want," Artemis murmured before sucking at the corner of Cormac's jaw. "But, what would I like? I would like for us all to enjoy this large if upside-down bed in as many fun and interesting configurations as we can before passing out in a sweaty heap. Does that sound reasonable?" He sat up on his elbows to take some of his weight off of Cormac. Now that his stomach wasn't trying to murder him, Artie was warming back up to his original intentions.

"I think that's the most reasonable thing I've heard all day, but my day also included cooking with fifteen eggs, and I think at least nine of them went into you. Are you sure there's room for anything else?" Cormac laughed and turned his head, pressing a kiss behind Artie's ear.

"My day included fake elves with giant ears pasted on. This sounds much better." Anders sprawled sideways across Artie and Cormac's legs, to rub his cheek on Fenris's knee. "Especially the part where the elf is real."

"I am the least elfy elf in all of Thedas," Fenris protested.

"Yeah, but those are actually your ears, and you don't have stubble," Anders teased. "And, you know, you're much more enjoyable than anyone in town -- not that I've tried anyone in town, but I really doubt they're all that into fun things you can do with magic."

"You are, at the very least, the elfiest person in the room," Artie pointed out to a snort of amusement from Fenris. "And that's including Ass-face over here."
"Who happens to be the dwarfiest person in the room," Fenris replied. He dropped a hand to Anders's head, lightly kneading his scalp and curling his fingers in his hair. "Was that you hoping to avail yourself of my dubiously elfy charms?" he asked Anders, eyeing the long line of his throat.

Anders responded by walking a pair of sparking fingers up Fenris's thigh, smirking when he felt the elf shiver. "You say as though you're not already thinking of my magey charms," he countered. "Which you should. They're pretty great, or so I'm told."

"They are," Artie agreed, reaching behind him to squeeze what he could of Anders. It was a bit hard to tell under the mass of fabric, but that felt like a globe of an ass.

"See that? My magey charms are already being fondled, even if nobody's groping my sad and lonely elbows, yet." Anders chuckled and squirmed, shrugging out of his robes and depositing them on the floor beside the bed -- the side Artie wasn't facing.

"I told you I'd lustily appreciate your elbows if you brought them where I could reach, but I have this sexy, young god on top of me, and it's going to take an awful lot to move me." Cormac nibbled at Artie's neck. "My beloved Lord Hawke, whose lips taste of lemon sweet, or whatever the fuck I wrote in that letter... I can't remember it, but I'm pretty sure it was true."

"It was practically Orlesian," Anders protested, hands wandering up under the bottom of Fenris's robes, healing and soothing the lines of lyrium he touched. He'd be subtle about this, since the point seemed to be not to worry Artie too much. At least the salve seemed to be working. It wasn't right, but it was a lot less bad, than when Fenris had first arrived.

"'Sexy, young god', hm?" Artie repeated in a purr. He closed his eyes at the feel of lips and teeth on his neck. "I could get used to that title."

He ground down against Cormac's hip and decided suddenly that there was still far too much cloth in the way. After a short but bruising kiss, Artie sat up on his knees long enough to pull his robes up over his head, pausing to fold them and twisting to set them neatly on the ground. He tried not think about the fact that this was a dirt house with an upside-down bed and instead pulled at Cormac's robes. His brother's skin was the perfect distraction.

"You know, Anders," Artemis said, looking coyly over his shoulder. "If you want to bring your neglected elbows over here, you could avail yourself of our Hawkish charms while Fenris avails himself of your magey charms."

"Fenris might have a little difficulty availing himself of my anything, if you two don't move a little more toward the edge of the bed," Anders pointed out. "Or roll to the side, maybe."

"You are much too tall. It is completely unreasonable," Fenris agreed, giving Anders a thankful look, as his skin stopped itching.

Cormac rolled to the side, taking Artemis with him. "Needed to do that anyway, unless my darling brother expects me to preserve my modesty, while I submit to his utterly enchanting whims. ... You don't, do you? I mean, I am supposed to take this off, right?" He tugged at his own robes.

"Of course you are," Artemis chuckled. "My whims are generally best appreciated nude." Now that the fabric wasn't pinned under their combined weight, Artie helped Cormac pull his robes up over his head, stealing a kiss right after and sucking at his bottom lip. He only pulled away so he could fold Cormac's robes too.

When he looked over, Fenris had already pulled off his own robes and was folding them
accordingly. He sent his husband a wry look. "There," he said as he tossed the folded cloth to the floor. "Now we are all suitably nude and lacking in modesty."

"The young, sexy god is appeased," Artemis joked.

"Has the sexy young god prepared to be worshipped at length and with length?" Cormac quipped, pulling Artemis close enough to conceal enough of himself from Fenris, not out of any sense of modesty, but because he knew Fenris didn't much like looking at him, and they were none of them quite drunk enough to be doing this with all of them together.

Fenris did, however, like looking at Artemis, and the view was quite inspiring. He'd never tire of the shape of his husband's lean, long limbs and firm bottom.

Anders followed Fenris's gaze. "You know, they really have both got the same ass."

"They do not. Your bear is unspeakably furry." Fenris shivered at the thought. "The very thought of the texture is even more unappealing than the sight."

"And yet, you like mine just fine," Anders pointed out.

"Have you touched your ass, recently? Your ass is--" Fenris choked on the next word. "-- not that. It's also the limit of my tolerance. I am not interested in magical bears. Or bears at all. And that beard is horrible."

"Nobody likes the beard," Anders sighed. "I don't even like the beard."

"The beard is ridiculous, but I'm getting used to it," Cormac admitted, tugging at Artie's hair and nibbling under his chin. "Just like I'm getting used to worshipping the most beautiful and orderly god ever brought forth in Thedas in any way he so desires."

"Are you only just now getting used to it?" Artie asked. "And here I thought you were an expert on the subject. Or are you simply out of practice? I suppose that's a simple enough fix." He bent forward against the tug on his hair to purr in Cormac's ear. "What if your god wants to please his high priest? What would you say to that?" He held himself up over Cormac on one arm, his free hand mapping out all the skin he could reach.

Cormac managed a wordless sound of pleasure, before he started making sense. "Please, please, please. What did I ever do to deserve this, so I can do it ten more times?" Smiling at Artie in absolute awe, he ran a hand along one long leg.

"He never looks at me like that," Anders muttered to Fenris.

Artie gave Cormac's skin a teasing bite where his neck met his shoulder. "What did you do to deserve this?" he repeated. "Well, it's not a reward for putting the bed together wrong. I'll tell you that much." He teased, but his eyes were soft as he brushed back Cormac's hair. "And I can hear you two muttering over there," he added, glancing at Anders and Fenris over his shoulder.

"Just admiring the view, Amatus," Fenris said with a pointed look at the ass he had been admiring earlier. Anders hummed in agreement, one hand still moving along Fenris's leg, tracing lyrium lines with sparks of magic.

"You know what I want," Cormac purred, nuzzling his brother's cheek. "And I promise you, tomorrow, we can take another look at the bed, after breakfast, and try putting it together differently." He didn't say 'correctly', as even if it was wrong now, there was no reason to curse the later attempts with that expectation.

"He means sometime around mid-afternoon," Anders teased, shifting to keep his head lower than Fenris's.

"You get out of bed at obscene hours, like you always have!" Cormac shot back, before returning his attention to Artemis, kneading that firm bottom as Fenris admired it. "But, you... I want you inside me. I want to feel you writhing against me, as Anders has his way with you. I want you to tell me all about how it feels with both of us..."

And that was an image Artie liked, between Cormac and Anders while Fenris set the pace. "I can do that," he said. He shifted, rearranging their tangle of limbs until he had Cormac's legs bracketing his hips. "I can definitely do that." He ran his hands down Cormac's thighs, kneading the muscles he found there, their shapes slightly different, slightly softer than what he'd been used to back in Kirkwall. "A bit like the old days in the cellar, if in a slightly different configuration." He reached between them to squeeze Cormac's knob even as he turned his head to address the other two. "Is that amenable to everyone?"

Fenris exchanged a look with Anders. "I think it is a good thing you got such a large bed."

"We planned ahead," Anders said.

"I specifically said I wanted one big enough for all of us and any cats that might wander in, and this was the biggest one we could find." Cormac's hips rolled, pressing him against Artie's palm.

"You just like everything unreasonably large, don't you?" Fenris huffed, moving aside to make room for Anders between himself and Artemis. He would miss the view, but there was no way they could swap places, speaking of unreasonably large things.
"Not everything," Cormac laughed, grease leaping to his fingers as he wound an arm around the complication of his and his brother's legs, to get Artie ready for Anders. "The two of you can take your time with each other. He'll let you know when we're ready."

Anders shrugged. "I'm always ready. I haven't been unready in years."

"Because you're a slut," Fenris teased.

"More usually a whore, but what's wrong with that?" Justice flared up with reminders of all the things that had been wrong with that, but every one of them was circumstantial and most of them were templars. "I get what I want; somebody else gets what they want; we both leave content."

"It wasn't exactly a complaint," Fenris replied. "Simply a statement of fact." He caught the blue glimmer behind Anders's eyes. Lighting the tattoos of one hand, Fenris brushed Fade-blue fingers along Anders's arm, watching Justice react almost immediately, blue lines branching out from where Fenris touched.

"Good." His eyes were blue, but the voice and the smirk were still Anders. "I like to hope I haven't given you any reason to complain about that. At least, you didn't seem to have complaints at the time." In the back of his mind, Justice was reminding Anders just how very nice the lyrium elf was to lick.

Artemis arched back against Cormac's fingers, his own hand occupied with Cormac's knob, kneading and stroking his velvet flesh into hardness. "I always love how your fingers feel," he said, voice low against Cormac's ear.

"Do you? Is it so different to the way your elven harem touch you?" Cormac pressed two fingers in, slowly, just feeling Artie's body react to him. Somewhere in the back of his mind their dad's urn was smouldering. Cormac was sure this wasn't what 'take care of your brother' had meant, but, it was what Artie wanted it to mean, and that was good enough for him. Didn't stop him being plagued by dreadful doubt, at times.

Anders licked his way down Fenris's arm, tasting the lyrium just under the skin -- and tasting something else, as well, something less pleasant. Justice shoved forward, grabbing at the magic within them, intent on healing whatever that deeper sickness was. Anders thought it might be an infection from how ragged Fenris's skin had been around the lines. The blue glow filled the room, swelling brightly, until Fenris cleared his throat.

"Yes, the lyrium," he drawled, "but could you avoid blinding us all with your excitement?"

"I wasn't going to say it, but yeah. Turn it down a bit -- we have the windows open, and they can probably see you in town," Cormac agreed, fingers stroking Artie's soft insides. "This what you like? Your big brother getting you ready for the nearly infinite Warden, over there?"

Artemis hummed, rocking back against those fingers. "The nearly infinite and glowy Warden," he added.

The glowing was a not-so-subtle reminder that that was as much Justice as Anders, which was a sobering thought. Artie supposed Justice had been present all the times he'd slept with Anders, but he'd never been so close under the surface. Not that Artie minded really, not with Cormac's fingers inside him and Cormac's knob hot in his hand.
The glowing subsided, but between Fenris and Justice the room stayed awash in a soft blue light. Anders continued mapping those lyrium lines with his tongue, focusing his attention on the filigreed lyrium branching up Fenris's chest. He kept up a steady trickle of healing as he moved, and Fenris let out a sigh that was as much relief as pleasure, his fingers carding through Anders's hair.

"Do you plan to lick every inch of me?" Fenris asked, voice a little breathy. "Which isn't to say I would mind if you did."

"Maybe not every inch," Anders said, looking up at Fenris from the vicinity of his stomach. "But there are a few inches I plan to pay an extra amount of attention to."

Fenris hoped they were the same inches he was thinking of. A moment later, he discovered that they were.

"More," Artie panted, squeezing Cormac's knob just this side of too hard, teasing a thumbnail along the head.

Cormac nuzzled up under Artie's chin, nipping at the skin there, as he teased with a third finger. "Never enough for you, is there? Good thing there's three of us, then. You know that's how this is going to go, don't you? Anders is going to have his way with you and Fenris and I will catch up, eventually. One and then the other, back and forth. I want to hear you begging for us, knowing anything you ask, one of us will do. I will worship you, we will give you all the pleasure you could want, and in the morning, you'll wake up in my arms. I've missed you."

Behind them, Anders continued to demonstrate the talents of his tongue on the lyrium that decorated Fenris's knob, an electrical air occupying the rest of the space in his mouth. It tasted of the Fade and the storms that used to hang over the lake. Justice -- fairly obviously Justice, from the sound -- moaned his pleasure at the taste against their tongue. Anders still didn't quite manage on his own, but he'd stopped making sure Justice remained silent, as well. A little victory.

The sounds had surprised Fenris at first, but he found he liked the way they felt against and around his skin. He kept his grip in Anders's hair loose so he could pull free if he needed to, remembering that this wasn't Artemis. Fenris knew Anders was much less fond of choking, and Fenris couldn't blame him.

The electricity tingled under his skin, made his toes curl where he dug them into the sheets. Anders certainly knew how to use his tongue and his magic, and it was enough to make Fenris regret the years they'd spent bickering instead of doing this.

Artemis bent in for another kiss, letting Cormac swallow the small, needy sounds starting at the back of his throat. "I want you," he panted, his hand sliding from Cormac's knob to knead at his ass instead.

And that was what Cormac needed to hear, every time. That was what made this something he could do. "Do you?" he teased, sliding his fingers out with half a smile. "Me? Your very own older brother, who will give you anything you want?" He wrapped his hand around Artemis's knob, casting another grease spell. He could do without, but he didn't want Artie getting hurt -- they'd done that once, and it was better not to do it again.

Pulling his knees up higher, Cormac tucked Artie's knob under him, gently stroking and squeezing. "Take me," he breathed, looking into his brother's eyes. "I'm yours."
Fenris kept his eyes on Anders, watching those little lines at the corners of his eyes. Anders looked content, even with the hint of Justice's glow creeping and flickering across his skin, but content wasn't good enough for Fenris, this time. He'd seen Anders take pleasure in things that weren't too disgusting to even suggest in front of Artemis, and something in him had shifted, at that. Suddenly, good enough didn't seem like enough, any more. No objections seemed like the absolute minimum to be tolerated, and however much Justice seemed to enjoy licking him -- and he still wasn't over how strange that really was -- Anders only really put a stop to things that might actually be dangerous. He nearly never asked for anything -- not from Fenris.


Anders made a noise and pointed, the obvious interpretation being 'don't ask me things when my mouth is full'.

Fenris huffed. Obstinate even with a knob in his mouth. Especially with a knob in his mouth. Justice made one of those sounds again, the kind of sound Fenris could feel at the base of his spine, and it was almost enough to distract him from the way that accursed beard tickled. Fenris tugged at Anders's hair, and Anders followed the tug, letting Fenris's knob leave his mouth with a wet sound.

"I asked a question," Fenris said, watching when Anders licked his lips. "Tell me what you want." After a moment, he added a "please" to make it sound less like an order.

"What do I want?" said Anders. "I thought I had made that clear. My elbows are still feeling terribly neglected."

Artemis breathed a laugh against Cormac's lips and glanced back to address the glowy idiots. "You're the only one who can reach his elbows like this, Fen. It's up to you." He turned his attention back to his brother. "Now. Where were we? Here?" He pressed in slowly, agonisingly slowly, savouring that moment when he had Cormac wrapped around him.

Cormac was beyond words, for the moment, but the sounds from his mouth made his opinion clear. "Please," he groaned, trying to pull Artemis closer. "More... I want more of you. I want all of you."

And that was something Anders was completely accustomed to hearing from Cormac, and his knob twitched in response, as if the words had been directed at him. Still, he lifted an elbow and offered it to Fenris with a piteous look.

Fenris huffed a sigh and shot Anders one last confused look, before reaching out to take the elbow in his hands, caressing it as he would some more caressable body part. He stroked fingertips down the inner bend, where Anders's veins lingered close to the skin, and Justice's glow darted alongside them. Carefully, he lit the fingers of that hand, touching just below the skin, feeling the lines of muscle and the way Anders's skin still sat so close. Unlike Cormac, Anders didn't seem to have changed size at all, aside from his shoulders perhaps getting wider, still. It struck Fenris, then, that the healer might not age, like the rest of them did. But, then, it was hardly as though he, himself, had gotten any thicker. Artemis, if anything, seemed to have gotten thinner -- more densely muscular. But, Anders seemed unchanged.

Aside from the part where he was now curling his fingers in the bedsheet and breathing more quickly. "I did not expect that to be quite so ... effective," Anders admitted.

Fenris hadn't either, but he smiled and said, "You shouldn't underestimate my talents," as though it
had been part of his plan all along.
The pair of nightlights bring that glow to the ... festivities.

Fenris was fast turning Justice into a puddle of goo, which was always an odd sensation to Anders as the other occupant of their body. The sensations were pleasurable on their own, sure, but much of the sensation of lyrium and the Fade echoed back to him from his other half.

"You want to know what I want?" Anders said as Fenris continued his exploration. "That. More of that."

"More elbow-fondling?" Fenris teased. "They truly must have been neglected."

Their words drifted over and past Artemis, who was focused on the more important task of burying himself inside his brother. His hands were tight on Cormac's hips, and he almost relaxed his grip in apology before he remembered whom he was with. "Is this what you want?" he asked, rocking forward into Cormac. "All of me inside you?" He'd never be able to fill Cormac the way Anders did, but damn if he didn't try anyway.

"Yes, yes, please!" Cormac clutched at Artemis, always careful not to squeeze too hard, his eyes wide and adoring, as Artemis moved inside him.

"Is this a Hawke thing?" Fenris asked Anders, without looking at the tangled brothers. "The pleading to be used and misused?"

Anders stared blankly at him until the words made sense. And then he turned his head to watch -- both the Hawkes were gorgeous, like this, each in different ways. "Huh. You might be right. I never thought about it."

Fenris shook his head and traced a finger along one nerve in particular, the Fade-glow cushioning the contact, and Anders suddenly relaxed, back just stiff enough to hold him up.

"Is this too much?" Fenris asked, suddenly mildly concerned, but Anders reached out with the other hand, after a moment, and patted his knee, reassuringly.

"Cormac," Artie sighed, burying his face against Cormac's neck and panting against his skin. "Cormac." He worried a bit of skin between his teeth, hips moving at a pace that wasn't quite fast enough to do more than tease. "So, what do you think, brother-dear?" He trailed his lips and teeth up Cormac's neck to nip at his earlobe and to speak in his ear. "Shall we invite the other two to our Hawke party? Am I ready for the -- what did you call him -- the 'infinite Warden'?"

Artemis flashed a grin at Anders, catching the relaxed, almost blissful look on his face as Fenris touched him. He wondered if he made the same face when Fenris did that to him.

"Mmm, whatever you'd like, dear brother," Cormac purred, twisting to look at Anders. "Would the pair of nightlights like to bring that glow to the party? I'm sure there are some holes that could still be filled..."
"I'd be happy to fill your loud mouth, if it didn't mean touching you," Fenris drawled, sliding his fingers out of Anders's skin, and gesturing for the healer to precede him.

Anders took a bit to breathe, watching the brothers move together, the way they were completely absorbed in one another until Cormac's eyes lit on him with a wicked smile.

"You going to come play, pretty thing?" Cormac asked, gasping as Artemis bit him more firmly.

"Only if you promise not to do any freaky glowing shit that's going to make me fuck right through you," Anders teased, reminding Cormac of the last time the four of them had shared a bed.

"Wouldn't matter," Cormac reminded Anders. "I'm not the one in the middle, this time."

"I promise not to glow, if that makes you feel better," Artemis said, turning a grin on Anders. He gestured him closer with the curl of a finger.

"I wouldn't find that reassuring even if you could glow," Anders drawled as he shuffled closer to the brothers, kneeling behind Artemis and smoothing a hand down his back. Anders could feel the bunch and slide of Artie's muscles as he rocked into Cormac, and he was almost sorry to feel that movement still when his hand slid down to grasp a firm buttock.

"It's been a while since we've done things quite like this," Anders said, "or... as close to this as we've come. Are you sure you're ready, Artie?" He would probably get kicked for the question, but he felt obligated to check. Doubly so, since Fenris was watching them.

"Cormac was very thorough," Artie assured him, reaching behind himself to touch what he could reach of Anders, his hand landing, ironically, on Anders's elbow. "Now come on."

"On?" Anders quipped, easing himself into position. "Now that's no fun. I thought we were going for in!"

"That was terrible, and I'm going to throw date pits at you for it later," Cormac groaned, burying his face against Artie's cheek.

"Worth it," Anders decided, pressing slowly in. He held himself up on one arm and smoothed Artemis's hair back from his face, with the other. "You still all right? I know it's been a while. Tell me if it's too much."

Artemis focused on his breathing, the combined scents of Cormac and Anders familiar and comforting. He'd forgotten how Anders had felt that first time, the pressure and the sheer weight of him inside, but the sound that escaped Artie wasn't one of pain. "I'm fine. Keep going."

"Maker, all my years in that tower and out of it, and it turns out that all I needed was a nobleman with a strong Fereldan upbringing." Anders chuckled breathily as he pushed in deeper, distressingly slowly. He'd almost said 'a Hawke', but that didn't account for Howe. But, then, nothing really accounted for Howe...

Fenris watched from just behind the pile of writhing bodies. From there, he could really only see the edge of Artemis's hip and Cormac's thigh flexing below it -- everything else was Anders. Not that Anders was a bad view, but from the back, he was still nearly all scars. Fenris watched the lines ripple, dull old wounds sliding over the hard muscle underneath. A reminder that he wasn't the only former slave in the room. A reminder that Anders remembered everything. He traced some of the older lines with one finger, keeping his hands outside Anders's skin, for now.

Artemis clung to Cormac, his face pressed to the bend where neck met shoulder, teeth worrying at
Cormac's skin to distract from the pressure. Anders watched the lines of his back as Fenris traced his, and Anders watched for any bit of tension, his hand smoothing healing into Artie's skin just in case.

"Anders," Artie breathed. His voice was shaky but not with pain, and he didn't tell Anders to stop. He reached behind him again, this time grabbing Anders's hip, nudging him forward when Anders paused.

Fenris decided it was probably for the best that he couldn't see much from this angle. He'd seen Anders's knob and felt Artemis's inside and still had no idea how they managed to fit.

"Tell me, beloved, is this what you wanted?" Cormac purred, wringing Artemis's knob inside him. He struggled not to howl, pressed close to Artie's ear, and a constant stream of gasps and choked groans punctuated his words. "Is this as good as you hoped it would be, when you were watching -- ah! -- when you were watching Gantry tear me apart? Did you think, then, of fucking me open? Of how I'd feel inside? Or was it just how I'd look bleeding and screaming for you? You can make me scream. Just... not while you've got your cheek on my lips."

Anders stifled a laugh against the top of Artemis's head. "Yeah, don't let him scream in your ear," he panted, grinding in hard and slow. "Tell us what you want, Artie." He looked over his shoulder. "And you, Fenris. I'm pretty good at guessing, with you, but we can do better if we know what you want right now. It's not like I'm going to say no. Well, unless it's really stupid."

Artemis chuckled breathlessly. "I'm usually the one who comes up with the stupid ideas," he said. He gave Cormac's shoulder another bite before twisting to kiss Anders's fluffy chin. He remembered at the last moment not to go for his lips.

"He's not wrong," Fenris drawled, "though I can't say I usually mind the consequences." He just watched them for a moment. Or rather, he watched Anders and the way Artie's toes curled in the sheets. He couldn't see his husband, but he could hear him, those tiny choked-off sounds that went straight to Fenris's knob.

Fenris inched closer, his full hand replacing the finger on Anders's scars as he traced them steadily lower. Anders had asked him what he wanted, and Fenris wasn't sure if it was feasible, but he supposed they had tried odder things. "May I?" he asked, unsure how he wanted to finish that sentence.

Anders tipped his hips back, sliding out of Artie just a bit, as he pushed back against Fenris's hand. "Probably. Just tell me if you're going to start groping my organs or something. I don't want Justice getting... He gets... we get... You love your husband; don't surprise me."

"I am increasingly glad you're a healer," Fenris muttered wryly, hands caressing the absurdly smooth skin of Anders's bottom. He decided, after a moment, that he didn't want to think too much about the texture of that mottled pale skin or the fact that it bore no relation to most of the skin above or below it. He'd known others in Danarius's service...

But, he pushed that thought aside and held out a hand to Anders. "Grease?"

"It's me, Fenris," Anders replied, rocking his hips teasingly. "You know I've already taken care of it."

Sometimes, Fenris had to admit, magic was a marvellous thing. He knelt behind Anders, trying to find space amid the tangle of limbs. "I was not planning on groping your organs just now," Fenris teased, "but if you would like me to, later, I will consider it." A flicker of blue chased over Anders's skin, and Fenris wondered if he should be careful about teasing him, at least in their current
"I will remember that," Anders replied, glancing at Fenris over his shoulder. "I trust you have other designs on my ass in the interim, then? I wonder what they could be." He grinned as Fenris rolled his eyes.
Are there four people in this bed or five? Depends on how you count them, but all of them are pleased.

Surprise! Yeah, we're supposed to be in for Assing It Up, tonight, but I'm trying to level out the time difference between these, so you get an extra chapter, here, and possibly another extra on Monday, until we're no longer so far behind, here.

Fenris laid a hand on Anders's hip, and Anders stilled, drawing an unhappy sound from Artemis, who tried to see what was going on over his shoulder.

Cormac rocked his hips as best he could, in the awkward, sideways position they were in. He couldn't offer what Anders could, but he could keep things from getting too slow. "We'll try another position later. Or tomorrow. Something where you can watch them," he promised.

As much as Fenris knew about how to please Artemis, that really was what he knew, and as he'd learnt so many times, Anders was not the same. Still, some things would be the same, he remembered, sliding a finger into the slickness of Anders's hole. He remembered their first time, on that awful leather sofa, when he'd just shoved in and Anders had taken it, but looking back, that hadn't been his best moment. Slowly, he worked Anders open, feeling the clench around his fingers and the tiny motions as Anders rode them, still buried deep inside Artemis.

For a moment, Fenris wondered what would happen if he made his fingers glow, only to decide that that would not end well. No surprises, Anders had warned, "Ready?" though he suspected by the shift in Anders's breathing that he was.

Anders nodded, still circling his hips, and slowly Fenris withdrew his fingers, the sheets bunching as he laid down behind the mages. His thumb rubbed circles into Anders's hipbone as he slid in, nudging Anders into Artemis and Artemis into Cormac. Anders still didn't make a sound, but a shaky breath spilled from his lips, telling Fenris he was doing something right.

"I wonder what a sight we'd make, the four of us," Artie said to Cormac.

Fenris paused to breathe, his forehead pressed to Anders's shoulder. He reached past Anders's hip to pinch Artie's ass. "We'd look like a tangle of legs," he said. "Gorgeous legs, mind you. At least for the most part."

"There should be a statue of this. We have transcended the inordinate number of limbs for our own pleasure," Cormac muttered, from somewhere under an awful lot of other people's hair. "Artie? Can you let go a bit? I need to lean back. I can't breathe under your face and Anders's."
Anders cackled and tossed his hair back, easily missing Fenris and spreading his hair across the bed behind him. "This is why these things are never cuddly, when you get up to this many people."

"I would hardly characterise this as 'cuddly'," Fenris retorted, hips jerking forward as Anders flexed, kneading the base of his knob.

Finally untangling himself a bit, Cormac leaned back and wiped the sweat out of his eye. "There. Now I can look at you." He brushed Artie's hair back, with his sweaty hand. "I know I've been saying it forever, but you really are beautiful."

"You're welcome to keep on saying it forever," Artemis said. "I don't mind the reminder." He turned his head to press a kiss to Cormac's hand, choosing to ignore its sweatiness for the moment. He smiled at his brother, slow and lazy, eyes lidding with pleasure as he rocked between Cormac and Anders. He ran his nails down Cormac's thigh before wrapping his hand around his knob. "Does this mean you'll scream for me, now?"

"Squeeze harder, and they'll hear me in Hossberg," Cormac promised, thrusting into Artemis's hand.

Artie grinned, tightening his grip and watching Cormac's face. A sharp thrust from Anders startled a gasp out of him, and Anders smoothed a hand down his side in apology.

"And yet, we're not allowed to glow," Fenris said, sighing as though this were some great injustice. He reached past Anders to grab Artemis's hip, pulling him back in time to his thrusts and wringing another shaky breath from Anders.

"Anyone within shouting distance is used to it by now," Anders replied. "Glowing distance is another matter."


Ragged and desperate sounds built up into a raw howl as he rutted into his brother's fist, flesh scraping along those stubby nails. He doubted Artie would draw blood -- that would be messy -- but as long as that sharp bite remained, he'd be happy. Even without it, he'd be happy, if he was honest with himself, but it definitely improved the situation.

Fenris pressed his face against Anders's shoulder, feeling that long, hard body writhe against him. He considered rattling off whatever he could think of, in Tevene, before he remembered Anders actually spoke Tevene ... Well, more ancient Tevene than conversational Tevene, but it wouldn't be as easy as it was with Artemis. And even if Artemis loved it, Anders laughing would skew the mood. He supposed he could try a few things that were actually dirty, but he still wasn't entirely comfortable with the aggressiveness of talking dirty in Tevene -- especially to Anders. Artemis, again, loved that sort of thing.

Fenris kept his words to himself, for the moment, aside from the occasional grunted "fuck" against Anders's shoulder. He half expected Anders to fill the space with his own smart words, but Anders was still eerily silent. Justice, at least, had made sound for him before, and Fenris decided he wanted to wring more of those sounds out of Anders's body later.

For now, Fenris took his cues from the shaky breaths he wrung from Anders, every time he pushed in at just that angle. Past him, Artemis was louder, his voice choked off and desperate as Fenris pulled him back into Anders and forward into Cormac. Fenris couldn't quite hear what he was
saying, but it sounded like a combination of all of their names.

Anders tried to be gentle. It wasn’t Cormac he was buried inside of, and that meant he couldn’t just pound in until he was satisfied. He’d been spoiled, he realised, thinking back. The hand he wasn’t leaning on slipped between the brothers, sliding over Artemis’s chest, rolling one nipple between his knuckles. There was nothing he could say, but his hand spoke to his enjoyment, to his desires.

On the other side of Artemis, Cormac shrieked and wailed, shuddering against his brother’s warm body. The few words he could manage were all praise and pleas for more, as he thrust into that merciless fist, out of time to Artemis’s own thrusts into him. "Please, yes, this -- Love you, my lord, my god -- Oh! Perfect..."

Artemis watched his brother’s face and felt him shudder, keeping his grip tight on Cormac's knob. He snaked his other hand under him, reaching up to cup Cormac's cheek before snaring in his hair as he pulled Cormac to him in a sloppy, teeth-knocking kiss.

"Are you going to come for us, big brother?" Artie said, hips shivering as he continued to thrust into him. Cormac's screams always went straight to his knob, and with Anders thrusting into him like that, he wasn't going to last long himself.

Fenris tried not to listen. This was what his husband wanted, and everyone was willing, but it still bothered him like it always had. Not in any way that meant he'd put a stop to it. Not when he'd seen how much Artemis enjoyed it. It was harmless, really. Just... kind of disgusting. He pushed memories of his own sister out of his head and focused on Anders. Anders, who was, frankly, a lot more disgusting, in the end, but again, harmless and pleasurable.

A sharp gasp was the only warning anyone else had, before Anders suddenly fell loose, his hips amplifying every one of Fenris’s thrusts, driving him into Artemis again and again as he spilled. The first was always easy, and with three gorgeous men wrapped around him and each other, it was even easier.

A low groan spilled out of Artemis, and he turned a lazy grin over his shoulder in Anders's direction. "Having fun?" he asked.

Anders couldn't find his words at first or any of his extremities. "I have no complaints," he said when he remembered how to speak.

Artie's lazy smile turned into gasp at a particularly sharp thrust from Anders -- Fenris, really. And that was a thought that he liked, Fenris fucking him through Anders. Anders started to apologise, but Artie shook his head. "It's good," he said, unable to manage anything else. He wanted to hold on a little longer, but it was all too much. He started to shake, voice filling the room and magic prickling just under his skin.

A part of Fenris still expected the room to shake, and he braced himself accordingly. What he wasn't expecting was the jolt that shot through Anders into him, making his teeth clack shut, or the smell of ozone that suddenly hung in the air.

The electricity crept along Cormac's scalp, followed almost immediately by the same jolt that struck Fenris. A ball of lightning, he thought, as his back arched and he spurted against Artemis's fingers
and chest. The room smelled like a storm, and he wasn't sure if that was just post-orgasmic weirdness, on his part.

Anders's hands clenched, gripping Artie's hip brutally tight. Actually, his entire body tightened and released in the space of a breath, the un-plaited parts of his beard tugging gently toward Artemis's hair. "What--?" he asked, as he felt Fenris relax against his back.

"Ow," Cormac breathed, as his chest hair sparked against itself and Artemis. "I just... I don't know how I feel about that."

"This is why mages are dangerous," Fenris muttered from behind Anders. "I liked the earthquakes..."

"Sorry," said Artemis, dazed. He blinked at his brother, the sparks behind his eyes finally dissipating. His hand was still bruisingly tight on Cormac's knob, and it finally occurred to him to loosen his grip, giving Cormac's knob a last few lazy strokes before letting go. "I was just... thinking... 'no mage-floors' and tried to push my magic in the opposite direction. I'm not sure if that was the opposite of mage-floors, but at least it wasn't mage-floors."

He trailed off and tried to smooth down his staticy hair with his clean hand. Then he noticed the state of Cormac's hair and bit the inside of his cheek.

"I'm with Fenris on this," Anders said. "I liked the earthquakes. We specifically made this place earthquake-proof, you know, if that's a concern."

"That... is actually good to know, yes," Artie said, his cheeks heating.

"Mindblowing," Cormac finally decided, recovering the scattered bits of his thoughts. "But, I'm going to vote for not repeating that one. You could actually kill someone with that. Probably not Anders, though."

Anders looked contemplative. "Justice agrees. Probably not. I'd still rather not test that too much." He nuzzled the top of Artemis's head. "I love the sparks, but not uncontrolled ball lightning in bed."

After a moment of uncomfortable chuckling, Fenris thrust forward again. "Don't tell me you're done so soon, Warden."

"I would never tell you any such thing," Anders replied, not looking back as he squeezed Fenris inside him. "I'm just watching the light show every time Cormac breathes."

Artemis squeaked when Anders moved inside him again, his body still loose and wrung out, the afterglow a bit tarnished after the lightning show. That was precisely the sort of dangerous magic he wanted to avoid. He reached for Cormac, only to get a shock for the effort. "Ow."

Anders chuckled in his ear, holding Artie by the hip as he ground back into Fenris. Anders's hair not tied back clung to his face, and he tried to blow it out of the way.

"Mages," Fenris sighed, settling back into the rhythm he'd set before. The faint prickles of static were almost pleasant where they touched his tattoos.

"You still interested?" Anders purred against Artemis's ear. "Or is this the part where I throw your brother down and you watch me ravish him?"
"If it's that part, I'm going to strongly suggest getting me a wet towel first." Cormac made the mistake of raising a hand to his own hair, setting off a shower of little blue sparks.

"Can it be the part where I touch your ... spirit with the Fade?" Fenris asked, fingers toying with the edges of some faded scars. The big one, still pink, sat right in front of his face, and this close, he could see how that had gone -- the runny, pocked streaks below giving away that this was much more than just a stab wound. "It seems that in addition to ignoring your elbows, we have been ignoring Justice."

"Justice's elbows must feel extra slighted," Artie teased, voice breathy as Fenris ground Anders into him, the short thrusts sending little sparks up his spine. It was tempting to stay there and let Anders ravish him again, but Artie still wasn't sure how he felt about Justice fucking him, not that he'd say no if Justice asked. Instead, Artie eyed his brother, cautiously smoothing a hand up Cormac's leg, only getting the one shock for the effort. "And I'm always interested, Anders, but I don't want to be selfish. Want to switch, brother-dear? I'll get you that wet towel, assuming my legs still work."

"Selfish? Not possible." Cormac leaned in, setting off a shower of sharp sparks as he kissed Artemis long and hard. "I wouldn't dream of depriving you of this. I get him all the time. We only get you for a few weeks." Something was definitely off, but he had no reason to doubt what Artie was saying. In fact, a concern about hogging all the knobs was just like his brother.

Artemis winced at another shock and pulled back from his brother's static onslaught. "That's sweet of you, brother-dear," he said, cupping Cormac's chin. "But I'm not the only figure in this equation, and... well, I think we all know Justice prefers the glowy ones."

Anders huffed. "Justice agrees. I was enjoying you, but he wants to get our hands on all the Fade he can touch, and I don't exactly object to Cormac. Not that he minds you, of course. At least not any more than he generally minds the idea of us getting laid, when he could be out fighting the depraved injustices of the culture I grew up in. And yes, we are going to have it out with the Carta representative about that painter, but that's not until the middle of the night, which it is not." He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "And yes, Fenris, we'd like that very much, if you're up to it."

Untangling himself from his brother, Cormac twisted himself off the bed and staggered to his feet, accompanied by a small storm and a faint shimmering haze of sparks. He grabbed a light wrap from where it hung on the corner of his dressing table. "I need to go pour water over my head, first. This is getting ridiculous."

"Sorry," Artie said with a sheepish smile. Reaching behind him, he gave Anders's thigh a squeeze and eased himself off of Anders's knob, a dull ache taking its place as he settled into the spot Cormac had been in a moment before. He turned onto his other side to better see Fenris and Anders. Or... just Anders, really, and maybe part of Fenris's arm.

Fenris's hips still moved in tight circles, enough to keep Anders interested as Fade glow lit the lines of one hand. He didn't dare reach deep inside Anders, not with his tattoos in the state they were in, but he let his fingertips linger just under the skin, stroking along Anders's scars.

It was as much the ragged sound that left Anders as it was the blue glow that told Fenris that Justice had come to the surface.

"I CAN HEAR THE SONG OF THE LYRIUM IN YOU ... AND IN ME WHEN YOU DO THAT." Justice's voice was relatively quiet, but it somehow carried the same impact as when he shouted. "YOU ARE KIND TO INDULGE ME."
"It is hardly an indulgence." Fenris pushed in as deep as he could go, melding himself against Anders's back as his fingers followed the scars around the curve of Anders's ribs. He ground in, feeling the ... He didn't know, but with Justice glowing, Anders felt different inside -- warm in both the figurative and literal senses, welcoming, righteous. He could say this was the first time he'd had to consider what righteousness would feel like wrapped around his knob, but he liked it. It seeped into him along the lyrium lines, crept into his mind in ways that should have been horrifying and disgusting, but ... This was how demons worked, he remembered, suddenly.

"Get out of my head." The words were firm, but not antagonistic. The spirit didn't seem to be doing anything, just ... lingering.

"WHAT?" The glow faded a bit and Anders twisted around to look, sorting through what had just happened. "Shit, sorry. We're not sure how not to do that. Or, I don't do that, but he can't not do that. It's also why he gets so upset -- he just ... sees things. He can't change anything, just look at it. It's still creepy. Did we do this before? We must have."

"You did," Fenris agreed, still grinding slowly against Anders's ass. "It feels good. I didn't realise what it was until now."

Anders groaned. "We're... Huh. I'm going to see if I can make that stop. He says he can only do it when someone's upset -- when they've been wronged. And you... it must be the Fade-fingers. There's something different, here, and we weren't expecting it."

Perhaps simply being aware of it would make a difference. Fenris hoped so. He was almost unnerved by how easy it would have been to give in, but then he knew that already.

"And here I thought you were expecting the Fade-fingers," Fenris teased, glowing fingers still light on Anders's skin. "Or were you expecting some other part of me to glow when I asked?"

Anders choked on a horrified laugh. "Please don't do that. Justice is very intrigued, but as your healer, I'm telling you both 'no'."

Next to them, Artie chuckled, his head propped up on his palm. "You don't know what you're missing." His eyes followed the lines Fenris's fingers traced along Anders's ribs and chest.

"And I'm perfectly okay with that." Veins of Fade-blue crackled over his skin as Fenris's fingers nearly touched the scar in the middle of his chest.

Cormac returned, then, a bit drippier than he'd left, but much less sparkly. "What are you okay with missing?" he asked, tossing his damp towel onto Artie's head as he climbed back onto the bed.

"Fadeboner," Anders filled him in. "I'm pretty sure neither my bladder nor my liver need that."

"If he's hitting your liver..." Cormac grinned and took a deep breath, calling the fade to himself. He caressed Anders's cheek with one indigo hand.

"I shoved my knob through you and out the other side. I'm not taking any chances."

Artie pulled the wet towel off his face, his lip curled. He scowled up at his brother, planted a foot on his chest and shoved him off the bed, tossing the towel back onto Cormac's face. "Ass. Also stop rubbing it in that everyone else in the room can glow."
"Do you want to?" Cormac wadded up the towel and threw it almost straight up, catching it on one of the bedpost dragons. "I learned it from a book. It's still back at the house, in Kirkwall. I don't know if you're going to have an easy time, since it's not your school, but this isn't some weird natural talent."

"Please don't," Anders sighed, hips still flexing and rolling in response to Fenris. "I really prefer at least one of us not being... You are solid. You are always solid. I'm not going to have any surprises with you."

Cormac dragged himself back onto the bed and sprawled between Anders and Artemis. "Is that 'don't glow' I'm hearing? Are you sure? I'm pretty sure Justice was looking forward to getting his hands all over my delightful blue glimmer."

"Those are my hands too, you know," Anders reminded him, using those hands to pull Cormac back against him.

"You're both pretty cute," Cormac replied, holding his arms out to Artie.

"What was that you said about not getting too cuddly with this many people?" Artie teased, trying to smooth out the sheets as he shuffled over, throwing a leg over Cormac's thigh and pressing in for a non-sparking kiss.

"Still not sure this qualifies as cuddly," Fenris said, hips pressing more insistently against Anders.

"Maybe not on your end," Artemis said, rubbing his cheek against Cormac's. "But I can cuddle you next if you're feeling left out."

Anders huffed, sliding his hand between the brothers to fondle the fluffier Hawke as he ground against Cormac's ass. "You want to squish the elf between mages?"

"Mages who are all talking entirely too much," Fenris said, one finger tracing the edges of the ragged scar in the middle of Anders's chest.

Anders jerked like he might slap the hand away, but Fenris's finger lit a bright blue and slid under the surface, gently running a fingertip down the bone beneath, and Anders shuddered and arched, Justice's light darting across his skin.

"YES!" It was impossible to say the voice was one or the other of them.

Cormac reached behind him, wrapping one hand around Anders's knob to slick it again, before he squirmed, easing it into himself. A bit of a sting, but he'd already been opened up, and Anders slid into him, thick and tight. Indigo on his fingertips, he reached back to stroke Anders's thigh, triggering a heated moan.

"Kiss me," he breathed against Artemis's ear. "Have me as you will, as you can. I'm yours, always, any way you want."

Artemis brushed his hand along Cormac's cheek, sank his fingers into Cormac's hair, and turned into a kiss. It was slow and lingering, Artie's fingers kneading Cormac's scalp as he sucked Cormac's lower lip between his teeth, biting just hard enough to elicit a small sting. "Any way I want?" he purred. "That's a dangerous thing to say, particularly to your little brother." But his smile was as
much affectionate as teasing as he dipped in for another kiss, his hand sliding down Cormac's chest and stomach to give his knob another squeeze.

All Fenris could see -- and reach -- of the brothers from this angle was Artie's leg hooked over Cormac's, and Fenris paused in his glowy fondling of Justice and Anders just long enough to run a Fade-blue finger down Artie's leg, making him squeak in surprise and point his toes.

Justice writhed between Fenris and Cormac, hands heavy with lyrium and the Fade pressed against the skin he shared with Anders. "PLEASE," he said, at Anders's prodding, gently running his fingertips over those hands. "I LIKE THIS."

Anders kept pulling them back, out of Fenris's head, out of Cormac's secrets. It was definitely something about the touch of the Fade, something about the lyrium, that made those minds more accessible, because he wasn't having this problem with Artie, and he hadn't been having it with Cormac, until the glowing started.

"Any way you want," Cormac repeated, mumbling against his brother's lips, as he massaged Anders's leg with the Fade at his fingertips. "Want you to be happy." He raised his voice. "And I want you to be happy, too, so tell me where to put this hand."

"EVERYWHERE," said Justice. "WHICH IS NOT SPECIFIC, AS ANDERS HAS JUST REMINDED ME. BUT IT IS WHAT I WANT."

Fenris dragged his fingertips along Anders's ribs, lightly stroking the bone, and another electric sound slipped out of Justice. Fenris smiled against Anders's sweaty skin, the roll of his hips making Anders writhe. He didn't need to be quite as careful, not with Cormac on the receiving end instead of Artemis, and he moved more insistently, panting against Anders's shoulder.

Artemis smiled against Cormac's lips as he felt the bed move, his hand still moving over Cormac's flesh. "Do you want me?" he asked, shifting his hips and angling Cormac's knob at his entrance.

"What the fuck kind of stupid question is that?" Cormac asked, blinking at Artemis. "You might have to squeeze that a bit, though. I'm not sure it's quite recovered from the last--" He trailed off in a ragged scream as Justice rammed into him brutally in response to whatever Fenris was up to. "Or that. That probably helped."

"GOOD SCREAM OR BAD SCREAM?" Justice asked, not willing to take Anders's insistence at face value.

"Good. Very good. Do that more." Cormac's hand moved like he meant to squeeze Justice's ass, but then he realised Fenris was going to be in the way and shoved the hand between himself and Justice, instead, squeezing and kneading the front of Anders's -- Justice's -- thigh, instead. The indigo crept up his arm, a faint touch of the Fade flickering around his shoulder.

It was also a loud scream from Artie's perspective, though not the loudest Cormac had been yet today. He chuckled, squeezing Cormac's knob for good measure as he slid his brother into him. After taking Anders, Cormac slid in easily, and Artie squeezed around him, a low sound escaping his throat.

Justice was letting out some sounds of his own, not quite screams but still loud enough to fill the room and for Fenris to feel the sound in his bones. Fenris's hips shivered, pleasure pooling at the base of his spine, and he withdrew his fingers from the surface of Anders's skin as he tried to hold himself
back from the edge, determined to send Anders -- Justice -- over again first.

Cormac wailed with pleasure, easily drowning out Justice, as he bucked between Justice and Artemis. His hips rolled and twitched, loosely following both rhythms as best he could. Still, he could do this all night -- had done this all night a hundred times before. There was no real urgency in it, for him.

The glow flickered on Anders's hand, where it clutched at Cormac's chest, thick flesh buckling where the fingers dug in. So strange to have two people -- and he did think of Justice as 'people' -- in ways one could usually only have one at a time. However much Anders insisted he and Justice were one, Cormac knew there were times they were more one than the other, and Anders knew it too. And whatever that hand looked like, the rhythm of the flagpole slamming into him, that was Anders. Cormac recognised the timing, even as Justice cried out in pleasure.

Artemis clutched at Cormac's shoulder, trying to match the rhythm the others set, his eyes sliding closed as his breath shivered past Cormac's cheek. Cormac was loud, this close to his ear, and Artie remembered Anders's earlier warning. But Artie supposed it was a small price to pay for the way Cormac felt thrusting inside of him, even if he'd regret it later when his ears were ringing.

Cormac's screams blocked out Fenris's murmured swears, but Anders caught the sound of his name when Fenris said it. Fenris's grip was almost too tight as he determinedly kept up his rhythm, trying to think of all manner of unappetizing things to make himself hold out longer.

The strangest series of jerks and twitches crept through Anders's body as he came again. As he relaxed into it, Justice lunged into the gap, squeezing, clenching, grunting desperately as he pulled Cormac closer. They came and went in waves, limbs tight and then limp, as the glow flickered and flashed over their skin.

Fenris huffed in amusement as the body in his arms shivered and flashed. That, by itself, was enough to hold him off a while longer -- more effective than even Cormac screaming. This was a reminder of what he was doing, that he had convinced himself to stuff his knob into an abomination. And somewhere in his head, that still bothered him in some ways. But, Anders -- or Justice -- had never done anything intended to hurt him and actually stopped, when asked, and not just in bed. Still, it wasn't somewhere he ever really imagined he'd be.
Even Anders gets tired eventually. It's just that usually everyone else gets there first.

Anders shuddered again, and Fenris gave in to the urge to keep going, pressing his face against Anders's shoulder as he quickened his pace again, losing himself in the sensation of the essence of Justice wrapped around his knob.

Justice was a pleased hum in the back of Anders's mind, veins of Fade blue rippling across his skin in time to each of Fenris's thrusts. He was loose and pliant where Fenris's grip was tight, his muscles tightening, coiling, as the slap of skin on skin filled the room. When Fenris came, it was with a garbled, anguished sound that bubbled up from his chest. Lyrium lines flashed and flickered, but he remained solid in and around Anders.

Artemis purred at the sound and stretched out the leg he had thrown over Cormac to stroke Anders's and Fenris's thighs with the edge of his foot. "It's quite the light show in here," he said, still rocking against his brother.

"This is why we don't have any neighbours," Anders said.

Fenris caught his breath, his head still floaty and filled with pleasant sparks. "I thought that was because of Cormac."

"We've got light and sound. It's both of us, on a good night. Can't be doing that in the middle of town." Cormac chuckled quietly, pulling Artemis closer with his leg. Sweat soaked slowly into the bed, under him, making the sheets faintly slimy, but he'd gotten used to that. One of the perils of trying to enjoy a Warden in this heat.

"And yet, this never stopped you in Kirkwall," Fenris pointed out, drily, caressing Artemis's leg.

"We were either on the second storey or underground in Kirkwall. The angle's different," Anders argued, rolling his hips and wringing another gasp and squeak from Cormac. "And it was better than some Lowtown alley."

"I rather liked some Lowtown alleys, to be entirely fair." Cormac shivered at the memory of some things he'd gotten up to, not least that one time with Artemis.

"I'm rather fond of one or two of them myself," he said, "even if they were a bit filthy."

Anders hummed, having the same thought. "The one time where you left an alley dirtier than how you found it. Assuming, that is, that you didn't go back to clean it after we'd left."

"You're lucky I can't really kick you from this angle," Artie said, breath hitching in the middle of the sentence as he shifted and Cormac pushed into him at a different angle.

"Notice he doesn't deny it," Fenris said, sliding out and peeling himself off of Anders as he rolled
onto his back. His skin was covered in a fine sheen of sweat where he'd pressed against Anders, and in this heat, the air on his skin was a welcome reprieve.

"There's nothing to deny," Cormac said, grinning at his brother. "We all know it. Artemis Hawke likes filthy sex in filthy alleys." He was going to get punched, and he was going to deserve it. Still, he couldn't help reminding Artie they were still brothers. For all that Cormac had devoted himself to Artie's happiness, there had always been that underlying, relatively harmless need to give him a hard time.

"And in freshly cleaned parts of the Chantry," Fenris pointed out, snickering at the ceiling.

Anders laughed sharply. "That's right! The two of you came all over Andraste's feet, didn't you? And only a little more direct than the Chantry encourages." The image of Sebastian's belt stood out in his mind, as he reached out to squeeze Artie's ass.

Artemis turned his face into the pillow, hiding half his face as he laughed. "The earthquakes... Anton actually believed there was a dragon under the Chantry!" Even with his brother's knob in him, he cackled at the memory, though that put him back in mind of how Fenris had felt that night. Artie bit his lip, let Anders's hand guide the motion of his hips. "That was a fun night." He leaned in and mouthed at Cormac's jaw. "Fenris tied me up and took me until the walls shook." Artemis shivered at the memory.

With his face pressed to Cormac's hair, no one could see the way Anders paled at the mention of being tied up. His hips stilled for a moment, but only long enough that he was able to play it off as intentional.

Cormac shook his head, rubbing his hair against Anders's face. "I will never understand the appeal of being tied up. How are you supposed to grab and grope and give as good as you get? It just doesn't work."

And that, Anders thought, was the thing about Cormac -- it was never some one-way thing, even when it could be. Even when, by all rights, it should be, because any sane person would've passed out hours earlier. Cormac was incredibly hands-on, and the more hands, the better.

"You're not supposed to. That's the point," Anders pointed out, leaning back from the depths of Cormac's hair, and pulling the brothers closer against him. It was fine. Nobody was tied up here -- not even Artie, who was into that. Still, his chest felt tight, as he picked up the pace again.

"That's ..." Cormac shook his head again, grinding down against Anders and letting himself be driven forward into Artemis. "I don't get it. Hands are important."

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Artemis huffed and pinched Cormac's ass where it flexed against Anders. "I don't know," he said, his hand coming to rest on Anders's hip as the three of them moved together. "I just... I liked the thought of being at his mercy. Still do."

Fenris smirked up at the ceiling, reliving his own fond memories of that night. He was smug in the knowledge that that was something he had given Artie that the others clearly hadn't.

"See? Hands." Cormac ducked down and nuzzled under his brother's chin, nipping at the skin. "I guess I almost get that. I love making you smile. Listening to you tell me what you want and then giving it to you."

"I'm going to second the appeal of that," Anders volunteered, sliding a hand up Cormac's chest to tug roughly at one nipple. "Of course, there's something to be said about the volume involved." He dug
in a thumbnail and Cormac thrashed and shrieked, pleading for more.

"I can agree with that," Artie said with a breathy chuckle. He did so love the noises Cormac made and almost envied how uninhibited he was when he was making them. Each shriek sent heat straight to his groin, and Artie snaked a hand down between them to squeeze his knob, a low sound slipping past his lips. "How loud can we make him, do you think, Anders?"

"He's loud enough," Fenris muttered. He ran a glowing finger along the top of Artie's foot and down his toes before retracing the patterns he'd followed earlier on Anders's back.

"He's not loud enough until I can't hear the--" Anders cut off in the middle of the sentence, shoving into Cormac hard enough to get another yowl. "It's a Warden thing. I like it loud. I like him loud. Of course if you want to get loud for me, too, I'm not going to complain."

"I prefer not to," Fenris grumbled, as visions of himself squalling like Cormac wound through his mind. Hideous, really. He simply wasn't loud -- not like that. But, that wasn't true. He had been -- and that was something he wasn't going to consider right now. No. There were three mages in this bed, and two lusted after his touch, submitted themselves to him to have it. And the third wasn't interested and took no offence at him. This was not the Imperium. None of the screaming would be his own.

"More, please, more, harder!" Cormac cried out from where he lay between two handsome, sweaty men, as Anders's hands gifted him pain and pleasure.

That was definitely a Hawke thing, Fenris decided. While he enjoyed watching Anders's ass move, he wished there weren't two mages blocking his Hawke from view. Whatever Fenris felt about Cormac, he did love the sounds and the faces Artemis made when he was being taken.

Harder was what Anders gave Cormac, pistoning his hips hard enough to make the bed shake, which, upside-down or not, supported their weight admirably. He added a spark to his touches, a low hum of electricity under his fingertips, but not enough to put Cormac's hair on end again.

"Fuck, Cormac," Artie groaned in his brother's ear. "It's like Anders is fucking me through you." His hand moved over his knob in time to their thrusts, pouring small, shivery sounds right into Cormac's ear.

Cormac whined at the thought, trying to find words before he finally managed, "Do you want him? Do you want him to fuck you like he fucks me? Pounding into your body until the sun's high, filling you with seed and slick until you feel it slosh inside you with every thrust, and you know the only reason it's not all over the bed is because he fits so tight?" He worked himself into a state, just thinking it, and considering how often they actually managed that, Cormac was impressed he could still find it so appealing.

Anders huffed, words escaping him as he rutted intently into Cormac. He managed a raised eyebrow and something like a sly smile at Artemis, but he wasn't sure how well that carried, between the beard and the sweat dripping into his eye. Either of the brothers would be wonderful, but he'd be more gentle with Artemis, which was less about Artemis and more about how ridiculously rough Cormac liked things to get.

Artie met Anders's look with a smirk before his eyes rolled back, a sharp thrust from Anders knocking Cormac into him. "Maker." He loved the filth his brother poured into his ear, and he shivered just at the thought, even if he doubted he could handle Anders in quite the same way Cormac could, despite how hard he'd once tried to prove otherwise. "Fuck. Yes." He wasn't sure if that was a yes to what Cormac was saying or to what he was doing, but in that moment he didn't
Artemis cradled Cormac's cheek and swallowed his shaky breaths in a kiss. "You're so good to me, big brother," he purred, still rocking against Cormac. He was achingly hard in his own hand, and watching, feeling, his brother come undone inside of him had him flushed and panting.

Still rocking into Cormac, Anders smoothed a hand down his side and then up Artie's thigh, turning his sparking fingers on the other brother. Artie shuddered, the electricity pooling at the bowl of his hips, and his leg tightened its grip around the two.

"Mmm, still not sure I can fill you up 'again and again'," Cormac admitted, squeezing Artie's bottom and grinding into him. The electricity was a bit muffled, but he could still feel the tingle from Anders's hands in certain positions. "I think after two I run out of creamy filling, so if we're going to turn you into an Antivan custard cake, that might take all of us. You want me to taste you and make sure you're still good, along the way?"

Anders reached back to squeeze Fenris's hand, before he dove back in with more lightning on his fingers, letting it dance over the sweat soaked skin. Curling his fingers between Artemis's ass cheeks, he pressed a firm spark to the tip of Artie's tailbone.

Artie's hips jerked, and he made a ragged sound that filled the room. Shaking, Artemis clutched Cormac with his free hand and begged Anders to do that again. He was close, so close, close enough that he could feel his magic shivering under his skin again. They liked the earthquakes, they'd said, so when Anders sent another spark through him, Artie let his magic go where it wanted to. It trembled under the bed and in the walls as Artie's vision sparked white.

Fenris hoped the house was as earthquake-proof as Anders had suggested, but when the roof didn't fall on them, he smiled, pleased to feel the bed shaking under him again.

"Holy balls," Cormac breathed, reaching down to cup them in his hand as he slid out. "I love it when you do that. It's everything all those trashy romance novels want people to believe you can have without a mage. But, they're wrong. And I have the lord high god of the perfect orgasm right here in my arms."

"He should be in my arms," Fenris grumbled, half-heartedly, having missed out on most of the show, due to Anders being in the way for most of it.

"He could be, you know. There's another side, here," Cormac pointed out, still rolling Artemis's balls against his palm. "What do you think, Artie, is your ass cold?"

"I'd have to get up," Fenris complained, reaching out to grope Anders's scars again.
"Such a romantic," Artie teased. He wiped his hand on the bedsheets, feeling too pleasant and loose to mind too much about the mess they'd made. He reached out that hand towards his husband and wiggled his fingers. "Come on. My ass is worth it."

Fenris made an unconvinced sound as though he were thinking that over. Just when Artie was wondering if he should feel offended, he pushed himself up, groaning. "I suppose you are correct. Your ass has not let me down yet."

"It will be dark day in Thedas if it ever does," Artemis said.

Fenris walked around the bed instead of clambering over it, mostly to avoid accidentally touching any part of Cormac, and Artie smiled as Fenris settled in behind him.

"Now my ass is cold," Anders said mournfully.

"Your ass is always cold," Cormac reminded him, easing off Anders's knob and rolling over to wrap his arms around Anders, squeezing one uncomfortably between the bed and Anders's hip, to better warm his ass with both hands.

"And now my knob's cold, too." Anders made a sad face at Cormac. "You wicked and terrible mage, you. This is why nobody trusts us, you know. People like you making for cold knobs."

"You dink." Cormac laughed and leaned heavily forward, knocking Anders onto his back. "I'm just going to have to be more creative if you expect me to warm your knob and your ass at the same time. We're mages. We can manage." Cormac's grin was not reassuring.

Still, he managed admirably, and the four of them enjoyed each other in a variety of configurations designed to keep Cormac and Fenris from inadvertently fondling each other, while still keeping Anders warm on all sides. At least until the last of it, when Anders rose onto his knees, behind Artemis, a great deal less gentle than he tended to be with the younger of the two brothers, but still enormously more cautious than he'd have been with Cormac. Fenris sprawled beside them, alternately kissing and groping Artemis -- what of him could be reached under Anders's bulk -- and Cormac contented himself with lying beneath the pile, albeit a bit to one side, with Artemis rutting against his loose, exhausted body.

Fenris carded his hand through Artemis's sweat soaked hair. They'd made a sweaty mess of the bed, but Artie was still too distracted to care, eyes lidded and mouth open around those small choked-off sounds Fenris loved to hear. He traced the fingers of one glowing hand down Artemis's throat, not daring to reach beneath the skin while Anders was jostling him, but it was enough to wring a mewl from that throat.

Anders's eyes flashed blue, but even Justice was nearing exhaustion. Still, Fenris caught that look, and his glowing fingers trailed down Artemis's side, feeling Artie's muscles bunch and shiver at the touch, and up Anders's chest. Anders sucked in a ragged breath and caught himself before tightening his grip on Artie.

Half-asleep and ragged, Cormac moaned against his brother's ear, quieter than he'd been for most of the night, voice thick in his raw throat. "I'm all yours, little brother. Always. I want to see you happy. I want to feel you come." And that sentence still stuck in his throat. He wondered if he'd ever get over it.

"Last one," Anders breathed, leaning over Artie's shoulder to kiss Cormac. That was something he was sure of, and somehow the words made it out of his mouth, as he pistonned into Artemis's body, still so tight around him. A quick spell for a little more grease, and then his thighs began to tremble.
So close, and so exhausted. He was going to sleep for a week -- or at least until lunch, which was fine, since he had to go out, that night. His hips rolled and his body ached, senses filled with the two extremely attractive brothers beneath him, and the occasional touch from Fenris, who seemed almost entirely absorbed in the look on Artemis's face. Anders almost regretted that he couldn't see it at this angle.

Artemis was too exhausted to do little more than cling to Cormac, legs shaking as he tried to meet each of Anders's thrusts. Fenris watched Artie's face twist, tightening and loosening, and he wasn't sure if that was the ground he felt shaking or just Artemis's body. But then Artie slumped over his brother with a long and anguished groan, and Fenris suspected that had been the night's last earthquake. Fenris tilted Artie's face towards his, and Artemis kissed back dazedly, still shuddering from every shove of Anders's hips.

Anders's arms tensed, his shoulders trembling, as he stopped breathing for a long moment. His face twisted, soundlessly, and his body hung loosely from his shoulders and hips. Somehow, he managed not to collapse onto Artemis.

"I'm sorry," he managed after a moment, slowly easing himself out of Artemis's body, to collapse to the opposite side as Fenris. Squishing the elf would not be an appropriate end to the evening. The bed squeaked in protest, and he reached out and patted one of the rails, consolingly.

Cormac rolled to the side, arms tight around his brother, putting Artie firmly between himself and Fenris. "Love you," he mumbled against Artie's neck. "And you're amazing, Anders."


Fenris huffed. "Watch where those hands end up," he teased with a mock scowl. He scooted in close, moulding himself to Artemis's back. His husband was sticky with sweat, but so was he, and the room stank of sweat and sex.

"These sheets are disgusting," Artie mumbled into Cormac's hair, but his eyes were already closed, body heavy with encroaching sleep.

Anders hummed in agreement but made no move to fix this either. "That's a problem for later," he said, patting Artie's shoulder. Artie mumbled something incoherent. "What was that about the camel?" But Artie was snoring into Cormac's hair before he could answer.
The Ghost of Injustice Done

Chapter Summary

Anders has a secret life at night, much as he always has. Fenris catches him going out and tags along.

Anders pulled on the robes he'd gone to Hossberg to buy. They weren't the sort of thing he'd wear, in general, but they suited his purposes well on nights like these -- a dark blue, nearly black, with runes embedded in lighter blue trim. Justice could trigger the runes -- all of them -- with only the faintest effort, and while they didn't do much, being that they were cheap protection runes, they did glow rather alarmingly when overloaded.

"Where do you go, at night?"

Anders looked up to find Fenris leaning in the doorway. "Justice can't rest in a place that cries out to him, and given that this isn't the Fade, there's always something. We go to address the upsets in the town. There's always something going on, usually with the merchants, where people think they're getting cheated. Or someone's out throwing paint on statues of Maferath. There's always something."

"And you do what? Kill them?" Fenris scoffed, eyebrow arcing up.

"It's not Kirkwall. Usually scaring the piss out of them is enough. If it's not, we pass on the name to the guard, with a long list of things we've watched them do." Anders shrugged and wrapped his face, before pulling up his hood.

"And what if you get the wrong person?" Fenris asked. "Is that not doing them some injustice?"

"More inconvenience, really. We don't make anything up, so whatever we report, we've actually witnessed. It's up to the guard to prove it. If it doesn't go to the guard, the worst we've done is woken someone up in the middle of the night and ... probably scared the piss out of them. If we're wrong, we'll make amends."

Fenris hummed, eyeing Anders up and down. That wasn't the hum of one convinced. "And has any of this been traced back to you? Do you really want to be attracting attention after running all this way?"

"They meet Justice, not me. At night, we just look like a lot of glowy anger."

Fenris's lips thinned, and he nodded. He picked up his sword from where it leaned against the wall, where Anders hadn't noticed it.

"What are you doing?" Anders asked, but the sword wasn't pointed at him.

"I am joining you," Fenris said, matter of fact. "I have slept enough, and I admit to being curious."

"And, what, you want to join in the glowy anger?" Anders wasn't sure that was the best idea, but
Justice seemed pleased by the thought. No, Anders scolded him. Stop being distracted by the glowy elf.

"I want to make sure you do not do anything too foolish."

"Foolish," Anders scoffed, checking himself one more time to be sure he'd gotten everything -- amulet, note, jar of sawdust and starch. He'd go and make his point, and when he was done, no one would see him leave. He handed another jar to Fenris. "Well, just to make sure you don't do anything foolish, take this. If anyone tries to come after us, smash that between us and them and run off in a different direction to the one I go in. It'll make a nasty cloud, a little hard to breathe in, but not enough to actually hurt anyone."

"And have you had to use them?" Fenris asked, tying the jar to a thong on his belt.

"Of course not. How long have I been on the run?" Anders grinned and headed for the door. "It's even easier here. I look just like everyone else. You, though. You don't. So keep your hood up and your head down."

"I left Minrathous before the last time you left your tower. I can look after myself," Fenris grumbled, following Anders out. "Who are we frightening and what have they done?"

"There's a sheep farmer -- there's a lot of sheep farmers -- but one of them is missing ten sheep and the other one just acquired eight that look surprisingly familiar, and it's said he just paid off some old debts, unexpectedly." Anders shrugged expressively and headed down the road, away from the village. "It's an unlikely combination of events, at the very least."

Fenris walked at his side, pulling his hood up. "So you have gone from championing mages to championing sheep farmers?" he teased. "Truly Justice never rests."

"Oh, I think you know just how tireless Justice is, by now," Anders said with a smug smile, "though the three of you made a good show of trying to wear the two of us out. But, really, Justice cares no less for the sheep farmers. He's just..."

"Not possessing one?" Fenris suggested, and the fact that he was something resembling friends with an abomination was something that still struck him now and then.

Anders opened his mouth, wanting to offer a different explanation but finding none. "I suppose that's part of it, yes." He followed a turn in the road and nudged Fenris to do the same. "This way."

Entering the farm was as simple as hopping the fence -- opening the gate might have gotten loud. Anders pet a few curious sheep as they passed through the yard, before he took out the note and fastened it to the door of the house with a bit of gum. Winking at Fenris, he stepped back out into the yard, eyeing the windows. The bedroom window was most likely the back one -- most people put their bedrooms in the back of the house, particularly when those windows could be made to face the rising sun.

He waved Fenris out of the way and stepped into a spot directly in front of the window, letting Justice rise to the surface. The runes on his outer robe were suddenly visible, glowing brightly, the lyrium sparking with the power of the spirit suddenly running through the designs. He looked, he thought, like one might expect an angry ghost to look. Justice called out to the farmer.

"Gunnar Jansson! You are called to answer for taking sheep which are not your own." Justice still
bristled a bit at that. The sheep were their own creatures, but human language was a strange thing. "You have led them away from their home and their keeper. You must answer for this injustice!"

The night fell silent, until Fenris heard hushed voices and the sound of someone fumbling in the dark house. A man's face with saggy jowls poked out of the window, eyes round and cheeks ghost pale in the Fade light. He stared at Justice, rubbed a hand over his eyes, and stared again. He muttered something in Ander, something that sounded like a question.

Behind the man, Fenris spotted a second figure, likely the man's wife. She hissed something at him in Ander, and the man waved her aside.

"YOU HAVE HEARD ME," Justice boomed. "YOU HAVE TAKEN THAT WHICH DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU."

Gunnar sputtered, forgetting to breathe, and Fenris half expected the man to faint. "What? No!" His Common was accented but clear. "Those... those sheep are mine. I found them wandering... and..."

"YOU FOUND SHEEP THAT WERE NOT YOURS ON LANDS WHICH WERE NOT YOURS. YOU WILL RETURN THESE SHEEP OR FACE PUNISHMENT."

Gunnar trembled hard enough that his teeth rattled. "P... punishment?"

Gunnar's wife smacked him in the arm. "You said those were a gift!" she hissed.

"THIS WOMAN HEARS YOUR LIES AND KNOWS THEM." Justice sounded like every children's tale of the angry dead that Anders had ever heard, and apparently Gunnar, too. Not surprising, since he thought they'd grown up in the same place. Common enough name, though. "THE OWNER OF THESE SHEEP SEeks THEM. I AM BROUGHT FORTH BY THE INJUSTICE YOU HAVE DONE HIM. LAY ME TO REST. RETURN THE SHEEP."

"Do you hear him, Gunnar? You angered somebody's ancestors with your foolishness!" Gunnar's wife scrubbed a hand over her face and glared at her husband. "Look at that thing in our yard!" She huffed and ducked under Gunnar's arm, as he clung to the doorway in terror. "Yes, of course he'll give them back! Whose sheep are they, so I can walk them over there and apologise?"

"ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VILLAGE ON THE RIVER. HARALD AND HILDE."

Justice paused, eyes still on Gunnar. "HE MUST GO. HE MUST ATONE."

"Oh, he'll go," Gunnar's wife looked balefully at her husband.

Sweat beaded at Gunnar's temples. He glanced back and forth between his vengeful wife and the vengeful spirit, and Fenris wasn't sure which one he was more frightened of. He swallowed visibly and nodded.

"GOOD," boomed Justice. "IF THEY ARE RETURNED IN THE MORNING, I SHALL LEAVE YOU IN PEACE. IF NOT, YOU WILL SEE ME AGAIN, GUNNAR JANSSON, AND I PROMISE THAT YOU WILL NOT WANT TO."

The affirmative sound Gunnar made was more a whimper than a word, and he nodded, retreating back into the house.

Justice watched the window a moment longer before turning to head back into the night, Fenris at his
side. When they were far enough way to no longer be seen from the window, Justice receded, the
glow leaving Anders's skin and robes.

A smile lingered at the corner of Fenris's mouth as he struggled not to laugh until they were further
down the road. "Brought forth by injustice? That was ridiculous. How does that even work?"

"Pretend you don't know me," Anders said with a lopsided grin. "Come on, you used to be terrified
of me."

"Used to be terrified I'd have to kill you, you mean. Killing the healer always ends badly, no matter
how richly deserved it is," Fenris scoffed, stretching. "So that's it? Just put on fancy clothes and glow
and shout at someone from across their yard? That actually works?"

"People will find a way to explain anything. We're getting a bit of a reputation around here. I just
have to make sure it doesn't attract templars." Anders shrugged and palmed Fenris's face, running
healing and electricity through it. "Probably won't. We haven't made a mistake, yet. So, it's just the
'Ghost of Injustice' going around to make people stop being assholes. And once the rumours start,
people know they're seeing the thing from all the stories, and that just makes them believe even
more."

Fenris chuckled. "I admit there is a certain... poetry to it. And I suppose finding non-violent means of
solving crimes is a good thing. I can't say I ever imagined you glowing over stolen sheep, unless they
were your own."

Anders's eyes flickered blue at that, but he shrugged. "I can't say I ever imagined it, either, and I've
imagined a lot of things."

"Considering the sorts of things you are likely to 'imagine', perhaps it is best that sheep do not factor
into them."

Anders turned an offended look on Fenris, but the elf looked impishly smug.

"Do you plan to do this again tomorrow?" Fenris asked.

"Depends on whether Gunnar has returned the sheep or not. Or if someone else does something else
Justice does not approve of."
The bed is repaired, just in time for soppy goodbyes and promises to repeat this experience.

Eventually, they made it back to the house, with Anders telling more stories of frightening local miscreants, along the way. Their cackling would be no more notable than any pair of drunks along the road, but it was better not to wake anyone, if possible, so they’d kept pausing to catch their breath.

"I know like six words of Ander!" Cormac's voice could be heard from the bedroom as soon as the door opened. "And most of them are things you shouldn't say to people and the rest are food! You read a little Tevinter, don't you? I mean, you married Fenris. You've got to know a little..."

A look of horror spread across Anders’s face as he shut the door behind Fenris. "Are they...?"

A distinctly wooden sound echoed through the house.

"He did say your bed was upside down," Fenris pointed out, glancing at the bedroom door in bemusement.

A pained groan escaped Anders as he pulled away from the door and headed for the bedroom to assess the damage. He found exactly what he was afraid of, their lovely, perfectly functional bed back in pieces, laid out across the floor in a tightly organized system, a pair of Hawkes kneeling among them.

"I know some conversational Tevinter," Artemis sighed, agitation making his forehead tight. "I don't know half the words on this sheet of paper." He set it aside, shaking his head. "No matter. I suspect it's more confusing than helpful, at this point. Most of these pieces are fairly straightforward, and we can deduce the rest. Here -- hand me that long piece, there."

Artie started fitting different pieces together, too absorbed in what he was doing to notice the two men in the doorway.

Anders sighed. "I leave you two alone sleeping in the bed, and I come back and you've disassembled it."


"It bothered him," Cormac muttered, holding up a plate of flatbread and lentil porridge. "I made breakfast."

"It... bothered him." Anders sighed again. "This is why my shelves were always in some kind of perfect order, back in Kirkwall, isn't it?"
"You can't have expected anything less." Fenris made his way over a couple of beams and took a fold of bread, scooping and rolling some porridge in it. "I'm amazed he slept in it as long as he did."

Cormac tore off half a piece of bread and rolled it up, scraping up a bit of porridge on the end. "It was inevitable. I thought we could get it done before you got home, but I set that one peg a little too well."

"That one? The one you set with your tongue, while holding up the side of the bed with your leg?" Anders asked, sitting on the edge of the vanity, the heavy edges of his outer robe clattering against it.

"The very one," Cormac agreed around a mouthful.

"Did I hear the instructions were in Tevinter?" Fenris asked, halfway through chewing his third bite. "This is really good. Reminds me of... nothing I want to think about, but it's good."

Artemis handed Fenris the instructions and offered Anders a cringing smile. "Sorry. I wasn't planning on disassembling the whole thing, but. Turns out these pieces here, the ones that were upside-down?" He gestured to the long bars that made up the bed's frame. "Turns out they're... kind of attached to a lot of things. That said, Cormac, please tell me you'll set that same peg with your tongue again, when we get to it. That is something I would like to see."

"And something I would not," Fenris said distractedly, mouth full of bread, as he scanned the instructions.

"I will shield your delicate eyes," Artie teased as he fitted together a few more pieces, nodding in satisfaction when they fit together seamlessly. "So what's it say? Am I doing this right?"

"I hope so," Anders sighed, stretching forward to grab a piece of bread and dip it in the porridge too.

Fenris hummed. "The instructions are a bit vague, but you seem to be on the right path. That piece there, however. The front foot? That's supposed to go in the back, on the same side as the headboard."

"Ah! That makes sense." Artie switched the feet around, nodding to himself.

"Well, obviously," Anders drawled between bites.

Cormac glared at Anders, with no real heat. "Oh, yes, 'obviously', as if you didn't have it the same way the first time we tried to do this."

"Hey, I was reading the Ander instructions! They ... make less sense than the Tevene instructions, and I'm not very good with modern Tevene! If it's less than a hundred years old, I probably only get half of it." Anders attempted to talk and chew at the same time. "The older and more magical it is, the better chance I have of reading all of it. Something mechanical written last year? Not so much."

"Some of the words have to be the same. I can't believe there's no words for putting things on or in other things in ancient Tevinter magic," Cormac pointed out, holding up a beam while Artie locked it into place. "That peg, actually. And yes. Later."

"Oh, there are, but... These words? These words were not the kind of words you said in front of your mother, twelve hundred years ago." Anders laughed.
"That is ridiculous," Fenris announced, not looking up from the instructions. "There is nothing in the least obscene here."

"That's what I'm talking about. There is -- or at least it was. Whoever they got to do the translation also reads ancient Tevene, because that's the only way you end up with pornographic instructions for assembling a bed, on the Ander side of that. That's not 'rod' like a piece of round wood. That's 'rod' like my knob." Anders stuffed the end of the bread into his mouth and reached for more. Justice needed to eat more, if they were going to go out and do things like that.

Artemis raised his eyebrows but didn't look up from his work. With Fenris guiding, he was moving through the pieces quickly now. "Honestly, the Ander instructions sound more interesting. Or possibly they're instructions for what to do on the bed after it's assembled?"

Anders tried to laugh around a bite of bread and ended up half choking, swallowing the piece of bread only half chewed. He coughed and massaged his throat. "Well, I'd say we already followed those instructions then, and rather thoroughly."

"They might bear repeating after the bed is reassembled properly," Artie said with a suggestive smirk.

Fenris shook his head. "I don't know how you're sitting after that last round of... instruction following as it is, Amatus. Oh, and that piece goes -- yes, like that."

The pieces were starting to look vaguely bed-shaped instead of just a pile of parts, which Anders took as a good sign. And Artie seemed to almost be *enjoying* the process. "We should have had you build all our furniture."

"I'm gonna go to the market and buy some complicated Tevinter sex swing or something," Cormac joked, handing the plate to Anders so he could hold a corner together while Artie pegged it together. "You can put it together for us, and then reap the benefits of the investment. Knowing you both building it and using it will be fun."

"Where are we going to put it, though?" Anders asked, glancing around. "I mean, the camel takes up most of the yard, and I don't think there's really space in the kitchen garden, and it's not going to fit in here."

"And we are only here a little while longer," Fenris reminded him. "As excellent as your hospitality has been, we have an entire city in various states of deconstruction waiting for us at home."

"You guys are lunatics." Anders shook his head. "I removed one building. One. And suddenly you've renovated half the city."

"And only the Chantry has touched the remains of that building." Fenris sighed, watching Cormac slip under the bed, a plank in both hands and a peg in his teeth. "They are not rebuilding at the rate the rest of the city has managed. They also refuse to use any mages or local workmen. It's nothing but Orlesians."

Artemis snorted. "It's always the Orlesians," he said, scooting over on his knees to help Cormac hold the plank in place. "That's why they haven't managed to rebuild the Chantry in the time it took us to rebuild the Alienage and build a town for the elves on Sundermount."

"A fact which annoys those Orlesians," Fenris pointed out before folding his last bite of bread into
his mouth. "Or at least the Orlesian nobles on the council, according to Anton."

"Yes, Anton whines about that often," Artie agreed. "It makes me want to build more pretty things for the elves to spite them."

"Is that the only reason?" Anders teased.

"It's a reason."

Cormac said something completely incomprehensible, slotting a peg with his teeth and then glaring at it while his tongue glowed until it went in and settled. "The other reason being that you're enjoying all the extra elven culture this gets you?"

"How much elven culture does one man need!?" Anders protested, covering his mouth with his wrist and trying not to laugh.

"That's not just 'one man'. That's my brother. So it's 'all the elven culture he can get'." Cormac chuckled and shoved himself out from under the bed frame, resting his head on Artie's lap. "I think he wants to experience the true glory of the Dales. The whole second empire."

"Well, someone has to," Artie said with mock humility. He grinned up at his husband, who merely shook his head in amusement. "I get to take the best part of elven culture home with me though."

"That's quite the compliment, Fenris," said Anders, "considering Artie's expertise on the matter of elf culture."

"And I am duly flattered," Fenris said, still with that dry amusement.

Artemis twisted Cormac's hair around his fingers as he looked over what they'd built. "So. I think that's it for the frame. Is that it for the frame? Are we missing any pieces?" He twisted to look around, patting the floor to make sure he wasn't sitting on a peg or something. "All the pieces have been used. That is generally a good sign in the building of furniture."

"That's it. I'm not laying on anything." Cormac rolled his head to the side to make sure there was nothing next to him. "But, I should probably get up before we try to put the mattress back on. And then I should lay down. Possibly with the fluffiest blankets and my favourite brother -- you know, just to test that we've put it together right this time."

"Perhaps you and your magical goat should test it first. I'd hate for your favourite brother to experience any remaining problems, and I'm sure you would too," Fenris drawled, reaching for another roll of bread, as Anders snatched the plate out of his reach.

"The 'magical goat' would love to lie down a bit, but Justice has other plans for the evening." Anders shot Fenris a dirty look. "We're going to do some more reading and writing about Ander economics, and why this constant dependency on the dwarves -- the Carta, no less -- is really keeping us from catching up with the rest of Thedas."

"You never stop, do you?" Fenris sighed.

"It's always something." Anders shrugged and eyed the bed longingly.
The boat would arrive soon, but they'd had time enough to stop for lunch. Anders had ordered some more of those delicious wraps for them, the ones with the meat and cheese that Fenris had liked, but Artemis kept getting too distracted to eat. His hand patted his clothes, his pockets. He was certain he had forgotten something, but then he always felt like that right before travelling, especially when he didn't want to go. He missed Kirkwall, true, missed his cats, missed Orana and his friends and family, and missed living in a house that wasn't made of dirt, but going back meant saying goodbye to Cormac and Anders again. That had been hard enough the first time.

Fenris took Artie's fidgeting hand in his, rubbing his thumb over Artie's knuckles. "We have everything," he assured his husband patiently. "We both checked twice before we left."

"I know," Artie sighed, but he relaxed a little at Fenris's reassurance. He conjured a smile for Cormac's sake and stuffed his face with food.

"We're going to be right here," Cormac promised, reaching out with his clean hand to tuck Artie's hair back. "Any time you need us, we'll be right where you left us. We built a house. We bought a complicated bed. Justice is writing a new manifesto. Why don't you come back, next year? When the garden's really grown in... Maybe in the spring, next time, so it's not so hot. Maker, this weather will boil your balls right off."

"They say the taint removes a man's ability to make children," Anders threw in, holding up a finger while he swallowed what he'd been chewing. "But, I grew up here, so I don't know how much faith I'm putting in anything short of magic."

"Is there something I should know?" Fenris teased, raising an eyebrow. "I thought you said the Imperium had never achieved ass-babies. Were you going to try? Or is there something we should know about Cormac?"

"You know enough about me," Cormac scoffed, shaking his head. "He means all the pretty girls in town who think it's so amazing that he makes potions and smiles at them."

"I'm worldly," Anders said with a grin, before pulling Artemis to his chest. "I'm also going to miss you. Can't wait until things calm down a little and I can come back and see what you've done to Kirkwall."

Artemis laughed softly against Anders's shoulder and patted his back with his free hand. "Assuming I haven't driven the viscount crazy enough for him to kick me out," he said, "which is likely, considering the plans I've been drawing up for the sewers. But... yes. The city isn't the same without you, renovations or not."

"I doubt any city is the same after Anders has been through it," Fenris teased.

"Aww, Fenris, that was almost a compliment." Anders smirked, releasing Artie to hold out a hand to Fenris, waggling his fingers enticingly. "Your turn."

Fenris's ear twitched. "No."

"Come on. You've touched more of me with less clothing on."

Fenris cleared his throat, glaring at a few passers-by who gave them curious looks at this pronouncement. He stuffed his face with food. "Different circumstances," he grumbled, bread and
meat swallowing most of the sound.

Cormac took advantage of Anders's distraction to sneak another hug from his brother. "You'd better come visit me again. Don't make me get on a boat and then go crawling through the sewers so I can get past the guard, to come see you. I'll do it. And I will not be happy."

"Fine." Anders put on his best look of offence and tipped up his chin. "No hugs for the broody elf. No greasy human fingerprints for you."


Behind them, the bell on the riverboat rang to remind people it would be leaving soon. People in the fishmarket finished their purchases hurriedly and made for the boat.

Artie's smile started to shrink at the sound, but he propped it back up, clutching Cormac tight against him. "I'll visit," he promised. "Just try and stop me." He took a moment longer just to breathe his brother in, to commit the scent and feel of him to memory.

Fenris cleared his throat, and Artemis reluctantly pulled away. "I have to go," Artie said, reaching up to smooth out a crease of fabric along Cormac's arm. His throat felt tight. "Try not to cause too much trouble without me, okay? Wait until I'm here for that. You, too, Anders." Fenris took his hand and started leading him towards the boat.

Cormac curled his hand in Anders's sleeve and gripped it tight, until the boat left the dock. "I can't keep doing this," he muttered, looking down the river.

"It's only a few years. Let them forget our faces, and then we'll go home. We don't look that much like ourselves, now, but it's too close -- we look just enough like the stories. One day, we'll be able to make a joke of it, but not now. Not yet." Anders licked his fingers and put his arms around Cormac. "They'll come back. You saw him -- he's not going to be able to stay away. He loves you."
A Gift of Steel and Blood

Chapter Summary

Anders is finally in a position where he can give back, and he does, bringing Cormac a beautiful and brutal gift, that they enjoy, together, while supper cooks.

(Bloodplay, masochism, most of you already know how Cormac gets...)

This chapter was commissioned by @Mevima.

The parcel arrived at their box in Kassel, and Anders refused to comment on it, all the way back across the river to Petty Crown. He kept the little burlap-wrapped box out of Cormac's reach until they'd gotten back to the house, no matter how Cormac climbed on him or tugged at his beard, to throw him off balance.

"Oh, come on, Jan! What did you buy?" Cormac laughed, calling Anders by the name he'd taken when they'd first come to town. "I can tell the writing on it is dwarven, and I remember the way you were whispering with that merchant all those months ago. It's got to be something good."

"I bought you a present," Anders replied, with a smug smile. "Go make supper while I check and make sure all the pieces are here."

"Now, I'm even more curious," Cormac complained, picking through the pantry. "Flipped dish?" he asked after a moment, naming a popular local casserole. "We've got the meat and veg for it, and I've had the barley soaking since before we went out. I think there's sweet yoghurt and ginger beer in the cold cupboard."

"It always amazes me how fast you took to the food, here." Anders smiled, picking at the wax seals on the knots binding the package.

"Once you introduced me to the wine, I had to have more of everything. You know me. I never did much care for Marcher food. Aside from that amazing cabbage salad, it all seemed like it was designed for people who thought paprika was spicy and that flavourful food attracted demons. Might as well have been eating wallpaper paste. I'm so glad to have had an unabashedly Ferelden family, through all of that." Working while he talked, Cormac laid strips of meat into the bottom of a clay pan, and started slicing vegetables.

"Once you introduced me to the wine, I had to have more of everything. You know me. I never did much care for Marcher food. Aside from that amazing cabbage salad, it all seemed like it was designed for people who thought paprika was spicy and that flavourful food attracted demons. Might as well have been eating wallpaper paste. I'm so glad to have had an unabashedly Ferelden family, through all of that." Working while he talked, Cormac laid strips of meat into the bottom of a clay pan, and started slicing vegetables.

"And now you know the other reason I wanted to come home. Real food. Pickled figs. Stuffed dates. Maize and hot peppers." Anders groaned in delight, as he tossed aside the outer wrapping of the box, which was, itself, beautifully carved, with a falcon etched into the jade of the lid. He'd spared no expense -- really hadn't needed to, with how things had been working out, since he'd started publishing works on the real-world applications of magic. Not just healing, although he wrote a text on a few illnesses commonly overlooked in works written outside the Imperium, but cleaning, farming, and building, with magical assistance. He'd been sending enormous piles of paper to Solona, who'd seen the works published anonymously, in Ferelden -- attributed to a nameless Mage-Warden, of which she had several in Amaranthine -- and she'd been sending back the money.

But, this gift was one of the most outrageous investments he'd made, he thought, lifting the top of the
box. A hinged rack folded out, revealing ten curved, metal talons, shaped to fit his fingers. They curved up just enough not to touch anything he pressed his fingertips to, unless he curled his fingers. Between the two levels, three metal rods, all of a very specific size, were mounted on the back of the rack, one smooth, one spiralled, and one with beads of increasing size.

"I'm still not convinced about the pickled figs," Cormac muttered, pouring soaked barley into the pan with the meat and vegetables, Anders reached around his waist, untying his belt and slipping a hand under his robes, as they fell open. "Ooh, are you going to distract me while supper cooks?"

"You're not expecting anyone, tonight, are you?" Anders purred, the box closed again, in one hand, while his other hand tugged at Cormac's chest hair and kneaded the soft edge of his belly.

"Not tonight. It's just us, tonight, unless the neighbours have a crisis." Cormac pushed back and rolled his hips. "But, if you want supper, you're going to have to move, so I can put this in the oven."

"I thought maybe, tonight, I'd tear you apart," Anders said, stepping back and opening the box again, sliding the talons onto the fingers of one hand. "Make you bleed and scream, before supper, and then let you lick your supper off my fingers, before I bang you until your legs go numb."

Cormac's knees nearly buckled, as he made his way out to the oven with the pan, and his knob twitched eagerly against his thigh. "You do know how to show a man a good time," he chuckled, raising the oven's fire from the embers that kept it warm. "So, what did you buy? Clamps? Needles? A new blade? A bigger plug? Oh, Creators, tell me you got a bigger plug...

"No, but you're making me wish I had. Might've added something to the evening."

As Cormac stepped back from the oven, Anders's arms wrapped around him, taloned fingertips stroking his knob, teasing at the tip. "Oh, fuck," Cormac breathed, legs suddenly shaky at the thought. "Do it. I want to feel it. Oh, fuck, hurt me, Anders, make me bleed."

"Do you know why I bought these?" Anders asked, tracing a thin, red line down from the point of Cormac's hip, along the curve of bone under his belly. "You do know how to show a man a good time," he chuckled, "So, what did you buy? Clamps? Needles? A new blade? A bigger plug? Oh, Creators, tell me you got a bigger plug..."

"No, but you're making me wish I had. Might've added something to the evening."

Smiling warmly, Cormac looked up over his shoulder and tugged on Anders's beard, pulling him down into a kiss. "You always think of the little things, even when I'm so turned on, all I can think is that I want more. What would I do without you, hm?"

"Probably bleed to death in an alley," Anders teased, flicking a talon across Cormac's nipple and swallowing the gasp that followed in another kiss. "You always think of the little things, even when I'm so turned on, all I can think is that I want more. What would I do without you, hm?"

"Probably bleed to death in an alley," Anders teased, flicking a talon across Cormac's nipple and swallowing the gasp that followed in another kiss.

"Probably," Cormac agreed, as Anders slid the robes off him, letting them fall to the pressed earth of the courtyard. He tried to turn, to face Anders, but Anders's hands were unyielding, bare fingers squeezing and kneading his balls, talons digging bloody gouges just below his collarbone. Staggering in the rush of pleasure, Cormac caught himself on the wall beside the oven, in a warm and dim corner.

"I love that your blood is in these bricks, that it runs through every wall of our home," Anders breathed, two fingers pressing firmly behind Cormac's balls, as the tip of a talon teased at one bloody nipple. "I come home to a shrine to the erotic talents and lunatic tolerance of the crazed apostate who fled a burning city with me. You are crazed. You do know that, right?"

Blood dribbled from Cormac's chest, each drop spattering against the ground between his feet.
"Don't ask me questions. You know I'll say yes to anything, when you've got me like this."

"Mmm," Anders purred, nibbling at the side of Cormac's neck. "I should wind you up a little more and then ask you to weed the front garden."

"A small price to pay," Cormac murmured, hips rolling of their own accord, grinding him down harder onto Anders's fingers. "I wish you could tear me open with your fingers, touch me in places that weren't meant to be touched." A breathy sound darted out of him. "Give me a new hole, right there, and squeeze me tight while you fuck me with your fingertips. Oh, fuck, Anders -- I want it. I want you in me in a hundred ways you shouldn't be."

The talons dug in again, burying themselves in the buckled flesh at the edge of his chest, tugging and tearing, until he screamed. Blood streamed down, warm and wet, and Cormac's thighs quivered as Anders's hands soothed his aching flesh, before tormenting him again.

"Please!" Cormac screamed, thankful for the thousandth time that they lived out past the edge of the village, that they had thick walls around the courtyard, that there were acres of date trees between the house and the road.

Anders squeezed tighter with both hands, the blood running down between them as he stroked and smeared it over Cormac's knob. Justice still worried about this, sometimes -- and to be honest, so did Anders -- but the dazed and rapturous smiles Cormac gave between screams had eased their concerns, over the years. Still, this time Anders couldn't see Cormac's face, and Justice shifted uncomfortably in the back of his mind.

"This what you want?" Anders asked, loosening his grip and easing the talons out of Cormac's skin, as his other hand gently stroked Cormac's knob.

For a few moments, Cormac just leaned against the wall, panting and whimpering, as he tried to find words. "It's a good start," he teased, still panting. "You going to have me right here? Right up against this wall, while we wait for supper to cook?"

"And then, after we eat, you can thank me," Anders purred, nudging Cormac's legs apart with his knee.

Cormac's knees buckled, dropping him onto Anders's thigh, while he waited for his balance to recover. "You are insatiable, and I will never regret the day I walked into your clinic. One of the best bad decisions I made, in that Maker-forsaken city." He felt Anders's hand smooth across his belly, and the slick rush against his innards, as he settled his feet more firmly, leaning forward again.

"Still no regrets?" Anders asked, hand cupping between Cormac's legs, after a moment to unlace his own trousers, two fingers teasingly pressing into Cormac's hole.

"Not even when you do that instead of fucking me." Cormac laughed breathlessly. And then the fingers tugged, and he felt the thick tip of Anders's flagpole pushing in, as the fingers slid out under it. Cormac saw stars, felt the ache in his hips like he might split apart, and he clutched at the wall, making little groans and whimper. until the first few inches were firmly inside him. This was it -- this was what he wanted, what he wanted and could have, which was really quite a feat.

"More," Cormac begged. "Come on, put it all in me. Fuck me like you want me."

Anders shoved the rest of the way in, pressing Cormac hard against the wall, to get the angle he needed. He would never cease to be amazed that Cormac wanted him like this. Years had passed and the warmth in his chest at being able to do this never faded. Cormac screamed for him, but always
for more. "You all right?" he asked, all the same, unaccustomed to this particular wall.

"Tear me apart," Cormac panted. "Make me bleed for you. Make a mess of me that would give my
brother chest pains."

Anders snickered against Cormac's neck, but started slow, until the lube caught up. As the thrusts got
harder and faster, Cormac started to make little half-squeaks and bitten-off sounds that progressed
into full-on desperate howls, as Anders finally pounded into him. Curling his fingers, Anders
dragged the talons along Cormac's belly, letting the thin slices dribble more blood down between
Cormac's thighs.

Cormac's eyes watered, tears streaming down his cheeks, as he shoved himself back against Anders,
meeting every thrust, grinding down onto the hand cupped between his thighs. *That* hurt, the way
Anders had bent his knob back under him, squeezing and stroking him against his own flesh, but it
hurt so good. The smell of his own blood filled his senses, and a powerful desire for more echoed
through his chest. There was never too much. There was never enough.

The talons bit in again and again, quick punctures, long slices, and the cold burn of his open flesh
shot pleasure through him, to the tips of his fingers. Cormac scrabbled at the wall, getting nothing but
clay dust for it. His cheek would definitely be scuffed when they were through, and he had no
regrets about that. Wriggling at Anders's every exquisitely painful touch, impaled on that glorious,
throbbing pole that forced him so wide, Cormac thought he might have finally found perfection.
Every shriek of pain was filled with words of pleasure, demands for more, pleas for the impossible.

"Oh, Maker, your perfect fucking body, Cormac," Anders breathed, as Cormac clenched around him
again, wringing him so tight that glitter shot across his vision. A thousand little golden sparkles of
delight. "Like you were made to take me in. How did I ever find you?"

Cormac opened his mouth to answer, but a ragged scream spilled out, instead, as the point of one of
the talons pressed into the tip of his nipple. "Fuck me," he howled. "Fuck me harder!"

Anders was all too happy to comply, driving himself into that slick heat, losing himself in the firm
warmth of Cormac's body, the smell of lust and blood and oranges. His breath came quicker for a
moment, and then dropped off into long, slow breaths, his focus absolute, even as the world around
him grew sharper to his ears. "As hard as you want," he whispered. "As long as you want. You're
going to burn supper, you know. I slept last night. I'll be up for days, and I will fuck you into this
wall until I collapse, if that's what you want."

The very thought was like a chime against his tailbone, echoing up his spine, ringing down every
nerve. Anders's body relaxed for one long, slow breath, as he spilled into Cormac, before picking up
the pace, again, pounding in with renewed savagery that complemented the waves of pleasure still
tumbling through him.

Pressed between Anders's body and the mud-brick wall, Cormac screamed with every breath, raw
sounds of pain, as the talons bit into the soft curve of his belly, the thickness at the edge of his hip,
the hard flesh of his chest and thighs. Dizzy with the stinging pain and the smell of blood, with the
feel of Anders's breath above his ear, Anders's fingers between his legs, Cormac writhed and
begged.

"Yes, yes, yes!" His words echoed off the corner in front of him, adding to the chaos in his head, as
he ground down against Anders's palm and the fingers crushing his knob back under him so far he
thought he could almost fuck himself. And that was a terrible and glorious thought, the thought of
twisting himself up until he was riding the head of his own knob, while Anders tore into his flesh and
made him bleed. Rammed down, with his legs propped apart, and those talons tearing into his thighs.
He wondered if it was possible. He wondered if, being mages, they could make it possible.

The throbbing between his legs became the rhythm of the world, his heart, his breathing, his thoughts falling in with it. Every pulse a rich, warm ache, as his body strained against the heel of Anders's palm and again beneath the tips of those long fingers. He felt as if his hips would split, with every merciless thrust of Anders's thick, hard pole inside him, felt his insides pull toward the outside, every time Anders drew back. And every motion fell in time with the pounding of the blood in his aching knob.

Cormac rose up on his toes, body tight, wringing a surprised huff out of Anders, as his muscles rippled with his impending release. So close -- the pain and pleasure rattling his nerves out to his fingers and toes. A tingling and crackling sense in the furthest bits of him, a counterpoint to the roaring need at his core. And then Anders's teeth sank into his shoulder, and Cormac bucked against the wall, toes leaving the ground for a split-second as his legs twinged and twitched. Exquisite, pounding pain shot through his knob as he spurted against the crack of his own ass, against the edge of his hole, where Anders still rutted brutally into him.

He sobbed, broken and raw, as Anders's fingers moved aside, catching his knob as it recoiled forward and stroking it gently, teasingly rubbing the last warm, white dribbles over the tight skin of the tip. A few more hard, deep thrusts, and Anders spilled again, sighing against the top of Cormac's shoulder.

For a moment, they stayed just like that, Anders's hips still rolling gently, grinding him into Cormac. His fingers soothingly stroking Cormac's bruised and aching knob.

"You're going to burn supper," Anders teased, laughing breathily against Cormac's neck.

"You're going to have to eat the burned parts, if you don't get off me," Cormac panted, thrusting into Anders's hand one more time before those long and powerful fingers let go.

Anders eased himself out, slowly and gently, still painfully hard. "Oh, was getting you off not enough?" he teased, half-lacing his trousers and pulling his shirt down.

"I'm hoping you can do that another three or four times, tonight." Cormac grinned, gasping as he tried to bend down to get his robes. Fortunately, they'd stayed behind him, when he stumbled into the wall, and managed to stay out of the little pool of blood that had fallen between his feet.

"Only three or four? Maker, we are getting old, aren't we!" Anders laughed again, as his hands caressed Cormac's skin, this time stroking healing into the dozens of gashes and punctures.

"Speak for yourself!" Cormac scoffed, straightening up much more easily and using the wadded cloth of his robes to pull the pan out of the oven. "I didn't feel this young when I was this young!"

"Then you must've gotten old fast, because you're moving like an old man," Anders shot back, holding open the kitchen door.

"I'll show you old, you great gangling savage!" Cormac snorted as he swept past, still naked, with their supper in his hands. "But, after supper. Gotta keep your strength up, Warden."

Anders whooped with amusement as he followed Cormac into the house, the door falling shut behind them.
Adventures in Dwarven Ingenuity

Chapter Summary

Anders's mother doesn't have an icebox. Cormac decides this problem needs a solution.

Chapter Notes

Yes, this chapter is in the right place. We are finally past the original chapter of this story. *laughs*

"Anders, your mother doesn't have an icebox." Cormac was sitting on the corner of one of the cabinets in Anders's workroom that didn't contain anything he was likely to break or spill, eating little balls of frozen fig paste from a chilled bowl.

"Hmm?" Anders measured another ingredient carefully, dripping two small drops into the boiling mixture he was working on. "Of course she doesn't."

"We could fix that, you know. Being rich noblemen and all." Cormac sucked a bit of fig off his finger, where one of them had started to melt before he got it into his mouth. "Really, we could probably also pay someone to fix the roof, where your dad hasn't done it. Not that I blame him for that. He's a little old to be getting up there."

"And he'd shit twelve bricks at the idea we'd done it, too." Anders shook his head. "I love mama enough not to piss him off too much."

"We should still get her an icebox. When's her nameday?" Cormac asked, holding out a fig-ball for Anders.

Anders gave him a flat look. "First Bloomingtide, same as everyone else's." Didn't stop him from licking the fig ball out from between Cormac's fingers. "Her birthday's a couple months from now."

"Early birthday present." Cormac smiled and shrugged. "He can't possibly object to that."

"And here I thought you'd met my father," Anders teased, adjusting the flame. "Magic. In his house."

"He can't cook and he doesn't go into the kitchen except for fruit," Cormac pointed out. "If we install it in one of the lower cupboards, is he even going to notice? We'll do it while he's out being a pain in someone else's ass, and by the time he gets home, we'll be gone. Your mother's been eyeing ours since the day she saw Artie trying to fit himself into it. We can make this work."

"As long as my mother doesn't try to fit herself into it," Anders sighed, even as he thought it over, "or try to fit my father into it. Then again, I'm not sure I'd blame her if she tried."
Anders supposed he spent enough time tip-toeing around his father. He wouldn't mind letting that asshole suffer in the heat, but his mother? If it would make her smile it was worth it.

"Fine," Anders decided, waving one hand before stirring the boiling mixture, careful not to let it splatter. "Something small that he won't notice. If he manages not to start frothing at the mouth, we can consider the roof."

Cormac rubbed his hands together. "I love it when you let me talk you into strange and troublesome things. I wonder, has Justice softened you up for me?"

The question went unanswered, as Anders changed the subject.

There was only one dwarven goods shop, in Kassel -- more of an indoor market, really, with everything from swords and armour to housewares from Kal-Sharok. Even the outside of the building was more after the fashion of dwarven cities than the surrounding buildings in that distinctly Ander style. Coming in through the stepped arch of the doorway, left open to attract customers during most of the day, an enormous, cool stone room stretched before them, with rows of shelves and racks displaying what was on offer, this week. As might be expected, most of the other people shopping were dwarves from the local Merchants Guild.

"Oh, this is nice!" Cormac found himself immediately distracted by a set of dishes. "Look at the pattern on these, and the heft of them! No fear of cracking something like this with a hot chicken."

"Cormac, focus." Anders plucked the plate from Cormac's hand and set it back where he had found it. "We are not loading down the poor camel with everything in the shop. Let's try to find a good icebox first."

Even as he spoke, Anders found himself distracted by a legless chair suspended from the ceiling. It was cushioned and light, made of wicker, and when he poked it, it swayed gently back and forth. It looked like the sort of thing the cats would steal. In the back of his mind, Justice did the equivalent of clearing his throat, and Anders shook himself, walking away.

"Right. Iceboxes... over here? That's where they were when we got ours." Then again, the place looked different every time they came, with new merchandise scattered about.

At least the dwarves spoke common. "Can I help you?" a dwarf asked, from behind them, amusement clear on his face. Few humans bought their goods, but these two he'd seen before.

"I thought the iceboxes were over here, but I haven't come in for a few months..." Cormac turned as he spoke, looking around and hoping to spot something familiar. "Is that roast nug I smell?"

"Good nose for a human." The dwarf cracked a bemused smile and gestured further into the depths of the store. "Ice boxes are probably three or four rows down and near the middle. Fresh food is all the way in the back, on the other side from the bronto armour. We've got a great deal on grilled bronto thigh, today. Got to get the best meat out, before it's only fit to be preserved. And if you're getting an icebox, you might as well take advantage. That stuff'll keep for days in one of those."

Anders's stomach grumbled at that, and Anders grumbled back. This dwarf knew how to make a sale. "We'll keep that in mind. Thanks." With a parting smile, Anders followed the dwarf's directions, doing his best to steer Cormac (and himself) away from anything particularly shiny.
Then Anders passed by a sea of throw pillows, the one on top featuring an embroidered cat's face, and he wondered if the dwarf had sent them this way on purpose.

"Be strong," he muttered to himself, turning to walk down the appointed aisle. Ice boxes. Never mind how nice that throw pillow would look on that hanging chair thing. "This place is evil."

The drop in temperature told him they had come to the right section, and a few other patrons lingered in the area, likely less interested in the product and more interested in a respite from this damnable heat.

"So, we're looking for a little one -- about the same size as ours, right?" Cormac asked, eyeing the seven-rune walk-in on the end. He tried to figure out if they'd be able to fit it in the kitchen at all. Maybe he'd build a fitting for it in the kitchen garden, in the other corner from the stove... But, there wasn't his whole family to feed, any more. He didn't need the space to keep an entire boar chilled -- or an eighth of a dragon.

With a sigh, he turned back to the smaller units -- one was about the size of a drawer and meant for just a few eggs and a bit of cheese. But, on the bottom shelf, there was one that looked about barrel sized, which would fit the space just about right, and the cabinet door would hide it perfectly. He elbowed Anders and pointed.

"This one, and then we'll grab some of that bronto?" Cormac grinned. "You look like your stomach thinks your throat's cut."

"The perks of being a Warden," Anders replied. At least when he remembered he had a stomach. He peeked at the ice box Cormac had pointed at, opened the door and stuck his head inside, taking a moment to savour the cold. He stepped back, closing the door. "The size looks good. I can picture it in their place. And I can picture some of that bronto in my stomach."

Without Justice running him into the ground, it was easier to remember simple things like eating. The dwarf they had spoken to earlier was, conveniently, waiting close by, and the transaction was quick and relatively painless.

"Still want those plates?" Anders asked after they'd hauled the ice box to the cart.

"Yeah, but we don't really have room for them. They kind of remind me of the ones Varric's brother had, honestly. And now that I've had that thought, I don't think I want them after all." Cormac shuddered and ordered another few pounds of bronto. They'd take some home and he'd leave some in Ulla's icebox. He hadn't found it much different to boar, really -- it wouldn't be difficult to cook, even if she'd never had it before.

Putting the meat into the icebox, they began the journey back across the river.

Ulla heard the cart before she saw them. It was much too early for Ewald to be back, judging by the length of the shadows, but then the voices she heard were familiar but not Ewald's. A smile stealing over her face, Ulla set down her baking and wiped her floury hands on her apron as she pushed the door open with her hip.

"Well, what's all this?" she asked, seeing the cart and the pleased look on Anders's face. Once her
son was within hugging distance, Ulla wrapped her arms around him and pressed a kiss to his bearded cheek, only to give Cormac the same greeting.

"I know it's a bit early, but we brought you a birthday present," said Anders, stroking a hand down the camel's side.

"We went to town and got you some fine dwarven crafts." Cormac grinned and heaved the icebox down from the cart.

Anders groaned. "I could have gone my entire life without hearing the words 'fine dwarven crafts' again."

Cormac looked at him oddly and blinked a few times before turning back to Ulla. "Just a little something for the kitchen. We saw the way you kept looking at ours, and we figured that since we're filthy rich Marcher noblemen, it was the least we could do..."

Ulla smiled brightly. "It's not... You didn't really..."

"We most certainly did! The finest in dwarven chilling technology." Cormac knocked on the top of the icebox.

"Small enough to fit in your cabinet," Anders added, "and out of your way until you need it."

Ulla kissed each of them on the cheek again. She had to pull Anders's face down to reach him. "You boys are too kind to an old woman."

"Old woman?" Anders asked, exchanging a look of mock confusion with Cormac. "I don't see any old women here. But you're welcome to keep telling us how great we are as we carry this inside for you."

Ulla clucked her tongue and tweaked his ear, not quite in reproach. "You know perfectly well how old I am, flatterer. Come on in, you two. Your father will still be out in the fields for a bit yet."

Anders wasn't going to pretend to be disappointed.

Cormac chuckled as he lifted the icebox and tipped it into Anders's waiting hands. It was a good thing, he reflected, that Anders was a healer, because he was absolutely certain that wasn't a noise his back was supposed to make. The thing was heavier than his brother. The thing was heavier than Anders.

Still, they got it into the kitchen with minimal trouble, and found Ulla already making room in one of the lower cupboards. Cormac rested his end on the table and took a few deep breaths, as Ulla took out the shelf that would've been in the way and dusted the bottom of the cupboard.

"Will it fit?" Ulla asked, looking between the icebox and the cupboard. "Oh, of course. I'm looking at the wrong side. It's not square."

Anders considered making a joke to Cormac about fitting larger things into smaller spaces, but his mother's hearing was much too good for that. He shifted his grip so that the edge of the icebox rested against his hip. It would leave a bruise, but that was an easy fix.

Ulla shuffled out of the way as quickly as she could. "You poor things, just standing there waiting
for an old woman. Come, come." She waved them forward, and Anders adjusted his grip again. His fingers were getting sore.

It wasn't until they were trying to lower the icebox onto the edge of the cupboard that Cormac remembered quite how much taller Anders was. "Kneel and we'll tip it in," he hissed, only to end up bearing most of the weight, as Anders continued to be taller.

"Down! Down!" Cormac choked out, sure it wouldn't be this bad if he hadn't twisted his back picking the icebox up, outside. This was ridiculous. He carried full grown men around, slung over one shoulder. He'd picked the damn thing up to take it out of the cart without help. This was just stupid.

Anders heard the pain in Cormac's voice, saw the awkward way he was holding the icebox and shook his head, bending as far down as he could manage and struggling to shove the thing in as quickly and neatly as they could without crushing any fingers. It took a bit of shoving and jostling to get it to sit just right, but that was simple enough.

As he stepped back to get a better look, Anders waggled his fingers in Cormac's direction, healing at his fingertips. Mid to lower back, from the way he was bending, which was where Anders laid his hand. "Do we need to have a talk about proper lifting techniques?" he asked with a pointed look. "Neither of us can shove things around quite like your brother can, and human backs shouldn't make the noise yours did."

Cormac made a sound of absolute relief as the healing spread through his back, mending whatever idiot thing he'd done to it. "Just slipped a bit picking it up. Could've happened to anybody. At least it was a piece of kitchen equipment and not my brother."

"Do you carry your brother around often?" Ulla asked, a hint of humour in her voice.

"It's probably how I screwed up my back. I haven't been slinging him around like a sack of groats, lately. It's throwing off my technique!" Cormac laughed and leaned over to kiss Anders on the cheek. "Thank you, pretty thing."

A strangled sound caught in Anders's throat as he thought of all the ways Cormac threw Artie around. He darted a look at his mother to gauge her reaction, but she still looked nothing worse than pleasantly amused.

"This is the same brother I met?" Ulla asked. "It is a marvel you haven't hurt your back sooner, even if he is all bone."

Anders wondered how many comments he'd have to swallow around his mother. Artemis being all bone was a perfect opportunity he had to pass up.

"I was in the habit of lifting my siblings for many years. Anton was short, Artie was cold, Carver was just looking for an excuse to poke me in the eye, and Bethany just needed help getting on the roof. I didn't ask." Cormac chuckled and eased himself back to standing, checking the angle of the icebox. It opened fairly easily, and he pulled out the two packages of bronto meat. "One of these goes with us, but we got you some fresh bronto, since you'd have somewhere to keep it cold."

"Bronto?" Ulla looked a bit confused. "Aren't those the things the dwarves use to pull carts?"

"Dwarves use them for a lot of things, including food. It cooks up about like boar, really. It's just..."
much larger. Good stuff." Cormac grinned happily at Anders. "Bronto steaks. I'll heat the oven as soon as we get home."

"He spoils me," Anders told Ulla.

Ulla's eyes sparkled. "Good," she said with a wink at Cormac. "Of course, you boys are always welcome to stay for dinner. There's bronto enough for everyone, it seems."

"Thank you, mama. But we should head back." Anders glanced out the window as though expecting to see his father coming to the door. He would still be out in the field, but Anders didn't want to risk running into him.

The look on Ulla's face said she had expected that answer.
Ser Peryn is not happy with the latest news out of Val Royeaux, a fact he shares with Mack and Jannik.

Pickles at the Petty Crown had become a bit of a Marketday thing for Cormac and Anders. If nothing else, it got Anders out of the house for something other than whatever wrongs Justice wanted righted, that week. Sister Ingill still took it amiss that the one time he was sure to be in public in a week, it wasn't for any of the services -- something wrong with a man who spent all his free time in pubs, she said, but Mother Yotte was always quick to point out that when he worked, his time was spent doing the Maker's work, directly. Still, the stink-eye Ingill gave them across the market, as they headed into the tavern was something Cormac could've done without, and he barely stopped himself making a rude gesture by reminding himself she was a Chantry sister. Instead, he smiled and waved for her to join them -- just to watch the offence settle, really. If she ever did join them for a few pints, she might have to admit they weren't secretly harbouring demons or Qunari or whatever it was, this week.

Cormac waved to the bartender as they came in, looking over the mid-day crowd, which was always fairly dense on Marketdays. They aimed for that, really -- people who needed Anders's help and didn't want to show up at their door could just casually mention their troubles at the tavern. Still looking for a table, he spotted Peryn, sitting alone. Perfect. Peryn was always happy to see them, and they were always happy to have news on what the templars were getting up to.

"Why the long face, Ser Peryn?" Cormac asked, pulling out a chair and dropping himself into it. "You look like Kirkwall just repeated in Hossberg."

Peryn winced into his drink but summoned a smile for Cormac and Anders, or at least the approximation of one, lips turned up but eyes still serious. "Not Hossberg," he said, scooting his chair in so that Anders could walk around him to the next empty seat. "And not quite like Kirkwall, but no less serious."

Anders hoped his eyes didn't flash blue. He could feel Justice there, under his skin, looking through his eyes. "What happened?"

Peryn opened and closed his mouth a few times, considered the nearly empty drink in his hand and the lack of drinks in theirs. "Have a drink with me, first. It is a drinking conversation." Turning in his chair, Peryn nodded, and within a few minutes, he stopped by their table, a pitcher of beer in one hand and two empty cups balanced in the other.

Peryn thanked the bartender and poured out drinks for all of them.

"How bad?" asked Anders, noting the haggard lines of Peryn's face. The man looked like he'd aged since the last time he saw him.
"Val Royeaux." Peryn said it in the Ander fashion, which sounded nothing like the way it was said in Orlais, and while Cormac was still making sense of the words, horror spread across Anders's face. "Val Royeaux is ... It is not Anulled. By the Divine's order, herself. Or they say."

"You say that like it almost happened!" The words finally caught up with Cormac. "It's the White Spire! It's right under the nose of the Grand Cathedral! What could possibly...?"

"A message came. If it was right, there is some new magic that changes everything. That is very... crispy? It is technical. But, it means that some very simple things are not so simple now." Peryn tried to explain, without letting on how terrifically dangerous the findings in that message really were. There was no sense in scaring people who'd probably never meet a mage as long as they lived. "The message after, I hope is wrong. Many First Enchanters died. The First Enchanters are the most precious of mages -- they guide the young. They teach the teachers. It is... I do not believe what it says is true. If it is true, nothing good will come of it. When our First Enchanter comes from the conclave -- that is what it was called, the Divine invited him to come, and we were happy. We thought it might be the end to the trouble in the south. When he comes home, we will know what is true."

Anders shut his eyes and bowed his head, ostensibly in grief -- which he did feel -- but mostly to hide his eyes if they started glowing. Justice wanted to barrel forward, in a rage Anders hadn't felt since Kirkwall, and the purity, the single-mindedness of his anger was something Anders had almost forgotten.

 templar, Anders reminded the spirit. A full tavern. This was not the time. Still, Anders's knuckles were white where they bunched in his robes, hidden under the table in case they started crackling blue.

Peryn took a long drink and shook his head, the lines deepening along his brow. "It cannot be true," he said, eyes far away. "Templars... We do not kill unless there is nothing else. We protect. I do not understand."

Eyes still closed, Anders reached for Cormac under the table.

"You sound just like Knight-Commander Cullen." Cormac struggled for some levity, as he felt Justice clutching at his hand. That couldn't be allowed to show. "I met the man, did I ever tell you? He said very much the same thing. But, I also knew a man who was at Ostagar, when the Blight came. All it takes is a bad leader. Just one person out of line, and everyone follows."

Could Peryn possibly mean the templars had attacked with no discernible cause? Cormac struggled with the idea in light of his own memories of the Gallows. Meredith had ruled with an iron fist, and no one dared disobey -- and some had no desire to. ...And Cullen had sent them back to Val Royeaux for re-training or retirement -- at least that's what he'd said he meant to do with the men in the dungeon. It wasn't impossible that this was the same templars all over again.

"It should not be true," Peryn said again, as Cormac called back to the bar for a plate of pickles and another of cakes. "But, if it is, perhaps that is less bad. Recruits and some addled lieutenant leading them."

Seeing a templar genuinely upset over this seemed to help quiet Justice's white-hot need to kill them all. Anders's thoughts followed the same route as Cormac's: there was a chance many of the templars who did this were the ones who had backed Meredith and survived. This was what came from mercy, he supposed, but at least Justice was more focused on killing specific templars now.
Anders cleared his dry throat and lifted his hand above the table long enough to take a long drink since Justice was upset anyway. "Excuse me a moment," he said while his voice was still his, retreating to the bathroom until his glowier half decided to listen to reason.

"Is he well?" Peryn asked, brow knit with concern. The bartender stopped by with their food, and Peryn reached for the plate of pickles.

"Massacres are bad for his digestion," Cormac quipped, taking a bite of a honey-soaked fried cake. "You're not going to want to go in there for a while, if you get what I'm saying."

"Your poor friend. Does he not have a potion for that?" Peryn seemed prepared to be momentarily distracted from the horrors of Val Royeaux.

"Sure he does, but it's not the kind of thing he just carries around in case the subject turns to slaughter." Cormac shrugged and finished the cake before any more of the honey could drip down his fingers. He could feel Artie glaring, all the way from Kirkwall. "I guess I've got the stronger stomach."

And that was a sentence he was glad Anders hadn't been present to dispute. Stronger stomach, until it came to cabbage salad and a few other things Artie would rather see removed from the face of Thedas, lest he eat them again. Really, Anders had the much stronger stomach, as he understood it. He'd mentioned swallowing darkspawn blood, on more than one occasion. Yet another benefit of being a Warden, he supposed.

Peryn clucked his tongue. "Perhaps I should not have brought it up? I apologise to you. It has been... a burden on my mind, since I heard."

Like lightning, blue light flickered under the bathroom door, quick enough that the bartender only caught a sense of movement out of the corner of his eye. When he looked, the light was gone, and he went back to pouring drinks. With his back to them, Peryn failed to notice at all.

Cormac wondered if he could claim Anders was lighting his farts on fire to clear the stench, if that got any brighter. It was probably the worst thing anyone had ever accused Justice of being, but under the circumstances it had to be better than a frightened templar and a panicked room, if anyone figured out that there was a man wrestling with a spirit, behind that door, instead of his own intestines.

"It is no small news, and for all that it is little concern of ours, I do wonder about the safety of our friends still in the south. Something like this... and in Val Royeaux... Every noble in Orlais must be trying to angle for an advantage from this tragedy." Cormac shifted in his seat, thinking of Anton and Cullen -- was this a shift in the balance of power or just a rebellion in a single city, the most powerful city the Chantry had? Either way, it was a statement, and one Justice would be unbearable for having heard.

Peryn had picked through the plate of pickles and ordered another drink by the time Anders reappeared, looking pale and strained. He returned to his seat with as much dignity as he could, which was more dignity than he would have had if Cormac had gone forward with his fart story.

"Sorry about that," he said, pulling the plate of pickles closer and stuffing his face before continuing. "I'm not quite feeling my best."

Peryn nodded sympathetically. "Yes, Mack told me how my story might have affected you. I
apologise to you."

Anders paused mid-chew, the food in his mouth stoppering a dry laugh. "I suspect he spared you the
details." He plucked up a cake next, shoving it into his mouth whole, cheeks puffing out as he
chewed. Anders had promised Justice that he would let him rage later, when they were back home
and away from anyone who might not approve of finding out he was possessed. For now, Justice
was a constant noise between his ears that he planned to tune out.

"Are your mages all right? In Hossberg, I mean." Cormac asked, studying the plate of cakes and
hoping for something less drippy, as he picked up another. "I can't imagine they'd be pleased with
the news."

"They are sad. We are all sad." Peryn shook his head. "But, I think that is not what you asked. There
is no talk of fighting or running away. They know we will protect them and Weisshapt will."

"Wardens? Really? I didn't think the Grey Wardens got involved in Chantry politics." Cormac
sounded surprised, but the Wardens he'd known had, in fact, been very political.

"They need us. All of us. We train strong mages, and every year, the Wardens choose the best." Peryn sounded very proud of his Circle, as he took bites of pickled pepper to punctuate his thoughts.
"Sometimes, they take none, because there is no more room, but there is a great festival and a show
always. We show the best we have. Everyone wants to be the next Warden."

And here Anders had had to go all the way to Ferelden to join the Wardens. Maybe it was inevitable
from the beginning. He had to wonder what the state of Kinloch Hold was in all of this, wondered if
First Enchanter Irving was among the dead. They'd had their disagreements, but Irving hadn't been a
bad man.

He jumped when Peryn patted his wrist. "Your brother, wherever he is, I hope is safe," Peryn said.
Anders stared at him for a long moment before realising he meant him.

The weak laugh that left Anders was little more than a shaky breath. "I hope so too."
An Invitation

Chapter Summary

Bethany makes a decision and sends word.

Every week, they went to the message office in Kassel. There was usually something -- letters from Artemis or Solona, Anton's monthly confirmation of their profits having been sent, the occasional annotated half a manuscript from Bethany with frustrated questions and angry notations scrawled in the margins. Oddly, Anders was usually more help with Bethany's troubles, mostly because he'd had a tower education, and the point at which things stopped making sense to her was the point at which they started making sense, to him. So, when a small, sealed envelope from Bethany arrived, they both assumed it was for Anders. Some thanks, perhaps, or an offhand question that didn't require an entire manuscript to explain the context.

Cormac studied the latest dispatches that hung on the walls, looking for some news about Val Royeaux, but the Anderfels maintained a firm indifference to Orlais, unless the Orlesians started marching north. He bet there would be news in Hossberg, but that would require going to Hossberg, which was really more trouble than it was worth, at this point. Still, there were posted notices of last week's guard blotter -- everything from an unidentified chicken thief in one of the river villages to the execution of a bandit who had been hunting Yothandi merchants returning from Kassel. A pity they hadn't become aware that was happening, sooner. Justice would have enjoyed taking care of it, himself. A page of the latest fashions in Tallo, marked with prices and ordering instructions, hung beside the counter, between warnings about restricted Tevinter imports and the list of prices for post by size and weight.

Anders opened the envelope from Bethany while Cormac checked the notices on the wall. The envelope's paper was a sturdy weight, finer even than her usual stationary, and inside was a card with beautiful, looping calligraphy. An invitation, he realised, and not to Anton's next sausage party.

"Mack." Anders held out the card to Cormac. "I think this was meant for you. Looks like Choir Boy finally stepped up!" He still thought Bethany could do better, but then she would make a terrifying and wonderful princess.

"You're kidding, right?" Cormac squinted suspiciously at Anders as he took the card.

"That... is a wedding invitation. An invitation to a wedding. In Starkhaven." No matter which way he held the card, the message didn't change. No hidden secrets in this one, just exactly what it said. His sister was getting married to the Prince of Starkhaven, on Summerday. "We'll be there, won't we?" It seemed like an idiot question, but Sebastian was still intensely displeased with Anders, and he was pretty sure that what his sister didn't want for a wedding gift was the murder of her editor.

"Damn right we will be," Anders answered, even though he knew it might not be the best idea. The groom had tried to kill him that last time he saw him, after all, and Anders could picture Sebastian interrupting his wedding vows just to chase him down. "Your sister might not forgive us if we don't, which is a terrifying prospect." He slipped an arm around Cormac's waist and looked at the invitation over his shoulder. "So, what do you think? We barely look like ourselves any more. Add a few
outlandish outfits and a couple of outrageous accents? How's your Antivan?"

"Not as bad as my Rivaini," Cormac admitted, with an uncertain attempt at a smile. "Andraste's tits aflame, we're walking into a death trap. ... Which, if I'm entirely fair, we've done before. Repeatedly."

This was quite possibly the stupidest thing he'd ever done in his entire life, and he could say that after having helped Anders relieve Kirkwall of its chantry. Still, he wanted to believe they could get away with it. Sebastian couldn't possibly be expecting them to be as blighted stupid as they actually were.

Cormac sighed and pressed the heel of his palm between his eyes. "Shall we send a proper response, or should I just send a fistful of Orlesian royals and some measures, and instructions to buy the latest in Antivan fashion? No, that would be rude. Response to Bethy, instructions to Artie."

"That would be the wiser move, yes," Anders agreed. "Artie would take care of the specifics, possibly a little too well. He would also probably think we're idiots for taking the risk of going, but I know he'd love the opportunity to spend some time with his Antivan lover." Anders waggled his eyebrows at Cormac. "Carver's going to end up punching you, isn't he?"

"I expect you to be there, so that when he does the scary templar thing and then punches my teeth down my throat, you can put them back in." Cormac reached up and tugged on Anders's beard. "And also so I can put you behind me every time Sebastian walks past. I don't think he's got the reach to hit you around me."

But, Sebastian was an archer, which meant there was more concern if he wasn't close enough to take a swing. Cormac was going to be uncomfortable every time Sebastian stepped out of his line of sight. This was idiotic, but he had to be there. Couldn't and wouldn't miss it, really.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked, again. "I mean you, not me. Are you sure you want to walk into this with me?"

Anders blinked down at him. "As opposed to, what, letting you walk into this alone? Like you said, you need someone to put your teeth back in after Carver punches you." He rested his chin on the top of Cormac's head. It was less of a danger for Cormac than for him, but it was still a danger. Anders wasn't about to let him do something stupid on his own, not after everything they've gone through. "So yes, I'm sure. Plus Justice insists he'd like to check on the lyrium elf. For purely professional reasons, he says."
Justice catches a chicken thief.

Anders went to bed, that night, but Justice got out of it, in the middle of the night, trying to keep the glow to a minimum, not to wake Cormac, who made disgruntled noises in his sleep, as Anders pulled away. Cormac whined, and Justice pulled the blanket up over his face to block out the light. He didn't try to speak to Cormac -- if anything would wake him the rest of the way up, that would do it.

Justice admired the clothes, as he put them on. It still didn't sit right with him that the only way to do good, to enact justice, was to do it in the dark, but at least they could make a difference. Anders had shown him, in Kirkwall, the power of compassion in leading people to just action, and he couldn't fault how Anders spent their days, but banditry in the streets was not proper, and he meant to spend this night, and many after it, putting an end to each case that arose. For some reason he couldn't quite understand, no matter how many times Anders explained, the theft of chickens was a particular local problem, even in Kassel. Something to do with blaming it on the sand cats, if he'd understood that part correctly.

Another farmer had complained of a rash of chicken thefts, and Anders had remembered the place, a farm that had belonged to an elderly couple when he'd been a child but had since changed hands to a young family. During the day, he could often hear them making repairs on the old house, but tonight the road was quiet as they walked a route Anders didn't need to see to know.

Their fence was still being patched up, and Justice slipped in where a section had slumped to the ground. He walked around the back of the house, to where he assumed the chicken coop would be, and approached the dark shape that looked about the right size. For now, he would wait and hope the chicken thief showed himself.

With any luck, the sight of the rumoured 'protector of the righteous' would push the thief back onto a just and righteous path. There had been an increase in offerings around statues of Hector in the river villages, since they'd started addressing the wrongs within walking distance of the house. Some people seemed to believe Justice was actually the spirit of Andraste's own protector, returned to guard her people, as he once guarded her. Anders still argued with Justice about correcting them -- what people believed was less important than that they did believe that someone was watching over them, in Anders's opinion. And fortunately, after one encounter with him and Justice, most people were inclined to respect the spirit, even if they didn't respect the law. ... Most. And then there was the Carta, which Anders insisted once again couldn't be their problem, because the Carta and the Merchants Guild were too deeply integrated into the national and local economy -- unlike the Chantry in Kirkwall, which had been primarily parasitic.

Still engaged in that argument, they heard a small scuffing sound from the other side of the coop, a sound like cloth on wood. Oddly, it was the first sound they'd heard all night, and it was right on top of them. Anders stood as quietly as he could and peered around the corner of the coop. Nothing. Another corner, still nothing, but now the chickens were awake and squawking their displeasure.
about... something. Possibly Justice, if he was entirely honest with himself.

Among all the squawking, Justice almost didn't hear the approach of footsteps, the creak of stiff boots. Eyes following the sound, Justice spotted the thief, a dark shape bent low and trying to be quiet, a weapon of some sort clutched in one hand.

Justice boiled over with rage at the brazenness of the thief, the overflow of anger spilling out in blue cracks along his skin. In the flare of blue light, he finally caught his first glimpse of the thief's face, the eyes wide and round in a tired face. "NO MORE CHICKENS SHALL BE STOLEN FROM THIS COOP," Justice boomed. "THIS IS THEIR HOME." In the back of his mind, Anders tried not to find this funny, but he'd never thought the Spirit of Justice would become a champion of chickens.

Cowards like this always ran. The thief faltered back a few steps, eyes still on Justice, unblinking, and Justice stalked after him, tensing to give chase. But instead the thief fell to his knees, hands up in supplication. "Oh, glorious Hector, you have answered my prayers!"

Shit. Anders threw his entire will into stopping whatever Justice thought he should be saying, throwing other words in the way. "I COME WHERE I AM NEEDED. BE AT PEACE, SERAH. I WILL CATCH THIS THIEF AND DEMONSTRATE THE ERROR OF THOSE UNJUST WAYS. YOU SHOULD BE TROUBLED NO MORE."

Justice argued at being overridden. They were not Hector. Neither of them was Hector. Hector had died long before even Justice had come to self-awareness.

"Bless you, guardian of most holy Andraste and protector of us all!" The man grovelled, gazing up adoringly. "I will make another offering. I will praise your name to all who will listen."

"PRAISE THE NAME OF JUSTICE," Justice boomed, before Anders could stop him. Still, that was ... among the ways least likely to backfire horribly. Anders took partial control again. "AND RETURN TO YOUR REST. THE THIEF WILL NOT APPEAR WITH YOU WAITING FOR HIM."

The man pressed himself even flatter to the ground, and Anders suspected if he grovelled any more he'd become one with the dirt. "Of course! You are most wise! And just! I will tell my wife the good news!"

Being called 'just' quelled some of Justice's agitation. He could ignore the false name for now as long as his purpose wasn't mistaken.

Still bowing, the man clambered to his feet, and he all but walked backwards into his house, still too awed to turn around. Slowly, Anders convinced Justice to tone down the glowing. Their talking might have scared off the thief as it was.

The blue glow was just dimming when they heard more movement from the coop, that sound like cloth on wood again, and Justice turned in time to spot a sand cat wriggling through a gap in the boards, dragging a dead chicken in its mouth. It froze, ears pressing back and eyes reflecting Justice's blue light.

"ARE You fucking kidding me...?" Anders filtered forward, and Justice let him. An actual cat? This, Justice hadn't been expecting.
The cat eyed them, calculatingly, trying to shimmy the rest of the way out of the hole with as little motion as possible.

With a sigh, Anders scruffed the cat and dragged it out, still clutching the chicken. The cat, unamused by this turn of events, made some muffled angry sounds and tried to twist around and claw Anders.

"Shh, it's okay." With his other hand, Anders stunned the cat, to prevent it hurting itself trying to get away from him. The chicken dangled as loosely from the cat's mouth as the cat dangled from his hand. Hands, a thing he didn't have enough of.

He set the cat on the ground and detached it from the chicken. They were probably going to have to wrap the cat in their hood, once they got to the road, but for now, he needed to leave a note and... probably the chicken, while the cat was still unlikely to go anywhere.

Daylight -- and Cormac -- found Anders in the kitchen, a sand cat nestled in the crook of his arm. The cat was making rumbling sounds halfway between a purr and a growl around bits of chicken -- cooked chicken, belonging to Anders, left over from last night's dinner, which Anders was hand-feeding the cat.

"Wondered how long that was going to take. 'S it got a name yet?" Cormac asked, rifling the cupboards for that citrus tea he'd gotten smuggled from northern Rivain. "And what'd you do with the chicken guy?"

"This is the chicken guy," Anders drawled. He paused in his chicken-feeding to lift up one of the cats paws to wave it at Cormac. Tail whipping, the cat whined and gummed at the hand holding it. "Caught him sneaking out of the chicken coop last night, after, uh... Justice tried to exact justice on the wrong person. Second cupboard to your left," he added, noting Cormac's barely awake shuffle. "And I was thinking of calling him Purrsino. He's an apawstate."

Anders half expected to be murdered for that pun. It was worth it.

Cormac paused, one hand already in the cupboard, and gave Anders a disapproving look. "Puns before I've had tea?" But, the tea was an automatic process -- he didn't need to be awake to make it, as long as he could find it. Warming the mug in one hand, he leaned against the counter, watching Anders play with the cat. This was what they'd been missing. Things weren't the same without a fluffy deathtrap underfoot -- particularly a fluffy deathtrap that actually belonged there, as opposed to the ones that leapt in through the windows, when they left the storm shutters open.


Anders cackled into the cat's ear, which twitched. "Yes, tea before you make any more interesting insinuations about yourself. You can make all the insinuations you want about me, which you already do."

The cat murrped and wriggled in Anders's grip, reminding him that he was neglecting his duties as cat servant.

"Sorry, Purrsino. You are absolutely right." Anders cooed and scratched behind its ear before pulling
off another bite-sized piece of chicken. "And he could be First Meower if the other meows elect him to the position. Or he could run off to Tevinter and become a meowgister. I won't tell Fenris if you won't."

The cat chirped again, looking up at him with small eyes that always looked like they were judging him.

Cormac muttered something incomprehensible into his mug, which trailed off in a burble as the liquid finally hit his lips. If there was one thing he didn't understand, it was how people without magic could stand waiting for their tea. Maybe it was less necessary, if one didn't have to sustain a power aside from oneself, but Carver seemed to be the argument against that. Anton had always seemed to be powered by wine in vintages he shouldn't have been able to afford.

Cats, though, were not powered by tea. And they now had one again, at least as long as it thought Anders was preferable to stealing chickens. For Justice's sake, he hoped that lasted a while. They'd been trying to convince Justice that in cases of petty crime, most often the environment was as much to blame as the criminal, and that punishment wouldn't drive down the rate of street brawls over seemingly inconsequential things or the theft of food animals nearly as well as making sure more people had food and the things that started arguments could actually be seen as inconsequential in relation to everything else. But, that was hard in a village getting by just above the survival level.

"The man called me -- or rather, called Justice -- Hector," Anders said, amusement colouring his tone. "Justice isn't thrilled, but I'd say it's working in our favour, at least until some priest or other tries to investigate this 'miracle'."

By now the cat had stopped pretending its purrs were growls, and it settled into Anders's lap, the tension in its little body leaving as his fingers stroked through its fur. Its ears stay perked, ready for any sudden noise, but slowly its eyes slid shut.

Anders grinned. "I think Purrsino likes it here."
Sister Ingill was tidying up the previous day's offerings from around the statues of the disciples, when Andries came in, carrying half a roasted chicken and an assortment of flowers. A major offering, then. Such things weren't unusual, when important things happened in someone's family -- but she couldn't remember Andries's wife being pregnant or them being in negotiations for new property. What in the Maker's name was he so thankful for?

"Oh, Hector!" Andries pronounced, kneeling at the base of a statue already heavily bedecked with flowers. "Protector of Andraste, guardian of her people, I thank you for your intervention! I am blessed by your appearance and your solution to my troubles, and I hope my neighbours are helped by this as much as I have been."

Hector. There had been a lot of offerings to Hector, in the last year. His sudden popularity had always confused Ingill -- including reports that the spirit of Hector himself had been seen pursuing criminals in the middle of the night. That was ludicrous. There was no reason for Hector to be here. The Chantry was too small to have any relics at all, nevermind relics of one of the disciples! She would suspect a demon, but as far as she could tell, no one had been harmed by the ... 'spirit'. Or, at least not seriously. A few sprained ankles and small burns. There had to be another explanation.

Ingill approached Andries, clasping her hands in front of her reverently and waiting until he had finished his prayer before clearing her throat to get his attention. He turned a beaming smile her way.

"Good morning, Sister Ingill!" he greeted her, pushing himself to his feet. "This is a beautiful day the Maker has given us!"

"Indeed," Ingill agreed, coldly polite. "Forgive me, but I could not help but overhear your prayer..."

"I do not mind, Sister! I would proclaim it to the whole town!"

"Uh. That is not..." Ingill tried again. "Proclaim what, specifically?"

Andries raised his hands to the heavens. "That blessed Hector himself appeared to me and answered my prayers. I am humbled by his intercession!"

"Appeared," Ingill repeated. "You mean that metaphorically, I am sure."

But Andries shook his head. "No, no! Hector was there! His voice was like thunder and his eyes like lightning! He protected my home and my chickens!"

"Your... chickens." Ingill didn't know how to address this, except with a polite smile. Whatever this false disciple was, he had apparently helped Andries and had bolstered his faith. Still, she had no way of knowing if this wouldn't turn around and bite them in the ass, later. "Could you tell me more? About what happened and what he was like?"

"Like a storm!" Andries's eyes widened and his hands fluttered. "A man all blue and crackling, with..."
a voice that echoed off the hills. A spirit! A real spirit!"

Not that Ingill had ever met a spirit. Or a disciple. Or any demons, really. Things were fairly quiet in the Chantry where she'd studied.

"He spoke to me, saying he would find the thief and put him on the path of righteousness. Saying I should praise the name of justice, because that's what would be done, of course."

"And this... spirit found the thief?" Ingill's eyebrow arched upward, and Andries noticed she always seemed to be looking down at him, even though he was taller.

"The thief was one of the sand cats. The note -- I have a note! -- said it wouldn't bother me again and to nail down a loose board on the side of the coop, where the cat was getting in." Andries gestured at the offering. "He didn't save the chicken, but he left it with the note as proof. So, I cooked it and brought half to offer in thanks."

Ingill found it all hard to believe. The spirit of a disciple, appearing just to stop a sand cat from stealing chickens? If not for rumours of other, similarly baffling stories, Ingill would write the man off as crazy, no matter how many times she'd seen him over the years. "A... note. That was considerate of him."

As she spoke, Andries reached into the folds of his robes and pulled out the scrap of paper, holding it reverently in his hands as though it were a sacred artefact. It occurred to Ingill that, to him, it probably was. Ingill looked it over, and it certainly looked real. She could think of no reason why Andries would fake a letter like this.

"I see," she said, handing the letter back, which Andries slipped right back into his robes. "Is there anything in particular you did to... summon Hector to you?"

"Only prayer, Sister," Andries said, bowing his head. "I asked others for help, put up notices, but no one seemed able to help me. And then I heard the rumours about Hector helping the people of our town, and I prayed for his aid!"

"I am glad your prayers were answered," Ingill said even as she puzzled all this over.

"Watch your step, Sister." Peryn offered a hand to Ingill, as they made their way toward the site of recent vandalism against a statue of Maferath. Of course, it was the middle of the night. Whoever this vandal might be, they wouldn't try again by daylight, and last week was the third week in a row of tasteless slogans painted across the statue, always on the same day of the week.

Ingill thought it might be related to the increase in fanaticism around Hector, given that Maferath had slain Hector, as well, when he turned Andraste over to Hessarian. The quotes lent themselves to that interpretation, as well. No doubt whoever this 'Hector' spirit was, he'd show up to investigate. Ingill thought he might even be responsible for it. Either way, they'd know, once and for all.

Peryn held a finger to his lips and stepped into a small space between two buildings, gesturing for Ingill to follow. "If we wait here," he whispered, "they won't see us. Not the vandal and not the... well, if it's a real spirit, it will see us anyway."

Which meant that it would see them if it was a demon as well, and Ingill was glad she had brought Peryn along. He'd told her all manner of stories about spirits and demons, and though she was curious, she was in no hurry to encounter one up close.
They had been waiting hours by the time anyone showed up, long enough that Ingill was leaning
against the wall with her eye closed, nearly dozing on her feet. Gently, Peryn shook her awake, and
Ingill followed his line of sight to the group of hooded youths congregating around the statue. Three
of them. No spirit or demon yet, but with luck, he would come.

"Kids," Peryn sighed as the vandals greeted each other, not even bothering to whisper.

The next movement was just a flicker in the corner of Peryn's eye, and at first he wasn't sure he'd
seen it. A moment later, it looked like a ball of lightning, crackling blue with sparks flying off. The
thing settled into the rough shape of a man, still glowing brilliantly as it descended on the youths still
trying to climb down from the statue.

"THIS IS NOT RIGHT OR JUST." The 'spirit' boomed. "YOU CLAIM TO SPEAK FOR
HECTOR, BUT HECTOR WAS DEAR TO ANDRASTE. HE ACCEPTED HER WILL. HER
WILL IS THAT MAFERATH BE FORGIVEN. SHE FORGAVE EVEN HESSARIAN, WHO
WENT ON TO BECOME HER MOST POWERFUL ADVOCATE. SHE WILL FORGIVE
EVEN YOU."

"Holy shit! Holy shit!" A girl peered around the head of the statue, staring down at the spirit
bellowing at them. "It's the fucking spirit of Hector himself! They weren't kidding! He's real, and he's
right there yelling at us!"

"It's cool! We'll be cool!" The boy standing in Maferath's elbow, pressed back against the statue's
side, looked terrified. "We didn't mean no disrespect against Andraste. I love Andraste! I just... you
know... didn't understand the forgiveness thing."

"AND NOW THAT YOU UNDERSTAND, YOU WILL PUT AN END TO THIS
DEFILEMENT." It was a command, not a suggestion, and the youths all nodded vigorously from
their respective perches. "AND YOU SHALL DESCEND FROM THE STATUARY."

"Of course!" said the boy at Maferath's elbow as he started to swing himself down. "We was
planning to!"

"Thank you, Hector ser," said the girl, still staring as she clambered down.

Something like agitation flashed over the spirit's face, but it was gone the next moment as all three
youths returned to solid ground. "AND COME MORNING, YOU WILL COME BACK HERE
TO CLEAN THE STATUE."

"What?" blurted the third vandal. The spirit turned flashing blue eyes his way, and the boy quailed,
putting the statue between himself and the stern-eyed spirit. "Uhh, I mean... Yeah. Of course. Sure,
Hector-ghost-man!"

"IT IS ONLY JUST."

Ingill turned ask Peryn about the nature of the creature in front of them, but Peryn was staring at
Hector as though the light of the Maker himself shone through his eyes.

"I cannot believe..." he began, awed. "The rumours were true."

Ingill snorted and crossed her arms, glaring at the 'spirit' before them. She still looked unconvinced,
but she was having greater and greater difficulty coming up with a reason to be. "Then why's he
speaking Ander?" she finally demanded. "Hector's Nevarran."

"It is the nature of spirits to speak so they will be understood. Can a man called forth after his death
Not learn a foreign language to get his point across?" Peryn pressed his lips together and looked sideways at Ingill. "I am a templar. I know about spirits. We are taught to know them, because of the healers. That is a spirit. Don't you feel it?"

"It feels like a storm coming," Ingill muttered. "I doubt the Revered Mother will be happy if that thing starts a fire with all that lightning."

Peryn shook his head in amazement. "The spirit of one of Andraste's disciples stands in front of you, and that is your concern? Are you not curious? Don't you have questions for him?"

"I have many questions," Ingill muttered. "And all we have ascertained so far is that he is a spirit. Whether he is Hector's spirit is a matter of speculation."

Peryn offered her a look that fell somewhere between pitying and amused. "You are terribly cynical, for a priest."

Ingill watched the spirit lecture the youths some more before they left with bowed heads. At least she wouldn't have to worry about making sure the sculpture was cleaned after. She had no doubt they would obey the spirit's orders. "Blind faith can be inspiring, but it is also dangerous and often foolish. I would like to believe this is Hector, but I still have doubts."

Peryn stepped out of the alley. "Hector!" he called out to the spirit. "My thanks! We were waiting to catch them, too!"

The spirit shimmered as it turned toward him. "JUSTICE HAS BEEN DONE."

"Now, just a moment!" Ingill squeezed her way between Peryn and a stack of barrels, to face the spirit. "Are you saying you're really the spirit of Hector? And we're supposed to just believe you?"

"I HAVE ASKED NOTHING OF YOU BUT THAT YOU LIVE JUST AND RIGHTEOUS LIVES." The glow grew brighter, further obscuring the details of the spirit at its centre. "HAVE I DONE WRONG?"

"Well, no, but--"

"THEN WHY DOES IT MATTER WHO I AM OR WHO I MAY ONCE HAVE BEEN? I AM JUSTICE."

"Now, see here!" Ingill barked, not accustomed to being addressed so lightly by any man, dead or living. She grabbed at what she thought was the spirit's arm, even as Peryn tried to hold her back. "You can't just--"

As her fingers wrapped around the spirit's wrist, she slumped back into Peryn's grasp. The spirit backed away. "SHE IS FINE. SHE WILL WAKE IN AN HOUR OR TWO. IT IS OUR NATURE. I APOLOGISE."

Peryn shifted Ingill's weight into his arms. For a woman full of such will, she was surprisingly light. "I understand, Hector," he said, dipping his head in reverence. "I thank you for dealing with these hooligans so effectively. I doubt the same words from me would have had quite the same effect."

"THANKS ARE NOT NEEDED. IT WAS MY DUTY, SER PERYN. SOMETHING THAT YOU UNDERSTAND BETTER THAN MOST."

"You know my name?" Peryn said in an awed whisper.
"I SEE MUCH. SEE TO YOUR FRIEND. I HAVE MUCH WORK LEFT TO DO."

"Of course." Peryn bowed his head as deeply as he could with Sister Ingill in his arms. "Be well, Hector!" A pointless thing to say to a spirit, but it seemed the polite thing to do.

As he watched, the spirit left, the blue glow fading as he disappeared into the darkness.

Sister Ingill woke in her own bed, in the Chantry, with Mother Yotte at her side. "Mother, I saw a spirit," she said, still trying to put together the rest of what had happened. They'd gone to catch those troublemakers, and the spirit had done it for them. And then... things got a little fuzzy.

"I know!" Yotte smiled indulgently, patting Ingill's hand. "Ser Peryn tells me you were very brave. I heard you tried to wrestle with it!"

"Wrestle? Did I?" Ingill blinked, looking surprised at the thought, as she sat up, clutching the blanket to her chest... which was still clad in the robes she'd gone out in.

"He told me that you grabbed for the spirit, and when you caught it, you fainted. The spirit apologised. You should know that. But, the way Peryn tells it, I think maybe you shouldn't go around grabbing spirits, unless you'd like a nap." Yotte chuckled. "You have come to no harm. The spirit went away, and Ser Peryn carried you back here, so I had him put you right in bed. He's downstairs sitting an all-night vigil before the statue of--"

"Hector," Ingill replied. "He's convinced, just like the rest of the village, that this is really the spirit of Hector come to save us. It doesn't seem right! What interest would Hector, dead or alive, have in the Anderfels?"

"We are a people of great faith, Sister," Yotte replied firmly.

"But... scaring off vandals, saving chickens? If this is the spirit of Hector, doesn't he have better things to do?"

Yotte's face fell in disappointment, disappointment in her. Ingill disliked how that one look could affect her. After years of working together, even when they argued or disagreed, Ingill couldn't stand to see that look on Yotte's face.

"The Maker makes himself known in the small things as well as the big things, Sister. You know this. No burden is too small, no hardship too trivial. And look what such 'small' deeds have wrought! In all my life, I have not seen this chantry so full so often. Whether the spirit is Hector or not, it is clearly doing the Maker's work."

Ingill wanted to argue, wanted to press the issue, but Yotte had already made up her mind. For all her wisdom, the woman could be dreadfully stubborn. "I see," she said, eyes to the floorboards. "Thank you, Mother."

Yotte smiled. "Regardless, it should please you to know that the statue of Maferath has been scrubbed and polished nearly into nonexistence."

"I wonder if we could trick them into washing the rest of the statues, while it's still so warm out..." Ingill speculated, turning to put her feet on the floor. "The water should cool them off, and it would keep them out of trouble."

"I'd hardly think of it as tricking them." Yotte lifted an eyebrow. "Perhaps just creatively convincing
them. Maybe you could offer them something. How much longer is Peryn in town, this circuit? Perhaps he could tell them stories about the spirits he's met."

Ingill was fairly sure the last thing these little hoodlums would want was to spend time with a warrior of the faith, but it was definitely a thought. Or maybe a jar of those dates Mack brought to be given to the poor. If anyone counted as poor, it was those families. As little as she liked Jan and Mack, perhaps they, too, had their uses. "Stories about spirits. Hmm. Maybe we should hear them, first."
Chapter Summary

Cormac makes a stupid mistake and follows it with a bad decision.

The market in Kassel was busy, as it always was, and Cormac really only came across the river for things you couldn't get in the village. Imports, mostly, like the sungold melons Anders liked, or that ridiculously expensive yellow fruit from Par Vollen -- any of the ridiculously expensive fruits from Par Vollen, really, or black-market lyrium, for Anders's work. He'd managed to haggle the trader down a bit on a few pounds of bananas, since they were the kind that was only good for putting in bread. The Anderfels and Tevinter had the ones that were good for frying, but the other ones from Par Vollen were good for just peeling and eating.

He considered stopping in the dwarven market, to see if there was any good meat, but setting foot in there without Anders meant he was going to walk out with four sets of dishes and some dwarfy wall art he didn't really have the space to hang, however good he thought it'd look in the library. And that was when he spotted the woman sitting next to a table displaying goat cheese, with signs in three languages, only two of which he could read. Her skin wasn't as dark as his -- few people's was -- but she was definitely the darkest merchant in the market, that day. He hadn't seen any Rivaini up here, since Isabela dropped them at the docks, and he stood out like a sore thumb, so he made his way over to her, hoping to finally shake hands with someone else of similar ancestry. And buy some goat cheese, which would go amazingly with ... almost anything he had the ingredients for, right now, as he thought on it.

With a wide smile, he offered some of the few Rivaini words he knew -- a common greeting. He'd have to go back to common, shortly, but he hoped that would give him an opening to more conversation than the price of cheese.

The woman smiled in reply, but it was a tired, apologetic sort of smile. "Apologies, friend," she said in accented Common and in the tight way that said she had spoken these words before, "but I am not Rivaini. I did recognise the word 'hello' in there but not much else. I do hope you speak Common? Or Ander?" She repeated the phrase in Ander to be sure.

Cormac nodded, his face darkening a bit across the tops of his cheeks. "I only know the other two words," he admitted in Common. "You're not Rivaini, and I'm terrible at it. My mother was a Marcher, and I just never had the time... Do you mind if I ask where you're from? I don't see many people who look like me, up here, so I just... assumed. Sorry. I swear I'm actually here to buy something."

"What? Did you think you Rivaini had all the colour in the world?" Her words were biting but tempered with her amusement. "I am from the mountains," the woman said, pointing vaguely north, in the direction of the Donarks. "The air here is... different, but I am getting used to it. Which is not to say that I like it. The smell of fish will never leave me."

"You and my brother-in-law," Cormac laughed, as he studied the bundles of cheese. "He came up from the Marches to visit, and spent days complaining about the sea and the smell of fish. Not that I
blame him, but it's not the fish that bothers me, it's just the sea." He shuddered. "Mountains. North. The Donarks-- Oh! Yothandi! Of course, we're in the Anderfels. I just ... left my brain in my other hood, this morning. Left the house without it. My friend's a great fan of the sungold melons from up there. I just didn't think."

"It happens to the best of us," the trader said, still looking amused at his expense. "I don't suppose your friend is a great fan of goat cheese as well? Melons I do not have, but goat cheese I do and only the best." Her voice and demeanour changed as she put on her customer smile. She pointed out the more popular cheeses she had on display and offered him a sample to try.

"I love goat cheese. And I am interested in buying a bit of most of the types you have." Cormac accepted a sample of a cheese variety he wasn't familiar with -- spicy and heavily herbed, a bit greasy. "And a lot of that one. That's intense. What is it?" He started counting coins through the leather of his pouch, trying to decide how much he could afford. "And you don't also have milk, do you? I guess that wouldn't make the trip down the mountain as well as the cheese..."

"We call it gevrik," said the trader as she started pulling out paper for wrapping the cheese. "We marinate the cheese in oil and a few spices you won't find down here." Her smile was smug as she wrapped a wheel of gevrik in the paper. "And we do have milk! Fresh, too. Why bring the milk down the mountain when we can bring the goats? A couple of them, anyway. They mind the journey less than my travel companions." She gave Cormac a long-suffering look as she reached for more paper a different wheel of cheese. "How much would you like?"

"A pound each of these five and half of those three. There's only so much space in the icebox."

Cormac chuckled. "And a quart of the milk -- I'm the only one drinking that." He read the numbers on the signs and started counting coins as the trader wrapped cheese. A few pieces of silver would cover it, not that he generally admitted to carrying silver, this far from the doors of the Chantry.

"Do your goats fare well in the valley?" he asked, laying the silver coins on the table under his fingers. "I have a brother-in-law whose family were goat farmers in southern Ferelden, if you can believe it. Of course, it was southern Ferelden, and every third house was goat farmers around there. Couldn't get married without a goat."

"Why? Were the goats your officiants?" She laughed. "What an odd thing. But I suppose it must be saner than whatever it is they do in Orlais. Or Tevinter." Her face scrunched as though she had tasted something sour. "As for our goats, they don't complain too loudly, but the heat bothers them a little. It is a different world, up in the mountains."

"The goats were proof the person doing the proposing had any business trying to start a household. Goats and wheat delivered to the lucky victim's mother. It's how two of my brothers got married, and that goat's still keeping one of my brothers company, last I heard." Cormac moved his hand off the silver and started to load the cheese into his basket. "Would you consider selling one of the goats? I have someone whose mother deserves good company and ready milk." It was an afterthought, really. He mostly just wanted to see the look on Anders's face, when Ulla showed up to thank them for the goat. And he had no doubt she'd be able to give it a good home -- and if, for some reason, she couldn't? He could. He wouldn't mind having something to keep the camel company. Poor Harellan got lonely out there.

"Oh? Planning to propose to some lucky lady?" She still seemed dreadfully amused by the whole thing. "That's sweet. And I suppose it makes a certain amount of sense. As for the goats..." She bit her lip, mulling it over as she finished wrapping up the rest of Cormac's cheese. "Well, we do rely on them for milk and cheese, and that's our livelihood. I suppose we could part with one, but we could
"The going rate for a fully-decked wedding goat, in Kirkwall, was two sovereigns, or so I'm told. I'd pay the same for the goat with no trappings. Would that buy you the time for the next generation to age up?" Cormac asked, without batting an eye. He knew the price of goats and that Fenris had probably gotten ripped off horribly, but he also knew he could afford it, and two double griffons would be more than most Ander people would see in a year.

The woman's eyes widened before she could school her expression into something more neutral. "That... would be sufficient, yes. Allow me to fetch her for you. And some of that goat milk you asked for." As she passed the assistant helping her tend her stall, she said to him out of the side of her mouth, "Clearly we're in the wrong business."
Chapter Summary

Anders is offended. Ulla has no idea what's going on. Cormac finds this just as funny as he thought he would.

Cormac had asked Ulla to come by in a few days and let them know how the goat was working out for her. If she needed help with it, or if it just wasn't the right goat for her, he wanted to know. Saddling someone with a goat, long term, just for a laugh, wasn't really on his list.

And, of course, he'd neglected to tell Anders any of this.

Instead, he'd made parfaits of goat cheese and fruits of Par Vollen, layered with the light cakes of millet and egg that went so well in these sorts of things, every day for breakfast. And every day, after breakfast, he wound up spending a couple extra hours in bed. A duel of desserts, Anders called it.

And today, as they lay there panting, there came a knock at the door.

"You should get that. Warden stamina. I'm sure you can get up faster than I can, right now," Cormac teased, reaching for his robes all the same.

Anders's whine floated up from the vicinity of Cormac's chest. "Just because I can doesn't mean I want to," he grumbled. But he only lazed a moment longer before getting up, toeing his robes over to him from where they'd ended up tossed against the bookcase. As much as he wanted to ignore the knock and wait for their visitor to go away, he knew they got visitors rarely enough for it to be important. Someone else in need of a healing potion, perhaps.

When Anders saw his mother on the other side of the door, he was glad he'd taken an extra moment to straighten his robes. "Mama?" He tucked his hair behind his ears, hoping it didn't look too mussed, and stepped to the side to let her in. "This is a pleasant surprise!"

Ulla beamed and pulled Anders down so she could kiss his cheek. "Surprise? Did Mack not tell you he invited me? Shame on him!"

Anders blinked, trying to remember if Cormac had said anything of the like but coming up with nothing. "No?"

Cormac smiled as he staggered out of the bedroom, hair more fluffed on one side than the other. "My mistake. You've been distracting me. I must've forgotten to mention it."

He made his way toward the middle of the room and threw a fistful of herbs into the fire to clear the smell of what they'd so obviously just been doing.

"Well," Ulla said, patting Anders's arm proudly, "your father almost choked to death on his tongue, but Mack brought us the most thoughtful gift. You know how much your father likes milk, and I'm getting much too old to be going to the market for it every day. And Mack brought us a goat! Can
you believe it! I'd always heard noblemen were stingy bastards, but you picked a good one. Some Marcher city must be missing him!

Anders's brain stalled at the word "goat". Red splashed across his cheeks and down to his chest, as he shot a horrified look at Cormac over his mother's shoulder. He'd deny that he almost choked on his tongue, just to insist he had nothing in common with his father.

Narrowing his eyes, Anders pointed a finger at Cormac. "Fuck you. The answer's still 'no', goat or no goat."

"Did I ask you? I don't think I asked you." Cormac smiled wider and batted his eyes. "I just bought your mum a goat, because she needed a goat, and there was a very pleasant Yothandi merchant selling a goat." Which wasn't quite true, but it was close enough. "Same one I bought all the goat cheese from."

"Ket, do sit down." Ulla patted his chest. "That's an awful lot of shouting over a goat. What's going on here?" She raised her eyebrow and squinted suspiciously up at Anders. "Mack, why don't you get him a glass of water. He's looking a little red. I don't want him fainting."

"Fainting when red? Is that a thing you do?" Cormac actually had the decency to look a bit concerned as he made for the kitchen to get a glass of ice water. A pitcher, probably, now that he thought of it. They all likely needed a cool drink.

"I'm fine, mama," Anders insisted, waving off her concern even as he let her herd him into a seat. "Mack is clearly making a terrible joke, and it caught me by surprise. The goat didn't come with any wheat, did it?" If it was just a goat, it wouldn't count as a proposal, right?

Ulla tilted her head. "Mack brought her over with a bag of mixed grain," she said, her voice tipping up in an almost-question. "Should he not have? The goat needs to eat something!"

Anders groaned and dropped his face into his palms. That wasn't quite the lace and sheaves of wheat Fenris's goat had come with, but it was probably the closest equivalent outside of Ferelden.

"I'm afraid I do not see the joke," said Ulla. "I thought it was terribly sweet. And generous!"

Cormac came back with a pitcher in one hand and three pieces of the good stemware in the other, because it was the easiest thing to carry three of in one hand. "Cold water for all of us. Can't have anyone passing out in this heat."

"He'll never admit it, but Ewald is very thankful for the icebox, by the way. Cold water has gotten very popular in our house, all of a sudden." Ulla patted a beanbag, inviting Cormac to sit. "So, Ket says this goat is some sort of terrible joke? I don't understand."

"A goat and three sheaves of wheat delivered to someone's mother is a rural Fereldan marriage proposal. I've got two brothers who got married that way. The first time, the goat didn't arrive with any indicator of who it was for, and for one blighted awful moment, I thought it might have been from him," Cormac gestured at Anders. "But, you'll notice this goat wasn't dressed in lace and laden with wheat, so..."

Ulla's eyebrows rose towards her hairline. "So Ket thought you were proposing to him?" She swatted Anders's arm. "And that was your reaction? You could do worse! You think you can do better?"
Anders leaned away from his mother and her disapproval, the beanbag making a shushing sound as he shifted. "No! That's not it! I'm a mage, mama. I'm not getting married in a chantry!"

That wasn't the whole of it, not when he thought about Karl and about what mages were or weren't supposed to have, but there was only so much heartache he was willing to burden his mother with.

Ulla's eyes softened, and instead of swatting Anders's arm again, she squeezed it. To Cormac, she said, "I'd marry you."

"I'm not the marrying type, I'm afraid," Cormac teased, pouring water for all of them. "Just breaking hearts all across Thedas." He paused. "Not his, though. I was going to stab the last person who broke his heart, but he beat me to it. I don't think I could ask for a better friend. Here, show her what I got you before we left Kirkwall, and I'll tell that story. Well, not that story. The one about what it is."

"Something special?" Ulla asked, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth as she picked up the water, and tried to settle the idea of these two kind men, one of them her son, killing someone. And the way Cormac mentioned it so casually. It must have been much more than a broken heart, if he wasn't joking. "I don't know, that sounds like you have some intentions, whatever you have to say about it."

"I bought you an icebox," Cormac deadpanned. "I'm just that kind of guy."

Anders leaned into his mother and said in a loud whisper, "Maybe he has intentions on you."

Ulla tutted and swatted him in the arm again. "If I were unmarried and a few decades younger, I might have done something with that." She winked at Cormac. "But show me this gift!"

Anders sighed as though greatly put-upon and reached into the neck of his robes, hooking a finger around the chain and pulling out the amulet he wore under his clothes.

"Jewellery?" Ulla said with a hopeful eyebrow tilt.

"Don't read too much into it, mama," Anders laughed.

"No? There's a big difference between jewellery and an icebox, Ket."

"It was a year for jewels. Particularly that kind." Cormac shook his head. "He doesn't wear it out, because it's Tevinter. Never mind where I got it, it reminded me of him, when I saw it, so I hung onto it for a while. Kept forgetting to pass it on. That's not really important. What's important is that it's the kind of thing you really only give your best friend. That jewel... isn't really a jewel. I have some talents in turning ... things ... into shiny rocks."

"Really? Is it very difficult? You could make a lot of money doing that around here. The Chantry would blink at you and coins would fall out. They're always looking for gems for those murals of Andraste." Ulla smiled and tilted the amulet in the light. "That looks very much like the real thing."

"It used to be the body of the man who murdered my mother and ... at least five other women we know about. And And-- Jan-- this git stayed with me and took care of my family through the worst of it. The jeweller I took it to, to have it set, seemed to think it was a real gem, too. Yellow diamond, he told me. I don't know. It looks good there. It seemed important." Cormac shrugged and reached out to tug on Anders's beard. "That's the kind of relationship we have. I brought him food, when he
wasn't eating. He took care of my family, when our mother died. I gave him a home. He gave me a home. I don't know what I'd do without him, but it's not... It's not like that. It's not the kind of thing you get married over, unless it's political."

Ulla gave him a funny look, still turning the amulet over in her hand. "My dear, that sounds an awful lot like a marriage to me." She opened her mouth as though to say something, only to close it in a sad smile as she thought better of it. But Anders suspected he knew that look. She was thinking of her husband and comparing. "But, that does not matter." Ulla dropped the amulet back to Anders's chest and patted his cheek. "What matters is that you each take care of each other."

"His cooking helps," Anders drawled.

"But, Mack..." Ulla went on, "I did not know this about your mother. That is a terrible thing to live through." They had mentioned killing again, turning the body of a man into a jewel, but though it frightened her, Ulla felt a grim sort of satisfaction that they had killed such a man.

"My father was a mercenary, and he died at home, in bed." Cormac laughed, rubbing his forehead. "They died each other's deaths. I just keep telling myself that. But, we got the bastard, even if it was much too late. I keep telling myself that, too. You know why he's... that? I had to have something back from him. I couldn't make any good of him while he lived, and I tried. I tried for all of a moment or five, before he tried to kill us all. In death, at least he could be beautiful. And that would be good enough."

"You are someone special, Mack," Ulla murmured, "to try to find beauty in something -- in someone -- so horrible. I don't know if I would have had it in me." She thought of the Templars taking Ket, thought of Jannik leaving. Those were the two most painful moments of her life, and she had never thought to look for any beauty there. She didn't think she could, even now with Ket back at her side. "I'm sure your mother would be proud of you."

"She said as much, before she died. I thought, for a moment, we could save her, but... There are things you just don't come back from." Cormac shrugged again, moving closer to Anders. "But, my father taught me to try, until trying becomes dangerous to someone else. And then to be quick and merciful. I like to think I'm merciful. He's just. We keep each other from slipping too far -- me into indulgence, him into vengeance. Between us, we do all right."

Without a word, Anders reached out and folded Cormac under his arm. Years later, it still had to be a difficult subject. "We do all right," Anders agreed. "No goats necessary."

Ulla barked a laugh. "Well, I'm keeping the goat. Your father would die before admitting it, but he's given her a name."

"And as long as it's not a marriage goat, he's welcome to call it whatever he wants," Anders replied. Then again, if it had been a marriage goat, he suspected his father would have had a few choice names to call the goat then too. Either way, Anders hoped the goat ate his socks.

"I'm hoping he's more creative than my brother. One 'Goatilda' in the family is enough." Cormac chuckled and picked up his glass again. "You don't figure Sandal's managed to enchant her yet, do you?" He laughed and tipped his head toward Ulla. "Sandal's a good kid. His father... sort of... is my brother's steward. But, Sandal's a bit odd. Kid's got to be in his mid-twenties, by now, but you wouldn't know it -- a dwarf with no beard, if you can believe it. Only got one word to him, most of the time -- 'enchantment'. And he's really exceptional at it, too! Man's got a talent! I'd hardly trust my runes to anyone else, but Gytha, and she's a bit of a specialist."
"A beardless dwarf who makes runes? And he's part of your brother's household? Your brother -- which brother is this? He must be very wealthy to afford this." Ulla's eyebrows arced upward. "And he's ... trying to enchant your brother's... marriage goat?"

"Oh, you leave Sandal alone with anything, he'll try to enchant it. The table in the kitchen wound up with plate warmers in it, at one point. Great kid." Cormac laughed some more, remembering Anders and Sandal playing together, with that ridiculous elven helmet. "And my brother does well for himself, with my investments. He's financed a substantial part of the reconstruction and renovation of Kirkwall, and at least one of the other brothers is working on the construction, itself. That's the one you met. The next one down is the one paying for it. The next one down from that is... I don't even know what he's doing, but I'm sure I'd have heard if he'd been swallowed by demons. He's a Templar. Couldn't handle the idea that he couldn't punch me in the teeth, so he had to go do something about it. And my sister's writing detailed examinations of the history of Nevarran architecture and funerary practises, because that's just a thing she does. Pays for her wardrobe with it, too, so it's a fair bit she's made doing it."

"Well, I suspect she's a bit too busy wedding planning to do too much of that?" Anders said with a shrug. "At least she'll be less manic than Artie was. I think. I hope."

"Don't get too excited, mama. He didn't even get her a goat." Or so Anders assumed. He suspected Artie would have said something about that in his letters. "Then again, who would he have given the goat to, anyway? Anton?"

"My sister's... Yeah. She's getting married." Cormac shook his head. "I don't really like the guy. It's political. But, he's a prince, and she thinks he's adorable. Blah, blah, he's like the tiny little dogs they have in Orlais, always barking at shadows and strangers. I hope she keeps him on a short leash."

"She's marrying into a royal family? Oh, that must just be a dream come true, for her! Every little girl wants to grow up to be a queen. Or a Warden." Ulla smiled brightly and settled intently into her seat, putting herself in a better position to absorb all of this. "So, what's wrong with this prince, hm? Is he just mean, or...?"

"He's not very smart, and he used to be a Chantry brother. And every time he gets pissed off, people die. A lot of the time, before anyone can question them. It's not that I necessarily disagree with all the deaths, but some of them were totally unnecessary. I mean, you don't hunt down and slaughter an entire mercenary company for doing what they were paid to do. You hunt them down and figure out how to make them tell you who hired them, and that's who you go after. But, no. He killed them and then spent three years trying to figure out who hired them. He's just... he really doesn't think things through."

"What can I say?" said Anders. "Some people cannot handle the glory of my existence. The prince is mortal danger was expected."

"Kill Ket?" she said, turning worried eyes on her son. They had hinted that they had been a part of something political, something to do with mages and how the Chantry treated them, but she hadn't wanted to believe that her son was in mortal danger. A foolish thought, she knew, considering he had once been a Warden. Mortal danger was expected.

"What can I say?" said Anders. "Some people cannot handle the glory of my existence. The prince is
a fool. A politically empowered fool, but a fool nonetheless. I'm not exactly worried." Either way, it was probably best that they not mention to his mother that they were going to that wedding.
Cormac made an offer, but neither Anders nor Justice have gotten back to him about it. Finally, he makes the same offer again.

"So, I've been meaning to ask you -- both of you, really -- if you've given any thought to the offer I made, while Fenris was here." Cormac sat on one of the few surfaces that wasn't littered with open books and prepped ingredients. He took a long breath, and the indigo light started at the tips of his fingers, crawling back across his skin. He could feel Justice's attention shift, as soon as he'd done it, and that... might not have been the best idea, now that he thought about it. "I've only glowed for you in a pantsless situation once, and it wasn't really the best of circumstances. It could've been good, though. Aside from that whole evil magister demigod problem. Which we don't have, right now."

Cormac leaned to the side to get a better look at what Anders was working on. "And if that's what I think it is, in about ten minutes, you're going to have to ignore that for a whole candle."

A strained laugh bubbled out of Anders as he worked, acting, for the moment, like this potion required most of his attention. Silly, he knew, since Cormac was aware that he could make this brew with his eyes closed. "I was beginning to think you had forgotten about that," he said, shooting Cormac's glowing fingers a speculative glance over the steaming pot.

Justice was sitting up, pressing in behind his eyes. The spirit was willing, it seemed, and Anders tried not to squirm at the memory of Fenris's fingers inside him. If Cormac could do that, too? Well. Cormac was very good at spoiling Anders.

Anders cleared his throat. "You make a compelling case, but put those away. I still need a few more minutes here, and for once, Justice is the one complaining about needing to work."

Another breath, and the glow at Cormac's fingertips vanished. "How about I just stop distracting you, while you finish up in here. I'll go feed Purrsino and see about wearing less. But, if I run out of things to do, I'm coming back in here. Don't start thinking you've got time to set up another batch."

He slid off the table and blew a loud kiss. Touching Anders right now would not be in his best interest. Either of their best interest, really.

The cat -- still a wildcat, really, despite having taken up residence because of the constant flow of roast chicken -- was easily attended and very pleased with the offering, that evening, and Cormac squeezed past him to check on the camel, for the night. Harellan seemed to appreciate Purrsino, too, and the two of them could be seen in the shade of the camel barn, throughout the day, Harellan kneeling while Purrsino tried to lick him clean. It was good, Cormac thought. Harellan needed a companion, and a cat was far less trouble than another camel.

Coming back inside, Cormac stripped off his robes and tossed them on a chair, as he passed through the main room. He cast a few spells to clean himself up and refresh that spiced orange scent that clung to his skin, and started to call the Fade to him.
Anders may have rushed through the potion a little more than he would have liked, but Justice was impatient and Anders was agreeable enough. He only cleaned up what he needed to, closed up vials and put away ingredients. He would wash the instruments later.

Justice smelled the Fade before they entered the room, like the air just after a thunderstorm, and as always it made Justice ache. Spirits were not meant to feel or understand loss, but he did.

But a spirit of Justice was also not meant to feel affection, and that was what he -- what Anders -- felt when they saw Cormac, naked except for the glow of the Fade. Anders meant to say something sexy, something clever, but what came out was, "Did you feed Purrsino?"

"I did. And Harellan." Cormac smiled and tugged at Anders's robes, unwrapping him like a remarkably awkwardly-shaped gift. "I told you, once, I'm not just for one of you. I accepted both of you, and I want both of you. I just always thought I had nothing to offer Justice. I'm not made of lyrium."

His fingers lingered on some of the safer scars on Anders's chest. Long lines, instead of that massive ... actually, it was looking a bit less lumpy, since they'd come up here, like maybe Anders had the magic to spare for himself, now. Still, Cormac kept his hands off that one. That wasn't his decision to make.

Justice did like the elf's lyrium, or so he informed Anders, and, really, some days Anders could do without all the extra commentary. "The lyrium is nice," he relayed to Cormac, "but you have a few other... attributes that weigh in your favour." As he spoke, he ran his hands over Cormac's arms, down his sides, pleased by the soft give of skin where he was once used to feeling muscle and bone. He gave Cormac's wonderfully plush bottom a teasing smack to remind Cormac that it was one of those attributes.

"I'm sure my attributes make me much more appealing to one of you." Cormac laughed, pressing his indigo lit skin against Anders, as he closed the gap between them. His fingers darted over all the old scars he didn't have to look to find -- an archer, an archer with a knife, templars, more templars, yet another templar, a broodmother. That last he traced up the back of Anders's thigh to where it passed between his legs and gave the firm ass cheek above it a tight squeeze. "You have been pretty consistent about my appeal."

Cormac pulled Anders with him as he leaned in the direction of the bed, turning to avoid hitting a bedpost, in the hope of sprawling the wrong way across the bed, at some point soon. They really had gotten an enormous bed, and he fit almost as well across it as he did along it. Angle really didn't matter in the way it had on that tiny cot in the back of Anders's clinic, all those years ago.

"Well, your appeal has been consistent," Anders replied, letting Cormac and gravity bear him to the bed. He braced himself above Cormac on his elbows so as not to crush him. As Cormac was fond of pointing out, there was an awful lot of him.

Anders shivered where indigo skin touched his. The touch was less like electricity and more like static, the promise of power, of more, in Cormac's fingers, making the hair on Anders's arms stand on end. His eyes flashed blue, and Anders remembered that he didn't need to keep Justice leashed, not here, not now.

"Be careful with that," Anders said in a tone that said he hoped Cormac wasn't. He took one of Cormac's hands in his and pressed it to his lips, sucking one glowing finger between his lips. He was
relieved to find that Cormac didn't taste like Fenris, even like this, and he liked the way the Fade tickled along his tongue.

Cormac writhed, expectantly. "Careful? Now, why would I want to do that?" A few deep breaths intensified the glow, but Cormac remained solid, shielded with the Fade rather than drawn into it. "I mean, other than the part where you'd rather not slam into anything through me. That was bad. Let's not do that again. Maker. I guess it was twice, not just once. In my defence, I was drunk at the time."

He reached up to cup Anders's cheek, feeling the difference in the texture of the beard, where it pressed against the Fade, before his hand. It didn't feel more real, or less real, it just felt... differently real. As if he were perceiving it with senses he didn't usually have. Curling his fingers into Anders's hair, he ran his thumb along the curve of Anders's ear.

"Show me what you want. Both of you."

Anders let Cormac's finger slide out of his mouth, nipping the tip just hard enough to sting -- and that was an interesting feeling, the Fade against his teeth, a fine buzz against the bone, reaching to deeper nerve endings. Not for the first time, Anders wished he could remember what it had been like in the Vimmermark Mountains, between Justice and Cormac, but all he had were flashes of sensation.

But Justice remembered where he didn't, and he wanted to surround himself with that glow, to bury himself inside it until he remembered what it was like to be home. They hadn't been gentle that time, but even if Cormac hadn't complained, that wasn't how they -- Justice and Anders -- wanted it this time.

Anders brushed his lips against Cormac's, and Anders wondered when something as simple as a kiss would stop seeming so novel. Justice had him linger there a moment, just to marvel at the texture of the Fade against his lips, before Anders leaned in to worry his teeth along the lobe of one ear. "Let me taste you," he said, voice not quite Justice's rumble. "And then, let me ruin you."

With lips, teeth, and tongue, Anders traced his way down Cormac's glowing body. The Fade's crackle went well with orange.

Cormac arched and stretched, head tilting back as a long, low moan spilled out of him. "Please, yes. It's not Marketday, tomorrow. I don't have anywhere to be. I don't have to be able to walk."

As Anders moved down, Cormac bent his legs, twisting them out from under Anders's body to wrap them around Anders, instead. He kneaded Anders's back with his toes, feeling that same otherness in the texture and consistency of Anders's flesh that he'd felt with his fingers. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't in danger, and he wasn't looking at Fenris across his brother's chest... he could finally really appreciate that difference, take the time to enjoy the newness of this kind of touch. And to enjoy the same old sensation of Anders's teeth and tongue against his chest and belly. He doubted he'd ever tire of that.

But what stood out for him was that this time, he'd taken the time to invite Justice. He'd done it before, but never like this. Justice usually... it seemed like Justice usually left them to whatever they were going to do. Took part as an observer and little more. But, really watching, with Fenris -- that had been Justice. That had, as he'd noticed, usually been Justice with Fenris, and he didn't begrudge them that, but he wondered if he hadn't done enough. On the other hand, maybe he wasn't Justice's type, which was also possible, but Anders seemed to think that wasn't the case.

He paused, hands clenched at a particularly hard bite, head pressed back into the bed, and realised he
was debating with himself over whether a Fade spirit was interested in mercilessly reaming his ass. It was probably a good thing his parents hadn't survived to this point, although he had little doubt his father would've found it hilarious, if he'd ever found out.

In the end, glowing, it seemed, was Justice's type. The growling hum around Cormac was too deep a tone to be from Anders alone. Blue light lit in cracks along Anders's skin, and in the back of their mind, Anders wondered if they should have closed the curtains. At least they didn't have neighbours to worry about.
Chapter Summary

A threesome in two bodies, lit with the Fade.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

For once, Anders let Justice drive. After some experience with Fenris, he was a bit less awkward, but Anders still coaxed him along. Anders remembered giving Artie similar instructions once, how to touch, where to bite, and he tried to remember a time where he didn't know Cormac's body like his own. With Cormac and the Fade on his tongue, Anders ran his own electricity up Cormac's thighs, a low current, to see how it would react.

"More," Cormac pleaded, as the electricity followed a somewhat different path than usual. He knew his legs. He knew that spell. But, the purpose of the spell he was using was originally deflection and refraction. He'd been tuning it from something that made him harder to hit and far more difficult to damage, if anything did land, to something that let the Fade surround him like another layer of skin. And he could hear his father's voice in the back of his head, telling him he was demon-bait. That was an accurate accusation, at the least, but Justice would protect him from anything that decided to take a closer look.

Now, it moved with him, like a lover, wrapped tight around him and passing on the pleasures Anders visited upon them. Him. The Fade wasn't another person, as much as he might argue with it, at times. And it definitely wasn't a spirit. Justice would've noticed. It was just the fabric of the next world, and as an outfit, it felt better than anything out of Orlais. It still thrummed and rippled like water, and he could feel the current of his own magic so much stronger in it, and the current of Anders's magic settled into gaps in the pattern, low pulses where gaps used to be, trills instead of peaks.

He wondered, idly, if this was anything like what Justice got out of the experience. Maybe he'd ask, when he remembered where he'd left his tongue. It had to still be attached. He was very definitely making sound.

And those were different sounds than what Anders had expected but still the kind that told him he was doing something right. His magic grew in intensity as Justice grew in confidence, hot ripples of electricity forking through the Fade's current, along Cormac's skin. Bracing an arm across Cormac's hips, pressed a jolt behind his balls just to feel his twitch.

It was more than just a twitch -- Cormac's toes dug into Anders's back, as he ground down harder against those fingers. "In--" he gasped, trying to find the rest of the words that went in that sentence. "Put that in me."

Usually, with Anders, Cormac could remember what words were and what order they went in, and he didn't have to pay attention in the least to what came out of his mouth, because it would be the right words for what he wanted. But, something about this... something about Justice so close to the surface, the difference in the thrum of the magic between them, was extremely distracting. Definitely not a bad thing, but definitely unexpected. He could understand what Fenris liked about this -- about
Justice. Maybe. Or he was totally wrong and it was some weird lyrium thing. Whatever. He knew why he liked it, and that was good enough.

Perhaps they should have done this sooner if it made Cormac this incoherent this fast. Anders smiled around Cormac's knob, teasing with his teeth, and reached lower, pressing the tip of one finger in and feeling him clench at the shock of more electricity.

Anders -- Justice -- pulled off Cormac long enough to ask, "HOW DOES IT FEEL?" Justice tried to temper his voice, to make it something closer to the low purr Anders made at times like these, but even when soft, his voice filled the room.

Cormac thought this must be what desire demons offered, and once again, he felt a bit smug, knowing he'd be able to decline -- he had everything he wanted at home, just like he always had. ... Except his brother, and that, actually was terrifying, and a thought for later, because now, right now, his perceptions were filled with the spirit that had, until a moment ago, been sucking him off. And he was ever so glad his father's ashes were still interred in Ferelden. Southern Ferelden.

"I always wondered what it would be like to touch you for longer than it took Anders to come back to me." Cormac stretched his leg, hooking his heel against Justice's tailbone. "Did you not believe me, when I said I wanted you both, or did you just have better things to do, for all these years?" he teased, pointing his toes and rolling his hips.

Justice still did not pretend to understand human desires, but he was beginning to see the appeal. What that said about him wasn't something he wanted to think about, not when he had already experienced far more than any spirit was meant to. For a moment, Anders felt guilty, but luckily Cormac was a good distraction.

"I BELIEVED YOU," Justice answered with all seriousness. "I SIMPLY DID NOT UNDERSTAND."

Anders continued to guide Justice as he spoke, pressing a second sparking finger into Cormac. Anders wondered how annoyed Cormac would be if he murmured another spell, one to ease the way.

Cormac had no opinions at all for a few very long moments, consisting mostly of whining and moaning desperately, clutching at whatever flesh or spirit was available to his hands. He panted, as the current eased back, knob still twitching with every little spark. As his eyes re-focused on the gorgeous blue-glowing... seer, honestly, he realised. What does one call someone who joins with spirits, instead of demons? A seer. Either way, his eyes began taking in the details of Anders and Justice, over him, and he smiled warmly, even as his knob dribbled streaks of clear fluid across his belly in time to the sparks inside him.

"And now?" he breathed. "Is this something you enjoy?"

Justice took a moment to weigh that word before answering. A Spirit of Justice was not meant to enjoy such things, and yet... "IT IS... PLEASANT," he admitted. At Anders's dry amusement, he wondered if there had been something wrong in that word choice. But it was pleasant, the way the Fade folded around him in the shape of Cormac's body. Even Cormac's enjoyment pleased him, the sounds he made in response to simple touches.

Still stroking Cormac's insides, Justice asked haltingly, "DO YOU WANT... MORE?" It was the sort of thing Anders asked or was asked in these situations, wasn't it?
"I do," Cormac assured him. "I want everything Anders will let you give me."

And that was it, really. Cormac wasn't sure if Justice really understood, but Anders did. Anders would know what was too much. And if they both just went with whatever Anders decided, this would probably continue to be an intensely pleasurable experience, for all three of them.

"Do you remember the first time I -- the first time we -- that one time, in front of my entire family and pretty much everyone we knew?" Cormac's eyes squeezed shut, in embarrassment. "I remember thinking that if we survived, I wanted to do that again, but with a little less being on fire, first. I remember feeling both of you, wondering what it felt like for you. Wondering if either of you would remember any of it. I think we made history. The first time a southern mage fought off a magister of tremendous power with nothing but willpower and an unconquerable ass."

Anders had a few comments about unconquerable asses, but all Justice said was, "I REMEMBER. AND I AM GLAD NO ONE IS ON FIRE THIS TIME. AND I IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE GLAD THAT WE HAVE NO AUDIENCE THIS TIME EITHER." Anders certainly was, though Justice didn't particularly care. A human sense of shame still wasn't something he understood, and Anders wasn't the best teacher of it anyway.

The Fade's current shifted as Justice pulled his fingers free, and Justice basked in its pleasant hum as he fitted the length of his body to the length of Cormac's. Like coming home, for both spirit and mage, and Anders had to wonder when Cormac had become home for him.

Cormac wrapped himself around Justice's body, feeling Anders's heart pounding against his glowing chest. "I want you," he breathed. "Both of you. All of you. Tear me apart, pretty thing."

He tangled his fingers in that long, gold hair -- lighter and longer, every time he looked at it -- and pulled them down for a kiss that left him breathless even before their lips met his. It was like standing on the cliffs of Sundermount, with a storm coming in, but sweet, somehow. A sharp, sweet, metallic taste and the smell of lightning, and then that tongue that had already tasted so much of him was in his mouth, and the storm washed through his head, bright light and visions of colour, sparks in his hair, and a bottomless feeling of rightness. Contentment. And beard-fluff.

Clutching at Justice's back, he rolled his hips, pressing himself demandingly against the lean, hard body above him.

Both of you. Cormac was the only one who had asked for that, who would ask for that, and though Justice respected that, it was Anders who appreciated it. Cormac was accepting all of him, of them. Not just whatever part he liked best.

Anders -- Justice -- bent in for another kiss, marvelling again at the difference in texture, at the sparks -- literal sparks -- that passed between them, magic to magic. There was a sweetness, a softness, to the gesture that stood in contrast to the near merciless way they pushed into Cormac, hands tight on Cormac's hips. Quick enough to hurt, but not enough to break, and always, always Anders had his healing ready at his fingertips, needed or not.

Cormac howled at the first sudden thrust, pulling Anders closer with his heels. Anders and Justice moved together, this time, the timing much more precise than it had been in the Deep Roads. And, unfortunately, less of that double thrusting. Still, if that was the price for doing this without anyone coming to harm, it was a small one. A small price for a very, very large--
"More," Cormac pleaded, rocking his hips and trying to force himself down onto that painfully thick knob, thrumming with spirit energy. "Oh, Justice, yes! Anders, please!"

He could feel the Fade clinging close to him, moulding around Justice, like it had its own thoughts on the subject. It was like being present at a reunion of lovers, being invited to participate in something far more intimate than anything he and Anders had between them. The sensations in him, on his skin, were breathtaking, and for a moment, he did forget to breathe, only taking the next breath when Anders forced the last one out of him with another jarring thrust.

"Oh, Cormac," Anders sighed with Justice's voice, because it was Cormac beneath him, albeit blurred and outlined in Fade glow. Even with the fragments of memory between them, the sensations felt new, the current of the Fade, the pulse of magic between them, setting a rhythm for Justice's hips to follow. As good as the lyrium elf had felt against and inside him, he had never enveloped him quite like this.

Chapter End Notes

September's Rhapsody Fan Chat is this Saturday, 24 September, @ 17:00 – 21:00 EDT. (What time is that?) You can catch the link to the party on Pen's Tumblr, once the party starts.

Let us know when you’re free for October’s chat, if you haven’t yet! We’ll announce the date in the October State of the Gazette.
Chapter Summary

First Meower Purrsoni objects to his humans making such loud noises. Fortunately, his solutions do not include biting asses.

Their combined light danced along the walls, rippling like water and deepening shadows. Justice did not hear the creak of the door, and he might not have heeded it if he had.

"Harder, please, harder!" Cormac begged, and there was no doubt the camel could hear him, and his screams turned blood-curdling when Anders complied, drowning out any other sounds in the room.

But, the screams of pleasure stopped suddenly as the bed dipped behind Cormac's head, weighted down by something unexpected. "What--?"

"Nyow!" Purrsoni announced, kneading his way into the thick cushion of Cormac's hair.

Justice didn't slow at all, but Cormac froze, awkwardly pinned between the spirit pistoning into him and the cat nesting against the top of his head. He still panted, little squeaks driven out of him with a few devastating thrusts, as he tried to convince the cat that on the bed -- in his hair -- was not somewhere there needed to be a cat, just then. Purrsoni, of course, wasn't having it, and he nipped at Cormac's fingers, every time the man attempted to free himself from the small but deadly bundle of fluff.

Justice noticed the cat and Cormac's flailing attempts to dislodge him, but he saw no reason to stop, at least not until Anders erupted into hiccuping laughter in the back of his mind. That laughter bubbled up from their shared lungs until it became actual sound, and Anders pressed their head to Cormac's chest until laughter became cackles.

"Purrsoni, no," Anders said, still laughing, still with his own voice. Blue still flickered over him, but Justice sat back, waiting. "Shoo. I'll feed you later!"

Attempts to dislodge the cat resulted in a warning growl -- from the cat when Anders nudged him -- and a startled yelp -- from Anders when the cat whacked him in retaliation. Cormac's hair, it seemed, was too comfy a spot to relinquish. Purrsoni's large ears twitched in a way that reminded him of Fenris.

"That is my head!" Cormac's voice was a bit strangled, between the pressure in him, the pressure on him, and the cat clawing at his scalp. "As if I needed another reason to go back to wearing plaits!"

Squirming under Anders's still-glowing body, Cormac managed to get both arms above his head at once, and he tried hugging Purrsoni, knowing that used to work with Assbiter. And it did seem to work, as Purrsoni attempted to leap over his arms... only to fail, claws thoroughly tangled in Cormac's hair. After a bit of yowling and thrashing, Purrsoni returned to his calmly coiled state.

"I don't know about you, but this was not a feature of the delightfully sexy evening I meant to have,"
Cormac deadpanned, looking straight up to where Anders leaned over him. "I'm thinking I have to get the cat a sheepskin. Maybe I need to get one for Harellan, too, so they won't fight over it." He paused. "This... we are not done, but the cat has to go."

Anders's lips were pressed thin still as he tried not to laugh. "At least he's not biting your ass," he pointed out, and though he missed precious Assbiter, he didn't miss that part of having him around.

Anders tried to poke at the cat, but he just yowled in protest. Assbiter, at least, was like an assassin; he'd strike, and then he was gone.

"Come on, Purrsino," he coaxed, slowly trying to extricate the cat's claws from Cormac's impressive hair. He really didn't want to have to get up and lure the cat away with food, but the hissing wasn't promising. "Maybe I should have called you Mewedith."

Either the cat was insulted by his comment or all the prodding had finally become aggravating, because Purrsino finally jumped up with a spitting hiss, ears back and tail twitching.

Cormac thumped the bed beside the cat with the back of one hand. "Go bother Harellan. We'll come see you both, when we're done here."

Cats. Just another thing he'd become accustomed to, in his time with Anders, he reflected, as Purrsino yowled in irritation and fled the room. He'd probably have to rinse the pee out of his sandals, later. Of course, in the moment, there was something else he'd intended to become accustomed to, with Anders -- Justice. He wondered, for a moment, if this would make kissing them stop working, when he needed to calm them down, but perhaps it would still be distracting enough, even if it wasn't something Justice would flee.

"How's your nose, sweet thing? He didn't swat you too hard, I hope." Cormac's fingers traced the side of Anders's nose, out along his cheekbone, down into that thick, plaited beard. "And you are sweet, you know. Or maybe it's Justice. Sweet like licking coins. You're the other kind of sweet. Also very pretty. Downright ornamental."

Anders barely felt the scratch across his nose, but he brushed a bit of healing along it just in case. Scars from battles were one thing, but scars from cats? Less interesting. Unless it was from a particularly vicious cat.

"Is that why you keep me around? To make the house look pretty?" Anders batted his eyelashes. "Though it's hard to feel pretty with all this beard in the way."

Anders rubbed his bearded cheek against Cormac's, and, since he figured they'd already passed into the realm of ridiculous, he made exaggerated purring noises. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Justice was waiting with all the humour of a wet cat.

"It's a pretty beard!" Cormac insisted. "It's got beads in it and everything. Maybe you should add some flowers, for the wedding. Maybe you should let me do your beard for the wedding. I've got spells for that." He tipped his head back and kissed a flicker of blue that darted across Anders's cheek. "But, that's later. Much later. Didn't we have something better to do, now? Weren't you going to make me ache for you, ache from you, hurt so good I wake up in the middle of the night just to grind against your thigh?"

His hands wandered Anders's body, tracing the deep lines of muscle. Unlike him, Anders never really got soft around the edges. Once he started putting muscle back on, that was all he put on. All
sharp edges and hard flesh, not that Cormac had any complaints.

Justice took that as his cue that the cat-sized interruption was over, and Anders yielded to his control when he pushed forward curiously. The Fade still licked around him pleasantly, like wading through sun-warmed water. And the warm, yielding body beneath him was pleasant too, Justice decided, though he wondered if that was more Anders's thought than his. Sometimes, it was difficult to tell.

"THAT WAS THE PLAN, YES," Justice agreed, voice pitched low. He was still buried inside Cormac, still felt every twitch and shift of his body, and his hips pressed forward, chasing that sparkling pleasure from before. His breath hitched, the low noise he made echoing strangely in his voice.

"Show me what you like," Cormac encouraged, tilting his hips up to take yet more of the flagpole. "Tell me what you want. It doesn't matter if it makes sense. Making sense is not a requirement, as I'm sure you've noticed, over the years."

He flexed, squeezing the flagpole inside him, feeling the touch of Justice's essence on parts of his body he never imagined a spirit might touch intentionally. "I know what Anders likes. I know he likes it when I wring him tight and tease his scars until he gives in and pounds me so hard I can barely catch my breath. I know he likes things he doesn't want to like, but I don't mind them. But, I don't know what you like."

His fingers finally made contact with the scar in the centre of Anders's upper back, just to the side of the spine, and he pulled against the Fade, feeling the rush over his hands and the warning sound of his magic finding fault in the idea.

Justice started to say that he wasn't sure what he liked either, but then that touch, there, that brush of Fade and finger just under the surface of knotted skin... that he liked. He didn't recognise the sound he made in response to that, the growling, aching note it pulled from his stomach.

"THAT IS GOOD," he said, hips moving as though on their own, muscle memory taking over when Justice's experience failed him. "YOUR HANDS. I LIKE YOUR HANDS IN MY SKIN." They weren't lined with lyrium, so they didn't have that extra bite, that dizzying high of sensation, but they still held the Fade's current, tingling and electric.

In it, Cormac noted, not on it. Had his fingers become tacky again? Were his internal organs still where he'd left them? Nothing hurt, as he flagpole slid in and out of him, so he was probably all right, yet. As long as Anders pulled out, before he became solid again, there wouldn't be too many unexpected surprises, aside from whatever else Anders left in interesting places, but there hadn't been any terrible aftereffects from that, last time.

His fingers pressed against the scar, again, and sank in to the bone of his fingertips. Just the flesh, then. Not too dangerous, whatever sounds of complaint he could hear. It wasn't the sort of thing he was used to doing, at the very least. Kneading at the scar, now, his fingers moved in time to Justice's breathing, and if he flicked one finger just so, at just the right time, he could hear Justice's breath catch.

Justice, it seemed, liked having their scars touched too, though whether that had more to do with the scar or with the spell was open to interpretation. "MORE OF THAT," he said, rutting into Cormac in a way that Anders assured him he liked. Justice was still cautious, not quite as rough with Cormac as Anders knew they could be, but he trusted Anders's advice when coaxed into shifting his weight to thrust from a different angle, when told to bite here or to press his nail there. All the while, his
senses narrowed to the ripple of indigo around him and the fingers just under his skin.

Anders was rushing him, tonight, Cormac noticed, under the haze of delicious pain and smooth pleasure. Probably to show Justice that these were good things. Probably also because Anders actually did need to get back to those potions at some point. That was fine with him -- he wasn't the one who would suffer for stopping early, and he'd get the chance to make it up to Anders, later, after he'd recovered a bit.

He kept kneading at that scar, his other hand dipping down into the barest space between their hips, to toy with a scar he knew Anders, and not just Justice, liked him touching, fingers sinking into the taut, soft curves of flesh, where Anders had once been disembowelled. This scar, he knew, was Anders's favourite, however horrible it was, and this was the scar Cormac had learnt to worship with his touch and his tongue.

The only breaks in Cormac's screams of pleasure came when he needed to breathe in.

Justice shuddered at the touch along this other scar. He had Anders's memories of sensations, his own memories of Anders's experiences, but rarely did a simple touch light up his skin like this. "CORMAC," he said, one name in two voices, Anders and Justice somehow speaking at once. It was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began when their world had narrowed to touch and heat and pressure.

Anders prayed no other cats interrupted them. Justice doubted he would stop even if they did. The bed squeaked under them, but it had survived worse.

"I'm here," Cormac panted, tongue numb with the rolling ripple of the Fade. "I promise."

And those words were the last he managed. Not even another howl for more slipped past his lips, before he lost control, clinging desperately to Justice and his own magic as he spurted across his belly, his wrist, the indigo glow of the Fade still clinging to his skin. He didn't want to hold on to the magic. It didn't want to be held. But, he knew if he let go, no one was going to be happy, and that was not what he wanted next. But, with every thrust into his rag-limp body, it got harder and harder to hold the spell where he needed it to be, and the magic started having opinions of its own.

Justice felt the magic waver but hold, the Fade still caressing and electrifying his skin, and feeling Cormac come apart around him had its own effect. He stopped holding back then, one hand tight on Cormac's hips as he chased that sparking pleasure at the base of his spine. Blue light broke over his skin in pulsing fissures, like Fade-blue veins showing just how fast his heart was beating. Then his rhythm stuttered and stilled, and he pressed in as deep as he could go, with no space even for the Fade light between their bodies. For a moment, his vision was nothing but blue and indigo, and as he floated, weightless, he thought he might be going home. Fucked into the Fade, Anders would say, and even dazed, Justice could hear his amusement.

When gravity returned, it was with extra force, and Justice -- Anders's -- body felt like lead. With noodle-limbs. Noodle-limbed lead. He laid like that for a moment, catching his breath against Cormac's neck.

Cormac wrestled his hand out from between them, draping his arm across Anders's back with the other one. "Okay," he panted, warm, loose-limbed, and aching for more. "More of that, but... less Fade. You remember what happened last time I dropped it. So, just... as soon as you can find all the parts of your body, you should probably take them out of all the parts of my body, so we don't... have problems, when I dispel this. It's really an awful lot of thinking, right now, and I want to do less
thinking about things that aren't your gorgeous naked body pressed against me."

He paused, taking advantage of the weight of Anders's body on him to enjoy the places they were both occupying at the same time. Still, having someone leaning directly on the bones of his ribs wasn't nearly as pleasing as some of the other intersections, and he had some concerns about what his belly might be doing to Anders's internal organs. Or maybe what Anders's hips were doing to his. "If you like it, I'll get better at this."

Anders huffed a laugh against -- into -- Cormac's neck, and slowly, as though uprooting himself, disentangled the two of them. It took a bit to figure out which body parts were his and where they were supposed to be. Two people occupying one space was enough, he decided. Three people was just getting excessive.

With a groan, Anders rolled to the side of Cormac, the air cool against his sweaty skin, and made sure that no part of him was touching Cormac or that enticing indigo glow. He grinned at his glowing bedmate. "I want you to know that Justice is purring like a kitten in the back of my mind."

Looks like they'd found a new way to quiet him down. Anders only wished they'd tried it sooner.

"Just what we need," Cormac groaned, stretching and slowly releasing the glow from the parts of his body he was sure weren't intersecting anything else, "another cat."

As he became sure the Fade had released him and he was quite himself and only himself again, he rolled over and nibbled Anders's collarbone. "I do like petting this one, though. And what about you, hmm? Do I have time to make you purr, or do you need to check the time on those potions, before I try to get you to make some noise for me?"

Anders tangled his fingers in Cormac's hair and muttered a curse under his breath. "Right. Shit. I have potions going." He groaned, head pressing back into the pillow. For a moment, he was tempted to ruin the batch and just stay in bed, hopefully making it squeak some more.

He pulled Cormac up to kiss him, lingering a bit longer than he meant to before pulling away. "Ten minutes," Anders said, one hand still on Cormac as he poured himself out of bed. "Then you can make me purr all you want, and I'll make you yowl." Finally, he let go, his stare smouldering before he made for the door.
Chapter Summary

The Venatori have made an impression on the Imperium, and some of their followers are attempting to spread the message beyond the borders.

As they led the camel up the wide road to the market, in the centre of the village, Cormac could already hear the shouting. A great deal of it was in Ander, but the parts in Common he could make out. Something about the only god Thedas needed being the Maker, he thought. And heresy. And villainous corruption. And the Blight.

"I think we should leave Harellan at the barber's," he said, as they came into the market to find Jan the Importer, as opposed to any of the other twelve 'Jans' in this village of only a couple hundred people, shouting at one of the Tevinter traders he sometimes bought from. The buying and selling had just about stopped, and everyone in the market was watching when Jan the Importer threw a full crate of Tevinter oils into the river.

"There is no god but the Maker, and Andraste is his prophet!" Jan the Importer shouted, waving a pamphlet in the trader's face. "I will not pay for you to raise your demon gods and bring the Blights down on us again. We have had five of them, Vasilia! Five Blights from the seven demon gods of Tevinter! I will not pay for you to raise an eighth! Nor for you to re-raise a demon the Wardens put down!"

Anders raised an eyebrow at Cormac. He didn't know how much of that Cormac had caught, but that last bit had been fairly clear. As had the tossing of the oils. He pushed forward a bit to get a better vantage point, though he was tall enough to see over most heads.

"I hope your 'Maker' is going to pay for those goods!" the Tevinter trader -- Vasilia -- snapped back. "Or is he going to strike me down with lightning for worshipping a real god?" She threw out her arms in invitation. "Well? I'm waiting!"

Anders toyed with the idea of throwing a lightning spell at her for a laugh, but he was rather fond of his freedom.

"With lightning?" Jan the Importer scoffed. There were angry veins visible on his neck, but he straightened and smiled, looking smug. "No. The Maker himself has sent us a guardian, one who reveals himself at night. I suggest you watch where you sleep tonight, 'Vint."

Cormac nudged his way through the crowd, wishing Anton was with him. Anton could work a crowd like this. Anton could work the trader's cart, like this. Still, he came up smiling and speaking Common with the heaviest Southern Bannorn accent he could manage. "Ho, Jan! What's with all the shouting?"

The importer looked up, surprised, just in time for Cormac to clap him heavily on the back.

"Is it a bad day for grapes, do you think? The prices have been getting very high, out of Tevinter,"
Cormac went on, slipping the pamphlet out of Jan's hand. "What's this? The new prices? Are they so worth shouting about?" He unfolded the pamphlet and held it upside-down. His Tevene was terrible, but he could at least tell which end was up, and that was not it.

"Tevinter's trying to bring back their demon-gods!" Jan the Importer bellowed. "It's trying to tell us how much better off we'd be, if we gave up our faith in the Maker and Andraste and turned ourselves over to the Archdemons!" Jan reached out and turned the pamphlet the right way in Cormac's hand. "See here? It says 'Make Tevinter Great Again!' And here's 'Do You Know Dumat'?"

Anders squinted and craned his neck, trying to get a better look at the pamphlet in Cormac's hand. Dumat? Anders tried not to toy with the amulet under his robes. At least it wasn't Urthemiel. He and Cormac would have had a good laugh about that afterwards.

"It's not like I'm holding a sword to your throat!" Vasilia snapped. "All it is is information. You are free to talk about your god, so why am I not free to talk about mine?"

"Because my god didn't turn into an archdemon!" Jan shouted. There were angry veins in his forehead now to match the ones on his neck.

"At least we both know my god exists!" Vasilia snapped, folding her arms across her chest, crumpling her complicated sleeves. "At least my god actually affects the world. What does yours do? And save your paltry threats about the 'Maker's guardian'. We both know that's hogwash."

Anders tried not to shift uncomfortably. 'Hector' appearing before farmers and townsfolk was one thing, but to a Tevinter? She would have grown up around magic and spirits. She would know exactly what he was.

Cormac took a huge breath like he might start shouting right along with Jan, but he fell to coughing, and as he pounded on his chest, a single bright bolt lanced down from the sky and crackled loudly through the spines of the trader's fashionable Tevinter hat. "Well, I did mean to warn you of it," Cormac choked out, "but I seem to have inhaled a bit of dust. Your pardon, and what. Seems the spirit's out early, today."

Vasilia's eyes narrowed as she pinned Cormac with a glare.

"Look out!" Jan cried, pushing Vasilia back against her cart, as another bolt fell from the sky, this one darkening the ground around it, as a few more crates slid off the back of the cart, into the river, and Cormac tripped over Jan's table and fell flat on his ass.

"Harellan!" Cormac called out, scrambling to his feet. "Balls, I hope it doesn't spook my camel!"

The camel bucked against Anders's grip, eyes wild, but Anders hushed him, grip tight on the bridle as he pet Harellan's snout.

"Get off me," grated out Vasilia, shoving Jan away from her to straighten her clothes, her shaking hands all that betrayed her unaffected manner. She looked back at her cart and swore when she saw more of her crates, bobbing in the water. "Kaffas! I have had it with this Blight-touched backwater! You want to lose my business? Consider it lost!"

With a flutter of voluminous sleeves, Vasilia waved off Jan the Importer and the rest of the market, shooting another withering glare Cormac's way. She gathered up the goods that had fallen without
landing in the water and tossed them back into her cart, her every movement clipped and angry.

Anders considered another lightning strike at her departing ass, only to decide it was better to not push it.

"Dumat, I've heard of," Cormac admitted, holding the pamphlet the right way and squinting at the words, "but, who's this 'old man' they're talking about?" He tapped a line he could only sort of make sense of. Religion and magic, he could do in most languages. It was things like buying eggs and getting directions he had trouble with. And building beds, apparently.

"Elder One, not 'old man'," Jan the Importer laughed. "Old man. I'll call him that if she comes back. I don't know. Some crazy Vint who thinks the Imperium should use forbidden magic to take over the rest of Thedas. Same shit they're always selling, just with a different face on it, now. I never thought Vasilia would be one of them, though. She always seemed like her interest was more in coin than religion. Maybe Hector can set her straight."

"Seems like he already tried," Cormac pointed out, gesturing to the singed spot.

"I don't see why he didn't just fry her ass to the ground," Jan muttered.

"Sure you do, or you wouldn't have pushed her out of the way." The corner of Cormac's mouth tipped up. "She's got some ideas that are dangerous, but she's not hurting anyone with them. Not yet, anyway. There's still time for her to remember that the only two Old Gods left are just biding their time before they turn into archdemons. Dumat destroyed Tevinter. Rained fire on Minrathous, they say. There's no way any right-minded person can think that's a better way. But, she can't figure it out if she's dead. I mean, really, isn't it to us to love the Maker? You can't love the Maker if you fear the Maker."

Jan chuckled dryly and clapped Cormac on the shoulder. "You are a wiser man than I am, Mack. That doesn't change that I would have liked to see her ass a little more singed, but I suppose you're right. Hector certainly agrees, and he'd know better than either of us."

Without all the shouting and throwing of crates, the crowd lost interest and started to disperse. The press of bodies was still tight, but it had shifted enough for Anders to steer Harellan through the crowd. "Are you two all right?" he asked, affecting wide-eyed concern. "You were both terribly close to that lightning!"

Jan the Importer laughed and waved off Anders's concern. "Would Hector harm one of his own? It gave me a fright but nothing worse."

Anders forced a smile, not wanting to point out that that depended on Hector's aim, not his intent. Next to him, Harellan nudged Anders's head and started to chew on his hair.
Lightning comes before a storm, and the Venatori merchant picked the wrong storm shelter to borrow. Later, Anders discovers his rare materials order has been re-routed, but it's not the Venatori to blame.

"The blind's down on the gate," Cormac pointed out, as they led the camel and a full cart toward their house. "We should come up through the camel gate and sneak up on whoever that is through the house. The wind's not up, so whoever's in there is probably sleeping, thinking no-one's coming home for a while. I don't like it. I know that's how things are, here, but after Kirkwall... They're expecting us to come in that way, blind. I'm not doing it."

A touch of magic silenced the huge, heavy gate that led into the yard, as he and Anders worked it open. The gate was, of course, no easier to use than any other way past the forearm-thick wall that blocked the house from casual inspection. But, it was their gate, and they could get it open and closed fairly quickly, even with a difficult camel, which Harellan wasn't being, today. Strangely, Purrsino didn't appear, as they led Harellan into the barn, but sand cats were wild, no matter how much one fed them. One more sound that wouldn't give them away.

"Cover the cart and leave it, for now," Cormac suggested, remembering how his father had taught him to approach an ambush laid in their house. He was sure it wasn't -- not really -- but the Ander custom of offering shelter along the road never ceased to make him think it. Just in case. Always cautious, just in case. Especially after Kirkwall.

Anders nodded and obeyed. Always better to be careful, especially people like them, especially after the things they had done. He gestured for Cormac to go ahead of him, slipping his staff out of the cart. Put the man with the sword in front or, failing that, put the man with the shields in his place. What had happened back at the market still had him on edge. They'd been careful not to let anyone see them cast, sure, but sometimes careful wasn't enough.

An ambush wouldn't have surprised him. But the woman's shriek followed by cursing in Tevene did.

Anders quirked an eyebrow at Cormac. The Tevinter was too fast for him to catch, but the voice was familiar. He twisted his fingers, readying a spell for when they spotted her.

Cormac ducked into the bedroom and grabbed his glaive, which he didn't tend to take shopping with him. The wards were still armed and it didn't look like she'd even tried to get into the house. In the midst of the next shriek, he whipped back the bold and threw open the front door, which led to the shelter at the front of the house.

"What in the name of all things great and holy...?" That was definitely Vasilia, as far as Cormac could tell, and her donkey, but... swarmed with cats. "We shut the windows when we left, didn't we. They're in here for whatever drove her in, because we shut the windows." He burst out laughing and leaned the glaive beside the door as he crouched. "C'mere, Purrsino. Who's a good cat? Probably not you, but that's fine," he cooed, scratching at his robes at the knee.
Vasilia spun on them in a whirl of dark fabric, not quite able to hide the startled look on her face in
time. She drew herself up, trying to look as regal as she could with sand cats gnawing at and
climbing her robes. The donkey braying at her back didn't help the effect. "You!" She narrowed her
eyes at Cormac. "Did you really think no one would notice?"

As she hissed and spat, Purrsino bounded up to Cormac, tail up and curling. He sniffed and pawed at
Cormac's hand as though expected it to be holding his dinner. Spoiled beast.

"Notice what?" Anders asked, purposely dense. "Your ridiculous outfit under the swarm of fur-
beasts? I noticed! But then, I'm just so very observant."

"Notice that we locked the windows, so the cats couldn't get in? Yeah, I did, actually. I've got a
chicken marinating." Cormac blinked up at the woman, as he scooped up Purrsino. "I was going to
ask if you wanted supper, since that's what we do when we find people in the shelter, but Creators,
not if you're going to act like that --" Two cats darted past him. "Shit, Jan, go put the chicken in the
icebox before the cats get it! I'll come deal with the oven after we're done here."

"You're a mage!" Vasilia insisted, jabbing a finger at Cormac.

"I'm a southern barbarian," Cormac replied, drily. "I don't know any of your Tevinter handwaving
shit. We've got some nice dwarven-made stuff in the kitchen, but magic? Are you crazed? I'd be
living in some fancy tower in Hossberg and probably eating better!"

There was a hysterical edge to Anders's laugh as he ducked back inside, hoping he got to the chicken
in time. Cormac could handle himself for a minute or two. If Vasilia couldn't handle a couple of sand
cats climbing her skirts, she stood no chance against him.

"Your lies might be good enough for the local riff-raff..." Vasilia sniffed, toeing a cat off her shoe. It
hissted at her and scampered off. "But don't make that mistake with me. I know magic. I know
mages. I know exactly where that lightning came from. Are you their 'Hector', then? Must be hard to
live up to that standard."

"Considering their 'Hector' glows in the dark and shoots lightning out of his ass, I'd think it would
be. I'm a date farmer. I don't have time to be chasing around after every miscreant who pisses on a
statue of Andraste. I'm too busy trying to turn this --" Cormac gestured around them. "-- this crap into
arable land."

"And yet you also have the money for dwarfwork," Vasilia pointed out, crossing her arms, "and that
implies black market dealings."

"No, it implies some very good investments in a port town that allow me to live like some
noblewoman's heir," Cormac grinned and stood, Purrsino balanced on one shoulder. "And this is the
Anderfels. I don't care how close to the river we are, it's still dry. You were just the tallest thing
standing where that lightning wanted to go. You trade here often, right? Haven't you ever seen the
storms with no rain? Lightning falling from a clear sky is nothing new."

"Lightning streaking right for me, twice in a row?" Vasilia scoffed. She folded her arms across her
chest and glared down her nose at Cormac. "If it was after the 'tallest thing' in that area, I would think
the lightning would have struck your friend." With her chin, she pointed at the path Anders had
taken into the house.
As though summoned, Anders reappeared, a cat on each shoulder. "So you're saying it wasn't just nature?" Anders asked, feigning surprise. "You honestly believe it was the Maker threatening you, and you admit it?"

"I'm saying it was a nosey mage who is making enemies of the wrong people." Her voice was cold, the threat clear. "This is your only warning, mage. You do not want to be on the wrong side of the Venatori."

"Madame," Cormac pronounced in his very best Orlesian accent. "I don't know who you think we are, but we've been on the wrong side of the worst things Tevinter has ever delivered in its two thousand year history, and we're still more concerned about supper. I'd still prefer to avoid a repeat of that last archdemon, though."

"That's ridiculous. The archdemon was in Ferelden and the only people who fought it were..." A bit of the colour drained out of Vasilia's face as she started to put things together. Still, Wardens weren't supposed to involve themselves in politics. Still, this was the Anderfels. The Wardens owned the Anderfels, regardless of who sat on the throne.

"Grey Wardens." Cormac cocked a thumb over his shoulder at Anders. "And I told you I was a southern barbarian."

Anders gave her a cheeky wave, wiggling his fingers, and Vasilia visibly swallowed. "Now," he said, "I know you're having a bad day, so I'm not going to take that last bit too seriously. After all, I'm sure the Venatori don't want to make enemies of the Wardens either. That just sounds like a mess."

Anders offered her his cheeriest smile, while one cat tried to climb from his shoulder onto Cormac's head. Its paw sank into his hair.

"And it looks like whatever storm brought you here has passed," Anders said, sticking his head out and making a show of looking around, "so if you don't mind, we'd like to get on with our dinner."

Cormac filled the doorway, under Anders's chin. Mages or not, they'd just established themselves as the last people anyone in their right mind would want to upset. "Don't let your donkey trip on the cats. They get terribly offended, and you've seen them offended. And now you've seen us offended. You have a nice night, and be careful where you leave those pamphlets, if you want to find somewhere to sleep, before you get to Tallo."

Vasilia checked for cats as she urged the donkey to its feet. As they left the shelter and set off down the road, Cormac shut the door and threw the bolt.

"Honestly, I don't know what she was expecting," he huffed, carefully turning to face Anders with too many cats on him. "It's a good thing she found us, though. I don't think the neighbours would've been nearly as pleasant."

"Vints," Anders sighed. "I'm beginning to wonder if they all have sticks up their asses." He leaned into Cormac with the shoulder no longer supporting a cat. "Speaking of sticks and asses, the sooner we have dinner, the sooner we can skip to dessert." He waggled his eyebrows.

"If you're thinking creamy filling, count me in." Cormac laughed and headed toward the kitchen, depositing cats on chairs, as he passed.
It was time for Anders to go shopping in the Dwarven Quarter of Kassel, again. Not just the Market, but a little shop in a back alley, tucked between a pho house and a laundry. The kind of place no one looked directly at, as they pretended the Merchants Guild wasn't just the respectable face of the Carta, which was still smuggling in fun things.

"Beardy," One of the dwarves addressed him, nodding and checking under the shelf in the vault in back. He came back out with a note. "I got some bad news. None of your blue beans, this month. We've got some supply problems in the south and Val Royeaux just doubled their order, this month, so all us little sellers got cut out of the loop. Gotta keep up with the big demand, or they'll start taking it out of Orzammar, and then where are we going to be?"

"Val Royeaux?" Anders repeated, brows knitting. He felt dreadfully out of touch with the outside world. The last news he'd had out of Orlais had been from Peryn about the mage rebellion. This wasn't connected, was it? "Leave it to the Orleansians to screw things up, eh?"

Justice was sitting up and paying attention, but behind his interest, Anders was running the numbers in his head, trying to remember how much lyrium he still had, as well as what and how many potions he could make with it.

The dwarf barked a laugh. "Right? Glad I'm on this side of the desert, either way. Heard it's a mess over there."

"As long as they're not marching north again, we'll be fine." Anders shook his head. "They're not, are they? They have made it across the desert, before, not that I'm sure how."

"Nah, nah. I heard they got some mage problems in the capital, and maybe somebody picking a fight with the empress. It's all very Orlesian." The dwarf laughed again, sorting parts of another shipment into boxes for the buyers. "Too busy sniffing enamel in those masks all day to come north."

"Picking a fight with the empress?" Anders blinked, hooking his thumbs in the back of his belt. "I wouldn't have thought Anora had it in her!"

"Anora? Nah, nah. It's all Orlesian, this time. Something about a bunch of elves starting a riot in one of those places I can't pronounce. And the empress stabbing some overenthusiastic suitor in the middle of a garden party. You ask me, she should marry the Queen of Ferelden, and put a stop to all the shit in the south. Trade is murder, down there. Sometimes literally."

Anders's eyebrows crept towards his hairline. "Goodness. Guess I have been a bit behind." He couldn't tell if the guilt he felt was his or Justice's, that exciting things were happening in Orlais, some of it including the mage rebellion, while they were here, farming and policing chicken thieves. Which was no less important, he reminded himself and Justice. Someone had to take care of the chicken thieves, even -- especially -- if they turned out to be cats.

The dwarf waved one hand dismissively. "Orleansians," he said with the same gruff tone in which Fenris used to say 'mages'. "Orlais has enough drama for ten kingdoms. I just wish its drama would stay out of my goods!"

So did Anders, but he supposed there was nothing for it.
"There is a mage in this village!" Ingill insisted, jabbing a fork full of cheese and sausage at Yotte, over the table. "Lightning doesn't just fall out of the sky!"

"The Maker works in mysterious ways, Ingill. He has sent us Hector. No one has seen Hector in daylight, but few people in the village would be out spreading the good word about the dead gods of Tevinter. Perhaps it is too much for him to bear." Yotte served herself a healthy portion of a light and fluffy dish of lentils, eggs, and cheese.

"Hector -- whoever he really is -- lectures like he hasn't got to breathe. I've met him. He's incapable of shutting up, I think, and he's deafeningly loud. I heard the crack of the bolt touching down, but I didn't hear any shouting that wasn't from Jan the Importer." Ingill sipped her wine, watered down and spiced, just the way she liked it. "Come to think of it, Jan Ewaldsson was there, with that Rivaini halfwit he lives with."

"Half the village was there," Yotte argued, shrugging as she took a roll. "It was a clear day, until the winds picked up. Everyone buying and selling what they could do without going over the river. I think you just don't like Jan and Mack."

"I don't dislike them any more than I dislike anyone else," Ingill protested, spearing a sausage with perhaps more violence than necessary. "But there's something odd about them. Freak lightning strikes, Hector... none of that used to happen around here before they arrived."

Yotte listened politely, but her small smile said she was humouring Ingill. "Then perhaps we should consider them our good luck charms, sent by the Maker."

Sullenly, Ingill took a bite of her sausage, breathing a sigh out through her nose. Yotte was a good woman, a holy woman, but sometimes she could be incredibly dense. On purpose, Ingill sometimes suspected. "Or one of them is a mage."

"I'd like to remind you that Jan grew up here and wasn't a mage then," Yotte smiled indulgently. "It's awfully late in his life for him to be developing such talents!"

"Then it's the halfwit," Ingill muttered.

Yotte sipped her wine. "If you're so terribly convinced, then talk to Ser Peryn. He spends more time with those two than either of us has, and I'm sure he could tell you more."

"I will!" Ingill declared, before muttering a few uncharitable words into her drink.

The next Washday, Peryn appeared at his usual time, arriving on the afternoon ferry. He brought
with him the latest pronouncements from the Chantry in Hossberg and the list of likely apostates who might have found their way into the nation. He tended to doubt those lists, though. No mage in their right mind would come to the Anderfels. If they came north at all, it would be toward Tevinter. The only mages he'd dealt with outside the tower were frightened children who just needed a little magebane and a cookie. It was amazing how quickly the little ones calmed down when he started talking about the tower and how the Wardens came there to pick the very best and strongest mages. By the time he took them away, they wanted to go. And their parents were usually so relieved not to have to worry about them hurting anyone, any more.

Ingill was waiting for him on the steps of the Chantry, a pitcher of that wet wine she drank sitting beside her as she read her book and glanced up, from time to time, to get a look at the crowd. As soon as she saw Peryn, she waved and poured another glass. "Ser Peryn! Right on time!" Down went the book, as she held out a glass. "There's been some excitement in town, and while Mother Yotte seems to think it's just 'Hector' -- and I still don't know if that's really who he is -- I'm sure there's a mage in the village somewhere. Lightning doesn't just fall from the sky onto convenient worshippers of the archdemons."

Peryn took the proffered wine glass with an indulgent, if confused, smile. He settled onto the step next to her, adjusting his robes so they weren't bunched under him. "So it's true, then? About the lightning? I had heard rumours about what happened, but by the time the stories got to me, the Maker himself was pointing a finger down through the clouds to smite the Tevinter himself." He chuckled over his wine, watching the way the sunlight glittered across its surface. "Did you see it happen?"

"I did." Ingill nodded decisively and pointed out into the market. "It happened right over there. I heard Jan the Importer shouting and came out onto the steps to investigate. Have you ever heard that man shout? I'd be surprised if the Fereldans didn't hear him." As she spoke, Ingill went through that day in her mind, tried to picture the lightning, the way it fell. "The timing was too perfect. Vasilia sneered at the Maker to strike her down, and then there was lightning. As much as I enjoy the idea of the Maker smiting Tevinters, you have to agree with me that there are other explanations that are, statistically, more likely."

"You think it wasn't Hector or the Maker? You don't think there are mages, here, do you?" Peryn chuckled, sipping the wine as he set down his bag next to Ingill's book.

"Of course it was mages!" Ingill looked shocked that he could even question that. "Although, I have to ask myself how offended I should be about a mage who is willing to defend the honour of the Maker and Andraste, in broad daylight. All the same, it's still dangerous, and you're a templar. You deal with dangerous mages all the time."

"Are you sure it was even someone from the village? Right here in the market, there are always traders coming through, and horsemen for the riverboats, and the people on holiday who got off the boat in the wrong place. It could just as easily been any of them, if it was anyone at all." Peryn shrugged, taking out the list of apostates. "Here's the latest list -- after what happened in Val Royeaux, I don't even know how many of them are still alive. I heard some bodies were... It was not good. Does anyone on there look familiar?"

"What kind of idiot name is 'Anders'?" Ingill asked, right at the top of the first page. "And that description could be anyone in this village or any other on the river! They didn't even know his name before they lost him? What kind of templars do they have in the south?"

Peryn shrugged and sipped his wine, making a noise of approval in the back of his throat. "This isn't bad!" he said, holding up his glass. At her impatient look, he sighed and addressed her questions.
"Perhaps they could not pronounce it? I hear it's common enough for southerners not to be able to wrap their tongues around our names. I would say, 'Perhaps he is unimportant', but then he wouldn't be at the very top."

"Useless," Ingill grumbled, shaking her head as she scanned down the list. No names were familiar, but she didn't think they would be. Anyone on the run would change their name... and likely not end up in some Anderfel town, but then, who would look there? "And they can't pronounce our names, but then they have ridiculous names like... Joe-wan? Jow-an?"

She scanned the list for anyone described as Rivaini but had no luck. Damn.

"Don't work yourself into a state over it," Peryn said, accepting the papers back. "I'm not saying that was a mage, but if so? It worked out in our favour. But I will keep an eye out for newcomers."

"Into a state? Hardly. But, mages wandering through villages, dropping lightning on whoever they please, is something Andraste worked very hard to end. It isn't something we should return to, now," Ingill huffed.

"Because if we did that, we'd be Tevinter?" Peryn smiled as he put the pages back into his bag. "At least this one has some moral objection to Tevinter ways. And much better control than you usually see on an apostate. One lightning strike, not a whole storm."

"Two," Ingill argued, just to be contrary. "Two lightning strikes. But, they both hit the same mark. It's not natural. The chances of that having just been the dry wind..."

Later that day, over a different drink that was more his style, Peryn laughed about it. "Honestly, Jan," he said in his thickly accented Common, "I have never known more of a cynic than Sister Ingill."

"Few mortals have," Anders replied, pouring himself a drink from the pitcher, and then another for Cormac.

"You know, after that lightning-strike," Peryn went on, waving his finger in Anders's direction, "she believes a mage to be here. In this town. I find this sad! She serves the Maker but does not trust him? How did she become a sister?"

"A touch of scepticism can be a good thing," Anders said, carefully not looking at Cormac. "Though I think Sister Ingill has more than a touch." He pulled the plate of pickles closer to him and plucked up whichever was closest.

"A mage, here?" Cormac looked around the tavern. "I was standing right next to that woman when the first bolt struck. I'd like to think I'd have noticed a mage! I mean, don't they... glow and things? When they cast spells, I mean."

Peryn cackled, slapping the table. "Glowing mages! Oh, that's a good one. The apprentices back in Hossberg will love it." He chuckled and took a small date cake. "No, they don't glow unless they're making lights to see. Or fire. But, fire is bright no matter who makes it."

"But, if there was a mage, here... how would you find them? I mean, if they don't glow." Cormac watched Peryn with wide-eyed curiosity as he folded a few pickled peppers into a honeyed orange roll and took a huge bite.
"We have a list of all the mages who have run away from their homes or gone missing. Some of them... some of them, I hope they come to us in Hossberg. I have heard some stories that not all templars are as straightforward as ours. Some of those mages, though, I hope they are eaten by berserkarn, before they hurt any good people. Every man and woman can be good or bad. It doesn't matter if they're templars or mages or regular people." Peryn licked the sticky spots off his fingers and pulled out the list, putting it on the table. "I have been showing it around to the merchants. I do this every time I come through the village. The merchants see everyone eventually."

Anders licked his fingers before washing down his food with ale. "That's a good idea!" he said, poking at the food and carefully considering his next selection, surreptitiously eyeing the paper Peryn had laid on the table. "Do you mind if we take a look?"

"Of course!" said Peryn graciously, which Anders took to mean he did not mind. "You were at the market, yes? When the lighting? I showed it to Sister Ingill, but she recognised no one. Maybe you saw someone."

He still didn't think there was anyone to see, but he shrugged and slid the papers across to Anders. Anders angled the papers so that Cormac could read along with him and barked out a laugh when he saw the name at the top of the list. "What the fuck kind of name is 'Anders'?

"What?" Cormac leaned over, cheeks bulging with cake, to get a closer look. "You're kidding. Who-? What--? And look at that description! That could be anyone we know! 'Tall man with blond hair and brownish eyes.'" He shook his head and washed the cake down with beer. "Suuuure, describe half the Anderfels. Are you sure this isn't someone playing a joke? I mean, that's really... kind of Orlesian."

"Does Orlais not have enough going on, with their own Circles?" Peryn asked, shaking his head right along with Cormac. "We have many names from Orlais on this list. Even the Grand Enchanter, if you can believe it. I do not think she has run away," he said, sadly.

"I don't know any of these names," Cormac said, looking at another page. "And the descriptions are so small. I must have seen ten people who looked like this woman, last week in the market over the river."

Anders hummed along with Cormac and said nothing about how he knew exactly who she was, though he remembered her going by a less flattering nickname at the time. The perils of having a name that rhymed with a part of the female anatomy. Whatever he thought of his lack of name, at least Anders didn't have that problem.

And that one there... The name was familiar, though he couldn't picture his face. Just the back of his head and the seat he'd taken in that class about the history of magic. And the next one... oh, Anders could remember his face, as well as a few other choice parts of his anatomy. Not to mention the broom closet he'd admired them in. And he wondered if those two at the bottom still had his shoes...

Missing. That's what he hoped they only were. Anders hadn't been particularly close with any of them, but he'd still known them. They were still mages. They were what he and Justice had been fighting for.

"I'm sorry," Anders told Peryn with a helpless shrug. "Nothing is standing out."

"Such a shame." Peryn shook his head, sadly. "I worry about them, you know? The Circle teaches
many very important things, but it does not teach you to catch fish or make a farm. I hope someone is looking after them."

"If you ever want to spend a few years in the Marches," Cormac said, without thinking, "I'm sure Commander Cullen would be happy to have someone like you, in Kirkwall."

"Kirkwall is the place where the Chantry fell into a hole in the ground, yes? And they have let the mages out of the tower?" Peryn looked interestingly at Cormac over the rim of his tankard. "I should write a letter anyway and ask how that is working. Mages are very dangerous, and they need to be kept safe from themselves, while they learn how to be less dangerous. The good ones, they do this. The bad ones learn to be more dangerous and much more sneaking. Like thieves. Like Crows."

Cormac nodded. "That's Kirkwall. I have some friends who live there, now, and they tell me it's still Kirkwall. Just with more clinics for the sick and things like the dwarfwork, with enchantments. Can you imagine? Regular people with baths that heat up, when you put water in them."

Anders hummed around a bite of date cake, pausing to finish chewing before responding. "That sounds rather wonderful! I wish we'd had that back when we were still there. I would've felt like royalty!" Magical amenities: one of the perks of being a mage. His first magically heated bath had been a highlight of his life in Kinloch Hold. "But, I used to work a bit in one of the clinics..." As though his hadn't been the only one. "I wonder how that's working with mages? I heard rumours Kirkwall didn't have any healers."

And that was something Anders still struggled not to feel guilty over. He'd left because he had to, and now he was doing what he could for the people here. His work here was no less important. It was just easier to visit his mother, now.

"No healers?" Peryn asked, brows furrowing. "That is strange. And not wise. Some magic is... what is the word? Dangerous, yes, but. Hard to control..." He grappled with his wording, offering a word in Ander and giving Cormac a helpless look.

"Volatile?" Anders suggested as a translation. Peryn blinked at him, uncomprehending. "Unstable?"

Peryn nodded, brightening. "Yes! What was that first word? Vola...?"

"Volatile."

Peryn mouthed the word to himself a few times. "Yes. Some magic is... volatile." He sounded the word out carefully. "Unstable. Some take time to learn to control it. Healing is needed."

"I wish I'd gotten to meet more mages," Cormac said around a mouthful of cake. "You make them sound so interesting. It sounds like the Wardens have the right idea, letting them in the same as everyone else."

"You would not feel unsafe living with them as your neighbours?" Peryn asked, a bit surprised, as he waved for another drink.

"I heard there was a mage in this village, once -- his brother." Cormac tipped his chin at Anders. "The poor kid burned down a barn, and the village had it back up in two weeks. What's to fear, really? Kids back in Ferelden didn't need magic to do that kind of damage. You knock over a lamp, it'll do just the same. And like you said -- they're scared. If we had magic teachers like we have school teachers, it would just be another normal thing. Some people study swords, some people
study magic. My father used to teach polearms to the village kids, back in Lothering. And imagine what the world would be like with a real healer in every village and town! No more going back to Hossberg to get your arm set."

Peryn considered Cormac in surprise. Surprise but not outrage or indignation as Anders might have expected a templar to react. But then, Peryn was one of the better templars he had known.

"That is a thought," Peryn said, nodding over his drink. "Magic is to be feared. But there is sometimes, too much fear around it. Like in Orlais, what happened there..." Peryn shook his head, shoulders sagging. "I am... not sure the Kirkwall way is best, but I am glad they are trying."

Justice was aglow at that -- if only in the metaphorical sense, Anders was relieved to know. Anders hid his smile behind his drink and called for another round.
Cormac does not know how to ride a camel.

Cormac looked up at Harellan. "And... I'm supposed to ride on his back." That sounded dangerous. And like a terrible idea. But, the other option was to get on a boat. He'd already vetoed the boat. And that meant they were going out across the desert, heading for Val Dorma. Harellan had made the trip, before -- they'd bought him off a merchant company that did regular trade on that route, after he twisted an ankle and couldn't make the trip back. And now, he was going to make the trip carrying Cormac, because Anders had paid a great deal of money to take a second camel for the month -- a camel that he would ride, because it knew all the standard commands, and he actually spoke Ander. Harellan and Cormac got along by virtue of knowing each other.

"I'll even help you up," Anders offered, drily, eyeing Cormac's discomfort with amusement. "You can ride a horse, can't you?"

"No," Cormac laughed. "But, I can ride an ox. Or a donkey." He paused. "I did tell Bethany I was sending our luggage ahead, didn't I? And you're sure this is faster than the sea route? Not that I mind that much. Yet. It's not an ocean. I'll get used to it."

Anders gave him a droll look. "Are you always like this when you travel? And here I thought that was just when boats were involved." He reached up to pet Harellan's neck, smoothing out a tuft of fur.

"Travel usually involved a team of donkeys and a cart. You know what donkeys don't have? Boobs on their backs. I am extremely averse to the idea of falling off this thing," Cormac tugged at the ends of his sleeves and patted Harellan's side.

Anders nodded as though that statement clarified everything. "Well, we all know you're more comfortable with asses, so I suppose that makes sense."

Harellan seemed to take offense to this, making that snuffling sound that Anders associated with him winding up to spit. Anders hooked a finger in the camel's bridle and turned his head away from them.

"See, now Harellan's getting offended," Anders said. "Look, you're not going to fall. And if you do? You have shields. And if you didn't have shields? You have a healer. At worst, you'll lose a little dignity, but it's not like either of us has much of that anyway. Besides, I've watched Artie push you from taller heights just to watch you bounce." Anders patted Harellan's hump in invitation, eyebrows arched hopefully.

Cormac eyed the saddle suspiciously, but heaved himself into it, with a small struggle. "You know what else I didn't do? Ride donkeys in a robe," he complained, untangling himself as Harellan snorted and nibbled at Anders's shoulder. He tried to get comfortable -- the saddle wasn't the lightweight blanket and a rope he'd gotten used to, in Ferelden, but a large solid leather contraption with thick cushions. Cushions he noticed Anders's saddle mostly lacked.
"Did... did you get me a different kind of saddle?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know.

"I got you the one for pregnant women." Anders grinned back at him, tying Harellan's lead to the back of his own camel's saddle. "You can thank me later."

"I ... that is... Couldn't you at least have pretended it was for royalty or something?" Cormac's face darkened and he covered his eyes, sinking down in the strangely soft seat.

"I could have, but then I would have missed out on the look on your face." Anders's smile was perfectly cheery and without mercy as he hoisted himself up into his saddle. Long legs made the movement easier and quite a bit more graceful than Cormac's attempt. Anders twisted in his saddle to check on Cormac. "How are we doing? Still worried we're going to tumble off?"

"Obviously, I'm a little less worried about you," Cormac huffed, envious of the ease with which Anders had mounted. Anders had told him to sit back and relax -- particularly back, because the most likely way he'd fall off the camel was forward, so he'd slumped down into the curved back and pulled his legs up after him, bracing him against the front of the saddle, which had a small post on it, in case he wanted to sit forward and watch the desert pass.

"I'll get used to it. It's only two weeks, right? Val Dorma gets us on the Imperial Highway, and then down to the Minanter, and take the river road into Starkhaven." He'd worked out the route with some traders who ran goods to Tantervale, in the tavern, one night. Said he wanted to go on holiday, because he'd never had a Starkhaven fish pie, and that caused so many jokes, no one dared ask more of his intent in going south.

Anders tried not to look too amused at Cormac's expense, but he failed. "Just about, yes. Pregnant or not, you'll thank me for the cushions later." At least this trip would involve much less puking than the way over. Or at least Anders hoped so.

Gathering the reins in his hands, Anders clicked his tongue and uttered a command in Ander. His camel's ears pricked as it started to stand, and the two-week journey was underway.
Chapter Summary

The Dead Wolf has a plan and the spirits will follow. The only problem is the templars.

Meanwhile in Ferelden...

The votes had been tallied by the Tranquil, because they had little reason to alter the results. Four of them stood at the front of the room, counting in front of any mages who wished to watch, and all the candidates for First Enchanter, who sat below them, still arguing. Finally, the piles were divided and counted – each pile three times, and each result printed on the slate board behind the Tranquil.

"Senior Enchanter Torrin has the largest number of votes," Owain announced. "In order of most to least votes, Enchanter Petra, Enchanter Godwin, and Enchanter Fen'Din follow."

Petra turned and shook Torrin's hand. "It was close, but you are the most senior of the Enchanters."

Torrin chuckled and patted her shoulder. "When you are old, maybe it will be time for your revolution. But, we have to live that long, first."

"I can only hope what you have in mind gets us there, then."

Beside them, Godwin was still shouting about funding and renovation, this time waving a letter from the queen. "Torrin, we have to. With the queen's protection, they'll have to be more careful with us. And the way to get the queen's protection is to get a contract, which we have an offer for. It's just basic runework for her personal guard, but she'll take care of us if we're working for her."

Torrin reached out and plucked the letter from Godwin's hand. "Are any of you going to challenge these results?" he asked.

Fen'Din stood slowly, smoothing his robes, and a clicking-clattering started, as his rats poured out of the walls. "No. I move to confirm First Enchanter Torrin of Kinloch Hold."

"So do I," said Petra graciously before turning a hard look on Godwin. Her supporters looked crestfallen but resigned, yet Godwin's supporters were still grumbling. She was still surprised that the tower held that many mages who thought like Godwin.

Godwin scowled back at Petra and at the room at large. "This is ludicrous!" he snapped. "The people in this tower are so focused on keeping their heads down that they don't see the danger that we're in. If they had any sense at all--"

"Do you wish to contest the results?" Owain said in his blank voice. "I will call for a recount..."

"No, no, no," Godwin huffed, cutting his hands through the air. "I am disappointed by the results, but I believe them. Even if they are nonsensical."
"Godwin, the only person in this room who is nonsensical is you," Torrin cut back. "The vote is finished. Show some dignity."

"It's Godwin," Petra pointed out, "he's not exactly known for his dignity."

"Bring forth the papers, Owain." Fen'Din gestured to one of the tables. "I will sign, before I go."

"Go where, to supper?" Godwin rolled his eyes.

"I should do that, as well. I have a long walk ahead of me, I think."

Owain laid out the letter of confirmation, each page beside the one before. "Sign the last page. This will go to Cumberland, in the morning."

Fen'Din took the quill from the rack at the end of the table, dipped it, and signed his name where Owain had indicated. "I wish you the best fortune, Torrin. I do hope that your decisions serve this tower well."

"Thank you. I hope you'll come to respect those decisions." Torrin smiled and took the quill to sign.

"I hope they are good enough decisions that I hear of them." Fen'Din smiled and his rats gathered at his feet. "But, we really must go. I'm glad to have met you all, but it's time for me to leave."

Torrin blinked at Fen'Din and exchanged a look with Owain, regretting it the next moment when Owain stared back at him as placidly as ever.

"Um. Good night, Fen'Din," Petra said to his back.

"Lunatic," Godwin muttered, snatching the quill from Torrin to sign his name and get it over with. "Who the Blight voted for him anyway?"

Fen'Din made his way down the stairs, talking to the rats around him. "It's time for us to go. Well, time for me to go. If you'd like to come along, you're welcome to join me. But, I think I will need your help, either way. The templars aren't going to be happy about this, so maybe we shouldn't tell them. Do you think you can keep them out of the way for a few hours, while I work on leaving?"

There was a brief chittering beside him.

"Oh, of course. I'm not that much of a fool. I'll definitely stop and get my things. The books have to come. I'm not leaving those behind. And then... whatever else fits, I suppose. Do you think anyone would mind if we took one of the wine carts? Probably not. Those can be bought. I wonder if anything larger is buried here. Would one of you like to be a horse? Or maybe an ox?" One of the rats scampered up onto his shoulder and he rubbed under its chin. "That's what we'll do, then. We'll take the wine cart and put a few trunks on it. I suspect we're not going to find a horse or an ox in here, unfortunately, so why don't you go out and look, while we get ready."

Torrin was pontificating on his plans for the future when a loud thump interrupted his speech and threw off his train of thought. It sounded heavy, like a wardrobe falling, and after years of dealing with young mages new to their abilities, Torrin knew exactly what that sounded like. He squinted at the doorway.
"At any rate, as I was in the middle of saying..."

The next sound was harder to identify, a heavy grating sound like something rolling against stone. The curious faces in the crowd were soon accompanied by curious whispers, and as Torrin tried to falter through his speech, Petra threw open the door to the hallway. She watched in amazed silence as a heavy, round table rolled its way down the hall. She waited for it to fall, to tip over, but it stayed eerily upright as it continued down its course.

"What's going on?" asked Torrin, pushing his way over to the doorway.

"Uh," said Petra.

Shouting could be heard from behind a door further down the corridor. "This Tevinter shit stands up for a thousand years and then falls over right against the door? I'm fucking writing to Val Royeaux! Send all this shit to the cellar and get goddamn Orlesian work!"

"Fen'Din," Godwin said, looking a little horrified around the eyes. "You don't think he meant he was... leaving..."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Petra groaned. "We should probably stop him before he does something we're going to regret."

"And that's how you almost became First Enchanter," Torrin said, with half a smile that turned into a wince, as the table dropped, spanning the entire hall between two doors. "Whatever he's doing, he's doing it well. Why those rooms and not the one we're in?"

"Who cares?" Petra asked, ducking out the door and checking both ways for rolling tables. "Let's just get downstairs before he decides to do the same to us!"

In that, at least, they were in agreement, and Petra found herself leading a retinue of mages down the hall. No more heavy tables rolled by, but they passed doors barricaded from the outside with spare desks and bookcases and chairs. Books and paperwork were scattered across the floor in the upheaval.

Behind one blocked door, they shouting and the banging of fists. "Hey!" shouted someone from inside. "Get us out of here!" The doorknob jiggled, but a strategically placed chair held it firmly in place.

Torrin reached to move the chair, but Petra stopped him with a hand on his wrist. Above him, a chandelier flickered and rattled as though in warning. "Templars," she said in a moment of epiphany. "He's locking in the templars."

"shit," breathed Godwin. "I swear, if this lunatic turns out to be smarter than the rest of us..."

Petra didn't wait for him to finish that sentence and took off at a run.

"He's going to get us all killed, if we don't stop him!" Torrin argued, running after Petra.

"Yes," Petra agreed, "but if we don't stop him, and they have to, we're going to die anyway."

The stairs were an interesting feat to get down. Below the Enchanters' Floor, they were iced in two straight lines, always the same width apart, in a way that raised part of the steps into a cart ramp.
"The wine carts," Godwin said, as he caught up, pointing at the stairs. "I know the wheel width on those -- I've had to move them enough. He really thinks he's moving out."

"I still don't know how he expects to get out the door," Torrin grumbled, pausing to catch his breath. "Even if he removes the guards, it's still not going to open for him."

"If he kills them, he can just take the keys, can't he?" Godwin asked.

"I don't know how those doors open," Petra admitted. "I've never seen it happen."

"Well, he must have some kind of plan, right?" Godwin asked, always walking just a bit behind her. Petra knew when she was being used as a human shield. "I mean, the rest of this... He's clearly been thinking this through for a while."

"I've heard you call him a lunatic three times in the past five minutes," said Petra, clutching at the railing as she stepped carefully around the ice. "Now suddenly he's a mastermind? Which is it?"

"They're not mutually exclusive," Godwin grumbled.

Petra supposed he had a point. Either way, they had sorely underestimated the elf. She kept waiting for a smite to roll over them and deaden the air around them, but it didn't.

Further around the curve of the first floor, Fen'Din set the cart back on its legs and smiled at the bored looking templars guarding the door. "If you gentlemen would be so kind, I have somewhere else I'm supposed to be, in a few days."

"Even if they elected you First Enchanter, you're not leaving this tower without permission from the Divine, and that's not going to happen until you're confirmed. Knight-Vigilant's orders," one of the templars drawled, looking thoroughly unimpressed with the idea.

"I'd hoped to do this with a minimum of damage to the tower. It really is very well made, even if it's poorly cared for." Fen'Din sighed and sat on the edge of the cart, feet still touching the ground, as he began to sing, loudly and wordlessly. It was almost one of the canticles, but the timing was different, and it wasn't shaped for Orlesian words.

"Look, elf, if you think you're going to move us with your terrible singing--" the other templar started, as the air began to thicken around them.

"Uh, Bran?" The first templar elbowed him and pointed up to where a block had gently slid out of the wall, revealing a pair of clear blue hands holding it. Another block began to move and then another, the hands and faces of those moving them slowly becoming clearer. One looked like one of the mages that had died during the demon attack. Another looked like the textbook sketch of a desire demon. Another looked like nothing that templar had ever seen before.

Ser Bran drew his sword, like he might do something with it, and then took a long look at the elf, who just sat singing, and the countless dead men and demons and... were those spirits? Like the healers used to have? One of them looked like Ser Drass, who was still sorely missed by those who'd known him. Bran tossed his sword on the floor and threw his hands up. "I don't get paid enough for shit like this," he decided, sitting next to his sword. "Just don't drop anything on my head, please? I've had about enough of all this."
Fen'Din winked and nodded, but the singing never faltered in its repetitive cycles. It was almost calming, except the part where it seemed to reach inside and rearrange a person's sense of what it meant to be real.

Fen'Din's voice carried up the stairs, and the descending mages heard him before they saw him. It made them no less confused.

"Is he trying to sing the Chant?" Godwin hissed, before Petra shushed him. The wordless sounds were haunting, the way they bounced off stone, overlapping and looping.

Following the singing brought them to the entrance, to Fen'Din, to a pair of wide-eyed templars, to the spill of sunlight where blocks had been and were being pulled free. Fen'Din sat in the eye of the storm, still singing, as spirits and demons and the ghostly faces of the dead flit around him, hard at work. The stone piled up as tears of sunlight became open wounds.

"What in the Maker's name?" Torrin breathed, face ashen.

Petra sucked in a breath, recognising the ghostly face of a classmate Uldred had killed. She gripped Torrin's arm hard enough to bruise.

"That's enough!" the templar still standing declared, casting a smite on the room. The mages reeled, but the spirits merely flickered in discomfort, before going back to work. Fen'Din missed a few notes, but didn't lose his rhythm and picked up again at the next measure.

Petra, on the other hand, turned on the templar and rammed her fist into the space left by his raised visor, dropping him to the floor, as soon as she got her hand untangled. "Do you want some, too?" she asked the other templar.

Ser Bran shook his head. "I think I'm going to retire. Maybe a nice farm out in the Bannorn. Pretty wife. Two or three kids. I've had about enough of this."

"Give the man a glass of wine! He's seen sense!" Godwin barked, from the corner, where he was trying to stay out of everyone's way. Every thing's way. What even was that?

"Enchanter Fen'Din," Torrin said, stepping to put himself between Fen'Din and the door. "Please stay. By leaving, you're putting us all in danger."

"By staying, you're putting yourselves in danger, whether I remain or not." Fen'Din finally stopped singing, to address Torrin. "When Irving still lived, we had a chance. He would stand up for us, and when he did, people listened. It's not that I don't trust you to follow in his footsteps, but I think it will take longer than we have, before anyone in Val Royeaux takes you seriously enough to make a difference."

"I thought you didn't believe in anything outside," Petra cut in. "So, who exists not to believe him?"

"On the contrary. I believe we are in the Fade, because we are all dead. I believe we have been trapped in some demon's stronghold, and now that the one defender I could depend on has been taken from us, it is time for me to leave this place. We know others who have left. They have not returned. Each one of them is out there, somewhere, in another dream. I hope to catch up to someone we know. To share a dream that is not a nightmare, like this place has been. I think some of the less material of our friends may join me. For some of us, it is time for change."
"Do you hear that?" Godwin said in a loud aside to his friends. "The elf has finally snapped completely."

"One could argue he snapped a long time ago," Petra replied, "but in this place, most of us do, at some point or another. But he is right. We've lost a First Enchanter who stood up for us, and, Torrin, as much as I admire you, I'm not sure if I'm willing to trust my safety to you."

Torrin turned to her, taken aback. "Your safety? Petra, the votes have been cast. You just signed, confirming my election."

"What other option did I have?" Petra asked. "What other option do any of us have? Fen'Din has his... eccentricities, but he is right about another thing: this place is a living nightmare and always has been."

A few mages muttered agreement. So did Bran.

Petra chewed her lip and cautiously approached Fen'Din, giving the spirits a wide berth. Past him, she could see the sky and the lake, teasing hints of an entire world she'd always wanted to see. "Fen'Din... wherever you are going, would you like company?"

"I will go, either way," Fen'Din said, shrugging. "The way will be long and difficult. There may be demons or bandits or demons disguised as bandits. If you come, you may die. If you stay, you may die. You're welcome to do either, but you'll have to find a way to carry your own things. This cart is only meant to hold a few barrels of wine, and it is already filled with books. I'm not leaving the best parts of the library and my research behind to be dreamed out of existence or lit aflame in an Annulment."

Petra watched the stones move -- more of them than needed to get the cart out. "Where are you going?"

"No," Fen'Din said, cocking his head at Bran. "The important part is that it isn't here."

Torrin looked at both of them and shook his head. "Both of you, now? If I stop you, you'll be executed or sent to Aeonar. If I don't, we'll all be Annulled."

"Punch him out," Ser Bran said to Petra from the floor. "They can't blame you for anything if you're knocked out. Who knew she was such a powerful mage?"

"He's probably right. We can save your life, Torrin, but it would be better if you left. Leaving is the safest thing to do," Fen'Din gestured to the open wall. "But, we're running out of time. And I will be leaving. Anyone who means to leave with me should find a way to bring what they need. Quickly. I don't know how much longer it will be, before they find a way out of those rooms, and I would prefer that no one be harmed in all this."

Petra turned to the mages behind her. Most of her friends had died during Uldred's assault, but there were people here who had sided with her and campaigned for her. "You heard him," she said to the wide-eyed masses. "Anyone who plans to come, grab your stuff."

"Are you kidding me, Petra?" Godwin hissed, reaching for her as she passed. "Torrin may be stuck in his ways, but he at least has more sense than him." He pointed at Fen'Din.

"I'm leaving," said Petra, pulling away. "I don't care how, just that I do." A number of familiar faces
were already making their way back to their rooms.

Torrin looked tightly wound and uncomfortable, and Petra wondered if she would have to punch him out after all, just for his own sanity.

"Ser Bran," Torrin said, after a moment, eyes unfocused as he held a finger out to the templar, "would you say the force of this wall falling might have toppled some furniture, elsewhere in the building?"

"Enchanter, I'll say whatever you like. What are they going to do, take away my pension?" Bran laughed and shook his head. "It's over. It's all over. My career, this tower..."

"Thank you. Your opinion in this instance will be invaluable." Torrin focused the whole of his attention on Godwin, who stumbled back into a wall, at the power of that gaze. "Godwin -- Senior Enchanter Godwin -- I want you to accept Queen Anora's offer, on my behalf, but do it conditionally. Explain to her there's been an unforeseen disaster, here -- the tower is no longer safe for mage nor templar, and we are undertaking a rescue of those trapped, but we need help, and we need somewhere to live -- preferably a place that isn't thirty-percent supported by the First Enchanter's continued life and good will. We understand that some mages may have used the chaos to flee, and we do not blame them -- running out of a falling building is a perfectly sensible thing to do -- but we chose to focus our attention on those still trapped inside."

"That's good!" Godwin sounded surprised.

"That's why I got elected," Torrin joked, rubbing his face, exhaustedly.

"Let them help you sell this," Fen'Din offered, making a few incomprehensible gestures, before he began to sing, again. The air thinned again, as the spirits passed, and the sound of stones falling and statues toppling in empty rooms echoed through the halls.

"Excellent," said Godwin, looking up at the ceiling. "Now I almost expect the tower to actually fall on us!" He laughed, but his eyes were wide as he backed into a more secure corner.

"That means it will be convincing," Torrin told him.

Petra and a gaggle of her followers returned. Petra had thrown on an extra layer of robes and sturdier shoes, her belongings tied up in a bedsheets and slung over her shoulder. Her whole life, reduced to that small bundle. She couldn't decide if that was more freeing or depressing, but she supposed that 'freeing' was the more relevant option here.

"We're ready," she told Fen'Din. She glanced at Torrin before turning back to the elf. "Were you the one who knocked over those statues? Please tell me that was on purpose."

"Almost crushed my foot," mumbled one mage behind her.

"You lived," muttered another.

"Put what will fit on the cart, and we will go. We will find a beast to pull it on the other side of the bridge -- and you may tell your superiors they can thank me for that bridge at their leisure, Ser Bran. Consider it a gift. I would ask you to join us, but... we have no lyrium." Fen'Din smiled widely and turned to those still lingering who had decided not to join them. "May you all come to better fortunes than we have had so far. I may come to miss some of you, in time."
As the last bundle was pressed in between two trunks, Fen'Din lifted the cart handles and strained forward. "Do any of you have force magic?" he asked after a moment. "No, of course not."

Three rats climbed up the cart and returned to being piles of bone, as the spirits turned their attention to moving the cart from the tower. This time, when Fen'Din pulled, the cart rolled easily behind him, and he led it down the path to the bridge -- a path he had never walked, since the bridge had been out centuries longer than he'd been there. He wished Anders could see this -- this was how an exit was supposed to go, he was sure. Not some mad leap into the lake or out a window, but a decently orderly procession through a brand new door, over an ancient bridge, and into whatever lay beyond.
A Taste of Freedom

Chapter Summary

Kinnon meets an exciting plant. Fen'Din makes some exciting friends.

The lightning-seared rabbit, Petra found, was a little crispy around the edges, but it was fresh, and it went well with the berries she and Keili had picked. She still wasn't used to all the air, to all the walking and the sunlight, but the breeze against her skin felt good. But a part of her felt exposed without the press of stone around her.

When Kinnon returned from the bushes, she pointed out the broad leaf with his share of the berries and meat. "Your rabbit's getting cold," she said.

Instead of taking a seat, Kinnon stood awkwardly over her, though perhaps he wasn't so much standing as squirming.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Keili between berries.

Kinnon didn't look at either woman but instead stared at something over their heads. "I, uh. I might require a healer. Before I sit. Or do anything."

Petra blinked a few times. "Did you get bit by something? What happened?"

"Plant demons," Kinnon muttered, after a moment more staring at nothing. "Apparently these Void-touched things don't like being used as ... cleaning rags."

"Cleaning... r--" Petra's eyes grew large as she put together what he must have meant. "Maker, Kinnon, what'd you wipe your ass with? Didn't anyone ever teach you to use an ice spell for that? Well, you'll remember, now."

"It had red leaves and they looked sort of ... round. Like clouds." Kinnon shrugged. "Does it matter? Just ... make it stop itching!"

Petra rolled her eyes and called forth a small healing spell, laying one hand on each of Kinnon's hips. "Four small ice spells in a bowl and melt them," she said. "Then wash any part of your body that touched the plant in that water and pour it out somewhere nobody's going to drink it by accident. It's not Void-touched. It's just poisonous. Don't wipe your ass with plants that look like that. They're red for a reason."

"And I thought magic was dangerous," Keili joked around a mouthful of meat and berries.

"Blighted then, if not Void-touched," Kinnon muttered. His squirming eased as Petra's healing sank in. "Why would the Maker create such a plant?"

"To torment idiot mages and their private parts, clearly," Petra drawled.
"Then I guess he succeeded," Kinnon grumbled, grabbing up a bowl and disappearing back into the bushes -- a different set of bushes than last time, Petra was pleased to note.

"We should probably warn any other idiot mages," Keili suggested, still looking amused. "Unless you want to keep firing healing spells at their hindquarters."

Petra groaned. "It's like the berries all over again. I know the little clustered red ones look tasty, but I promise, it's a bad idea to eat them. I should make a list and pin it to the cart. Or maybe I should just tell them all not to touch any plants unless I point out that it's okay." She thanked the Maker that she had actually paid attention during her potions classes.

A flash of purple light caught Keili's attention, and she looked around the fire to where Fen'Din was kneeling on the ground doing... something. "What's he doing, now? We have his dogs to pull the cart. What else do we need?"

"They're wolves, not dogs. You'll never find a mabari with a face like that." Petra swiped another bit of meat -- plain, but edible -- and took a closer look at what their uncannily fearless leader was up to.

She saw the horns, first. Enormous ivory spirals tearing up out of the ground, earth falling from the spaces between them. He cooed and laughed and started cleaning the dirt off the thing as it rose up, a bit smaller than a horse, she thought, not that she'd seen many horses up close. What was that thing? It stumbled, dizzily, as Fen'Din rubbed it with his blanket and a knife, and finally turned its head to nibble at his hair.

"Is that... What is that?" Petra asked, scooting closer to Keili to whisper the question. "Is he creating odd hybrid beasts now?"

Keili hummed around one berry-stained finger and pointed. "No, hang on, I think that's a halla! I read about them once in a book on magical beasts. Mostly I just liked the pictures, but I remember the horns. Oh, that is... much less enchanting decomposing."

"But, we already have the wolves, why does he...? Is he collecting undead creatures?" This was why they were hiding away from the road, Petra reflected. This troupe of idiots would attract too much attention, and generally the point of running was to avoid being dragged back later.

"Let's ask him," Keili decided. "New friend, Fen'Din?"

"Old friend," Fen'Din corrected. "New body. There were elves, here, once. Lots of them. But, I don't need elves. I need something that can bear a man's weight. We are barely out of the tower, and I see how many of you look tired. We'll move more easily if some can ride. The cart's too full to add people to it, but there's a graveyard of halla, here. Just a few to carry the weak or injured, and we'll be making much better time than the templars expect. Of course, I don't think any of them are expecting us to head into the Frostbacks, either."

"Where are we going, anyway?" Petra asked. "Now that we're away from the templars..."

"North. I know some of you will want to go to Tevinter, and that won't be difficult, but I'm following a different trail. There's a little village on the river, in the Anderfels. I remember he could tell me every town they stopped in bringing him back from there, and I remember every one of them." Fen'Din smiled and took a deep breath. "We're going to find Anders and Karl."
Templars on the Road

Chapter Summary

Being newly-minted apostates is difficult, when there are templars between you and where you're going. Fortunately, Kinnon has a plan.

As long as she kept walking, Petra couldn't feel the blisters on her feet. A healing spell every now and then soothed them, but she wasn't the only one complaining of sore feet, so she would need her mana. Petra threw Keili some healing every time she started to limp, and Keili threw her a relieved smile in thanks.

When Kinnon walked up beside Petra and nudged her arm, she already had another spell ready. "What? Don't tell me you wiped your ass with another poison plant."

"No, I learned my lesson," Kinnon muttered. He pointed ahead of them, up the road, where Petra would have been looking if her mind hadn't wandered. The gleam in the distance was odd, at least until it drew close enough to take on a human shape. A few human shapes. "Templars. Stop casting. There are templars, and the cart is being drawn by wolf skeletons. Well, freedom was fun, I guess. Except for the itching privates. I could have done without that."

Fen'Din gently guided the cart to the side of the road and unhitched the wolves, whispering to them and rubbing behind where their ears might once have been. They disappeared into the underbrush, occasionally barking. "Whoever's on the halla, get down and let them follow the wolves. They'll come back, when it's time to go. Right now, we need to be ... not what we are."

Kinnon rummaged in the cart until he came up with a bag of apricots they'd picked earlier. "We can be a travelling circus," he suggested, juggling the fruit.

"That is the most idiotic--" Keili started, but Petra cut her off.

"It's that or an itinerant choir. Look at us. We look weird, but none of us as weird as him, and we don't have the kind of skills we'd have to be able to use and talk casually about, to say we're anything else."

"I don't look weird," Fen'Din protested. "I look Dalish, and I'm sticking to that. Quick, who can do what? Silly things, people!"

"I can sing Tevinter bawdy operas," one mage offered.

"Oh, me too!" Another moved to stand next to her.

By the time the templars had caught up to them, Kinnon was juggling while another mage threw forks at the apricots when he bounced one over his head every few cycles, five mages were singing the parts of a story of a married woman with three lovers and a chambermaid who was selling her exploits to the press, a few more were practising a dance routine, and Keili was turning a Maker's eye pendant in her hands, counting the sun's rays, and saying a prayer for each.
The templars slowed to eye them, but Keili took it as a good sign that none of them had thrown down a smite. One templar elbowed another, pointing out Kinnon and the fork-thrower with a laugh.

"I've seen quite a few things on this road," said the templar being elbowed, "but this is new." He sized up Fen'Din, stare lingering on the tattoos on his face. "Are you a travelling troupe? That would be my first guess."

"What's your second guess?" Petra asked. She didn't have any hidden talent half as entertaining as the others, but if pressed, she could pass herself off as the group's manager.

"Escapees from a madhouse," the templar answered, to guffaws from his companions.

Petra supposed that was probably closer to the truth.

"So does the cart pull itself?" another templar asked. "Is that its trick?"

"We've stopped to rest the dogs a bit, before the pass," Fen'Din answered. "There's six of them, and they get a little touchy in the afternoons." As if to confirm that, there was a rustling in the underbrush, followed by a few yips and some howling. "Good a time as any to practise our work."

"What do you do, then, some kind of trick archery? I heard the Dalish are great archers," a templar asked.

"Me? No, I breathe fire. I wouldn't know what to do with a bow if you handed me one, which is a fine reason to run off and join the circus, if you ask me." Fen'Din laughed and pulled out the bottle of something that had been wine, when they left the tower, but was now strong enough to take the paint off leather. Petra had distilled it, overnight, to use on burst blisters. "It's not so hard. I could teach you in a few moments, if you want to impress the boys in the barracks."

"You don't need magic for that? You don't look like a dragon to me!" The templars laughed among themselves.

"All you need is a strong drink and a torch. And maybe a little patience." Fen'Din took a swig from the bottle, before setting it on top of one of the trunks and snapping two stones together with a small fire spell to light the torch they'd bound to the front of the cart. He unfastened the torch and held it up, before blowing a gout of flame across it.

The templars cheered and applauded. "And you can show me how to do that?" asked one, stepping forward. Over his shoulder, he added to his friends, "Imagine if I did that in front of the commander! He'd have a heart attack!"

"Or try to smite you," another responded. "Maybe both!"

Petra laughed along as though she actually found that funny.

"Perhaps I left out the part about having a strong constitution," Fen'Din joked, spitting the alcohol into the dirt and offering the bottle to the templar. "Don't swallow that. Just put it in your mouth and hold it half a moment. It'll burn a bit, but not so badly as if you do this wrong. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth, and close your mouth before you stop, if you don't want to light your lips on fire."
The templar nodded, listening intently, turning to exchange grins with his fellows before putting the bottle to his lips. His face scrunched at the taste, and the other templars laughed. Gesturing for the torch, he was all too eager to spit it back out.

Templars and mages both applauded the spout of flame that followed. He coughed and wiped dribble from his chin, handing back the torch.

"How was that?" he asked the other templars, throwing his arms out wide. "Did I look like a dragon!"

"Sure did!" said another templar. "A constipated dragon, but still a dragon!"

"Are dragons often constipated?" Kinnon asked, looking concerned. "If they are, perhaps we shouldn't make that purchase of a drake, next season!"

One of the templars reached through the apricots and took Kinnon by the shoulders, turning the man to face him. "Buy the drake," he said, firmly. "And then definitely come back through. I'd give my left testicle to see a travelling show with a dragon in it!"

"A dragon for Ser Templar, here! What do you think, are they popular enough to get a crowd that's worth the cost?" Petra asked, nothing but relieved when no smites landed.

"Oh, definitely!" the templar replied. "There's not a red-blooded man in Ferelden who wouldn't come out for that! Though, I suppose we'll be somewhere else, next year. There's talk of moving the tower to a place with less history living in it."

"Oh, what a spooky thought!" one of the mages called out from where she was rifling the cart for something. "Living around all that magic! What's it like in there? Are there spirits? I heard there were spirits!"

"Oh, there's rumours of all sorts of things in that tower," said the fire-breathing templar. He spat, still trying to get the taste out of his mouth. "I'm not sure you know the story, but during the Blight, a blood mage went crazy and killed half the people living in it. Now there are stories about mages and templars seeing the ghosts of their dead friends!" He gave an exaggerated shudder, while Keili closed her eyes and murmured another prayer, still spinning the amulet around her neck. "So, yeah, pretty spooky from what I hear. But the place is falling apart anyway, so." He shrugged.

"I wonder where they're going to put all those mages," Kinnon asked, turning the apricots over in his hands. "Is it even safe to move that many mages?" He turned a concerned look Petra's way, and she hoped the templars didn't think the fear in his eyes was too exaggerated.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll find us something nice. I bet you there's some old Avvar forts we'd look great in." One of the templars shrugged and gestured at the hills around them. "That stuff's everywhere. They tell me that keep the Wardens got in Amaranthine is Avvar. Whatever they live like now, those guys built some nice places a thousand years ago. We just have to wait for the queen to find us a good one."

"Andraste bless Queen Anora," the fire-breathing templar agreed. "And moving mages isn't that hard, really. No harder than moving anybody else, anyway. We've got ways of making it easier -- templar secrets, you know. It's why the Order's so hush-hush." He winked at Petra, who tried very hard to look interested.
"Come on, guys," another templar said, looking up at the sky and pointing. "Hadley's going to have our asses for supper if we don't make it back in time."

The templar still holding Kinnon's shoulders let go. "Don't be afraid to send us a letter, if you see any mages wandering around, out here. A few of ours got lost in the woods, a couple days ago and we're hoping to find them before anything unfortunate happens."

"We'll send a messenger the minute we see magic," Fen'Din promised, trying to keep the amusement out of his eyes.

It wasn't until the last gleam of the templars' armour disappeared that Keili stopped praying and Petra allowed herself to breathe. Kinnon tossed the apricots back into the cart and sagged against it.

"Well," said Keili, "that was stressful."

"You weren't the one throwing forks at apricots," muttered the fork-wielding mage. "That was stressful."

"Good quick thinking, everyone," Petra said. "Especially you, Fen'Din. I half expected them to smite you after that fire-breathing trick, but it was a hit!" The elf was insane, but he did well under pressure. Maybe they wouldn't have been quite as screwed with him as First Enchanter as she had thought, but... no. She still couldn't picture it.

Kinnon stepped off the road and peered into the woods, rubbing the fingers of one hand together and whistling, trying to call back the undead halla.

"They're not cats, Kinnon," sighed Petra.

Fen'Din crouched by the edge of the road and whistled a bit of an unsettling tune. After a bit of rustling, the wolves bounded out, leaping up on him and rubbing their teeth against his hair. "There's certain sounds they like. Yours didn't make the list."

"What, because I don't sound like a dying cat getting bludgeoned with an organ pipe?" Kinnon sounded offended, and Fen'Din could see his shoulders bunch as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Because you don't sound like the Fade. I don't really, either, but they think it's funny that I'll try."

Fen'Din grinned and started buckling the wolves back into their harnesses, as the halla swaggered back toward the road, looking totally disinterested in anything that was going on.

"Like the Fade? The Fade doesn't sound like anything... does it?" Keili looked confused at the idea, squinting at Fen'Din and the way the light reflected off the jewels on his hair clip.

"You had a Harrowing like the rest of us, and even if you didn't, look around. Listen. It doesn't have a song, to us. It has a song to the spirits, though, because spirits don't have expectations about what a world is supposed to be. We bring that with us. We change everything we touch. And what we haven't touched? They say it sings. And the stone deep down sings. And the singing-stone, obviously, also sings. And they're all different songs, but Leniency, here, tells me they all used to be the same song, once. It tries to teach me to sing the songs, but I haven't learnt to change my shape enough to make the right sounds."

"And the song -- or something close to the song -- calls these spirits to you?" Keili asked, folding her arms around her. "That sounds dangerous, Fen'Din. What if it summons the wrong kind of spirit?
What if you summon demons?"

Petra didn't mention that she had seen what looked like demons tearing down the wall of the tower. It was something that still rankled in the back of her mind, but she had seen no blood magic.

"What does it matter?" asked another mage, one of the dancers. Keili had passed her in the hallways a few times but never learned her name. "It's worked well enough so far, hasn't it? We escaped, we have our own transportation, and no one's made a deal with a demon to do it." She squinted at Fen'Din. "Right?"

"I have made no deals with demons or otherwise." Fen'Din stood, brushing dusty paw-prints off his trousers. "These spirits follow, because they are as tired of the tower as we are. Probably more tired of it, really. They've been there since before any of us were born, died, came to be in this place. Some of them have changed, in that time, though few of them can articulate how. But, while some are playful and most are helpful, I have seen none of them strike out in anger, like the spirits who fell to Uldred's call. So many of those had hungry faces and angry faces, but with us, I see only friendly faces, so far. But, Uldred was right. Even friendly faces don't stay friendly, with the right provocation, and I can say the same of the spirits that I would say of any of you. Who among us could not be driven to lash out?"

He spread his arms and looked slowly across the assembled mages, many of them breaking away from his gaze, before he moved on. "Karl, actually. I always thought he'd be First Enchanter, one day. But, they sent him to Kirkwall, and I don't think anywhere in Thedas hasn't heard what happened in Kirkwall. But, I expect that was Anders -- He always did make a splash."

"Especially when he hit the lake," Kinnon remarked, a smile sneaking across his face until he couldn't hold back the laugh.

"I told him there were easier ways across the lake, but did he ever listen to me?" Fen'Din sighed and shook his head. "But, they must be away from there, by now, and there is one place I know to look for them, no matter what they used to say about the Hinterlands or Minrathous. They will have opened the way for us. We will be welcome, as long as we can get there."

Petra cleared her throat. "And where is 'there', exactly?"

"I told you. We're going to the Anderfels." Fen'Din smiled in that entirely unsettling way he had, as if he'd never quite figured out the purpose of a smile. "A little village on the Lattenfluss, just over the river from Kassel. It's easy by the Imperial Highway, but I think we want to stay off the roads until we're much further north." He gestured after the templars.

"The... Anderfels," Kinnon repeated, eyes owlish. "That's... But Tevinter is just as close, right? Maybe closer?" He glanced at the mage next to him, who verified this with a nod. "So why don't we go there, where mages are actually treated like people? I don't want to trade in a Fereldan tower for an Ander one!"

"We won't end up in an Ander tower," Petra assured him, rubbing her forehead. "But, Fen'Din, that is a long way to travel with such a large group. And not easy to travel! We would have to cross water, mountains, desert..."

"What? No." Kinnon shook his head. "No. I want to enjoy my freedom while I can. Grab a pint at a tavern, served by a pretty girl. Let Karl and Anders enjoy their freedom how they want!"
"You could always have that pint and still head for the Anderfels," Keili said softly. "You could even have that pint in the Anderfels."

"I want the world they dreamed of. I want to find them and to take my place at their side, where I belong. As I said, you are welcome to follow, but that is where I'm going." Fen'Din re-attached the torch to the cart and checked to make sure everything they'd taken out was back where it went. "We can stop and get pints in Orlais or Nevarra, but we have to get over the mountains, first. We have to get out of Ferelden, while they still think we're here. While they're still checking the docks for us. If you want to go to Tevinter, it's the same way I'm going, for most of the way, anyway. You'll just want to stay on the Highway, when I turn west. It might be easier if I go to Minrathous and then catch a boat, in which case, it's the same way the whole way, but I won't know which decision to make until further up the path. All I can see now is Orlais. All I can concern myself with is the first step, and that is not being in Ferelden."

"He has a point," Petra admitted. "Whether we get all the way up there or not, we need to get away from the people who might recognise us. We got lucky with those templars -- a bunch of new recruits, from the look of them -- but we're not going to get that lucky again. There are Orlesian towns and cities on the Highway, and we can stop and reconsider, there."

"We need to stay away from Val Royeaux. Let's go on to Nevarra," one of the singers argued. "They killed Irving, in Val Royeaux. The templars in Orlais have run mad. We can get some supplies, but we can't stay there."

"As long as those supplies include some Orlesian chocolates," Kinnon said, "I am fine with not staying in Orlais."

"I always wanted to see Orlais and Nevarra," Petra said, surprised by the realisation that she technically could, now. They were on the run, yes, and they had to be careful, but they were free. For the first time in her life, she could choose where she wanted to go or stay. For the barest moment, she considered going home, but she knew that would never work. "And... well, I suppose the Anderfels could be interesting too. Full of history."

"I hear Ander art is really beautiful," Keili said, "and that their chantries glitter like gems." She grinned, broadly and brilliantly. "I would certainly love to see them."

"We'll stop in Halamshiral," Fen'Din decided, suddenly. "I have read stories -- it's big, but not like Val Royeaux, just big enough that no one will notice a performance troupe visiting for an afternoon. Maybe we should tell them we're pilgrims, instead. And maybe we should have something to sell... Herbs. Potions. Fruit. Everything is paid in coin, outside the tower, and we have none. No matter. We will have what we need by the time we need it."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Petra demanded, jarred out of her reverie by the realisation they still had a long way to go, and with nearly no supplies.

"Has it failed me yet?" Fen'Din counted the halla and checked the wolves again. "Come, we have to get off the road. We need to get into the pass and over the mountains. When we're back near civilisation, you can decide whether to stay among them or follow me again, but staying here is not going to end well."

He set off toward the pass, again, and the wolves followed.

"He's really not that reassuring, is he?" Kinnon sighed and set off after the cart, the rest of the mages
with him.
"There's something in the trees," Kinnon insisted, as the rustling grew more intent around them. Wolves -- living wolves -- or maybe bears, he thought. What horrors would come out in the dark of the mountains and eat them before they ever made it to Orlais?

"Don't be ridiculous," Fen'Din scoffed, as a skeletal bird pushed a berry between his lips. "Sisterhood says it is the trees, and I think it knows what its talking about. Unless you meant 'in the trees', like 'the trees are possessed', in which case, yes. They are."

"We're going to be eaten by trees!?" Kinnon howled, and a young-looking tree stepped onto the path behind him, when he turned to jab a finger at Fen'Din. "This is your fault. You got us into this."

"Before me I do see an elf. With spirits he surrounds himself. But his loud little man does not understand we are nourished by Thedas itself." The tree's words sounded strangely like wind through leaves -- very loud whispers through leaves, in fact.

"Which is to say he's not going to eat you, Kinnon," Petra translated, face still frozen in shock. There was a tree standing in the road talking to them. That was... Did that sort of thing happen often? Was this something she'd become accustomed to outside the tower? She'd certainly never seen any indications trees could talk, before.

Slowly, Kinnon moved until the cart stood between him and the tree. "The tree is talking," he said, eyes round. "The tree is not only talking, it's rhyming. Did you know that rhyming trees existed, Petra?" His voice rose in pitch as he spoke, until his words came out in squeaks.

"It's called a sylvan, I think," Keili said in a small voice. "A tree possessed by a spirit. But... I've always heard them described as violent, not... rhyming."

Kinnon pressed closer to the cart. "Implying it can't be rhyming and violent?"

The tree straightened, leaves bristling, but it only stepped closer to get a better look at them. Petra still found herself reaching for one of her few fire spells, just in case -- except, no, she didn't want to burn down the forest with them in it. That would be a bad thing.

The tree rumbled before speaking again. "The creature you're thinking of, mage, is a tormented monster of rage. No such demon am I, but since you passed by, might a few words be exchanged?"

"It's rhyming again," Kinnon said in a loud whisper.

"Don't mind the loud little man," Fen'Din replied, with a smile. "He's doing the best that he can. As I
started to say, we're bound for Orlais, and any help is better than..." He gestured around them with a shrug.

"No, no, no." Kinnon ducked behind Petra. "Is it contagious? I think it's contagious. Now Enchanter Crazypants is doing it too."

One of the wolves chuffed in amusement.

"I have sometimes heard of Orlais, from others who travelled this way. But where to begin or whether you're in, however, I just couldn't say." The tree shrugged, branches creaking and leaves falling. "There are other men in this wood. You'd be best to ask them, if you could. Just head on this way for another half day, and right at their gates you'll be stood."

Fen'Din looked over his shoulder at Petra. "I didn't know there was a town out here... Have you heard of one?"

"A... town? No, I don't think so." Petra tried to picture where they would be on a map. She had found one in one of Fen'Din's books, but it was old and small and didn't have much by way of details. "This seems awfully secluded for a town, unless we're veered really far off track, somehow, which..." She squinted through the trees, but, no, the sun was still on the correct side of them. "I don't think we have."

"Do you think that they would believe we're a travelling troupe?" Keili asked. "All the way out here?"

"Bring the rhyming tree, and they might be more likely to believe us," Kinnon muttered."

"Oh, so now you want the tree with us?" Petra teased.

"No, I was just sarcastically pointing out the ridiculousness of the situation," Kinnon grumbled.

Petra rolled her eyes. "Thank you for clarifying."

Keili watched Fen'Din and the tree make more and more ridiculous rhymes as the conversation continued at a rate she didn't want to think too hard about. "Perhaps we should stop for lunch. I saw some quail, earlier, if the tree hasn't scared them all off."

Petra grinned and called back into the crowd. "Hey, Candles?"

"Yo!" a voice came back.

"How many quail do you think you can hit at once?" Petra asked, crouching down and peering into the shrubbery at the side of the trail.

"How many candles are in a library chandelier?" an elven woman asked, the voice finally taking on a face as she broke through the crowd to look where Petra was pointing.

"Keili thinks she saw some quail, and if the tree hasn't scared them, we can get a good meal," Petra explained.

"Well, some of us. It's going to take more than a few quail to feed us all," Keili sighed.

"The road right here follows a stream. Head that way and watch for the gleam. If you don't mind some fish, you can make quite a dish, as it's down from the lake filled with bream," the tree called over Fen'Din's head.
"Fishing," said Kinnon. "Always wanted to go fishing!" Not that he had any of the materials to do it the traditional way. But, magic existed.

"You just want to get away from the rhyming tree," Keili leaned in to mutter.

"At this point, the rhyming tree is no worse than the rhyming elf." Kinnon pointed at Fen'Din. "But that does not hurt, no."

Petra exchanged a look with Keili as Kinnon cheerfully headed down the road, following the tree's instructions. "Keili, Elma, go along with him and make sure he doesn't fall in. The rest of us will be along with the cart shortly."

As she spoke, Candles cracked her knuckles, squinting into the shrubbery. Her lightning struck without warning, outlining the trees in a crackle of light and sending up a few singed plumes of feathers. A moment later, the air was heavy with the smell of burnt feathers and flesh.

"Got 'em!" Candles cheered.

"Most of them," Petra agreed, pointing out movement in the brush and an escaping creature.

Lightning cracked again, and this time the base of a tree began to smoulder. "Got 'im!" Candles said, with a cheerful shrug.

"This isn't the practice rooms, Candles!" A wall of ice followed, lancing between trees and uprooting the underbrush, where it passed.

"Forgive them their ignorant ways," Fen'Din said to the tree. "This wasn't the way they were raised. They've never seen trees, or flowers, or bees -- well maybe bees, but that was my fault -- thus these uneducated displays."

The tree blinked at him, considering the concept of a creature that had never been outside. "I would think you were dwarves, but you're tall. And dwarves know no magic at all. But, where were you kept, that left you inept, and what else will your magic befall?"

"Not you," Petra was quick to reply. "Definitely not going to befall you."

"We come from a tower of mages, on Lake Calenhad now for ages. We were trapped in that prison, until spirits arisen let us out in ways truly outrageous." That one was good, and Fen'Din looked a little smug.

Petra was starting to wish she had joined Kinnon and the others. "Let's just... gather up the quail and meet up with the others. Unless, of course, you want to possess the quail so that they can walk to us instead." Her chuckling died out, and she looked concerned. "Please don't actually do that."

"Don't go giving Enchanter Crazypants ideas, Pets," Candles called over her shoulder as she kicked her way through the bushes. She paused mid-stomp and twisted the other way to address the sylvan. "Hang on, rhyming tree. These aren't your cousins or something I'm stepping on, are they?"

It took Petra a moment to realise that the sound of wind rustling through leaves was the sound of the sylvan sighing. She was relieved he didn't do that in meter as well.

"Each plant, rock, and tree is my kin, and, yes, that's a friend you've stepped in. But better your boot than the lightning you shoot, though I wonder where that boot has been."

Candles frowned up at him before lifting one foot to inspect its sole. "Oh, ew. What the Blight did I
"Just pick up the quail," Petra groaned, leaning forward to thump her head against the cart.

Kinnon stood on the bank of the river, a sharpened stick in one hand, stabbing at the fish that darted beneath the surface of the water. "I almost got it!" he insisted, as Keili rolled her eyes at Elma.

"I don't think you can stab fish, Kinnon. Aren't you supposed to throw string at them, or something? Or a net? There's all those pictures of nets full of fish and people with fish hanging from strings." Keili watched, dubious, as Kinnon thrust his makeshift spear at another fish he completely missed.

"Kinnon, you idiot," Candles started, and Fen'Din leapt between her and the water.

"No! Don't do it!" It was the most excited he'd gotten about anything since they'd left the tower. "It would work, but we still don't have nets. There's no way to get them out of the water once you do that, so our supper is going to end up back at the other end of the stream, a day down the road."

"Do you have a better idea?" Petra asked, cynically eyeing the stream and the surrounding mages.

"Let the wolves do it for us," Fen'Din responded, with a shrug and a smile. "It's not like they'll get dog drool on anything."

"And how is that better than me stabbing them?" Kinnon demanded, jabbing at another fish.

"Well, for one, spirits can see underwater and they don't need to breathe. You're standing on the shore. Of course you keep missing."

Kinnon glared, angling his spear for a second as though to stab it at something other than a fish. "Maybe that's because my concentration keeps getting interrupted."

"Just let the wolves do it, Kinnon," Petra sighed. "We have them anyway, and it's really not the worst idea." At Kinnon's dejected look, she rolled her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Fine, you can keep stabbing at the fish, too. Just try not to hit the wolves. They don't need to be any deader than they are."

One of the wolves wagged its tail in agreement. Since it was mostly bone, it was more disconcerting than cute, at least to Petra. She still offered it an affectionate pat on what was left of its snout.

Another wolf slipped into the river, the fish darting out of the way, but after a time of it standing still, they began circling it as if it were just a rock. The other wolves slid quietly into the water after it, and in a few minutes, the stream had returned to normal.

"That's a great job they're doing," Kinnon grumbled, as the wolves stood still and the fish continued to dart away from his spear.

"Why don't you start a fire?" Fen'Din suggested. "We'll make camp here. Eat, rest, and then go to find these people the tree was talking about."

Suddenly one of the wolves lunged, throwing a fish out of the stream, before settling back to its unmoving state.

"Or you could stab that fish," Fen'Din said, smiling blandly. "Either way, I think we have to cook it before we try to eat it."

"I hope someone knows how to cook fish," Keili said as she watched Kinnon, who was doing a
marvellous job of stabbing the stone around the flopping fish. He was bound to hit it eventually, preferably before the fish flopped its way back into the water.

A flash of lightning jolted the fish, and it flopped limply to the ground, smoking. Kinnon turned a betrayed look Candles's way.

"What?" Candles huffed. "I'm hungry!"

One of the wolves flung another fish towards the bank, this one smacking against Kinnon's shins before wriggling on his feet.

"You can stab that one," Candles suggested.
Candles steals a buck from some relatively displeased hunters, who take the mages back home with them to be judged.

They followed the path the tree had pointed out, and hoped they were getting closer to civilisation. There were more blisters than Petra could handle, and the idea of walking for months was wearing very thin with most of the mages -- especially since food had been so hard to come by. A rustling in the trees drew their attention, and a deer burst out, racing across the path. And then lightning struck it, and it flew forward into a tree, unmoving once the momentum wore off.

"I think I got enough for all of us!" Candles enthused, running over to investigate the deer. It was very definitely dead, but less cooked than smaller things had been. "Still going to have to make a fire or something. It's too big."

As the mages struggled to load it onto the cart, for later, few of them noticed the hunters creeping out of the trees, around where the deer had appeared.

"Uh, guys?" Kinnon brought up a barrier and clung nervously to his staff.

One of the hunters, painted like some combination of shadows and beasts, lunged forward, shouting angrily as he plunged a spear into... nothing. It bounced off the barrier and tore out of his hand, sending him reeling.

"Hey, hey, that is not necessary!" Petra shouted, scrambling around the cart, to get a better look. "We're not here to hurt you! We just need food and some help!"

Fen'Din quietly worked open the buckles on the wolves' harnesses, and they radiated out from where he crouched to sniff at the edges of the barrier. They liked when Kinnon used arcane spells, he'd noticed.

In the trees, Candles noticed a pair of hunters with bows drawn and trained on them. Clustered as they were, she could easily hit them all with one spell, but Petra caught her eye and sharply shook her head.

The hunter who had thrown the spear eyed the wolves through the barrier. He crouched to pick up his spear and held it at his side, available but unthreatening. Or less threatening. "The gods hunt with you," he said in a rumbling accent Petra didn't recognise. His stare lingered then on Fen'Din, brows knit on confusion under the paint. "What brings a clan of lowlanders into our lands?"

"We are just travelling through," Petra said, still keenly aware of the arrows trained on them, her own barrier spell ready in case Kinnon dropped his. "Sorry about stealing your kill. We didn't know you were hunting that deer. But, there's plenty of meat. Perhaps we could share?"

'Plenty' was an exaggeration with their numbers, but it might be worth the trade, especially if no bowmen tried to shoot her in the face.

Fen'Din rose to approach the hunter, one of the halla following him. "What did you mean 'gods'?"
The hunter blinked at him in confusion and pointed to the halla. After a moment, he gestured to the wolves. "Your gods walk with you."

"My friends walk with me." Fen'Din looked at the halla beside him. "Dolora, are you a god?" He paused. "She says she isn't."

Whispers spread between the other hunters. The word 'augur' came up several times.

"Bring the deer," the first hunter decided. "We will bring you to our thane. She will know what to do."

Petra sighed with relief. "So, there really is a town out here? That's the best thing I've heard all day."

"Hawk Hold," the hunter corrected. "It is where we live and who we are. Where do you come from?"

"The east," Petra said.

"Kinloch Hold," Fen'Din replied at the same time.

"There has been no clan in Kinloch Hold for a thousand years," the hunter pointed out. "Not since the magisters took it. But, our thane will know."

Petra glanced at the bowmen in the trees, thanking the Maker -- or these... gods with them -- that they had put their arrows away. She gave Kinnon a reassuring nod, and only then did Kinnon let the barrier dissipate. When the hunters made no other move to attack even with the barrier down, Petra let her own half-formed spell fizzle out.

"Avvar," Keili whispered to her as the hunters escorted them down the road, in the direction the sylvan had told them. Petra nodded, familiar with the term but knowing scarcely little of the people. Keili twisted her amulet in agitation.

Hours passed before their wooden gates came into view, and by then Petra's feet throbbed. She would wait to heal them, not wanting to risk startling an Avvar with a brush of magic.

"Lowlanders!" One of the hunters called, as they entered the settlement. "Bring Thane Setach! She must judge them! They were hunting on our land, and they claim to be from an eastern hold!"

Faces appeared in doorways and windows as the mages passed through, toward the hall at the far side of the central plaza. Kinnon nervously waved to a few children who stood watching them, stuffing their faces with berries. Women pushed their husbands behind them and made signs against evil spirits as they passed. A group of apprentices glowed a strange and unearthly blue at the sight of the halla.

"Who is the augur?" asked a woman with a weighty spear and heavy red hair. Red, not ginger, Kinnon noticed. Quite a bit like his own, actually.

"If you could tell us what an augur is, we'd be happy to tell you!" Petra said, with a smile. "We're very sorry about the deer. We didn't know anyone else was hunting it. You can have it -- a gift of our goodwill. We can hunt something else." Her stomach growled at the thought.

"I think she means me, Petra." Fen'Din stepped forward, leading one of the halla, still with a mage on its back. "I am Fen'Din, and these are my friends." He rubbed the halla's teeth, gently. "We mean you no harm. We're just trying to get over the mountains."
The woman's eyes were grey and sharp as steel as she looked over Fen'Din, the halla, and the mage astride the halla. "I have not heard of elf augurs, but the world is a strange place." Her voice hardened as she asked, "You use gods as steeds and pets?"

"Use? They're my friends. They're helping us because it's what they want to do. Do you have anyone who speaks with spirits? They're welcome to come speak with the spirits we travel with, if that would set your mind at ease." Fen'Din looked somewhat confused and concerned by this reaction. Certainly people had been horrified at him, in the past, but never for that reason. "And, like Petra, I still don't know what an augur is, but if you're looking for the person the spirits speak to, that's me."

The woman looked mollified, if puzzled, her grip relaxing on her spear. "An augur is... what you lowlanders call a mage. They speak to our gods." She tipped her hat at the hunter who had brought them in. "Conall, bring our augur. I would hear his counsel on this matter."

"Yes, Thane Setach." Conall bowed his head respectfully and left the hall.

Petra cleared her throat, barely daring to speak. This woman was more intimidating than a Qunari. "By your definition... yes, Fen'Din is our 'augur'."

"How do you come to travel with an elf?" Setach looked into the crowd. "Several elves, from what I see."

"We all lived together," Petra explained, cautiously. "But, there were some...problems, when our leader died, so some of us left. We're making our way north, to find a new home."

"There was an elf-slum, you mean? I have heard Lowlanders do that." Setach tried to interpret what she was being told, in light of what she'd heard from the dwarven traders who paid her to use the roads.

"No, we all lived in a tower, together," Kinnon corrected.

"We come from Kinloch Hold," Fen'Din offered, rubbing under the chin of another halla that rested its head on his shoulder.

Setach nodded slowly. "I know the place, though I have not been. I have heard strange stories of towers where Lowlanders lock up their mages, but none of elf augurs in such places, blessed by the gods. And the gods have helped you to form your own clan, separate from the others?"

"They helped us," Petra said, glancing at the halla closest to her. "The... gods. But it was our decision to leave." It was odd to think of them as a 'clan', and yet... the people with her were the closest thing to family she had. She could think of worse words for their motley group.

"A decision they are pleased with, if they still follow you," Setach said. "Where are they leading you now?"

Two men entered the hall as she spoke. One was Conall, the hunter they had already met, and the other was a stranger clad in furs, a mask covering half of his face. He considered the halla at Fen'Din's side with a practised eye.

"Orlais, for the moment," Fen'Din answered. "Some of these people would like to go on to Tevinter. I would like to visit the Anderfels. They lead us north, and north we will go. Unfortunately, many of them have never been off the island we lived on, either."

"You called them?" the fur-clad stranger asked.
"No, but they came. When they knew I could see them and hear them -- that I wasn't afraid of them -- they came to talk to me. They told me so many things about the tower we lived in -- about the Fade, about the Veil, about the songs of the world." Fen'Din shrugged and rubbed his cheek on a halla's skull. "I am called Fen'Din. This is Dolora and this is Fastidiousness. We're pleased to meet you, and I'd be happy to introduce you to the rest of our spirits, if you can promise us safety while that happens."

"You have come into my home as guests," Setach declared, with a sweeping gesture. "Though we may test your words and your intentions, it is not our intention to harm or kill you, unless we come to believe you mean to do us harm, in your words or actions."

"Thank you," Petra said, all her relief in those two words. "Is there-- If I may-- That is, we have come a long way, and many of our people are tired. Is there a place they could rest? Fen'Din and I would be more than happy to answer whatever questions you have for us."

Setach nodded and again gestured at Conall. "You have guest-welcome among our clan while you are here, so long as you honour it. We have room enough in the houses of our village and food enough to keep your bellies warm."

Conall gestured for the other mages to follow him, and Keili turned a concerned look at Petra, who smiled reassuringly and waved her on, hoping they hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

One of the halla nuzzled the fur-clad man, who reached up to pet its head, amazed.

"Take the deer," Fen'Din called after them. "We stole it from their hunters. If they're going to feed us, we might as well give it back." He nodded gratefully to Setach, as one of the wolves tugged at its harness. "You are very kind. It wants to thank you. I thank you as well."

"We are not hunters," Petra said, watching the mages take their bundles from the cart and follow the locals out of the plaza. "But, we have a few among us who might be able to help your hunters."

"Conall tells me one of you struck that buck with lightning," Setach said, with an amused smile.

"Candles is really good at that." Petra nodded. "She got us six pheasants in a single shot, yesterday."

As they fell to talking about mundane matters, Fen'Din unbuckled the wolves, who rushed to the augur and pawed at his legs. "I would tell you they are amazed to meet another who can hear them, but you know that. You can hear them."

"I can," the augur agreed. "They are dressed in bones, as you said, to help you. They say you are fleeing a place of demons. Is that so?"

"That's one description of it, yes. We were held prisoner in what is best described as the stronghold of a powerful demon, who has been taunting us with the idea of freedom for generations." Fen'Din smiled, in that uncanny way he had. "And finally, we were strong enough, with their help, to leave."

Petra's brows knit at that description, but she didn't question it. "We have two friends who left before us, and we are hoping to meet up with them." She hoped Fen'Din was right about Anders and Karl going north. Moreover, she hoped Fen'Din was right about Anders and Karl being safe. "It... won't be a short journey, but these spirits -- gods -- seem intent on helping us get there."

Or so she assumed. Petra really had no idea what these spirits wanted, but Fen'Din seemed so sure of them.

The augur nodded. "You are blessed, indeed. The gods don't always answer our prayers and rarely
in such numbers. Kinloch Hold has lost a fine augur, and I am sure they grieve your loss."

"They grieve other losses more, I'm sure, and those yet to come." Fen'Din looked grim, an odd twist of his usually faintly amused face. "May they have time to miss us."

"Your gods speak to the truth of your words," Setach glanced at her augur for confirmation and received a slow nod as his attention continued to drift between all the bony faces looking up at him. "But, the gods of other clans are not our gods. We will put your intent to the test of our gods."

Fen'Din and Petra glanced at each other, uncertainly. "And what will this test involve?" Petra asked.

"A test of your courage, a test of your will, and a test of your strength. None of them will be possible without the favour of the gods." Setach's face remained perfectly neutral, an expression that wouldn't have looked out of place on Fen'Din.

"We really don't have any force?" Fen'Din muttered to Petra, and then, "I will meet the first two of those challenges. The third will depend on the nature of the test which of us will speak for us."

Strength. Petra eyed the Avvar towering over the two of them and wondered what show of strength they could possibly make that would impress them.

"Then we shall start with the first two and see if you make it to the third," Setach said with a slim smile. "But that can wait. First you must rest and recover your strength. Join your companions. Eat, drink, and tomorrow we will see."

Setach tipped her head and waved them away with a finality that said the conversation was over. Petra didn’t quite hide how relieved she was at that, not when she could feel her stomach gurgling expectantly.

The augur gave the halla next to him one last pat and led the pair to where they would be staying.
"The first challenge before you," Setach explained, waving forward a pair of warriors bearing trays of large needles and folded rags, "is one of will."

Fen'Din listened, unmoved, as one tray went on each stump to his sides. Around the edges of the plaza, clansmen and mages gathered to watch the challenge. The clan had seen this type of challenge before, and they whispered among themselves and pointed at the elf who dared to undertake it.

"Place as many needles as you wish into your flesh, in whatever manner you deem fit. Your choices will show us the power of your will and the blessing of the gods. Korth, himself, carved out his own heart and bound it, but that is not a deed for men." Setach gestured at the trays and took a seat between her augur and an older warrior, to watch and judge the challenge. "Begin!"

Without so much as another glance, Fen'Din undressed completely, folding his clothes and setting them onto one of the trays. He gazed down his body, thoughtfully -- where had Anders spoken of the worst pains? His hands tempted him, but those were best saved for last. Underarms didn't seem to be a good starting point, either.

He picked up a needle and studied it, before sliding back his foreskin, with the other hand, and pushing the needle through just below the head and out the hole. If he could remember where all the important parts were, he could do this without making too much of a mess. He wondered if he could set them close enough to jingle without risking them tearing out from the weight.

The Avvar watched, stonily expressionless, but Petra thought she caught a surprised twitch of an eyebrow from Setach. It was easier to watch her than to watch Fen'Din, though Petra watched him out of the corner of her eye to make sure he wasn't causing more damage than she could fix later.

At her shoulder, someone made a strangled sound, and Petra glanced back to see Kinnon, face a ghostly shade of white. "All right?" she whispered back to him.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be all right again," Kinnon whispered back.

The needles went in easily, and Fen'Din never stopped smiling. Not the faintest hint of a grimace or a wince. Not a word spoken. Six needles passed, then two more between his testicles, four between his toes. He reached for another needle, but they were gone, and he stepped out, carefully, from between the stumps, turning to slowly display all of the needles to the crowd, before turning to Setach.
"Do you have any more? I had a rhythm going, and it feels incomplete."

Behind him, a soft thump and a murmur echoed through the crowd as Kinnon's head dropped out of sight. Petra's "Shit!" was clearly audible across the plaza as she ducked after him, to make sure he hadn't given himself a concussion in the fall.

"I admit to being impressed, Lowlander," Setach said, eyes gleaming with something between approval and amusement, "both by you with your poise and daring and by your friend for dropping so quickly."

"He's fine!" Petra called out over the Avvar's laughter. She helped Kinnon sit up. "We're fine! Carry on!"

"You have passed the challenge of will," Setach continued, her voice ringing across the plaza. Her declamation was met with thunderous applause and cheering from mage and Avvar alike. "Next comes the challenge of courage, but first you may tend to yourself." With a sharp smile, she added, "You may keep the needles, if you wish."

"Thank you, but they're a little long. I think they might catch on my trousers." Fen'Din looked at himself, bemused and somewhat saddened. He thought keeping them might be a nice touch, but there was no way that would work.

"Hey, hey, Lowlander!" An adolescent boy waved from the edge of the crowd. "That was incredible! Come to my mother's shop! She's a smith! She'll make you something nice just so she can say you're wearing it!"

"I suppose the gods really are looking out for me, today," Fen'Din joked, picking up his folded clothing and holding it somewhat modestly as he slid out the needles between his toes before following the boy into the crowd. Chuckles and congratulations followed in his wake.

Petra shook her head at Fen'Din's back but kept her attention on her patient. "Feeling any better, Kinnon? I've sent Keili for some water."

Kinnon blinked owlishly up at her. "I don't remember lying down..." He glanced past Petra, where Fen'Din had been sitting the last time he looked. "Where's Fen'Din? Did he win?"

"Oh, he won!" said Candles cheerfully, crouching over them. "Turned his knob into a pincushion, and now he's off to commemorate it!"

Kinnon looked a bit green around the edges. "Commemorate?"

Candles's grin widened. "He's been offered jewellery. You know, for his new piercings."

Kinnon made another solid thud as he slumped to the ground.

"Dammit!" Petra hissed. At least he didn't have as far to fall this time.

Fen'Din reappeared shortly before the second challenge was announced, surrounded by a small group of men and women of the hold. He looked confused, as he approached Kinnon and Petra, in the shade of one of the craft halls.

"And this is my friend Kinnon. You'll like him. He's much more... human. And alive." Fen'Din smiled awkwardly at the other mages.
"Maybe, but he wasn't laughing and telling funny stories while Muirenn fixed rings through his shaft," a young woman pointed out, still giving Kinnon a once over.

"All. Twelve." A hunter of about the same age looked awed, still. "I took three. And in the name of the Mountain Father himself, I didn't take them there."

"Conall's father took eight, in that argument with Fennec-Tooth," said a woman with a distaff and spindle, still spinning as she chatted. "But, all along the top of his arm, and with a bit of hissing. The other hunter took six and wept."

"But, here's this one," a young man said to Kinnon, cocking a thumb at Fen'Din, "takes all twelve and then doesn't even bat an eye with Muirenn tugging at his shaft."

Kinnon looked up at the group from where he sat at Petra's side. "I'd blink," he admitted. "I'd flutter my eyes and bark, if it'd get me that treatment."

"Why don't you try it?" Candles suggested. "See if it works."

"Please don't bark at the locals," Petra sighed. She eyed Fen'Din, tossing some low-level healing his way. He didn't seem to have stabbed himself anywhere that made her worried, but if there was one thing she had learned from Wynne, it was better to be safe with Fen'Din.

"So," Kinnon addressed one young woman standing close to Fen'Din, "any idea what the test of courage will be? Because if it involves Fen'Din mooning a dragon, I get two sovereigns." He pointed at Candles with his thumb over his shoulder.

"She doesn't even have two sovereigns to give you," Petra sighed. She did quite a bit of sighing around these two.

"It depends on the gods," the woman answered. "Conall had to bait a bear, naked."

"I remember that," one of the men next to her laughed. "When the bear roared at him, he roared back even louder."

"Have we had a pit of snakes, lately? I don't think we've done that in a while." The woman with the spindle twirled it idly, nose scrunched as she tried to remember.

"No, because that wasn't our test. That was from the dispute about the dragon with those Dalish." The hunter held out his hand to Fen'Din, who was still somewhat improperly dressed. "If you're ready, we'll take you to the thane. She'll tell you what to do next."
A Test of Courage

Chapter Summary

Fen'Din undertakes the second challenge and returns with more feathers than he left with.

Setach waited with her augur. "I see you've chosen to join us again, Lowlander. Already courageous."

"Just a traveller looking to the road ahead," Fen'Din replied, still trying to figure out what had happened to his smalls.

"You'll feed the hawks, for your foresight." Setach smiled thinly, a faint sparkle in her eyes. "Another challenge to be undertaken in the nude. Bring him the meat!"

The gathered Avvar howled and cheered as one of their hunters brought out a bag, which he handed to Fen'Din.

"Really?" Kinnon muttered to Petra. "Why does he have to be naked to feed birds? I'm beginning to think the thane just has a thing for him."

Petra shushed him, but Candles leaned in on Kinnon's other side. "Looks like you owe me two sovereigns," Candles whispered.

"What?" Kinnon hissed. "Your bet was that they would try to have him poop on a bird!"

"Yes, and I was close. There are birds involved."

"That doesn't count!"

Petra reached around to smack them each upside the head.

Fen'Din left his clothes with Petra, this time, to avoid losing any more of them. He followed one of the hunters up to the cliff-top aerie, above the village, studying the plants they passed.

"I don't understand why this is supposed to be frightening," he said, opening the bag to retrieve the first length of twine dotted with organ meats. "And I'm not sure what being naked has to do with it."

"You've never met a falcon, have you?" The hunter laughed and shook his head. "I wouldn't try this without clothes. I wouldn't try this without my gloves and shoulders. They get a little excited about food. And they get even more excited by small bouncing things." He pointed down.

Fen'Din shrugged. "I'd miss the rings," he said. "I just got those."

The hunter blinked at him a few times. "I've got my gear, and I'll be back here. Scream bloody murder, if you need me to come carry you out. You've got four strands, and you'll want to get all the way out to the end and back. Stay on the path."

The first thing Fen'Din noticed was the smell -- a sharp reek that underlaid everything else. And then
the birds saw him, saw what he was carrying, and they were on him, tearing at the twine in his hands and screeching as they pulled away, to call the others. The first string went alarmingly fast, and the birds pecked at his hands, as he tried to get the next.

But, he wasn't afraid of them. They couldn't hurt him. Well, they couldn't make him feel pain, anyway. That talon in his shoulder did make it hard to move his arm, and he lured the bird away with the next bit of meat.

Petra stared up the cliff-face, chewing on her thumbnail as she watched the distant whirlwind of feathers. She couldn't make him out from here, but at least she would be able to hear if he started screaming. Assuming he would start screaming. The mad elf probably wouldn't even notice if a bird pecked a hole in his arm.

Oh well. Any damage they did, she could fix later.

"Can you see anything?" Kinnon asked in a loud whisper. He clutched at Petra's sleeve.

She shook her head.

In the end, Fen'Din returned, still standing, one hawk firmly attached to his shoulder and another, smaller hawk trying to build a nest in his hair. He was spattered with blood, some of it his own, but he'd wiped the worst of it off with the now-empty sack he carried in one hand.

"Can someone please get this bird off me? Either of these birds?" he asked, sounding terribly put out. "Flannan tried, but they just keep coming back."

The augur sat down on the fence he'd been leaning on, cackling madly at the sight of the naked elf, covered in blood and hawks.

Kinnon saw the blood and the new piercings and whimpered.

"Kinnon, I swear to the Maker," Petra said, "if you pass out again, I'm not healing your concussion this time."

A few members of Fen'Din's new Avvar fanclub crowded him, trying to help coax the hawks off of him. They squawked and flapped their wings indignantly but eventually relocated to a tree branch just overhead. They still eyed Fen'Din as though expecting more food to materialise out of his hands.

"Has he passed the challenge?" Petra asked the thane.

Setach had a hand over her face, trying and failing to hide her laughter. "Yes, of course he has passed. The gods are pleased with his showing so far. Rest, and then we will discuss the third challenge."

Petra took that as her cue and elbowed her way past Fen'Din's admirers to light up his skin with healing. Nothing too horrifying, she found, but she didn't like the amount of blood. "Fen'Din, sit. No, put on some pants, then sit."

The elf did as he was told. "It's not ... most of it came out of the bag," he protested. "And now I'm hungry, too. Watching the birds eat reminded me I got rings put in, instead of getting lunch."

"Food!" called out one of the crowd. "Lunch for the Augur of Kinloch Hold!"

"When did you become Avvar?" Petra teased, filling in the punctures from the hawks' talons.
"Somewhere around the twelfth needle, apparently," Fen'Din replied, with a shrug. "Does this make you our thane?"

"I wonder if we can actually make it north like that. We're not escaped mages, we're an Avvar clan." Kinnon still looked like he might fall down, looking at all the blood. "What's the next challenge? Wrestling warriors? Heaving bears? You up for it?"

"Probably not. I don't think I'm the best choice for a challenge of strength. Especially not after that." Fen'Din shook his head and prodded his freshly-healed shoulder. "Which isn't to say you don't do good work, but Wynne always said I wasn't to do anything strenuous after things like that."

"Wynne was a wise woman," Petra agreed. "Having something to eat is also a good idea. We can worry about the third challenge once we know what it is."

As confident as she sounded, she was concerned. Without Fen'Din, she wasn't sure they would have passed the first two tests, and strength? Physical strength wasn't exactly something the Circle emphasised.

"Between the lot of us, there's bound to be someone who isn't useless," Candles added with a cheerful nod.

Kinnon made some kind of sound that could have been agreement or nausea.

The third challenge still loomed over them, the next morning. Maybe Fen'Din would do it after he'd rested, the other mages speculated, but over breakfast, he insisted he wasn't the best choice.

"How are you not the best choice?" Candles argued. "It's a contest to see if you have the favour of the gods. You walked in here with a dozen of them."

Keili looked up from her berries and eggs, blinking as if something had just occurred to her. "Because I am."

Kinnon pointed. "That is absurd. How, exactly, do you expect to dead-lift a dragon, or whatever it is?"

"The Maker rewards the faithful." Keili looked down the table. "Who among us is more trusting in the Maker's way, incomprehensible as it may be at times? It's not a test of strength. It's a test of faith."

Kinnon rubbed his forehead. "So, you want to beat a test for Avvar gods with faith in a completely different god?"

"Yes," Keili said unflatteringly, as though the answer were obvious. "Maker willing, that is how we shall win. Assuming he wishes us to, but he has guided us safely so far."

Petra shrugged at Fen'Din. "Honestly, I'm not seeing any better options. Why not?"

"Our thane has spoken," Candles drawled, pouring a handful of berries into her mouth. "So, what do you think happens if we fail? Do they kill us or just kick us out?"

"Candles," Petra said disapprovingly.

"We won't fail," Keili assured them, returning to her eggs.
The Test of Strength

Chapter Summary

Keili believes she can use faith in place of strength, for the last challenge.

The final challenge was announced in the plaza, as the others had been. Setach and her augur waited, as the mages approached.

"Who stands for you?" she asked, half-expecting it to be Fen'Din, again, despite his protests, but a woman strode forward.

"I stand for us. It is my strength you will judge." Keili looked as certain as she had battling the ancient demon in the foyer, all those years ago, Kinnon thought.

"So be it!" Setach declared, without a moment's hesitation. "You will climb the cliff below the aerie. Unlike the other challenges, this is a competition. You must best the hunter whose meat you stole."

"We gave it back!" Candles complained from the side of the plaza.

"You did! And so we will weight him with a single stone." Setach gestured into the crowd. "Conall, come forward to meet this challenge."

Conall strode proudly forward, shoulders back and head held high. His skin was painted for battle. "I would know the name of my challenger," he said, inclining his head respectfully in Keili's direction. He stood more than a head taller than she did and was easily twice as broad.

"I am Keili," she answered, "and I wish you well."

Conall's lips twitched up in an almost-smile, and it was difficult to tell if it was genuine or mocking. "Gods be with you."

Setach pointed across the plaza. "You will be climbing that cliff face when I give you the word. First, our Augur will weigh down Conall with a single stone. Kinloch Hold clan, you may test the weight of the stone first, if it pleases you."

"I have faith," Keili declared, brushing aside the hands of the other mages. "It is all I need."

Kinnon turned around, as Keili stepped up to the cliff. "I can't watch this. What if she falls?"

"That's why we have a healer, innit?" Candles joked, draping her arm across Kinnon's chest and resting a hand on his shoulder.

"No," Petra said, quietly. "If she falls too far, there's nothing I can do. I'm not Wynne."

Fen'Din watched Keili's first hesitant grabs at the stone. "Kinnon, if she falls, she's your problem. How fast can you cast a barrier?"

"Maker's breath, are you kidding me? You want me to catch her?" Kinnon whirled around, horrified.

"I think you stand a better chance than most of us of actually having any useful spells and getting
Kinnon looked ill, but he nodded, squaring his jaw. "Guess that means I have to watch this, then."

Candles squeezed his shoulder in consolation.

With Keili and Conall in place, Setach's voice filled the plaza. "Begin!"

Conall had clearly climbed this cliff before. He reached for a jut of stone and pulled himself up with the confidence of someone who knew where he was heading. But next to him, Keili did the same.

Petra chewed on her thumbnail, wincing when Keili's foot slid. Next to her, she saw Kinnon's fingers twitch in the beginning of a spell, but Keili recovered quickly, finding a better foothold and hoisting herself up.

"She's moving too fast to get a good hold," Petra muttered.

"She's gotta move fast if she wants to beat him," Candles replied. "But look at her go!"

The crowd was a cacophony of shouting and cheers, encouragement from both sides that melded into a roar, but as Keili pulled ahead, the mages did their best to be heard over the din.

Fen'Din chanced a glance at the Avvar crowd and, in front of them, at the augur who squinted intently at something that didn't seem to be one of the challengers, on the side of the cliff. Following the man's line of sight, he saw it too -- and most likely, no one else did. Bright colours and flashes of feathers, each time Keili moved a hand or a foot. Some spirit climbed with her, and it wasn't one of the ones from Kinloch Hold, as far as he could tell.

"She's won," he said, quietly.

"What are you even talking about!?!" Kinnon barked, voice sharp with nerves. "They're barely halfway up!"

"She's not alone, and it isn't ours. By the very definition of the challenge, she's won. Their gods favour her." Fen'Din watched curiously, as Keili's movements grew more sure and steady, each one landing a solid grip on a strong support.

"Weird spirit shit. Great." Candles shook her head and chuckled. "I guess it's a good thing we brought you along, isn't it?"

Fen'Din laughed. "Oh, yes, an excellent choice. Can't imagine where you'd have gotten to without me. Probably Aeonar, don't you think?"

Kinnon's fingers flickered again, and Fen'Din's eyes leapt back to the cliff in time to see Keili land solidly after a strange sideways leap that put her on a better incline.

"What the blighted Void is she doing?" Kinnon clutched Petra's shoulder for balance as his knees weakened.

"Besides giving each of us a heart condition?" Petra said with a crooked grin. "She's winning."

As Kinnon clutched Petra's shoulder, Candles still clutched his, her grip tightening the higher Keili climbed. She bounced on her feet, jostling Kinnon and hissing, "Go, go, go!" under her breath.

Conall glimpsed Keili out of the corner of his eye and reached steadily higher, his longer reach still an advantage Keili didn't have. One slip, one false grip, and he could pull ahead again. This close to
the top, there was no room for error.

And Keili made an error, reaching for a loose rock, but instead of slipping or stalling, she continued climbing, a hand steadying her that she could not see. Her arms were shaking and sore, but she could see the ledge.

Candles's chanting rose to a shout as Keili reached the top, pulling herself up and over the ledge. Conall was still climbing.

"Oh, thank the Maker," Kinnon groaned. He let his jelly knees bear him to the ground.

"I'll admit I wasn't expecting that to actually work," Fen'Din said, still gazing up at the cliff.

"Then why didn't you do it yourself?" Petra asked, shoving Fen'Din's shoulder.

"Because it wouldn't have worked for me. Our spirits would have come to me, yes. I'd have made the climb. But, we're not here to impress our spirits. We're here to impress theirs." Fen'Din cracked a smile, like those smiles when he swore he knew nothing about what Ser Drass was doing lying in a pool of wax at the bottom of the library stairs. "I knew one of you would be strong enough to do it, but it couldn't be me, because I can actually speak to them."

"So, it's not really strength, like picking stuff up," Candles said, thoughtfully. "It's... strength of what, faith? I mean, if it's really faith, then obviously Keili's the one, like she said."

"Strength of anything, really," Fen'Din offered, shrugging, as the hunters at the top of the cliff led the challengers back through the aerie and down. "Strength of will, strength of faith, strength of love or hope or compassion. These are the things that draw spirits. Someone had to have something that would draw one of the local spirits -- and I'm still working on how faith in the Maker managed that."

"Faith is faith." Petra shrugged. "If her faith is strong, do the spirits care what it is for?" Not that she knew the first thing about this spirit nonsense, but she had been around enough spirit healers (and Fen'Din) to make a few educated guesses.

"Who cares?" Candles laughed, tugging at Kinnon's arm until he reluctantly pulled himself back to his feet. "We won! Their gods approve, and that means we're -- I don't know -- guests of honour? Or at least guests they're not going to kick out or try to kill."

"I like being that type of guest," Kinnon muttered.

Another cheer went up as Conall and Keili reappeared. Keili met her friends with a beaming grin, and Petra pulled her into a hug, which Kinnon and Candles piled onto.

"Thank you for not falling," Kinnon said, voice muffled against Candles's arm.

"Did... did I really beat him?" Keili asked, finally, from under the pile of mages.

"Just barely, but absolutely," Petra assured her. "How did you do that? That was incredible! You just... all of a sudden, you just started climbing like you knew what you were doing!"

"I prayed to the Maker, and Andraste came to me in a vision." Keili smiled tiredly. "I don't know why she had feathers, but she guided me. Told me my faith would preserve me. And it did. I didn't fall."

Conall stood back by the Avvar crowd, surrounded by other hunters, and shooting dirty looks at the mages. Next to him, the thane and her augur discussed the results of the contest.
"Drost tells me what I could not see, and that the hand of the Lady guided Kinloch Hold's champion to the top of the cliff. She has won not only the favour of her own gods, but of ours, and we extend our favour in light of this. I will discuss the possibility of a treaty of safe passage with the Thane of Kinloch Hold, over supper." Setach's voice echoed across the plaza. "The people of Kinloch Hold are our guests, favoured friends of our own gods, as proven by their successes, this day. We welcome warmly these Lowlanders, and I invite their hunters to join our own to provide for a feast. Such victory should be celebrated!"

"We have hunters?" Kinnon asked.

As one, Keili and Petra pointed at Candles, who grinned and cracked her knuckles. "Ooh, I get to show them how to catch and cook dinner at the same time!"

"Gross," Petra said fondly. "Do us proud!"

Candles and a couple other mages disappeared to join the Avvar hunters. It had been a trying couple of days -- couple of weeks -- but now they were safe. Celebrating seemed like a good idea.
A Wine-Warm Welcome

Chapter Summary

A religious debate and an offer of safe travel north, for certain values of 'safe'.

By nightfall, the feast was in full swing -- meat cooked over every fire, and everyone had a cup of mead. Petra warned the mages not to get drunk, that being drunk out here might end in stumbling off a cliff or insulting the gods. But, she and Fen'Din and Keili sat with the thane and her augur, at the head of the hall, eating and drinking and talking about the little concerns of living and leading a tribe.

Setach told stories of defeating challengers to become the thane and reworking old treaties with the dwarves. Petra tried to explain the much less violent process of electing a First Enchanter, and how the College of Enchanters had worked, when there still was one. To the other side of them, Drost and Fen'Din talked about spirits, over Keili's protests that the Maker did not intend his first and second children to interact.

"And the Voice of the Maker shook the Fade, saying: In My image I have wrought My firstborn. You have been given dominion over all that exists. By your will all things are done," Fen'Din intoned, with a smile at Keili. "And then, the Canticle says, 'Now, with their Father's eye elsewhere, the firstborn at last created something new: envy. They looked upon the living world and the favoured Sons and daughters there, covetous of all they were. Within their hearts grew an intolerable hunger.' He parted them from us because they did nothing, and then the first to create -- the first to seize the will granted the second children -- were demons. But, they're not all demons -- I don't think you'll argue that point with me. The Maker cast down the first demons and bound them in the earth. But, clearly, some of the firstborn escaped that fate, because they're doing as they were intended. They're creating. They're making things that couldn't be, without them. And so are we, also as intended."

He reached out and stabbed another bit of meat off the serving platter for himself. "So, in essence, whether you call them gods or spirits, we're in the company of people who have managed to live the life the Maker intended for his children."

Keili's lips pursed, and Petra saw her readying an argument behind them. Instead, Petra passed the serving platter directly in front of Keili, drawing her eyes away.

"Arguing politics or religion is a good way for a feast to turn into a food fight," Petra said with a tight smile, "and this food is much too delicious to be tossing around." Which was true. After subsisting on lightning-roasted pheasant and fish, whatever was in front of them tasted divine. She could only identify some of the food, but she tried it all.

"But..." Keili started to protest, even as she took the platter.

"Keili, my dear," said Petra, "you have already proven the strength of your faith. Any words would pale in comparison, anyway."

Mollified, Keili nodded and served herself another helping of meat.

Setach watched over the rim of her cup, a smirk pulling at her lips. "I see why you are thane," she
"I, uh. Yes. It's a bit like herding cats, really."

"The only cats I know are the lions of Orlais," Setach joked, taking a sip before she continued. "I would like to exchange a safe passage treaty with you. Once you have settled in your new home, you would have the right to pass freely through our lands, provided you do no harm, and we would have the same rights in your lands. Is this agreeable?"

"I can't speak for our new lands. We may be returning to a Lowland city, far from here. It depends on whether they will accept us." Petra nibbled at some sort of fruit gravy on a surprisingly tasty leaf. "We are trying to get to the Anderfels. We have friends on the river who may be able to help us. So, I suppose the question is what assistance can we offer in exchange for your help getting as far north as possible?"

"Hunt with us," Setach replied. "Help us cure the meat and preserve fruit for later in the year. In a few days, the dwarven traders will return from Redcliffe, and they are the ones you will want to ask. I have heard them speak of getting wealthy with statues from the Anderfels."

"That seems a fair enough trade," Petra agreed. "Plus I think Candles is starting to enjoy hunting, perhaps a bit too much." She glanced down at the table where Candles and Kinnon sat, surrounded by Avvar hunters. Candles was, it seemed, fairly popular, judging by the number of Avvar trying to ply her with drinks. Petra hoped Kinnon was keeping an eye on that.

"Excuse me," said Keili, leaning over the table to join in their conversation, "but did you say dwarves?"

"I did," Setach answered.

"Don't dwarves travel underground?" Not that Keili had had more than passing interactions with any dwarves, but that is something she thought was consistent.

"They often do, yes," Setach responded, amused.

Keili turned round eyes on Petra.

"What's wrong with underground?" Petra asked, still slicing meat on her plate.

"Darkspawn? Demons?" Keili gestured futilely. "A thousand tons of stone over your head?"

"You lived in the tower," Fen'Din reminded her. "It's a lot more likely to fall on you than dwarven tunnels. You don't hear about dwarven settlements getting crushed by cave-ins."

"No, but you do hear about them being overrun by darkspawn!" Keili argued.

"The Blight's over," Petra reminded her, gently patting Keili's arm. "The darkspawn have gone back to wherever they go when they're not invading places. And if you were a merchant, wouldn't you make sure your trade routes avoided those places?"

Keili sighed, stabbing her meat with a bit more force than necessary. "I know. But we only just got out of being surrounded by stone. I'm not looking forward to feeling closed in again." Under her breath, she added something else about darkspawn possibly being there anyway.

"It's just for a little while," Petra said, hoping she was right. "It's better than crossing over mountains and deserts, and we're less likely to run into templars."
"Templars or darkspawn," Keili sighed. "This is the choice we have."

"After what I have seen since you all arrived," Setach said, refilling her cup, "I would fear more for the darkspawn."

"I fear Kinnon's going to wind up with a concussion," Petra muttered, looking down the table to where Kinnon was still trying to impress some warriors with his magic. "Kinnon! Knock it off! What did I say about mixing mead and magic!"

"If he keeps that up, I think you'll be the one to give it to him," Fen'Din teased, spooning honey onto a slice of ... he wasn't sure what that had started out as, but it was tasty, now.

"Maker preserve us all," Keili muttered into her drink.

"The dwarves travel the Deep Roads all the time," Drost reminded her, gently. "And you travel with your own gods. From what I have seen, maybe the dwarves should be paying you to guard them. You will have little trouble, if you have done battle with demons, like your augur says. It is a long road, but you are in good company." One of the halla leaned over his shoulder and bumped his cheek. "Dolora is concerned about you. What is it that you are unhappy with? It's more than the Deep Roads."

Keili opened and closed her mouth a few times and stared down into her drink. Petra knew her to be a melancholy drunk and hoped that wasn't what she was seeing.

"I keep wondering if I should have stayed," Keili admitted. "I... hated the tower, but it's where mages are supposed to be, to keep the world and ourselves safe. I thought the Maker was giving me a sign when you opened the walls, Fen'Din, but... sometimes I doubt."

"I'd say the Maker gave you a pretty strong sign while you were climbing," Petra said, skirting the issue of where mages should or should not be. She had her own lengthy response to that, but getting into an argument wouldn't help.

"I don't understand your 'Maker'," Drost admitted, after a moment. "Why would something create a world and abandon it instead of changing it, if it wasn't what they wanted? It seems foolish. Our gods are not the creators, but they are what we need. We trade with them, and they help us when we need. We sing, we make sacrifices, we undertake what they ask of us -- from what I know of the Lowlanders, this is what you do for your Maker, but he gives nothing back, because he has turned away from his people? It doesn't seem like a good deal."

"The idea," Fen'Din said, with a mouthful of something sweet and greasy, "is that we are trying to lure him back to the world. To prove that we are good enough."

"Your all-father is kind of a deep latrine, as far as gods go, no personal offence intended to the lot of you. What kind of parent abandons their children for doing childish things?" Drost shook his head. "Our gods may become angry with us -- sometimes they punish us for doing wrong -- but when we do right, they are just as quick to reward us. They teach us. They instruct us. They help us become better. How does the Maker help you become better?"

"In wanting to be worthy of Him, we make ourselves better," Keili replied. "We treat each other better, hold ourselves accountable. Or... we should. A good parent also allows his children to grow, without holding their hands when they are old enough. It is perhaps, not the best deal, no, but I believe it was the one we were given. It is our duty now to make the best of it, not to complain. Turning away from him and towards other gods is what made him turn away in the first place."
Drost shook his head with a companionable chuckle. "I do admire the strength of your conviction, if your not conviction itself." He patted Keili on the back hard enough to knock her forward. "I'll never understand it. But come! Have another drink."

Petra had visions of Keili stumbling drunkenly off a cliff at this rate. At least Kinnon had stopped casting.

"You should've seen us," Kinnon was telling some wide-eyed apprentices. "Demons to the left of us, demons to the right, and there we were -- it was me and Petra with Enchanter Wynne and the Hero of Ferelden herself. Solona just started hammering on the big one with ice and ice and ice, and there was fire everywhere--"

"Some ancient rage demon the enchanters trapped, centuries ago, if you listen to a word out of Nolan," Candles added, rolling her eyes. "I guess he was trying to stop Gant from waking it up, before ... well, you know. Still, it wasn't Slapwits and the King of Farts, this time. I heard Solona let the thing out, so she could kill it."

"We helped," Kinnon insisted. "There were shadows everywhere -- the kind that'll kill you, but we squished them flat!"

"Squished them?" asked one of the apprentices, completely absorbed in the story. "How did you manage that?"

"I have my ways," Kinnon said with a coy smile.

"By which he means magic," Candles cut in. "Magic specifically for squishing."

"Can you show us?" asked another apprentice, pressing closer excitedly.

"I, uh." Kinnon shot a look at Petra, who frowned back at him as though reading his mind. She couldn't possibly hear them from all the way over there, could she? "I would love to, really, but some magic is much too dangerous to take lightly. It would be irresponsible of me." He puffed out his chest and reached for his cup.

"Giving him alcohol was a bad idea," Petra sighed.
The Dwarven Merchant's Caravan

Chapter Summary

Thane Setach passes her visitors off on a dwarven merchant heading north. The mages run into an old friend at the first stop on the route.

"Why would anyone want to go to the Anderfels?" the trader asked, bafflement clear even through his bounteous beard. "It's nothing but death, death, sun, and death up there, with the occasional darkspawn. I know the people make some art that really sells in Val Chevin, but that's that tortured artist thing, I think."

"If we don't like it, we can always go on to Minrathous," Kinnon pointed out.

"Or you could save yourself the trouble and go to Minrathous to begin with," the trader argued. "We can get you there. You'd come up through the Dwarven Embassy, right in the middle of the city. I mean, people keep telling me Minrathous is a nice place, but the Tevinters never did learn how to use stone properly. The whole place is going to fall in on their pointy magisterial heads, one of these decades."

Petra cleared her throat. "Nonetheless, Kassel is where we need to go, Master Ansgar. We are prepared to offer our services as guards, hunters, and healers, for the duration of the journey. We may not know much about the Deep Roads, but we can flawlessly hit a running buck at ten yards."

Ansgar let out a belly laugh at that. "You won't be seeing too many running bucks in the Deep Roads, lady. But there's always the occasional deep stalker. They're ugly things, but their meat tastes as good as any other." He looked Petra up and down as though sizing her up. "As long as you're pulling your own weight, I don't see the trouble. We're heading that way anyway."

"We appreciate that," Petra said, shoulders sagging in relief. "We'll help make sure the journey goes as smoothly as possible."

Keili still looked less than thrilled at the prospect, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

Candles and Kinnon, somewhat hungover, as they'd been since the first night in the village, were demonstrating their talents for some of the locals and a few members of the trade caravan. Flashes of fire and lightning brightened that side of the crafthall, and Kinnon met every shot Candles took at him with a strong shield. One of the Avvar came back in with a pile of bones from the midden heap, and Candles shot them down, as the dwarves tossed the bones into the air.

"Did I mention I could juggle?" Kinnon asked, holding his hand out. One of the traders tossed him one bone at a time, until he got a nice rotation going. After five, with every new one added, Candles shot one down.

"Have you ever thought of touring as a travelling show?" a dwarf asked, hands on her hips as she watched them.

"It was one of our first thoughts!" Candles replied, grinning as she turned her back on Kinnon and still made the next shot. "We got to put on a show on the side of the road, for some templars. No
"Like a dragon?" the dwarf laughed. She glanced back at Fen'Din, where he and Petra were talking to Ansgar. "Skinniest dragon I've ever seen."

"If it turns out he's hiding wings and a tail under that robe, I'm definitely going to Minrathous," Kinnon said, still juggling.

"Considering how Tevinter is with dragons, that might not help," Candles said in a sing-song voice. "Besides, you already know what's under that robe."

She waggled her eyebrows, and Kinnon faltered, fumbling a bone, another hitting his head before it tumbled to the ground. "Please don't remind me. I drank myself into a stupor last night, and those piercings still gave me nightmares." Clutching the bones he hadn't dropped, Kinnon stared out at nothing with a haunted look on his face.

The mages hadn't expected to find a market at the gates of Orzammar. Of course, they weren't really sure what to expect at all, but that was on exactly no-one's list. The dwarves they were travelling with, however, behaved as though this were perfectly normal, and the mages tried to follow suit.

"Hrildan!" Ansgar called out, as they approached the market. "Aren't you supposed to be in Amaranthine, by now?"

"Do you know I lost the Amaranthine route?" The other dwarf huffed, crossing her arms. "I guess when the Wardens opened up the Deep Roads down there, they cut a path right back to Orzammar. Cleared out all the darkspawn. There's no need for a surferacer, now that they can get through underground. The Vigil's got the market cornered on Orzammaran goods, but I might try one of the northern routes -- see if I can't sell out from Kal'Hirol to Minrathous. Not too many importing to the south from there. You and the rest of the Blasted Lands Trading Company have the human trade out of the Anderfels locked down, but not too many are selling Minrathous, down here."

"Go Minrathous and sell to the mages. Of course, I heard Val Royeaux and Lake Calenhad both had some problems, so that might stick you back with the Vigil, if you don't want the trouble of Jainen," Ansgar suggested. "Of course, selling Minrathous to mages is about as legal as the lyrium trade, so..." He shrugged.

"And we don't know any lyrium traders," Hrildan replied in a tone that implied that not only did they know lyrium traders, they might actually be on very friendly terms with them.

"Of course not," Ansgar said, face firm with exaggerated sternness. "Say hello to Oskias for me, when he gets back in. I've got to get these pilgrims inside, before the mountains eat them."

As he spoke, Petra looked around to make sure they were all accounted for. She wasn't sure if 'thane' was synonymous with 'babysitter', but in moments like these, with mages wandering off every which way to investigate the vendors' stalls, it might as well be.

As least Candles was still -- wait, no, she wasn't. Where had she gone?

Petra found her shuffling towards one stall as though pulled on a line, eyes glittering at the display of jewellery none of them had the money for. "Candles, no," Petra said, taking her by the wrist and pulling her away.
"But... can't I just try them on?"

"You can, but you won't. Back to the caravan, little lady."

Candles pouted but allowed herself to be wrangled.

But, the market outside was nothing compared to the orange-lit hall beyond the doors. It took a few moments and a mention of Hawk Hold to get them through those doors, but the ancient alliance was still supported by the current queen, and after a lengthy lecture on, in essence, not wandering away from the group and not touching anything, they were allowed through.

"Those are incredible!" Keili eyed the towering statues of dwarves with awe. "Who are they? Kings? Gods?"

"Paragons," Ansgar replied, letting the rest of the caravan pass them, while the mages gawked at the scenery. "They're the best dwarves who ever lived, or so they say. That one there? That's Paragon Branka. I knew her. We lost her in the Deep Roads, when she went chasing after ..." He spun and pointed at another statue. ". . .Paragon Caridin's research. The Wardens went to find her, but the darkspawn got her, I guess. But, they were smiths. And this guy, here, was a warrior, and that one was a king. All through history, Orzammar has kept the history of its best right here. Mind you, none of that applies to the Surfacers, like me." He tapped a swirl on his cheek. "We're not dwarves, any more, once we see the sky. Or that's what they tell us. You ask me it's a bunch of stupidity and fear of progress. Still, gives me a job, so I can't complain too much."

"That seems awfully silly," said Keili, brows knit in confusion even as she nearly tripped over her own feet looking around. "I don't see how glimpsing the sky would make you any less than what you already are."

Ansgar shrugged. "I was barely more than a kid when I first saw the sky, and though, yeah, it's nonsense, I've gotta say, seeing something like that for the first time? It changes you. I kept expecting to float away!" He laughed at that, and Keili was starting to get used to his laughs, which were sharp and loud, the kind that echoed in the cavernous chamber and came back to her ears distorted and unfriendly. "So, I don't know about being any less a dwarf, but I can't say I was the same person either."

After tasting freedom, Keili could relate. "The statues are lovely, anyway," she said softly, unsure what else to say.

"Wow, check out this one!" Candles pointed at the plaque at the base of a statue further into the hall. "Did she really cut out her own tongue? She sounds amazing!"

Ansgar nodded and led the mages toward the Commons. "Astyth the Grey. You know, there's still Silent Sisters in Orzammar. Couple of them still fight in the Grand Proving -- and for them, it's to the death. They're some scary ladies. I wouldn't want to piss one off, and she's the first and greatest of them all."

"This Caridin..." Fen'Din caught up with the group after too long studying the story. "I thought there was no magic among dwarves. But, he gives life to stone?"

"Ah, I think the official story is that he didn't need magic. He was just more dwarf than any dwarf before or after him, and he found a way to wake the spirit of the Stone itself to defend his people from the Blight. Who knows what really happened? Well, Branka, maybe, but she's dead, too. A shame. She was really something."
Fen'Din opened his mouth to say something when he heard a voice he recognised, loudly joking with a merchant further down the ... were they still streets, if they were underground? He whistled sharply and called out. "Dagna? Is that you?"

A dwarf girl with pigtails, bright eyes, and an air of energy turned at the sound. She looked around at the mages's waist level before thinking to look up, and a beaming smile lit her face when she spotted Fen'Din. She ran to him, arms spread in threat of a hug.

"Well, if it isn't Enchanter Crazypants!" she called out. "What are you doing here? They let you out? Oh! Did they send you here to see my work? That is just perfect! I've been looking for a second opinion on the effects of high levels of heat on lyrium potency -- particularly lava heat. Have you been to Orzammar? There is lava everywhere -- but everyone I talk to just blinks at me until I go away."

Dagna barely paused for breath, forgetting in the middle of talking that she had been planning to hug Fen'Din and instead using her arms to gesture emphatically.

Kinnon waved from behind Fen'Din. "Hello, Dagna."

"Oh! Kinnon! You're here too! And Petra! And... wow." Dagna finally noticed just how many mages there were. She blinked. "You're all here."

"Kinloch Hold has a new door," Fen'Din joked, reaching out to tug at Dagna's hair, the way Anders used to pull on his. "The spirits missed you. We brought them with us, you know. Well, some of them."

"The rats?" Dagna's eyes lit up. "Oh, you're the best! You brought the rats!"

"Well, the wolves and the halla, but... yeah, they... I guess they just followed him out." Kinnon shrugged and bent down to give Dagna a hug. "Well, after they let him out."

"Tore a hole right in the wall!" Candles added, leaning over Kinnon's shoulder. "I mean, I wasn't there for that part, but you could feel it happen all the way upstairs!"

"That wasn't the wall, it was the falling furniture." Fen'Din grinned and shrugged in the worst impression of innocence since Anders left Kinloch Hold. "Had to block a few doors. We couldn't have the templars coming after us. They'd never have let us take a holiday like this."

"They'd have packed you off to Aeonar in an instant," Kinnon agreed, still patting Dagna's face and shoulders. "I can't believe you're here! I can't believe I'm here!"

"So, how has the whole 'introducing dwarves to magic' thing been going?" Fen'Din asked. "And what do you know about Paragon Caridin? I think he must've been a mage..."

"A mage, huh?" Dagna repeated, eyes lighting. "Oh, that would be interesting. It would also mean contradicting so much of what we think we already know, which is the best kind of knowledge to find, really. Never mind how bent out of shape the Shaperates get. Ha! Get it? Bent out of shape?"

Kinnon chuckled indulgently.

"But, really, you're better off asking the Hero of Ferelden, if you can get a hold of her," Dagna went on. "Rumour has it she found the Anvil of Void and spoke with Caridin herself, however that works. But, she's a busy person and... you asked me something else, too, didn't you?"

Kinnon helped. "About introducing the..."
"Oh! Right!" Dagna's expression turned more wry than excited, but her eyes didn't lose their spark. "It's a long, slow introduction, really. Or more of a courtship, with a very reluctant partner. Still, there is progress. And interest! Though you... really have to look to find the interest. It's there, though."

Ansgar edged his way through the cluster of mages. "With this many of you, we've got to move quick," he told Petra. "Keep your wits about you and follow me. You can catch up with your friend after you're settled -- and we're only staying a couple of days, before it's time to push north."

"Why don't I walk with you?" Dagna asked, still giddy to be back in the company of mages.

"Because we're going to Dust Town," Ansgar replied, firmly.

"I've been to where they're from. They only let me stay in the palace because I'm on a diplomatic mission." Dagna laughed and held out a hand. "Dagna. I used to be a Smith."

"Ansgar, merchant." Ansgar shook Dagna's hand, and his face softened a bit. "You went out there on purpose?"

"Totally. I read all these books about magic and mages, and then Warden Amell came down here looking for somebody to fulfil that treaty, and she was a mage, and I just wanted to go and study where they taught her to do all that cool stuff. Which was amazing. Did you see? Were you here? She fought in the Provings, and it was like bam! Pow! Zap! She was great. And she put in a good word for me with Enchanter Irving, who is such a sweetheart. Really. What a nice guy." Dagna's eyes sparkled and her smile looked like it might split her head in two. "And then? Then I wrote a book, and it was great, but there was some work I wanted to do that I just... they wouldn't let me do it in the tower, so I came back here to see if we could have a tower in Orzammar. I mean, totally saves on the cost of shipping lyrium, if it's right here. I kind of wanted to move to Amgarrak, but... yeah, let's not talk about Amgarrak. But, it's amazing and it's so big up there! And I didn't fall into the sky or anything!"

"Always a surprise when that doesn't happen," Ansgar said drily, eyeing her as though he still didn't quite know what to make of her. Granted, most of the mages didn't know what to make of her, either, but they were glad to see her.

"Listen, Dagna, about Irving..." Petra started and then stopped. "A lot has happened since you left. I'm not sure if any of it would affect your circle down here, but things are a bit tenser than usual upstairs, with regards to mages."

"Has it? I don't really get much news down here." Dagna frowned up at her, walking quickly to keep pace with her. "But, hey, I figure something must have happened for you guys to just break out like that. All of you, too! That must have been some hole in the wall!"

"It was a sight," Petra agreed.

Ansgar eased himself to the front of the group as the marketplace noise of the Commons dimmed behind them, and the buildings started to look a bit more decrepit. There was a foulness in the air that was very different to the sulphurous lava smell around the bridge to the Proving Grounds, and it reminded Fen'Din of the way Anders had smelt that last time he came up from the dungeon.

Beggars crowded around them, recognising them as surfacers, and therefore probably merchants, and few of them could understand why people with nice, if filthy, clothes had no money, until Dagna shouted, "They're escaped prisoners and we're taking them to the Deep Roads, next week!"

Suddenly, the beggars didn't want to stand too close, lest they end up in the Deep Roads, as well.
"Where's the water come from?" Kinnon asked, looking around for a well. "It doesn't rain down here, does it?"

"There's a well. There's a river, really, but it's more that way, and the mud is really good for making pottery, but it means the water's higher near the river, which the city is. I mean, aside from the parts with lava. There's not much water right under there, but there is piping in the Diamond Quarter. Somebody became a paragon for that," Dagna rambled, pointing in appropriate directions as she walked and talked. "Why?"

"Because we can give these people water. We don't have money, but we do have that. Water, fire, oil..." Kinnon shrugged. "It just... seems like we should do something. However bad we had it, it wasn't... this."

"Unless you were Anders," Fen'Din pointed out.

"Anders made his own trouble," Petra scoffed, shaking her head as she looked around them. "But, Kinnon might be right. We might be able to do something."

"Too bad Anders isn't here," Candles said. "He could entertain them with his spicy shimmy. That's another thing sovereigns can't buy."

"I'm not so sure about that," Keili said with a coy smirk. "I remember a few wax sovereigns encouraging a spicy shimmy or two. Besides, he's not the only one who can do it." She nudged Kinnon with her elbow, and Candles turned his way, eyebrows arched in interest.

"I will require a few more drinks before that will happen," Kinnon said. "Sobriety is not conducive to shimmying."

"You were drunk back at Hawk Hold, and I didn't see a spicy shimmy!" Candles protested, sounding for all the world like someone betrayed.

"You know what else is not conducive to shimmying?" Kinnon replied. "Cliffs."

"Right," said Petra, "water, fire, oil, and a spicy shimmy. That's what we can offer these people."

Dagna glanced at Ansgar. "You spend more time down here than I do. Any of that useful?"

"Karshol's gonna shit forge-fire, but as long as it benefits him, in the end, I don't see a problem."

Ansgar considered it. "How do you make water? Just wave your hands and it pours out of the air?"

"It's usually frozen, but once the ice melts..." Keili shrugged.

"Good. It's more portable that way. We can let people put it where they need it. Most people down here have picks and hammers, so if you make a wall of ice, they can just come break some off, take it wherever." Ansgar nodded, considering the filthy street in front of them. He pointed to a building that seemed to lean a bit to the right. "That's where we're going. Karshol owns the place, of course -- all the property worth owning in Dust Town belongs to the Carta -- but that also means it's the nicest place you'll find down here. Got a nice tavern on the ground floor and everything, not that most of these people can afford to drink."

"We probably can't afford to, either," Fen'Din pointed out. "We have, as we have been pointing out, no money. We lived in a place where there wasn't money -- mostly so we wouldn't be able to take it and leave."

Candles tossed an arm heavily across Fen'Din's shoulders. "So we trade, right? That's how we got
this far. We have stuff we can offer these people like..." Her eyes lit up and she grinned at Petra. "You're a healer..."

"So, what we really need, then, is somewhere to set up shop! Well, whatever you call it when it's free. But, we need a place to put you." Dagna clapped her hands and looked excitedly around, before pointing to a spot that looked like it had once held an enormous statue. "This is going to be great for my argument to get a tower down here! If I do it, I hope some of you will come back! There's no templars in Orzammar, if you know what I mean."

"Thank the Maker for that," Kinnon muttered. "I don't know why, but dwarf templars sound especially horrifying."
Petra discovers her skills are a bit more useful than she anticipated, or desired, really.

Word travelled fast in Dust Town. The mages had barely set up shop before they were thronged by dwarves. Petra tried to keep order, but it was difficult from her corner where she had set up a makeshift clinic. She healed what she could, but many of the injuries and ailments presented to her were old and partly healed, if badly. There was only so much she could fix.

Candles had set herself up as a hawker, shouting in the street and directing dwarves to whichever mage could best help them. After trying to banish the foulness in the air and accidentally starting a fire -- only a small one, in her defence! -- Petra had told her to find something to do that didn't involve magic.

"Need healing?" she called out. "Step right over there and head to the back of the line! Need water? Join the line in the middle! Oil? To the right! Need a bucket for the water and the oil? Too bad, because we don't have any! Bring your own!"

"She said line, not amorphous herd," Petra called out to those waiting.

"Did she just call me a muffled turd?" one of the dwarves muttered to his friend.

Two dwarves in leather armour closed in on Candles -- unlike the rest of the crowd, they seemed much cleaner and healthier. And much more threatening. Ansgar spotted them and tried to cut them off, but they reached the elf, first.

"We want the healer," the one on the left said. "Karshol has some business with him."

"Her," Candles corrected, pointing to the slightly less amorphous herd around Petra. "Get in line."

"Dougal! Erahel! Good to see you both! Did you come to see what I brought back from the surface, this time?" Ansgar grinned broadly as he walked up to the two. "Picked up some pilgrims with very useful skills, in one of the Avvar settlements. Thought I should come share the bounty with the rest of Dust Town."

"You should've shared it with Karshol, first," the dwarf on the right argued.

"Please, you know how he is about visitors, and there must be forty of them." Ansgar shook his head. "But, it is to his benefit! The people will be thanking him for this, for years. You didn't think I'd take all the credit, did you, Dougal?"

"Give us the healer," Erahel demanded, stepping forward to loom over Ansgar.

"Healer's busy," Kinnon cut in, the faint glimmer of a shield licking into existence around him. "How about I give you a spicy shimmy, while you wait?"

The dwarves eyed Kinnon, trying to stare him down while staring up at him. "The Blight is that?" grunted Dougal. "Some kind of surfacer sex act? Sorry, Red, but my type runs a bit broader in the
hips, if you get my meaning."

Erahel cackled.

"No!" Kinnon huffed, ears turning pink. "It's a dance. To be performed with your clothes on... unless you're paying for them off, anyway."

"We're not," Erahel assured him.

"Your loss," said Kinnon. "Now, this is usually more moving with musical accompaniment, but..." Kinnon closed his eyes and adjusted his posture, standing taller, shoulders back, and then he started to move in a full-body, well, shimmy that started at his hips.

Behind him, Candles pinched her lips together with her fingers and tried not to laugh.

Erahel and Dougal stared at him in repulsed fascination. "So what exactly makes this spicy?" Dougal asked Erahel, who shrugged.

"It's a lot spicier after three glasses of wine," Keili chimed in, between filling buckets with olive oil -- a luxury the dwarves appeared never to have tasted.

"Do I have to be drinking, or does he?" Erahel asked, cocking his head to the side.

"Both," Fen'Din assured him, raising another ring of ice around their makeshift shop. "Both is best."

"Says Enchanter Jangle-My-Dangles over there," Kinnon scoffed, raising his arms over his head and bending his knees. He could almost hear Leorah's clapping, as he tried to remember the rhythm the other apprentices used to keep for him. He still missed her, even if she did make Enchanter, while he was still edging toward his Harrowing.

"It really jingles," Candles assured Dagna, who was squinting at Fen'Din.

"Huh. Maybe we should have him do the shimmy," Dagna said.

"And, what, have him shake it like a tambourine?" Candles laughed. "I've heard jokes about said dongles being wind instruments but never percussion."

"Stop, both of you," Kinnon groaned, glaring over his shoulder while still wiggling his hips. "I would like to go the rest of my life without seeing or hearing Fen'Din's pincushion knob ever again."

"Pincushion?" repeated Dougal, who looked alarmed behind his face tattoos.

"Pincushion," Kinnon assured him with an intensity that said it all.

Between patients, Petra glanced over and showed the commotion. Or, rather, she spotted a pair of armed dwarves staring confusedly at a dancing Kinnon. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. "Excuse me one moment," she said to the patient next in line before squeezing through the amorphous herd to stand next to Candles. "Did someone pay him, or is he drunk?"

"Neither, he's trying to keep us from getting killed until you were done over there," Candles replied, quietly. "These guys want to 'take the healer', they say. On the orders of some Karshol guy. I don't know dwarves, but that doesn't sound very good."

"Stay with Fen'Din. If anything goes wrong, the two of you get the rest of them out of here." Petra set her jaw and stepped forward, poking Kinnon sharply in the side. "One of you needs a healer? I should tell you to go to the back of the line, but I understand this is serious?"
"Karshol's our boss. In fact, in Dust Town, he's everybody's boss. He says he needs a healer back at
the house. Something went wrong," Dougal explained in more words than he'd strung together since
he'd arrived.

"How fortunate that we happened to be travelling through. What would he have done without us?"
Petra waved for two more mages to join her, and Candles noticed they were some the Avvar had
been borrowing as hunters.


"I'm going to go keep them out of trouble," Ansgar muttered to Dagna. "Can you keep an eye on the
rest of them, until I get back?"

"Hey, if you've got Karshol, the worst's taken care of, right?" Dagna grinned.

"These mages seem to have a way of finding their own trouble," Ansgar replied with a smirk.

Petra followed Dougal, a pair of mages at her side, but Erahel at their backs. Her spine prickled with
the weight of his stare, and she wondered, a bit frantically, if she was being led to her death. The
route they took, through alleys and behind buildings, did not give her great confidence.

The building Dougal led them to didn't look like much from the outside. It looked like any other
building on the street, rundown and worn, the stone pockmarked and crumbling. Dougal knocked,
and an eye slit opened on the door. Dougal exchanged words with someone on the other side of the
door, words Petra couldn't quite hear and doubted she would understand anyway.

The slit closed, and then the door opened. Dougal gestured them inside. "Come on."

The first thing Petra noticed was the heavy cloud of incense, and under it, the reek of blood. A lot of
blood. The next thing she noticed was the lack of screaming. "Are they still alive?" she asked, as
Dougal led the way to a room behind the stairs.

"He was alive when I left," Dougal said, shrugging.

He opened the door and blocked the doorway with his body, but Petra could see over him. Three
dwarves, covered in blood, stood around a fourth, passing water and bandages.

"Boss? I got you a healer. Real thing, too, from the talk in the streets."

At the sound of Dougal's voice, one of the standing dwarves looked up. "Well, hurry up! I don't
know how much longer he's going to live, and I don't know where I'm going to find someone else
who keeps the books that well!"

Dougal stepped aside and Petra eased herself into the room, the other two mages following close
behind her. They at least had a basic grasp of healing and could take care of smaller problems while
she tackled the worst of it. Of course, none of them were real healers. There were no spirits among
them to aid their magic.

Petra knelt beside the cushion of linens and rolled sacks to examine the fallen dwarf. "What
happened?" she asked, peeling the bandages back to get a closer look.

"A merchant got robbed, and the guard stabbed my accountant because of his brand. He's casteless,
so they just left him in the street, when they spotted the actual robber," a dwarf with a thick black
beard explained. "One of my girls spotted him and ran down here to get help."
Petra started casting before she finished peeling back the bandages. That was definitely a stab wound, at that size and angle, a deep cut below the ribs. She couldn't do much for blood loss, but she could slow the bleeding that was still happening, could mend the skin and the muscle beneath.

"I'll do what I can," she said, assessing the damage with glowing fingers. "Could we have some space, please?"

The dwarf with the thick black beard nodded and snapped his fingers, motioning the others back and away.

While she worked, Petra set aside the knowledge that she was being watched by Carta dwarves, though the stares from the tattooed faces were difficult to ignore. She thought of Wynne's voice and the soothing warmth of her magic as she reached past skin to stitch together organ and muscle. Maker, she missed Wynne.

The dwarf she was working on began to stir, midway through the healing, and his coughing rustled his thin, red beard and made the bleeding start again. "Gerda! Blood!"

One of the other mages stepped in and started re-attaching the tiny blood vessels, while Petra continued to struggle to reconnect the muscle. There hadn't been many incidents like this, in the tower, and Wynne had handled most of them, herself. Or Anders, sometimes. But, they'd both gone and then Finn had gone off with Solona, too. Petra wondered, idly, why she hadn't seized on that opportunity, but really, she'd never much wanted to leave. She just wanted the tower to stop being frightening and dangerous, even if a substantial part of that could in some way be blamed on either Anders or the elf she was following to his doorstep. Maker, that wasn't the brightest decision she'd ever made, but neither was staying. She hoped Torrin was still alive.

Under her hands, the edges of sliced flesh came back together, easier to join as she no longer had to hold them in place with her hands. She pointed to one of the dwarves with one bloody hand. "Milk and groats. Hot. If he survives this, he's going to need something warm and simple to eat -- and a lot of it. Tomorrow, if he sees it, as much meat as he can eat. It'll be weeks before he recovers -- if he recovers."

The dwarf blinked at her and cast an eye at Karshol, before looking back. "Ah, that... what... what's a groat?"

Petra decided the Maker was really testing her, this time.

Candles's voice was getting hoarse by the time Petra returned, but she still called out when she spotted the returning group. "Welcome back! You're not dead!"

"Thanks," said Petra as she squeezed closer through the crowd. "'Not dead' was what I was aiming for. And hopefully we just made someone else less dead. Or less likely to be dead by this time tomorrow." Past Candles, she eyed the line to the empty clinic. Her fingertips burned from pushing her magic too far, and she felt exhausted just thinking about healing all those people.

"Oh?" Petra looked down at the sound of Dagna's voice. "So Karshol really did need a healer? Phew. I was worried he didn't like us on his turf or something."

"Well, not him, but someone, uh, useful to him, was the impression that I got." Petra shrugged, spotting a bit of blood under her fingernail that she'd missed in washing her hands. "Not only did he not mind us on his 'turf' -- do you even have turf down here? -- but I think he offered us a job."

"You might want to talk to him about your research," Ansgar suggested, eyeing Dagna. "He seemed..."
very keen on the idea of Dust Town having access to this kind of thing more regularly."

"Sell it to the Carta instead of to the queen? Now, there's an idea." Dagna tapped her lip, thoughtfully. "Except then it would be controlled by the Carta, and I might as well be dealing with templars. But, yeah, I'm definitely interested in people who are interested! And people with magic who want to stay here and help out." She glanced at the mages around her. "So, you'll be here a few days, right? Anyone want to come to the meeting I'm having with the queen, tomorrow? Having some real mages to back me up would be nice."

"Can I bring the spirits?" Fen'Din asked, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "They're very confused by dwarves. You don't... have something. Or maybe it's you have something we don't. But, they tell me you don't dream, and they're very interested to know that you're not just some kind of Tranquil -- that there's a whole city full of people like you. I think they thought I was joking when I said there were more dwarves."

Dagna chuckled. "I'd be happy to tell them all about us, if I could see them! How amazing would that be? A dwarf interviewing spirits?"

"Just try not to scare the locals," Petra sighed. "That might hinder rather than help."

Dagna nodded, but her eyes had that bright, glossy look that said she was busy scheming something.

"Anyway," Petra said, "we have a job, and the Carta didn't kill us. I'm counting this as a productive day, but now I need to get back to work. Please try not to destroy anything."

"The healer's back!" Candles called out, to a smattering of cheers. One of the mages Petra had taken with her offered Candles a bit of healing for her throat, and she called out louder than ever.
Breakfast in Dust Town and preparations for a meeting with the Queen of Orzammar.

In the morning, Dagna was already waiting for them, when Fen'Din came down the stairs into the tavern. The place had been open all night, and many of the same faces still sat at the same tables. A beardless dwarf man stood by the side of the stairs, chanting what seemed like nonsense, as Fen'Din passed.

"Blood of the stone sings. Blood of the stone sings to me. Not for the sky people. Sky people keep stealing the blood of the stone, but I know. I know!"

Fen'Din blinked at the man, about to say something, but Dagna interrupted. "Lyrium," she said. "That's what happens if you get too close."

Fen'Din's face relaxed. "I knew a templar... You knew Carroll, didn't you? Worked the docks?"

"That poor guy. And they do that to themselves on purpose?" Dagna shook her head. "I still don't really understand. I mean, I understand what they say about it, but I don't know why it would be true."

"They do it because it's what's always been done. Chantry says it's the only way." Fen'Din shrugged and squinted at the list of prices painted on the wall. Maybe he could afford some more mushroom gruel, after Petra got up. "Chantry says a lot of things." He paused, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Don't let Keili hear me talking like that, or we'll never make it to the Anderfels."

Dagna laughed, clapping hand over her mouth when it ended in snort. "Oh, Keili," she said. "Honestly, I'm surprised she came with you guys. She was always so..." She shrugged, grappling for the word. "I dunno. But she was just so convinced she had magic because she was being punished for something. How could you see something like that as punishment? I mean, yeah, the imprisonment part, I could see, but the magic itself? I've always wondered what that must feel like."

They heard Kinnon before they saw him, the clomp of his feet just as heavy as it had been in the tower. "'Morning," he mumbled to Fen'Din and Dagna, rubbing one puffy eye. "Is breakfast here an option, or should I go send Candles after some deepstalkers?"

"Is she awake yet?" Dagna asked. "I remember being told not to wake her unless I had something heavy and solid to hide behind."

"I have shields," Kinnon reminded her through a yawn. "She's only fried me the one time."

"We had better healers at the tower," Fen'Din assured Dagna. "But, they all left. We're going to go get one, now. One of the best."

"So, you're going to the Anderfels for a healer?" Dagna asked, putting down a few coins for a whole roasted nug. "You're getting meat for breakfast. I need you two to be able to think. And I really want Petra, too, but I can't take all the responsible parties."
"Ansgar's still here," Kinnon pointed out, between angry noises from his stomach.

"Ansgar's a dwarf. Ansgar's *Carta.*" Dagna shook her head. "I'm not leaving forty mages alone with a Carta lieutenant without someone in charge. And Karshol likes her."

"She has a point. Ansgar doesn't have a clue what he's dealing with, but Petra made a fairly serious bid for First Enchanter. The rest of you followed *her*, not me." Fen'Din smiled lopsidedly at Kinnon. "If we're doing politics, don't take Keili. Candles, maybe, but if you bring Keili, Orzammar's going to end up with Templars."

"Which is not conducive to my research. You're getting pretty good at this." Dagna elbowed the elf, as the woman at the bar slid a tray of fresh, hot nug down to them.

"I was also a candidate for First Enchanter," Fen'Din admitted, cutting a slice for himself. He nibbled at the meat. "I think Candles cooks it better."

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Kinnon wouldn't call it breathing fresh air, not while they were still underground, but compared to the stink of Dust Town, the Diamond Quarter smelled like lilies. Lava-scented lilies, sure, and lava had its own unpleasant undercurrent, a bit like rotten eggs, when Kinnon stopped to focus on it. But, he supposed 'fresh' was a relative thing down here.

Dagna had barely paused for breath since they had left the inn. She'd pointed out landmarks and her favourite stalls and even where her parents still lived and worked, all the while beaming with pride.

"And here we are!" she said, pointing out a particularly large and ornate door, lit from the sides by pools of yellow-hot lava. "The palace! I still can't believe we get to go into the *palace!* Isn't it exciting? I'm excited!"

"I'm excited," Candles agreed, though whether she was excited about the palace or about the runaway nug that was letting her pet him was open to debate.

"We have a conference with Her Majesty at three morning. These are ... representatives from one of the affected groups," Dagna told the door guard.

"The investigation on magic and lyrium," the guard replied, nodding. "Go straight in and talk to the man with the red banner on his sword. He'll take you to the right room. You're the first ones here."

"Well, I hope so!" Dagna grinned and the guard smiled back. They'd been having this same conversation three times a week for a month.

The guard eyed the four mages and then leaned in. "Is that one of those wild elves? The ones that live in the woods?"

Dagna laughed. "Nope, no Dalesmen, this time. That's just Enchanter Crazypants." She coughed and cleared her throat. "I mean--"

"That's *Senior* Enchanter Crazypants, I'll have you know." Fen'Din raised an eyebrow and snorted, nudging the back of Dagna's shoulder.

Gerda covered her face with one hand. "At least he admits it," she muttered to Kinnon.

"I didn't realise the elves had such odd names," the guard teased. "Are they always so descriptive?"

"You should hear what he actually calls himself," Kinnon replied.
"I don't know," Dagna said, nudging Kinnon's arm. "I think some of the things you've called him are far worse."

"Nothing I haven't said to your face," Kinnon assured Fen'Din. Past Fen'Din's shoulder, he caught sight of Candles, only then realising that she hadn't quite kept pace with them. "Candles, come on, put down the nug," he called out to her. "You realise we just ate one of those this morning?"

"But he's so cute!" Candles whined even as she reluctantly set down the nug. It snuffled her leg, and Candles gave it one last pat in farewell.

Eventually, Dagna managed to herd the mages inside, receiving only a twitch of one eyebrow from the man with the red banner when he saw the unlikely group.

"I promise they won't pee on the floor," Dagna assured their guide. "They're not nugs."

Fen'Din eyed Kinnon. "Not nugs, but there might be some similarities."

Candles cackled. "It's true. His nose wiggles if you pet him just right."

Kinnon's face matched his hair as he folded his arms and stiffly followed their guide further into the palace. "I'm not a nug, and if you pet nugs like that you need to have a long talk with the Maker," he muttered.

Gerda stepped up next to Dagna. "I'm not hearing any of this. So, what can you tell me about those lamps? They don't look like they have fire in them..."

"These? Oh, these are lyrium lights! The miners use them to light tunnels, too. They come in a bunch of colours, but orange is really popular in Orzammar. I like blue better, and so does someone in here, because it's almost a surface colour in these halls. Somebody became a paragon for those, but I can't remember the name." Dagna shrugged. "I should check. I wrote a whole chapter on them, and it's just slipped my mind, probably because everyone and their third cousin down here has the same couple hundred names, over and over. Like, the old king, King Endrin? He's named after another king, Endrin Stonehammer, who was also a paragon. And there's like twelve other Endrins, because everybody wants to name their kids after a paragon. The next generation's going to be full of Brankas."

"Maybe the generation after that will be full of Dagnas," Candles said with a companionable nudge.

"What? Oh stop." Dagna's grin was so wide that Candles's cheeks hurt in sympathy. "I don't know if the work I'm doing is nearly popular enough for that sort of thing, but it's a nice dream, isn't it? Imagine a giant statue of me greeting you when you come into Orzammar! I'd finally be taller than you!"

Their guide stopped in front of a wide set of double doors, and he cleared his throat pointedly, still looking thoroughly bored. "Wait here. I will see if Her Majesty is available to see you."

"Of course!" Dagna chirped as their guide disappeared behind the double doors. "Isn't this exciting?" she said to Fen'Din. "Have I already said that? I don't care. It's exciting. I'm glad you guys are here."

"If," Fen'Din noted, eyebrow quirking. "Well, I'd certainly hope she'd be available for things she scheduled." He glanced at Kinnon. "You think that's what it's like, being in charge? If I was First Enchanter, do you think I'd be able to get away with saying 'if' to people I had meetings with?"

"You're a mage," Kinnon pointed out. "Hadley would have your head for it."
"Hadley's all of what, twelve? I'd say he could eat Anders's ass, but I don't think Anders would stand for it." Fen'Din laughed and shook his head, largely unable to take the new Knight-Commander seriously. Greagoir's health had been failing for years, and with Irving's death, he'd stopped coming back from his treatments in Val Royeaux, leaving Hadley in charge. Hadley who, even after this many years, still looked like it was his first day on the job.

"Anders had standards? Since when?" Kinnon scoffed, examining the design on the doors. "These are nice. Look at the detail. When was this place built?"

"Endrin Stonehammer moved the capital from Kal-Sharok to Orzammar before the First Blight. I don't know exactly, but it's probably older than anything that looks this good on the surface," Dagna replied, beaming with pride that her mages finally got to appreciate proper dwarven architecture.

Their sour-faced guide returned, this time holding the door open for them. "Queen Aeducan will see you."

"Oh, so she is available?" Candles griped to Gerda out of the corner of her mouth. "Lucky us."

"Politics," Gerda responded. "Keeping us on our toes."
The Queen of Orzammar

Chapter Summary

Dagna makes an argument for a templar-free mage tower in Orzammar. Queen Sereda Aeducan weighs the benefits of magic against the risk of an Exalted March.

The woman they met looked more warrior than queen, dressed from pauldrons to greaves in plate armour, which she moved in with practised ease. Blond hair tied back, she studied them with dark eyes and motioned them forward.

"Come in," she said. "I have heard many colourful rumours about the visiting mages in Dust Town. Are you those mages, or is there a mage pandemic on my hands?" She smiled, but there was an edge to the expression.

"Both?" Kinnon cast a questioning glance at Fen'Din. "Both." He nodded.

"There are probably forty of us, Your Majesty," Fen'Din clarified, "but we're just passing through. A trader offered to lead us to one of the other stops on his route, but we had to pass through Orzammar on the way. I trust we haven't caused too many problems?"

"Problems." The queen laughed, gesturing to the room around her. "The last time there was a mage in this room, she summoned a dragon and uncovered a cache of ancient treasure from some king the Shaperate cannot name. You're not going to summon any dragons, are you?"

"Dragons?" Gerda squeaked, looking around and then ducking behind Candles.

"That would be incredibly exciting, but also incredibly unlikely. ... The last mage -- you don't mean Solona, do you?" Fen'Din blinked in surprise, face twisting in confusion. "Solona Amell, who ran off with the Wardens, summoned a dragon in the throne room of Orzammar?"

"That is what I'm told," Queen Aeducan replied. "I wasn't queen at the time."

"It's what I'm told, too," Dagna agreed, nodding. "You should ask the guards. They were mostly here for that. She was so cool!"

"I'm to understand you know her? The Warden-Commander of Ferelden?" The queen's eyebrows arched up inquisitively.

"Know her?" Kinnon scoffed. "I--"

"Don't say anything I'm going to regret," Fen'Din said, holding up a finger but not looking back at Kinnon. "Yes, we knew her. We all grew up together."

"I see," said the queen, eyebrows arcing up. She almost looked impressed. She leaned forward in her throne, armour rasping against stone, and, really, that could not be comfortable. "So you are from the Circle Dagna studied at?"

Occasionally, the queen's hand would drop to the side, fingers brushing the hilt of a sword where it was propped up against her throne. She showed no interest in drawing it, just in seeking the comfort
"We are," said Candles, side-stepping so Gerda was no longer hiding behind her. She ignored the betrayed look Gerda sent her. "We got to show Dagna around our place, and now she gets to show us around hers. It's pretty great."

The queen hummed, her smile thin. "There are some in the assembly who would insist Orzammar is no longer 'her place', now that she has seen the sky, but I've never concerned myself too much with that."

"So, just to cut the shit," Candles started, and beside her Dagna hissed, "Dagna tells us she's trying to negotiate with you for a mage tower here in Orzammar, and we're supposed to prove it's a good idea."

There was a tense moment in which everyone but Fen'Din blinked at Candles in sudden horror. Fen'Din's smiling serenity continued, even then. And then the queen began to laugh.

"She really gets to the point, doesn't she?" Queen Aeducan's enormous, echoing laughs faded to a chuckle. "All right. Convince me. What's the benefit to Orzammar?"

"Healers," was the first word out of Fen'Din. "Even those who do it poorly can make the aftermath of an injury less severe. Our that-- that is, one of our people healed a gut-stabbed accountant, last night, shortly after we arrived. He may never be well, again, but he is alive. An excellent healer -- of which we no longer have any, at Kinloch Hold -- might have been able to do even more good. But, healers are the very best we have to offer, as mages."

"There's also earth magic," Kinnon added, looking contemplatively around the room. "I'm not horrible at that, but you can use it to reinforce walls and tunnels. Put a mage out with your miners, and I'd bet money I don't even have that your cave-in rate drops."

"We can provide water," Gerda said, nudging a loose tile in the floor with her foot. Not loose, she realised, but a pressure plate, and she edged away from it. "We washed the streets of Dust Town, last night, and gave water to everyone who brought a bucket. It's... less foul."

Candles shrugged. "Don't look at me. I just kill shit. But, I can also light an entire three-tier Tevinter chandelier from before the First Blight faster than you can blink. Which, surprisingly enough, also works for killing and cooking game birds. I don't know what you people eat, down here, aside from mushrooms and nug, but if you hunt it, a mage can probably do it cleaner."

Queen Aeducan scratched her jaw, her knuckles hiding her smile. She pointed at Candles. "I like you. Now, those are all wonderful ideas, but ideas are all they are without mages. And where will we be getting these talented mages? From the surface, I'm sure, which your Chantry is sure to love. I have no use for your Chantry, but I have no interest in poking a dragon in the ass either. It's hard to enjoy a less foul Dust Town with an Exalted March clomping through here." She pursed her lips. "As it is, that many runaway mages passing through my city is bound to draw Chantry attention, or it would, if they were a little less preoccupied."

"Well, we could work something out with the Chantry, couldn't we?" Dagna asked. "Brother Burkel has his connections..."

"And, really, we're only 'runaway' mages because our tower was starting to collapse," Kinnon said. "They'll have to find some place to replace Kinloch Hold anyway, so why not here?"

"Kinnon, if they make it official, there's going to be templars," Fen'Din pointed out, quite sensibly.
"That's inviting the Chantry into Orzammar, which is the last thing we want to do."

"Warden Amell made that same argument against building an actual Chantry, here. A surfacer returned from Redcliffe and brought the Andrastian faith with him. He wanted to open a Chantry in Orzammar, but the Shaperate decided against it, and your friend was quite vocal in her objections, as well. Said we didn't want to invite that into our home, which I found rather surprising, since she was, it seems, also a believer in the Maker and Andraste. "Queen Aeducan looked faintly confused. "I thought all surfacers followed the Chantry..."

"Okay, so, it's like this," Candles opened, leaning her elbow on Dagna and crossing her legs. "Andrastianism is a belief that Andraste is the prophet of the Maker, and the Maker made all the world, including people and spirits. The Chantry is an institution that was founded on that belief, but you can have the one without the other."

"The Chantry has kept all the mages it could find imprisoned for centuries, because it claimed the alternative was to kill us all," Kinnon said, nudging Candles and pointing at Dagna. "I mean, sure, it's totally possible that there were evil warlocks wandering the countryside when the Chantry was founded, but I like to think we're over that, for the most part. We've got a solid magical tradition in the south that's no longer dependent on Tevinter and the magisters. But, they're stealing kids from their families and locking them up. We're not allowed to have children. We're not allowed to have strong relationships with each other."

"One of my best friends -- there were three of us -- finally made it out. He's been gone for almost ten years. They sent the other of us to Kirkwall, just to make sure we wouldn't try again. The two of us had never tried. But, they caught Karl crying, one night, and it was all over. Sent him off by the end of the month." Fen'Din shrugged, the same slightly distant smile still on his face. "That's what happened if you got too close. Everything was meant to be professional, all the time, but we didn't go to work and then go home -- we worked where we lived. These were the only people we knew, our entire lives, and we weren't allowed to get too close to them, or someone would be sent away. Not allowed to get too close to the mages, the templars, the Chantry sisters... One poor fool fell in love with a Sister. She's been in prison for a decade and he's... I don't know. He got away, but they were going to do the same to him. I don't know that I really see the difference to where we were, but they liked to scare us with the idea of Aeonar."

"Templars are horrible people. Can't be trusted," Gerda muttered, arms folded across her belly.

"The point is, if you do this, you really don't want to involve the Chantry," Candles said, finally realising she was leaning on Dagna.

The queen shrugged. "And I would really rather not involve the Chantry," she said. "But I am also not hearing anything that lessens my concerns. You don’t want me to involve the Chantry, but opening a Circle without the Chantry’s approval will get them involved, whether I want them to be or not." She shook her head. “It’s a bold plan, Dagna, and I like bold. But it’s also dangerous."

“But, Your Majesty," Dagna said, her desperation shining through, “think of what they’ve been able to do for Dust Town in less than a day! Think of what all these mages could do in a year!"

The queen looked ready to protest again, but Kinnon politely intercepted her. "Queen Aeducan, if I may," he said. “If your only concern is the Chantry, you already have an advantage over them, and more specifically over their templars…” He trailed off meaningfully.

Queen Aeducan sat back, chewing on the inside of her cheek as she considered his words. “The lyrium trade. Yes.”
Kinnon nodded.

“And you are suggesting what, exactly? That I lever that against them?”

Kinnon shrugged. "I'm saying it's an option you have that few other rulers do."

“That's a very dangerous move. Orzammar was, until the last Blight, the last dwarven stronghold in Thedas. We may have leverage, but that depends on us living long enough to profit from using it." Queen Aeducaan crossed her legs and stared into the corner of the room.

"On the other hand," Fen'Din pointed out, "it's Orzammar. It's the last dwarven stronghold in Thedas because the walls have held off armies of darkspawn for centuries. And those come from underground, so they have an advantage the Chantry lacks."

"Was, not is." Queen Aeducaan tapped her foot thoughtfully against the air. "Kal-Sharok, Ortan Thaig, Bownammar -- in the wake of the Blight, we've been reaching out into the Deep Roads again. Trying to get back what we lost. Turns out Kal-Sharok also never fell, but it's so far north that with the Deep Roads closed, we never knew. They never knew, either. We're trying to get back together with them, but eight hundred years changes a lot." She considered the point. "We probably could hold them off. No one has ever breached the surface gates of Orzammar -- ever. The Shaperate has no record of us being invaded from above. Of course, the Shaperate also had no record of the survival of House Ortan until Warden Amell found it in the Deep Roads, but I think they'd have marked a successful invasion. But, we're still here, and even Bownammar fell, in the end, so you may have a point."

"This also gains you magical support in repelling that invasion. It's possible--" Candles cocked a thumb at Kinnon "-- to seal the surface gates so they no longer open. Those are made of stone, right? We can mend stone -- or he can, anyway. Actually a lot of us can. I just... spent more time with lightning than stone. You can defend this city. That will never be a problem."

"The problem is cutting off the trade with the surface and abandoning all the surfacers to the Chantry's wrath. I know how the Chantry gets. I've heard the stories about the Dales." Queen Aeducaan shook her head. "Whatever we do, it's not going to be a simple decision. In every case, people wind up getting hurt, and I have to weigh the options to see which one results in less of those people being my people. Whatever horrible things are being done to mages, on the surface, those things haven't come to Orzammar. But, at the same time, mages can solve a lot of the problems Orzammar suffers with self-sufficiency, in the wake of the Blights, which would help a lot of my people, but at what cost? And that is the question I have to find an answer to. That is the question that all of this hangs on -- is the cost of this help greater than the cost of doing nothing?"

"Well," said Dagna with a sheepish smile, "you know what we think the answer is, Your Majesty."

The queen's laugh was sharp but genuine. "Yes, you've made your position clear. You have given me much to think about, however, and I'm afraid I cannot simply give you an answer, at least not yet. I hope you will continue your work in Dust Town while you are here, either way."

"Gives us something to do," Candles said with an insouciant shrug. She was still using Dagna as an arm rest.

"What she means is," Gerda cut in with an exasperated glance at Candles, "we are certainly happy to help where we can." Kinnon nodded his agreement.

"Isn't that what I said?" Candles muttered.
"Then you have Orzammar's thanks and appreciation," Queen Aeducan said formally, "and mine."
That's Not a Nug

Chapter Summary

Travelling with spirits comes with its own concerns.

A few days and a lot of magic later, the buildings in Dust Town stood straighter, the water table was higher, and the streets were no longer foul. There was no way to tell how long that would last, but it would take years to get as bad as it had been, when they arrived. After a great deal of smiling and back-patting from the locals, the mages climbed onto Ansgar's carts, and one of their own, having finally sold the dilapidated wine cart and bought something new, with the coin earned from caring for Karshol's accountant. This time, they would all ride, and for that, they were grateful.

"How long is the journey?" Keili asked, eyeing the Deep Roads gate with trepidation as they passed through it.

"It's around seventy, maybe seventy-five days to Kal-Sharok, depending on the condition of the tunnels. But, it's big roads, all the way. The Kal-Sharok to Orzammar trade corridor was one of the foundations of the dwarven empire, back when. None of this tiny tunnels nugshit on this route. And a lot of the side tunnels have been bricked over and marked, to keep the darkspawn out of the main road, until we push in against them in another spot. Well, not us. The Legion handles that, and they've been doing a great job. We're taking back thaigs all over," Ansgar explained from his position in the middle of the caravan. "I've been running this road since it re-opened, and it's in much better shape than we found it."

"And what happens once we get to Kal-Sharok?" Keili asked, trying to wrap her head around the idea of being underground for another two and a half months.

"Then we go up to the surface and push on from there. Kal-Sharok's got a major camel and bronto hub, so we just put these guys in their safe keeping and borrow a few camels for the trip across the desert. You might want to invest in something to cover your face, when we get there, if you don't already have something for that." Ansgar looked vaguely sympathetic. "I about peeled my face off, the first time I tried that route. The winds will pick up the sand and just slam it into you -- doesn't sound like much, it's just sand, but once it hits, it'll take the face right off you. I lost half my beard."

Keili frowned, touching a hand to her chin. Two and a half months underground, only to resurface to a route that could tear her face off with sand? She wondered if this was the Maker telling her she had been wrong to leave.

Candles stretched out, resting her heels in Keili's lap. The ride was smooth and would have been relaxing if not for the press of stone overhead and the chance of darkspawn, however small.

"Do you think the queen will listen to Dagna?" she asked, watching the ceiling pass overhead. Some crags in the dark were deeper in than others, and she amused herself trying to picture just how deep they went and if there was anything inside them.

Ansgar grunted something less than hopeful. "A circle would benefit a lot of people, particularly anyone in Dust Town, but the noble caste has a way of screwing over Dust Town, so I'm not optimistic."
"So, she'd have to find a way to make it good for the nobles," Kinnon ventured, looking at the damaged stonework that seemed to support the tunnel. Eight hundred years no one had travelled this way, and he could only assume it had been a popular road before, making this even older than the tower, in all likelihood. Different, too. But, then, anything underground would have to be different to the spire that had, at one time, stretched up to the heavens. "Can't be that hard. We've got the same benefits for everyone, really. You need food, water, healing, and a house that isn't going to fall on your head, no matter who you are."

"A house that isn't going to fall on your head being our official reason for leaving Kinloch Hold," Fen'Din noted, eyes closed, as he reached out with his mind and the spirits following them. What died down here? What died down here that wasn't blighted? He was sure that offering blighted bones would have an ill effect on his spirit companions.

"They let you leave because it was unstable?" Ansgar asked, eyebrows crushing together quizzically. "I thought they didn't let anyone leave for anything."

"They let the enchanters go to Cumberland. Used to be a meeting every year, before Kirkwall." Kinnon let a grin creep across his face. "And it wasn't so much that they let us leave because it was unstable as that a wall ripped open in front of twenty witnesses and we left."

Ansgar glanced over his shoulder, surprise writ large across his face. "Well! I've been by that place, and it didn't look good, but it didn't look that bad!"

"It might've had a little assistance," Candles admitted. "I guess Enchanter Crazypants sang to the wall and it got out of his way."

Fen'Din shrugged, still looking for suitable hosts for the spirits. Travelling away from the tower seemed to be harder without bones to carry them. "The walls and I were always very close," he joked.

Ansgar let out one of his sharp laughs, the kind that echoed off the stone. "So if we run into a cave-in or something, we should have this chicken wing of a mage sing at it to clear our way? Is your singing just that good?"

"Or just that bad," Candles teased. "Even the walls tried to escape."

"Better than Kinnon's singing," Keili said. She still fiddled with her amulet, her nails tracing its edge. "I still think that's why the bookcases in the library tipped over that one time. They fainted in horror."

"For the last time, that wasn't me singing!" Kinnon protested. "That was Jowan!"

The cart erupted in a chorus of "ohh" in sudden understanding.

"And now we know how Jowan really escaped," Candles said, wriggling until she had her head in Kinnon's lap. "All this time we thought it was blood magic!"

Fen'Din leaned over the side of the cart and made a small clicking sound with his tongue, holding out his hand for a skeletal nug, which hopped toward it and was quickly swept into the cart. "There you go, Sisterhood. Feeling a bit better? Good."

The nug tipped its skull up and examined the rest of the mages in the cart, before settling into Fen'Din's lap.

"You're not going to be able to stay there, you know. You'll fall off if I have to lean over to get one of the others."
The nug glowed a faint blue and stayed where it was.

"That is uncannily cute," one of the other mages muttered.

"I could unpack the wolves, but I thought they'd fare better with something more local." Fen'Din shrugged. "I may have to unpack the wolves anyway. A lot of what's down here is blighted."

Ansgar looked back at the glow he caught in the corner of his eye. "What are you doing cuddling a dead nug?"

"Spirits aren't meant to travel like this. They get sick, it seems, when they're left formless for too long." Fen'Din explained, scooping up the nug and holding it out to Ansgar. "This is Sisterhood. You met it before, as a wolf."

Ansgar stared, cross-eyed, at the glowing skeletal nug. "And it was... just as unsettling that time, too." Sisterhood's head drooped as though hurt. Haltingly, Ansgar reached out a hand to pat its skull, and it leaned into his touch. "Still a bit dusty," he muttered, wiping his hand on his pants. "But, uh. Hello again. Sisterhood."

Sisterhood glowed happily.

"Are there others coming?" Candles asked, sitting up enough to peer over the edge of the cart. "Please tell me none of them are possessing a giant spider, or something. All the singing in the world wouldn't save you then."

"Or darkspawn," Keili muttered, "but... I assume Fen'Din is wiser than that."

"I'm trying to keep them away from the darkspawn, the ghous, the strange blighted things I can't recognise. They're with us, but they really do need bodies to wear. Particularly down here, it seems. They tell me there's a song, down here, and it's a different song to the one they taught me to sing." Fen'Din shrugged and set the nug between his feet.

"Are you telling me they can hear the Stone singing?" Ansgar asked, paying less attention to where they were going than the weird elf with the spirit bones. Of course, it was a long, straight road, at this point, so he wasn't going to miss any turns. "The miners always swear it sings to them, but everybody says it's because they've been around the lyrium too long."

Fen'Din shrugged again. "I don't know what sings. I only know there's a song. Maybe it's the same one your miners hear. If it is, they're not crazy. They're just hearing something that ... huh. They're hearing something for spirits. But, dwarves don't dream. I remember Dagna saying it. Dwarves don't dream and they can't do magic. So, I guess there's something different about your miners, if they're hearing songs for spirits."

"You know, we had a paragon, back in the -- well..." Ansgar counted on his fingers. "Back in your Exalted Age. Paragon Ebryan, a poet. He wrote a book called 'Songs Only Nugs Can Hear'. And it was silly stuff, but here you come, with a nug, and I have to wonder if he wasn't on to something."

"I haven't met enough living nugs to guess." Fen'Din shrugged, which was becoming a common gesture. He figured it must be good for the muscles in his shoulders, if nothing else. Suddenly, he looked behind him, toward the front of the caravan. "Dolora, what are you--?"

Kinnon followed Fen'Din's line of sight and squeaked, jostling Candles into sitting fully upright. "That's not a nug," he said.

The skeleton that lumbered towards them was taller than the cart. The slope of its back and its heavy
bones bore a strong resemblance to the brontos pulling the carts, but there was something off in the way one leg dragged and in the shape of the head, which was much too small for its hulking body.

"Actually," said Keili slowly, drawing out each syllable. "I think that's part of a nug." She pointed at Sisterhood, who had perked up at the sight of Dolora. Its skull was a similar shape.

The brontos pulling their cart huffed in agitation, small ears turning back as Dolora brushed by them to put its head in the cart. Ansgar made soothing noises, though his wide eyes said he could use some soothing himself.

"That's... uh..." Kinnon stammered.

"At least it's not a spider," Candles said, flopping back to use Kinnon as a pillow.

"Dolora, no," Fen'Din sighed, rubbing his face. "You can't wear that. It's broken and it's too big to fit in the cart."

There was a pause and a flash of blue that had the brontos skittering sideways, nearly overturning two carts.

"And you're spooking the brontos. And their drivers." Fen'Din scrabbled down off the chest he was sitting on and pulled it open. "If you're that sick, I'll get one of the wolves out for you, until you find something better. You can come ride with me."

Another pause and Dolora bit at the strangely dangling leg.

"That's because that isn't the leg that belongs there. You picked up the wrong -- well, if there's not another leg there, then something else dragged it off. Come back and get a wolf."

"Is it just me," Petra whispered to Keili, "or does he sound exactly like Enchanter Wynne talking to the apprentices?"
Despite everything, Jowan liked to think his rescue mission wasn't a complete disaster. He got the girl and got her out alive, which had been his objective all along. That 'out' meant slipping sideways into the Fade was a separate issue.

They had long left Aeonar, had watched it disintegrate into nothing the moment the last mage had stepped outside. The spirits with them hadn't even bothered with stairs or doors, floating right through the walls as though knowing they would turn to dust a moment later.

Now they wandered through dreamscapes, across craggy stone with upside-down stairs, under floating stalactites with a green sky. It was like and unlike every dream Jowan had ever had, and every now and then his skin prickled with the sensation that he had been here before.

Like his back prickled with the sensation of eyes glaring at him. They blamed him for what had happened, for the demons that crossed their path and plucked more templars and mages from their number. The people of Aeonar, it seemed, prisoner or guard, were all desperate in their own way, and that drew demons to them like flies to honey.

But, that spire rose in the distance, and Jowan didn't think it was the Black City. It looked ancient, when they were close, and dark, when they were further away, but walking toward it didn't seem to determine which of those things they got, as if something else were at work to tempt them with signs of civilisation and then pull them away. But, he was sure it was real. Unlike Aeonar, it never faded. Someone was there. Someone would be able to help them, he hoped, since whoever they were, they seemed to be able to reach into the Fade.

And then, one day, he found himself standing on a cliff, looking at a scattering of islands that surrounded a central spire that rose up from a point much too far below them. The shape looked oddly familiar, but he couldn't place it. Something that nagged at his memory. Maybe it was Tevinter -- he had no idea which way they'd been going, and Tevinter had been everywhere, at one point. Maybe he could talk a nice magister into letting them out.

Of course, to listen to the Chantry, there was no such thing as a nice magister, and nevermind Hessarian. But, the Chantry had been full of shit about a lot of things, including the part where he'd apparently just done the impossible and with every inhabitant of Aeonar. After a moment, he started to chuckle nervously, and glanced at Lily, who was still somewhat less than impressed with him.

"I was always so worried about my Harrowing. I, ah... I guess I've been Harrowed, now." His laughter turned hysterical, and he sank to his knees, hands pressed to his face, as he stared down at that tower, at the way the Fade almost seemed to bend and pool around it. And that's when he saw it. The laughing choked off in a sick groan. "Lily? Look again. I think -- I think we're home."

"The First Enchanter can help us," Lily decided, smiling for what Jowan thought was the first time since they'd left Aeonar, however long ago that had been. "Irving was always a good man."
"First Enchanter Irving is also on the other side of the Veil," Captain Brynn pointed out.

"Technically, so is the tower, and yet we can see it," Lily said, throwing her hands up in the building's direction. "Maybe we can, I don't know, talk to him in a dream or something?"

"This is the Fade," Captain Brynn pointed out. He looked tired, shadows heavy under his eyes. "Nothing is real, not the way we know of it. This is probably a projection of yours."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Lily said, an edge creeping into her voice, taking a tone she once never would have dared with a templar. "Maybe we should keep walking by it into this green nothingness like we have been, until the next demon warps it into something else?" Her voice rose in pitch, verging on shrill.

Hesitantly, Jowan reached out a hand to comfort her, but Lily moved out of his reach. Asha curled an arm around her shoulders instead, making soothing sounds until she quieted.

"It couldn't hurt to check it out," Knight-Lieutenant Owain said, leaning in towards the captain. "It's not like any of us know where we're going."

"It could hurt," Jowan muttered, looking for a way down to the base of the tower, and finding himself a little surprised when one spooled out beside him, winding down the face of the rock. Perhaps he was finally getting the hang of this place, after all. "Maker only knows what happens to the ones who don't come back from a Harrowing. Maker only knows what's happened to the ones who do."

"You're an apprentice?" the Knight-Lieutenant looked utterly horrified.

"No," Jowan quipped, setting off down the path, "I'm an apostate."

The stone around him flowed and rippled, temptingly, as they descended. A faint rainbow of colours crept through it, blooming into flowering vines. And that was uncomfortable, to say the least.

"Desire?" one of the other mages asked, studying a flower.

"Probably," Jowan agreed. "Or sloth, like the old Tevinter tales of Amaranth and the flowers that make you sleep forever."

"A cheery thought," another mage muttered, inching away from the flowers. "So don't sniff the Fade flowers?"

"Don't sniff the Fade anything," Owain sighed, picking his way down after all the mages had descended. Captain Brynn still walked up front with Jowan, and together the remaining templars acted like the mages' escorts even now.

Flowering vines followed and surrounded them, making a trail towards the front of the tower, inviting them onward. There was something off about the flowers, the colours too bright, as though painted on. A dream's impression of what flowers might look like.

"I don't like this," Lily murmured, keeping close to Asha.

They almost bumped into Jowan when he came to a sudden stop, eyes round and fixed on the door. Or, Lily realised, the gaping hole in the wall to the side of the door. Blocks of stone floated up and out of it as though forgetting which way to fall.

"I really don't like this," Lily said.
"Oh, shit," a voice groaned from closer to the tower. "Are you fucking kidding me? Of all the things you could show me, you show me the dead maleficar and a templar?"

"Hey, fuck you, I'm not dead!" Jowan objected. He didn't say anything about being a maleficar. He probably was one, really. He'd used blood magic and summoned demons.

"Bullshit, you're not dead. You're here, same as me." The shape of a man resolved from between some apparently dead branches, as flowers and leaves suddenly raced along them. "I'm definitely dead. I watched that happen. I failed the Circle, but Solona didn't."

"Wait, what about Solona?" Jowan stepped forward, still expecting the man to turn into a demon at any moment. "Hey, I know you! You're ... Niels? Nolan? That isolationist who used to sulk around the back of the library all the time."

"Niall. And everyone remembers your name, asshole." Niall shook his head. "Weren't you one of Uldred's students? Is that where you learned it?"

Jowan shifted uncomfortably. "Yes and no. He didn't teach me, but he left a lot of books laying around, in obvious reach of his apprentices. I just... I didn't think I'd make it through the Harrowing."

Niall laughed, incredulously. "Well, I'd say there's little question, now. Where did you even come from? How long have you been here?" Niall paused. "And how long before they cut you loose?"

"They?" Jowan asked, looking around him for traces of demons and finding only flowers.

"The templars," Niall answered, punctuating his words with a tired sigh. "You've been here a while, haven't you? You've got that look about you in the eyes. Poor sod."

"Templars? What...?" Jowan glanced at Captain Brynn, who shrugged pauldroned shoulders. It took a long moment for Jowan to realise Niall didn't mean these templars.

"There's no one to 'cut me loose'," Jowan answered. "I'm not being Harrowed. Or... I suppose I just was, but not officially." His laugh came out higher and thinner than he liked. "As for where we come from... it's a bit of a long story. I summoned geese at Aeonar and ended up here. That should tell you everything you need to know."

Niall blinked. He looked confused, then disgusted, and then he pressed a hand against his eye in frustration. "You what? Aeonar?"

Brynn stepped forward. "I'm Knight-Captain Brynn, and he's not joking. I don't know about the geese, but I came out of my office to discover I hadn't been in my office, and then the fortress just sort of... blew away."

"That's impossible," Niall deadpanned, eyeing Jowan. "You know that's impossible. Even Uldred knew that was impossible."

"Knew?" Jowan asked. He'd heard that Uldred had caused some troubles, after he left, but the Mages' Collective wasn't terribly forthcoming. Being apostates, they didn't know much about what went on inside the tower.

"He's dead. Solona killed him after he -- are you really going to tell me you know nothing about this?" Niall crossed his arms and leaned back.

"Apostate," Jowan reminded him. "I heard he started some shit, but it only lasted a few days."
"Some shit," Niall drawled. "Some shit. Do you know about the Blight? You must. You were outside for it. At Uldred's suggestion, the Circle was about to ally itself with Teyrn Loghain, when the teyrn's treachery was revealed."

"You mean that he killed the king," Jowan guessed. "Or was there something more?"

"I guess he betrayed us, as well, but I wasn't really listening, at that point. Do you have any idea how boring those meetings are? Everyone knows what's going to happen before we even sit down." Niall shook his head. "Should've been. Might still be alive."

"What happened?" asked Jowan. He noticed the trail of flowers stopped in front of Niall, their colours muted.

"Uldred hit us all with a bolt of energy," Niall said with a thin smile. "It must have been a signal, because then a group of mages poured into the room. I started paying attention then." He pinned Jowan with a look. "That was the first time I saw blood magic in action. It was like they brought the wrath of the Maker himself down on our heads."

Jowan gaped. "Uldred... attacked the Circle? I-I mean, he was always a bit odd, but..."

"In fairness, that's what a lot of people said about you," Niall said, drawing a wince from Jowan.

"I just wanted to be with Lily," Jowan said in a small voice. Lily turned her head but said nothing. "So, what happened? Was he killed? Made Tranquil? What did you do?"

"Me? When Uldred became an abomination, I ran for my life! Thirty years and just barely an enchanter." Niall shook his head and looked back toward the tower. "And then I thought about what would happen if that... thing got out of the tower. I gathered some of my fellows and we went to get the Litany of Adralla from the stockroom. I don't know who or what Adralla is, but they said it would stop blood mages, and blood mages is what we had."

"Did it work?" Jowan asked, eyeing the hole in the side of the tower.

"It worked for Solona, after she took it off my corpse. I watched my friends fall, and then the sloth demon got me, too. I was asleep too long. Just wasted away." Niall paused. "Maker, that's morose."

Lieutenant Owain looked terribly uncomfortable. "You got... trapped here? And then you died, but you're still here?"

"Yyyes?" Niall blinked at him. "That's usually how it works."

"They didn't tell us that." Owain looked at Brynn. "Did they tell you that, Captain?" He pulled off a gauntlet and ran a hand through his hair. "I served at Aeonar. We didn't do Harrowings. But, I learned about them, same as any templar. If the mage doesn't come back or they turn into something else, you kill them, and they die. But, you're ... I don't know, not really dead. You're half-dead, because you were in the Fade when you died. And I can't help but wonder..."

Captain Brynn stared at Niall, looking stricken. "They only tell you to worry about demons," he said. "If a mage is in the Fade too long, you have to assume he's made a deal. You have to assume the threat of a demon possessing his body is imminent. They don't tell you what happens to the part of the mage still in the Fade."

Owain swore under his breath, wiping a hand over his face. "This is..." He shook his head, fumbling for an adequate adjective and coming up empty. "Are there others like you, here? The Harrowed who didn't make it back in time?"
Niall considered Jowan and the other mages clustered behind him. "Where else would they go?" he asked with a shrug. "I see others, sometimes. They don't always hear me when I talk to them, and some of them don't even look human any more. Some of them stay around the tower, trying to find a way back in."

"Is that why there's a hole in the wall?" Lily asked, speaking up in a timid voice.
Illusions of Home (2/4)

Chapter Summary

Niall is something more than he seems, and so is his apparently young friend.

Niall laughed and then suddenly stopped, looking distressed. "No. That wasn't in. That was out." He took a long breath and breathed it out sharply. "Do you remember the crazy elf who cut up his face and dyed it purple? Used to say he talked to the walls?"

Jowan's eyes rounded. "Alim? You think Alim did this?"

"He wasn't talking to the walls. He was talking to the spirits. And not really discriminately, either. Demons used to hang around him, too," Niall paused, squinting into the distance. "But, he didn't make any deals. With anything. They just liked him, I guess. I kind of liked him, too. He could see me. He'd talk to me like I was still there. But, I didn't do this. I thought he was going to get us all killed. Them. Them all killed. No, us too. Maker only knows what all the Tevinter shit in the cellar could've done if anyone had a mind to use it."

"So, he... what, asked the walls to get out of his way, and they did?" Jowan scoffed. He'd heard the elf say it often enough, over the years, but he never really believed it.

"Basically? Yes." Niall shrugged. "The spirits liked him, and he wanted to leave, when he didn't get voted First Enchanter."

Lily looked confused. "Why would he be First Enchanter? Isn't Irving--"

"Oh, shit," Jowan groaned, burying his face in his hands.

Niall blinked at Lily. "Seriously? I've been dead for ten years, and I'm more informed on current events than the rest of you are?"

"We don't get too much news in Aeonar," Lily grit out. She pointed at Jowan. "I don't know what his excuse is."

"I'd heard about what happened at the White Spire," Jowan said, a tad defensively. "It's why I broke into Aeonar when I did! I just... I guess I never thought about what had happened to Irving. Or, I just assumed he'd made it out. The man is -- was -- an institution! He was just sort of always there, and you felt like he would always be there."

Niall nodded. "Wynne was like that too. I couldn't believe it when I heard."

"Wait, Wynne's dead too?" Jowan blurted. "Shit. No wonder Crazyface Alim took off. Wynne and Anders were most of his impulse control."

"I always thought he was Anders's impulse control," Niall muttered. "Anders is gone, too. And Karl. Gone, not dead. Anders finally didn't get dragged back, so they sent Karl to Kirkwall. And you know about Solona. Everyone knows about Solona. Liorah died, along with most of the enchanter, when Uldred brought the demons down. I liked her. She's not still here. Sweeney, too. I always thought Sweeney would outlive us all. I thought he was immortal. But, really, the only one of the
senior enchanters who lived was Torrin, and he's First Enchanter, now."

"You think he'll help us?" Lily asked, still watching the flowers get denser around them, never quite reaching Niall.

"Help you what?" Niall asked, gesturing broadly at the endless cloud and stone. "You're in the Fade."

"Help us get out of the Fade, you cad," Jowan retorted. "Can you get out? I mean, if we find a way out, would it help if we took you with us?"

"There's nothing for me out there, any more. Just this, here. Emptiness and sorrow, as far as the eye can see, with occasional interruptions from Pride, Sloth, and Desire. Is there anything out there for you? Really?" Niall raised his eyebrows. "You're an apostate, Jowan. A maleficar. And you're travelling with templars who aren't going to have the slightest compunction about locking you up again, once you get out. They can't lock you up, here. It just... won't work, if you don't let them."

"I protest!" Owain held up a hand. "The man broke into Aeonar and transported everyone inside into the Fade. I'm pretty sure locking him up isn't going to help."

"All I did was summon geese!" Jowan protested weakly. "I didn't--! Maker." He hung his head, staring down at his feet, finding them completely surrounded and cushioned by more of those cursed flowers. Well. They were lovely, he supposed. He'd forgotten what colours other than green and grey looked like.

"All the more reason why I doubt it would help," Owain muttered, crossing his arms. "You weren't even trying much, and this happened. Imagine if you had actually tried to do something of this scale on purpose."

Niall laughed long and hard, wiping at his eye, and even that laugh, for all its sincerity, sounded hopeless. "Jowan? Please. If he tried, he probably would have just dropped a chandelier on his head or something. It's when he's not trying to be disastrous that you have to worry."

"Hey!" Jowan said, shoulders slumping. Even Lily was nodding in agreement, and he stared down at the flowers again. Flowers that not only stopped at Niall's feet, he noticed, but withered and died the moment they pressed too close.

"So, whether they can help or not," Lily said, "is there a way we can contact anyone who's left in the tower?"

Niall shrugged one shoulder. "Ironically? If the crazy elf were still here, he could probably hear you. At least hear me complaining about you. Sorry, Jowan. Your timing is still shitty."

"Well, where'd he go?" Jowan asked, folding his arms and looking like he might go storming off after.

"Who the fuck knows?" Niall shrugged and the flowers in the shadow of his arms shrivelled. "He wouldn't tell anyone because the templars were listening."

"Okay, Wynne's gone, Alim's gone, Anders is gone... What about, ah, Flora?" Jowan snapped as the name came to him.

"You mean Finn? He's gone, too. Blame Solona for that one." Niall kicked at the dust and a few more flowers died.
"What's... with you and the flowers?" Jowan finally asked. "Is that because you're dead?"

"Huh?" Niall looked down and finally noticed the way the flowers retreated and died around him. "Well, that's shitty. Like everything else. Everything has sucked since the moment I became an enchanter! Why do I even bother?" He flung his arms out in exasperation and more of the flowers died, in a ring around him. Two mages standing in the dead flowers began to cry. "There's just no point!"

"Demon," Asha said, quietly, gathering one sobbing mage into her arms. "Your friend's been here too long. He's lost his way."

Brynn nodded sombrely, fingers itching to hold his sword. "I'm afraid so."

"What? No! I'm not a demon!" Niall held his hands, palm out, and more of the flowers shrivelled and died, bright red and blue petals rotting to black.

Something had changed in the stance of the templars. None had drawn their weapons, at least not yet, but they held themselves poised and ready, their stare sharp. Niall swallowed and took a step back.

"Of course you'd think I'm a demon," he said bitterly, wrapping his arms around himself. "The first mildly sane conversation I've had in... What is the point?"

Jowan could see Niall's breath, ghosting in front of him as though he were standing in the first morning frost of the year. Watching him, Jowan could swear he felt the cold too, nipping at his fingers, and not just a physical cold, but an icy heaviness in his chest.

"Despair," Jowan said, putting a name to the feeling. And despair was what he felt, knowing he couldn't do anything for Niall.

Another scruffy, young mage, this one dressed as a senior enchanter, swaggered through the flowers, from the direction of the tower, and they bloomed larger, in stranger, brighter colours. "Niall, Niall, you could've had anything you wanted, but you just gave up! You gave up before you ever got here."

"Does it matter?" Niall scoffed, another quick cloud in the chill air. "I was there, and I was never supposed to be able to leave. Now, I'm here, and I still can't leave."

"It's not like you're me. You're actually talented. You have friends -- look at them! They came to see you and everything. You have a name! You have power!" The younger mage tossed an arm around Niall's waist, with a tiny, hopeful smile. "I've been here so long I don't even have a name any more. Nobody remembers who I was."

"But, you're Mouse," Niall said, looking up. "Does it even matter if you were someone before? We're never getting out of here, so whoever forgot you doesn't matter. Nothing matters, really, but you can't say you don't have any friends. I mean, I guess you could. It's not like I count for much."

"You still remember what it's like to be real. You could change this place to be anything you desire. You could rule it in your own image." Mouse crouched down to get a look at the flowers. "You're the only one who really stayed with me, Niall... And now you've brought your friends. Why don't you make something nice for them?" He picked a flower and studied it. "Or maybe they can make something nice for you."

"Who are you?" Owain asked sharply, in his 'templar voice' as his friends liked to call it. Not that he had many friends who weren't templars, with the job he had. A demon in his sights and now
another... spirit? Demon? Dead mage? He wanted his sword in his hands, but best not to provoke them.

"Oh, I'm sure I had a name at one point, but now everyone calls me 'Mouse'," the maybe-spirit said. He offered the flower to the templar, the petals an almost blinding shade of yellow that made Owain think of -- and long for -- sunlight. "I have been here, longer than I remember. Coaxed a few mages through their Harrowing, after I failed mine. I thought that was the most terrible day of my life, for the longest time, but you get used to the Fade. It can be beautiful, in a frightening sort of way, if you make it so."

Owain still didn't take the flower, and Mouse nodded as though expecting as much. Instead, he tucked the flower in Niall's hair. It stayed there a moment, golden and blinding, until Niall made it dim, petals curling and growing black and brittle. Niall brushed it away with a frown.

"He just has these fits," Mouse sighed, taking Niall's hand. "The Fade changes, when you feel. That's what the demons do to you -- they make you feel. They trap you with it. But, he's just... unhappy. I don't know if he's ever been happy, but who is? We have no family; you don't let us make proper friends. And then we get woken up in the middle of the night and forced into the Fade, and whether or not we go, for the most part, we die. And don't tell me being Tranquil isn't death. Look at them! They can't even come to the Fade in their dreams, because they can't feel anything at all."

"Didn't you just say demons make you feel? I mean, I'd think you'd want to feel less, not more."

Brynn watched the young mage curiously.

"Demons make you feel what they want. If you don't feel anything, you lose your dreams. You lose your will. You think Niall looks poorly, but at least he still can feel. It's just... a little dangerous sometimes. Here." Mouse looked a bit abashed at his sudden sharp reply. "I don't mean to be rude. You're our guests. Are you all asleep? Dreamers? It's just a strange assortment of people -- I don't think I've ever seen this many templars at once. Not here. Is this some new ritual?"

Niall eased his hand out of Mouse's grip and sat down amid the dead flowers. "That's one word for it. Those are their bodies. They're really here. You remember the stories of Aeonar? Jowan says they broke out of there. Well, he broke in, and then the Power of Jowan happened, and now they're here. The last time the Power of Jowan happened, the walls of the phylactery vault were shattered, and no one could shut up the Tevinter ghosts in the cellar for a week."

"The Power of Jowan, eh?" Mouse said, gaze landing on the mage Niall indicated as Jowan. "That is impressive. I've heard of mages trying to enter the Fade, body and mind, but never thought I'd live to see it. How did you do it?"

Jowan's whole body moved with the weight of his sigh. "If I figure it out, I'll let you know."
A return to Kinloch Hold, which looks much the same, aside from some subtle things no one's dreams filled in.

"He says he summoned geese," Niall told Mouse. He plucked at the dead flowers underneath him, pulling off their petals and crumbling them under his fingers.

"We're just trying to find a way back out," Jowan said. "Maybe you could help us? Niall didn't seem to, uh... think it mattered."

"Have you tried summoning geese again?" Mouse drawled. He chuckled at Jowan's sour look. "Never mind. The Veil is thin in some places and thick and others. I have heard the Veil is thin in Aeonar. It is thin here too. If you want to find your way back, you have come to the right place to try."

"We have?" Lily asked, sounding achingly hopeful, hopeful enough to make Niall wince. "So, do you know, then? How to get back?"

Mouse tapped his lip as though deep in thought. "'Know' is a certainty I would hesitate to give you. But ideas, on the other hand... Those I have in abundance."

"If they don't execute all of us, when we get out of here, you should write a book," Brynn chuffed, shaking his head and taking a closer look at the way the land dipped down around the tower. "Fade Travel By Way of Goose. I'm sure the Chantry will love it, as soon as they ban it to keep it out of the hands of impressionable young mages."

Asha cackled, slipping an arm around Lily. "Sounds like you're coming around, Captain. Always knew you had a head on you."

"Well, the obvious answer really is summoning more geese," Niall pointed out. "Not that I think it's going to work, but if it's how you got here..."

Jowan studied Niall, who hadn't aged in all the time he'd been here. Outside, Niall was older, but here, time had stopped and they looked the same age. And Jowan could remember that hopeless feeling -- the sense that there was no way out. "We're not... leaving you here, you know. If we get out, you can come, too. I mean, I know you don't have a body any more, but we'll think of something. It's not right. The two of you were people, once."

"Well, whether or not you can leave," Mouse began, looking around, "you might want to stay here, a while. The demons haven't been as bad, since that thing where that enchanter dragged them all out. They don't die, when you stab them, you know. They come back here, but... where exactly? Nobody knows. They didn't come back to where they started. It's safe here. Or at least, it's safer than what's out there." He gestured away from the tower. "You look tired. You should rest and regain your strength. Then I'll see what we can do about putting you into someone's dreams. Now, I don't know that it'll work -- you're not a real spirit -- but I'm sure a powerful mage like yourself has some tricks."
Jowan huffed. "Most of my tricks end in disaster," he said, and Niall hummed. He realised then that he was standing at the edge of the dead flowers, and he took a step back.

Mouse clucked his tongue and tugged on a lock of Niall's hair. "Niall, my friend, you're depressing our guests."

Niall mumbled a half-hearted apology.

"Resting... does sound good," Owain admitted, rolling his right shoulder. Even in the Fade, his armour felt heavy, though it was something he'd barely noticed until they had stopped to chat. "Maybe the fake tower has some fake beds in it?"

"One way to find out," Mouse said. "And it looks like someone left the door open."

"Thanks, Alim," Jowan said with a nervous laugh. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what he'd find inside that tower, but Lily and Asha were already making their way over to the hole in the wall, following the trail of flowers that blossomed in front of them.

"This is where you grew up?" Asha asked Lily, eyeing the antechamber beyond the hole.

"No, but he did. I was raised in a lovely little Chantry in Crestwood. I just came here as an initiate." Lily clung to the almost-normal conversation, as Kinloch Hold gaped before her, once again. Her feet dragged as she grew closer, and her breath shortened, but Mouse was at her side, in an instant.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, here. You're the queen of this castle, if you wish it. But, there's only something to fear if you fear it first."

"It's just the memories," Lily choked out, bringing Asha with her as she walked through the wall. "I was happy here, once. A young fool in love."

"And if that makes you happy, who says you can't have it again? You're still young, but you don't look like a fool. That might get in your way," Mouse joked, easily, still tugging Niall after him. "And who did you love? Some young Templar? I know they were very popular with the ladies, for a lot of years."

Lily opened and closed her mouth, without answering, but the look she darted at Jowan said enough.

Mouse hummed in understanding, eyebrows tilting up. "I see. Young, forbidden romance, hmm? There are many things we mages aren't supposed to do, and fall in love is one. Is that why Enchanter Goose-herder broke into Aeonar in the first place? To reclaim his lady love?"

Lily's blush showed up bright and red against her pale skin. "I suspect he had his own memories of being a young fool," she said to the floor.

"And now he's making memories of being an older fool?" Mouse teased.

Behind them, Jowan followed and pretended he wasn't listening. Walking into the Circle was a bit like being punched in the gut, and he could understand Lily's reaction. It was like they had turned back time ten years earlier. Except someone had punched a hole into the wall.

It wasn't the only change, they noticed, moving further inward. The doors all opened easily and it was strangely quiet. There were no people in the halls.

"Where is everyone?" Jowan asked, looking into the apprentice dormitory. "I mean, not the living people. People like you two."
"Not everyone manages to survive. For a long time, there were demons -- trapped for the Harrowings. If you failed, usually they'd consume you," Mouse explained, following Lily into the library. "There are still spirits here, but a number of them left, recently. Took to travelling."

"The hole in the wall," Jowan realised, still unsettled by all of it, as he took a book off a shelf and opened it, to find the words were all incomprehensible and shapeless. "What--?" He took down another book and then another, but none of them had real text in them.

"The Fade is only an impression of the world," Mouse reminded him, as Niall drifted deeper into the stacks to what had once been his favourite section. "This place is made of dreams, and dreams don't care what's in the books, just that there are books." He paused. "You could change that, if you remember what belongs in them. Or what you want to see in them. You can change all of this. What was missing, when you were here? You can have anything, as long as you can dream it. No demon owns this place, so it will turn itself to your will, if you push -- just like the flowers."

"Wait, I'm making the flowers? That's not just a thing that happens, in this part of the Fade?" Jowan looked confused.

"All of you are making the flowers, because one of you believes it should be that way. You and she are the only ones who remember this place, and only you are a mage. You have the power." Mouse looked at Jowan, almost deferentially, and Jowan almost felt competent, for once in his life.

"This is becoming a theme," Jowan sighed. "Accidental magic having odd effects. I can't get us home, but I can grow flowers!"

Mouse chuckled, walking in step with Jowan now. "It's a start. Think about it. You want to go home, yes? To do that, you have to exert your will on the Fade so it will let you. Controlling the Fade accidentally shows that, with a little practice, you can control your surroundings on purpose."

Jowan tried not to feel too hopeful all at once, but hope was, he supposed, a nice change of pace. Maybe he could do this. Maybe it wasn't impossible.

"Hey, this one's got something in it!" one of the other mages called out, tossing a book in Jowan's direction. "No words, but it's probably somebody's dream!"

Jowan turned just in time to take the book square in the cheek, but he caught it before it dropped to the ground. There was something vaguely familiar about it, and he opened it to the middle, where page after page of faces caught his eye, and then a page that was nothing but Anders with his mouth full. "Aww, come on, I've seen enough of that to last a lifetime," he complained, flipping back to the page before it. Godwin. That was Godwin, and there was Sweeney.

"Alim," he breathed, flipping back to the first page of the book. And there it was. The drawing of a three-eyed wolf with billowing fog instead of feet.

"How does this work?" he asked Niall, handing him the book. Niall was probably too old to have been too closely familiar with Alim, but he'd know the faces. "You said he left -- broke a hole in the wall and left. Why is this still here?"

"He made an impression," Mouse answered, as Niall paged through the book in amazement. "The spirits preserve things that have great meaning. And when I say that, what I mean is don't go downstairs. Up here is memory. Almost everyone agrees on what these rooms look like -- they haven't changed much in centuries, to hear the spirits talk. Down there, though... Don't open that door. You remember what's down there, and so do centuries of spirits preserving the memory of the tower."
Jowan paled at the thought. He'd been down there to get things out of the vaults -- mostly because Sweeney couldn't carry things up the stairs, and he'd grab whatever apprentice was handy to help him -- but the fact remained that there was still a dungeon down there. And he'd gotten a much better look at it when he and Solona had gone looking for the phylactery vault. Empty, but mostly because Anders hadn't been well enough to do anything stupid, recently. He liked to think he'd have broken people out, if anyone had been down there, when he was making his escape.

Another mage seemed to be taking Mouse's advice. "Hey, look!" she cried out, as the bookcases on one row burst into wooden blooms, perfectly polished and shaped as if they'd grown there.

"How'd you do it?" asked the mage who'd thrown the book, running his fingers curiously over the shapes.

"I thought it would look pretty, so I told the shelves to do it. And then they did." She grew a tree out of the floor, but much like the flowers on the bookshelf, it appeared to be made entirely of polished wood.

"You see? Even she can do it. But, with your power, you can do so much more. I can feel it, just standing next to you." Mouse looked a little awed and elbowed Niall. "Tell him I'm right. You feel it, don't you?"

"I feel an impending disaster," Niall muttered. "It's Jowan." He paused. "Nothing personal, but you've got to admit, your track record is high-powered disasters. Still, Irving was talking, after you left. If you hadn't turned to blood magic, he was going to give you a Harrowing. He really didn't think you'd have any trouble with it -- I mean, not worse than any of us did. Maker knows, I made it, somehow. Destined for great things, my mother used to say." He snorted and shrugged.

"A Harrowing?" Jowan said with a nervous laugh. Maker. Once upon a time, he had been terrified of just that, and now, here he was in the Fade, as thoroughly Harrowed as one man could get. "Like you said, I was a disaster. Imagine the kind of disaster I would have been if I had stayed."

"Couldn't have been worse than Uldred," Niall muttered. He pinned Jowan with a hard look. "Would you have sided with Uldred, if you had stayed?"

"Of course not!" Jowan squeaked. He liked to think that would be obvious, but... he had also never thought Uldred capable of any of that.
Chapter Summary

A dream of meat, an Antivan hot-tub party in the templar barracks, and a touching moment.

Cheering behind him broke Jowan out of his thoughts, and he turned to find a table in the middle of the hall where there hadn't been one before, piled high with exotic foods he couldn't identify. Even the food had that smooth, too-perfect quality that made the flowers unsettling. It didn't stop his mouth from watering.

On the other side of the table, Owain and Brynn looked more uncomfortable than excited, no matter how good the food looked. "I don't like this," Brynn muttered, even as he eyed a pastry.

"So, make something you do like!" one of the mages enthused, around a mouthful of cake. "It's not hard."

"We're templars," Owain reminded her, at the same time Brynn replied.

"That's not what I meant."

"Do you dream?" Asha asked, picking apart a bit of roast fowl as if she were looking for something. "I think you must dream. You're not Tranquil. If you dream, I don't think it matters if you're templars."

"That can't be right," Owain objected, crouching down to get a closer look at Asha's plate. "And that's... not quite how meat works, is it?"

"It's a dream about meat," Asha pointed out, finally tasting a bit. "But, it's a very good dream."

"This is magic," Brynn insisted, gesturing down the table. "Templars don't do magic! We're the opposite of magic. We stop magic."

"You put lyrium in, you get magic out," Asha drawled, helping herself to some strange Orlesian-looking sphere of what she thought might be caramel and... something fluffy. "Besides, it doesn't matter. You're awake, but you're dreaming. Every time you dream, you make a whole world, don't you?"

"I don't think it's the same, for them," Mouse said, nibbling on a Nevarran vegetable pastry. He looked surprised and genuinely pleased at the taste, as if he'd forgotten what it was like to eat. "A true mage touches the Fade always. Templars are like everyone else -- they only do it when they're asleep. You have the real power, here, because you're expecting it. It's expecting you."

"I'm not sure if that's more comforting or disturbing," one mage said.

Lily said nothing but quietly stole a piece of Orlesian chocolate, nibbling at the corners as though it were the only food she would ever get to touch.

"I'm going with disturbing," Brynn muttered, pointedly turning his back on the food and inspecting
the books again.

"Spoilsport," Mouse sighed. He nudged Jowan with his elbow. "Why don't you try something?"

"I, uh... I don't know..." Jowan shifted his weight nervously.

"If you're worried about accidentally doing something too big," Mouse said, "then start with something that's easier to visualise." He took Jowan by the shoulders and steered him to face the door. "Something simple, to start. Close that door. No casting, no spells... and no walking over to it and closing it by hand. That's cheating."

Jowan supposed that was harmless enough. He could picture taking the door's handle and pushing the heavy door closed. He knew its weight, knew the way it scraped against the floor on humid days. The slam of the door startled him, making him jump, and Mouse patted his shoulder with a laugh.

"See? It's that easy. You're good at this! Imagine what else you could do. What would you like to do?" Mouse still had one hand companionably on Jowan's shoulder.

While Jowan fumbled for an answer, Asha cut in, "I'd like to eat chocolate while soaking in a hot tub." She nudged Lily. "Is there any place in here with the room for that?"

"I... I don't know, really..." Lily looked around and pointed toward the inner chamber of the library and its stairs. "There's the great hall -- that's big. It's mostly enchanters' rooms and research facilities upstairs, then there's the templar barracks... At the top -- well, the last floor to have a roof, still, I heard, there's the Harrowing chamber. I've never been there." She looked around. "Actually, I don't know if any of us have been."

"I have." Niall waved, looking a little exasperated. "But, you know, I can see where that might be 'none of us'."

"Oh! That's right!" Lily shook her head and smiled. "I didn't know you very well, when you were alive -- I just wasn't there long enough to meet everyone. I keep forgetting you're from here, since they're not." She gestured to the rest of the mages gathered around the table.

"It's big and mostly empty. But, I wouldn't go up there, for the same reason I wouldn't go downstairs." Niall shuddered, looking slightly ill at the thought. "I don't think anyone's ever had a good time up there, and it probably shows."

"Antivan hot tub party in the templar barracks!" a mage called out from the end of the table.

Brynn still looked terribly uncomfortable with the idea of living in a completely malleable world -- and one with no lyrium. He noticed he still hadn't gotten sick, for some reason. None of the templars with them had. Which, he supposed, reinforced the idea that this was a dream. A dream he was living in, which was almost a pleasant thought, until he remembered how many people they'd lost to demons, getting here. A dream in which you could get killed.

"Captain?" One of the templars tapped him on the shoulder. "I think it's okay. I think we should go with them. There's no demons here, and it's the first time we've had a chance to rest on something other than rocks, mud, or nightmares in months. We'll keep our swords close -- no different to being at home -- and if anything happens, we're trained for that. We've gotten this far."

Brynn wiped a hand over his face. This was out of his control -- this entire situation was out of his control -- and even after all these months he still struggled with that. "Fine," he said, voice clipped. He waved them on. "Just keep them -- and yourselves -- out of trouble."
"Thank you, Captain," said another templar who looked a bit more eager at the thought of a hot tub. They took off after the mages who were already racing each other to the barracks.

"See?" said Mouse with a crooked smile. "The Fade isn't so bad once you're used to it. In fact, it can be kind of wonderful, in the same way dreaming can be wonderful."

"Demons make it less wonderful," Niall muttered, "in the same way nightmares can be less than wonderful."

Mouse offered Niall an indulgent smile. And a fluffy pastry. Niall looked less scowly after a few bites.

"So, maybe I've been awake for too many days, but if you two know all this, why aren't you creating things? Do you have a house somewhere else around here? Do you make flowers or swords or something, for fun?" Brynn looked a little confused as he sat on the edge of one of the huge study tables.

"Do you need a house," Niall muttered, mouth full of cream. "Dead."

"What he means to say is we're dead, and that means we have a lot less control over things than the living. Or the natives. Demons build entire kingdoms, spirits preserve places that mattered to the living. We're just... stuck here." Mouse shrugged and tugged a strip of meat from some indistinct sort of fowl that smelled good. "The demons that used to be here -- they ate people like us. I'm... I don't even know who I was, any more. They chewed it all away. So, the event that left him stuck here saved me from a dreadful fate. It's nice to be known, again. To have a name and someone to say it."

"So, because we're alive -- and especially because they're mages -- we can do things you can't do," Brynn tried to wrap his mind around the idea and found it might not be so difficult. "That makes some kind of sense. Mages change the real world, too, and dead people don't. And the rest of us are stuck in the middle."

"Yes! Exactly!" Mouse beamed. "You're really quite smart, for a templar. I'm surprised. I'd understood you were all savage beasts."

Brynn squared his jaw. "The only 'savage beasts' I've encountered are the abominations I've had to put down. Aside from that, mages, templars... we're just people."

Mouse pouted and addressed Niall. "Well, that's no fun. I was hoping he would get all huffy and upset. Maybe make all that plate rattle."

"Sorry. I am not, as you said, a savage beast." Brynn's smile was tight and did not reach his eyes.

"So, you... said you had an idea of how we could try to get back?" Lily said, finally speaking up. "Could we try that?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Mouse said earnestly. "But not just yet. Relax. Rest. You all seem like you've had a long journey, and it's no good casting when you're stressed or exhausted. So... Lily, was it? Why don't you have some -- what is this? pheasant? -- and maybe a soak in the hot tub. Once everyone is rested, we can begin." Mouse beamed at her and Jowan.

Lily's face fell, but she nodded, staring at her feet.

Jowan put an arm around Lily's shoulders and, for a moment, she looked like she might shrug it off. "He's right. We need to rest and we need to practise more. We've been here for ... I don't know how long. Months? Does time even pass the same way in the Fade? It's going to be all right. We're safe,
for now. In a few days, once we're all feeling a little better, we can get out of here."

He paused and then gave Lily a chaste hug. "I know things are different between us, but I just want you to be safe and happy. That's all I ever wanted. Well, and for me, too, but I thought it was part of the package -- we'd be safe and happy together. I got you out of Aeonar. I'm not going to lose you in the Fade."

"Look at them, Niall. Aren't they sweet?" Mouse sounded more than a little bitter, and it was the last straw for Lily.

She pushed Jowan away. "Blood. Magic."

"I didn't know what else to do!" Jowan sounded frustrated, like they'd had this argument before.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about, with him," Niall told Mouse.

"Why don't you make dear Lily a nice Orlesian bathing robe?" Mouse suggested. "I think she'd look lovely in gold. And then we can all join your friends upstairs. I think you'll both feel better after a nice, relaxing dip. You really do need to relax. Don't want to end up uptight for all eternity, like poor Niall, here."

"Up yours with the horse you rode in on," Niall muttered, still working his way through a plate of pastries. "I was meant for great things."
Chapter Summary

Rocks, rocks, and more rocks. Oh, look. That one's moving.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Yes," Petra sighed. "It was a rock. Again." She shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. Sitting in the cart was making her ass numb, and she considered getting up to walk next to the cart for a little while, just to feel like less of a sardine. She wasn't sure it would matter. She swore the walls and ceiling were closer than they had been the day before.

Candles nudged Kinnon awake with an elbow to the ribs. "Hey. It's your turn."

"Mmrf?" was Kinnon's intelligent answer. "We're still playing?"

"No," Candles drawled. "We decided it was your turn to pull the cart. Yes, we're still playing."

"All right." Kinnon looked around half-heartedly. "I spy something... grey."

"Let me guess," Keili said, staring up at the ceiling with her head resting on the back of the cart. "Is it a fucking rock?"

"It was a specific rock!" Kinnon insisted, crossing his arms.

"I spy something ivory that-- No, Dolora, they can't see that. Yes, I know you can see that, but they can't." Fen'Din chuckled absently, rubbing the back of the nug's skull.

"Another dead nug?" Kinnon yawned.

"Well, it's definitely dead," Fen'Din allowed, looking where Dolora told him to.

"Dead... dwarf I think," Ansgar said, spotting it on his own. "Looks like they're working on clearing out an old cave-in up here, to put in a real door."

"A door?" Candles blinked and looked up toward the top of the tunnel. "Isn't that going to be kind of... heavy?"

"Orzammar's uncovered some of the ancient seals our ancestors put in place to keep out the darkspawn. They're mostly still standing -- it's hard to get through that much steel. But, the doors are incredible. If they're unlocked they open and close like they're normal door size. Almost no effort at all -- or that's what I heard from the crew in Amaranthine. But, Orzammar's trying to get this tunnel worked up proper, while the darkspawn are still losing."

"How many people were trapped down here?" Keili asked, looking over the edge of the cart at the ancient bones laid against the wall of the tunnel, as they came up to the massive construction site. "Was this because Orzammar closed the gates?" She could feel herself irritated by the idea of Orzammar cutting itself off, like it had. Leaving people out here in the dim stone tunnels. It was like
travelling through an unending crypt.

"This? Probably not. Looks like just a cave in, I think. And everyone who died fighting on this road has been returned to the Stone." Ansgar shook his head and pointed. "This is probably some miners who got caught up chasing a vein into disaster. The caste tries to pretend it doesn't happen, but ... Every year or three you hear about someone pulling on the wrong stone. Usually, it's all right, but then there's things like this. It's sad, but natural."

Keili wasn't sure anything about this place, these roads, was natural, but she was polite enough not to say so. Still, the thought of these walls being filled with bodies made her shiver. She wondered if it made Dolora nervous too, the way the nug lifted its head, moving as though sniffing the air. Keili considered reminding Dolora that she didn't have a nose but thought better of saying that, too.

"Okay," said Candles, nudging Kinnon again as he started to drift back to sleep. "Enough gloomy talk. It's my turn, right? Well, I promise I will pick something other than a rock." She made a show of sitting up and looking around, squinting in concentration at her surroundings. "I spy... oh shit!"

"Is it Bronto shit?" Petra drawled. "Or the metaphorical shit we're standing in?"

Instead of answering, Candles pointed, smacking Kinnon's arm to make sure he was awake and paying attention.

"Ow, stop hitting me!" Kinnon shifted away. "I don't think you're playing this game right."

Fen'Din looked up and blinked. "Ansgar? Is that rock supposed to be doing that?"

The caravan stopped moving. "I don't know what that is," Ansgar admitted, studying the blue-glowing pile of rocks that had just stood up in front of them.

In the carts, two mages burst into tears, completely unable to explain themselves, but sure it wasn't the pile of rocks towering over them.

"Rock wraith," one of the dwarven merchants whispered, gazing into the blue, unblinking. "There's the ones that don't go back to the Stone. They get up again. They take the mining slag and the cast-offs and they get up again."

"It's just a legend!" Ansgar insisted.

"Then what, by your ancestors' blood bones, are we looking at!?" the merchant barked.

With a sickly wail, the nug in Fen'Din's lap exploded, showering shards of bone across the whole cart.

"She's upset. It's all right, Dolora. It happened a long time ago. Do you know how to make it better?" Fen'Din paused as the blue glow thickened in the air before him. "It's all right, Dolora," he said, again, before raising his voice. "She says they need to return to the Stone. Does anyone know how to make that happen? Is that something we can do?"

"They already are stone!" Candles shrieked. At least now she held Kinnon's arm in a death-grip instead of whacking him some more. In her other hand, she summoned fire, tucking it against her palm like a weapon. She had no idea if that would help, fire against stone, but at least fire was familiar.

"I don't think that's quite what he -- she, whoever's talking -- means?" Kinnon protested, seeing the flicker of fire between Candles's fingers. Still, he kept her between him and the glowing mounds of
"It's hopeless," Keili murmured, face drained of colour, as the rock-wraiths shambled closer. "They can't go back, and neither can we."

The brontos snorted and tossed their heads, trying to back up, only to find the carts in the way. Petra turned to Ansgar for instructions, but he merely stared, absently trying to soothe the bronto in front of him.

Fire leaped in front of the rock-wraiths, herding them back a step.

"Candles!" Petra hissed, hoping that hadn't just made things worse.

"Rocks? Rocks..." Kinnon's hands flashed and the rock wraiths trembled violently, the stone splitting and shearing. But, it still held its shape, sort of, if a little differently filled in. "Running out of ideas! Keili? You want to give me a hand?"

"It's too late for us. They won't pass us by. Even if they do, we'll never get out." Keili rocked back and forth as one of her feet bounced against the bottom of the cart. "We're here forever."

The swirling blue-green that hung in the air between Fen'Din and Keili shrieked, wordless and filled with the loss of them.

"Keili," Fen'Din called over to the other cart. "Keili, we're walking out of here, just like we walked in. Don't you remember all those people from Hawk Hold? They think you're amazing, and they're right. So, be amazing for us, Keili. Sing that song they were trying to teach Kinnon."

"Why does it matter! We're never getting out of here!" Keili snapped, the loudest and harshest she'd been in years.

The rock wraiths pressed forward, and Kinnon raised a barrier around the front rank of carts. "Come on, somebody do something! I'm running out of ideas! Still!"

Fen'Din reached up into the thick cloud that hung around him. "Come on, Kinnon, sing me a dirty Tevinter drinking song. I know you know a few of those. You pick, I'll follow along."

"That's your idea? To sing?" Kinnon's voice came out a bit shrieky. "Why do all your escape plans involve singing?"

"In fairness, it seemed to work the first time," Petra said. A shield shimmered into existence around the front of the cart.

Kinnon looked at her as though betrayed, but they both knew she was right. As Candles continued throwing fire at the rock, Kinnon began to sing. It wasn't Tevinter and it wasn't the dirtiest song he knew, but it was the one that came to mind. "In the woods, there grew a tree. A fine, fine tree was he." Trees and rhyming put him in mind of the sylvan they had met what seemed like ages ago, and he hated himself for picking this song. "On that tree there was a limb, and on that limb, there was a branch..."

"On that branch, there was a nest, and in that nest, there was an egg," Fen'Din sang with him, gesturing for Candles to join in.

"You know, if we sing loud enough, at least somebody will find us. Hopefully somebody who knows what they're doing." Candles laughed and turned around in her seat to encourage as many of the mages as she could see to join them, as she started to sing. The fire hadn't been doing much.
Better to rest her hands and come back with something else.

"Of that feather was a bed!" Petra joined in, as well, shrugging. What could it really hurt? They weren't running. She cast a weak but wide rejuvenation spell, imparting a general air of well being, if not much else.

But, the rock wraiths grew angry, and Dolora raged and wailed their despair.

"Sing, Dolora!" Fen'Din encouraged. "Show them the words. They're not trapped any more."

The next verse picked up, and Fen'Din fell in with it, still swirling his arms in the air that was Dolora. He'd done this before. He could keep her out of it. But, the rock wraiths... That wasn't something that was mentioned in the histories back in the tower. If they were spirits, though, maybe it would work.

"And on that bed, there was a girl!" Kinnon shouted more than sang, as though he could repulse the rock-wraiths with the volume of his voice. Or its poor quality. Shaping rock slowed the things but did little else.

The dwarves looked at the mages as though they were crazy, and Petra wondered if, assuming they made it out of this alive, they would ever escort any other surfacers along this path.

"That's not how you send anyone back to the stone!" Ansgar said. "If anything, all that singing will wake more of them up!"

Candles stopped singing. "Would that happen?"

"That's not how spirits work," Petra cut in while the others kept singing. Dolora still glowed distressingly, but Keili had started to mutter along. "I think. Right? Anyway, Ansgar. How do you send someone back to the stone?"

"Usually, you kill them." Ansgar chuckled, weakly. "But, if somebody's dead, you bury them and bless them. I mean, I'd have thought these guys counted as buried, with the cave in and all, but..."

"But, nobody read them a funeral," another dwarf cut in, above the din of singing mages. He hopped down from the cart he rode in and tugged at the ankle of the dwarf in the next cart. "Help me do this! We need to bury them and say the rite."

"Cover them," Ansgar ordered the mages behind him, and fingers flickered, raising shields for the dwarves.

As the other merchants understood what was happening, they, too, moved toward the bodies, and the mages kept singing. Fen'Din opened a chest and gestured toward its contents, but Dolora wasn't interested. Whispers wound through the air, under the song.

"They're out there. Can you hear them digging?"

"There's nothing for us to eat, in here. We're going to die whether they get in or not."

"The blood of the stone fed our ancestors..."

"That's a children's story! You can't eat it! You'll go mad!"

"It doesn't matter. We're all going to die."

"Atrash tunsha. Totarnia amgetol tavash aeduc," the merchants recited, again and again, as they piled the stones and dust removed from the passage onto the dried corpses of lyrium miners who had been
missing for centuries.

Shields flickered as rock-wraiths hammered against them. Petra held her breath, knuckles white on the edge of the cart. This wasn't working. They were still attacking!

Until suddenly they weren't. The floor stopped shaking with the weight of their footsteps, and shields stopped flashing with the force of their blows. They stilled, a set of misshapen statues, and with a sound like a ragged sigh, their blue glow faded, stone slipping to break upon the earth.

A new whisper cut through the air: "Thank you."

Ansgar wiped the sweat from his brow. "I can't believe that worked."

Petra nodded. "Now we know what to do if we run into any others."

Ansgar's laugh came out a bit hysterical. "Others. Right. Good work, men!" He reached forward to pat his bronto's rump. "Some days I hate the blighted Deep Roads."

The air thinned and as the sickly glow around Fen'Din ceased, a skeletal wolf stepped out of the crate and rested its head in his lap, in the fashion of a mabari that knows it's done wrong. He pet the thing at the back of its skull. "It's all right, Dolora. You didn't hurt anyone. You were only trying to help."

"That was helping!" Kinnon sounded outraged.

Dolora leapt between carts to nuzzle Keili's face. "I'm sure that's very sweet, but... that's..." Keili leaned away from the skeletal wolf, who curled up at her feet, instead.

"Of course it was helping. Without her, we'd have had to fight those things. Those spirits." Fen'Din turned his gaze to Keili. "She's just trying to apologise for upsetting you. She worries about you a great deal."

"Fight... rocks. Rock-spirits." Kinnon shook his head, considering the things he'd tried and failed. "All right. That's a reasonable point. But, I hope she can do it a little less terrifyingly, next time! I really thought she was a demon for a few minutes there!"

"So did she," Fen'Din responded, sighing.

Chapter End Notes

Rhapsody Fan Chat is this Saturday @ 13:00 – 17:00 EST. Keep an eye on Pen's Tumblr for the invite link, when the party starts.
Controlling the Power of Jowan

Chapter Summary

Mouse has some thoughts about how to get back out of the Fade, and Jowan's willing to try just about anything.

Jowan was sure hot tubbing would be more fun, but he had seen the look on Lily's face. She wanted to get out of here, wanted to go home, even if people like them didn't have a home any more. He had to do what he could to make that happen.

"I would not recommend summoning any more geese," Mouse said, rubbing his hands excitedly. "That may have worked the first time, but I doubt they will be as helpful this time around. Or as happy. You don't want flocks of angry geese tormenting you. That's how people turn into Niall."

Jowan laughed along politely. The flowers were springy under his feet, and he wondered how they would feel under his bare toes. "Right. No more geese. I am okay with that. But what *would* work?"

"You are in a place of infinite power, and it is to you to take control of that power and mould it to your will. Of course, if you draw too much without a proper outlet, there's a chance you might... I have heard stories of magisterial excess, and the men who boiled their own faces off. But, they were on the other side of the Veil, so I'm sure that's nothing to worry about, here." Mouse gestured at the expanse of stone before them. "This world is yours to command, Jovan."

"Jowan," Jowan corrected, reflexively, bending down to pull off his boots. Maybe it really would help. Maybe if he felt the power of the Fade on his feet, he could do something with it. He started small, letting the ground cool his sweating feet, as he ran what should have been a thread of ice through it. The flowers seemed not to mind it right away, more of them blooming close around his bare feet, despite the sudden pool of ice. "I'm no good at this," he argued, warming his feet until he sank through the ice.

"Are you an elementalist, by trade?" Mouse asked, curiously.

"No, but we all learned it. Learn your elements and then worry about your speciality." Jowan huffed and bent to pick a flower. He'd made this, just by being alive in this place. "It's... I studied entropy magic. Hexing and weakening and messing with people's minds. It's... I don't know. I feel like that's why I'm terrible at everything. The Maker's given me a gift and I hexed myself with it."

"But, that's perfect! You'll do great things with that!" Mouse looked at Jowan in awe. "You're trying to weaken the Veil, so you can get through. What better than entropy?"

"Um. I guess," said Jowan unconvincingly.

Mouse threw an arm around Jowan's shoulders and jostled him companionably. "Guess nothing! It is the truth! The problem is you're thinking too small. Why freeze the flowers under your feet when you could freeze..." Mouse turned Jowan to face away from the tower. "...that whole valley, down there. You can, you know."

"Didn't you just say something about magisters melting their own faces off?" Jowan asked, looking
askance at Mouse. "I mean, in this case, it would be freeze, but... aren't we trying to avoid that?"

"Well, like I said, it probably won't happen here." Jowan still looked unconvinced, and Mouse went on. "That's why we're aiming waaay down there. There's no one down there to freeze, and you'll have plenty of time to break off the spell if you feel yourself losing control of it."

"I suppose that makes sense," Jowan admitted. His stomach still felt like a worried knot, but he had to do this.

Think big, he told himself, which was something he didn't usually do, and the last time, he wound up with like six pitiful demons and a gash in his hand that got infected. And then, it was there, sudden and uncontrollable, the power searing through his body as ice dripped from his fingers, beads of it gathering at his feet. In a flash, the empty valley was crisp with fresh ice, but he let go, shoved it away, tucking his hands under his arms to warm them. He panted with the cold and the effort, and his breath clouded in the air before him.

"Look at that!" Mouse sounded outright awed. "It's not full of ice, but it's all frozen, and so fast! You're incredible at this! Think what you could do with even a little practise!"

"Hurts," Jowan complained, looking at the red tips of his fingers, before sticking them back under his arms.

"Can't tell me the first time you tried to do anything magical didn't. And step to the side, where it's still warm. You just froze right in front of you." Mouse pointed. "It's a line from you to there."

Jowan took that step and then another one, and drew in a deep breath of warmer air. "You really think this will work? You think I can open the Veil and let us out?"

"Of course you can! It's already thin here, and just look at that valley! First try!" Mouse looked incredibly excited at the idea.

"But, what about you. I mean, I have a body. You... don't. How long have you been here? Can you leave?"

Mouse tilted his head, considering. "Time is an odd thing, something I had forgotten existed. I have no way to measure how long I have been here, but it has been long enough that I barely remember what life was like before here. As for getting out... I believe I can, but not without help." He waved aside anything else Jowan could have said. "But don't worry all that, and certainly don't worry about me! Let's just focus on getting you home, shall we?"

Jowan wasn't sure how freezing a valley would help him escape, but Mouse seemed so sure of him and his abilities. It was nice, for once not being told that he was messing up, always messing up.

"I... don't know if I could do another cold spell. I can still barely feel my fingers." Jowan wasn't sure if he could get frostbite in the Fade, but he was fine with not finding out.

"Then why don't we heat things up, instead?" Mouse suggested. He held his arms out wide. "Remember, think big! What about a pillar of fire, way out there?" He pointed again down the valley, still frosted from Jowan's last spell.

Jowan threw him an uncertain look. "And is this the part where I accidentally melt my face off?"

"It's not likely. The problem's usually getting the power to come through the Veil with enough force to pierce it and not enough force to destroy the mage using it. But you're already on the side of the Veil with all the power, so you should be able to use whatever you need," Mouse shrugged. "But,
let's be honest. You're the first mage to physically walk into the Fade since the Seven Sidereal Magisters turned the Golden City black. There were once exactly seven people in all of Thedas who knew how this would work."

"That's not encouraging. You do remember what happened to them, don't you?" Jowan shuddered, the magic rushing to his fingers to warm them more quickly.

"Yes, but you're not trying to break into the stronghold at the centre of everything. You're just trying to get out," Mouse reminded him.

"Pillar of fire, huh?" Jowan concentrated on not setting himself on fire, this time, forcing the magic away from him before it could twist to his will. The fire started small, or comparatively small, in the basin of frost, slowly rising up in a cloud of steam. The flowers around Jowan's feet grew denser and more colourful, as if he stood on some Ferelden moor of the sort he'd only seen in picturebooks. More and more of the power lanced through him, eager to accomplish his desires, and his arms ached with it, as the plume of flame licked into the air, wider than he was tall.

"Amazing," Mouse murmured, barely audible over the roar of the flame, and in that moment, Jowan felt like a god, bending the forces of nature to his will.

"Jowan?"

At the sound of her voice, Jowan remembered he was human. The pillar of fire wobbled and twisted unsteadily, and he let it dissipate before it could topple. The air smelled like smoke, even though there wasn't any.

Over his shoulder, Jowan saw Lily approaching from the tower, her steps cautious, Niall in tow. She stared off at the where the pillar of fire had been.

"Ah! Lilian, was it?" Mouse clapped his hands. "Come to join us? Jowan was just putting on quite the fire show!"

"It's Lily," she corrected him coolly. "And I saw. What are you two doing out here?"

"I, uh..." Jowan floundered and looked to Mouse.

"Practising, of course," Mouse stepped in. "Jowan here knows how desperately you want to go home, and he was adamant about finding a way."

"Mouse had some... theories. I thought I should see if they seemed realistic. If they seemed like something we could really do." Jowan shifted his weight uncomfortably, under Lily's gaze. "It's not blood magic. I promise. Look at me. I'm not bleeding. It's... something about the Fade. The Fade is where magic comes from, and we're standing in it. Mouse... Mouse thinks we can command it to let us out, by casting the right spell with enough power."

"Man was not meant for this, Jowan. For any of this," Lily sighed, as Niall stepped up beside her, dripping wet and looking confused.

"It's why I'm trying to get us home! If we just go back, we'll be fine!" Jowan insisted, sucking at the burnt tip of his finger. He'd almost gotten it right, that time. "Everything will be normal again, if we can just get back to Ferelden. We can get a nice farm in the Bannorn. I'll give up magic. We just have to get out of here."

"If it's just a matter of spells, remind me why we haven't tried this?" Niall chimed in, gazing down into the frozen valley with the melted centre.
"You're dead, Niall. You lack that certain... special something," Mouse snapped. "And I've been dead longer. It's a true miracle I can even remember how to get us out of here. Twice the miracle we've been provided with someone who can actually do it."

"Is that what this is?" Niall scoffed, but his gaze dropped to his feet. He dug a toe into the leaves of a dying flower and ground it into ash. "A miracle? If so, the Maker has lowered his standards. No offence to Jowan and Lily, and all your friends in the hot tub."

"The Maker," Mouse spat. "Does it look like the Maker is anywhere to be found in here? In the Fade, the only gods are the ones you make."

Lily bristled, squaring her jaw, but she said nothing. It was easy to lose faith in a place like this. She wondered if, maybe, she was meant to be locked away, kept away from the world. Freed from Aeonar, only to be trapped in the Fade? It felt like the Maker was telling her something... or maybe He was still punishing her for falling for Jowan years ago.

"Why don't you go cry over your destiny some more, Niall, while I help these nice people get out of here? And maybe get you out of here, too? You're so attached to living." Mouse turned a brief melodramatic look of sorrow on Niall, before returning his attention to Jowan. "Don't mind him. Being dead's really getting to him. Ruined his perspective."

"He always just wanted to be left alone," Jowan muttered, shaking his head. "And I understood it. Just a nice normal life with no one looking over our shoulders..."

"You can have it. You can make it, here, or you can go back, take some of this power with you, and make it there. A decent home. A quiet farm. A beautiful wife. Neighbours who will never know you're anything more than a good farmer." Mouse smiled warmly. "You have that power. All you have to do is get control of it."

"I still don't see how fire and ice are getting anyone out of here," Niall grumbled. "What are you going to do, burn down the Veil?" He turned to Lily and touched her shoulder, as he headed back inside. "Come on. He'll come to his senses in a few days. You keep on like this, and people are going to think there's something going on with the two of you, still."

Lily started to protest, only to stop at the stricken look on Jowan's face. She pursed her lips and followed Niall inside, feeling Jowan's stare at her back.

Mouse squeezed Jowan's shoulder. "Hey. You saved her, right? She'll come around."

"Maybe," Jowan murmured. "After we've gotten out of here and I can promise her a normal life." Not that he would know a normal life if it punched him in the face, but if it was what she wanted, he'd move the earth and sky to give it to her. Punching a hole in the Veil didn't seem like so much of a challenge in comparison.
The Black Song (1/2)

Chapter Summary

The spirits claim something's singing a song they don't like. Ansgar's got thoughts on what it might be.

"Where are we?" Kinnon asked for the twelfth time, that day. "And how can you even tell? It all looks the same down here!"

"There's markers," Ansgar explained, pointing them out. "You just can't read them."

Kinnon leaned over the edge of the cart and squinted at one, as they passed. It looked like it had once been larger, but it was broken, now. "I can't even tell what language that is."

"It's Dwarven, but not the kind you hear in Orzammar. One of the older kinds, but they all read the same, even if they sound different." Ansgar laughed, the sound echoing off the high stone walls of the ancient road. "It tells us where we're going. The only part left on that one says Kal-Sharok's this way, but sometimes there are markers that point to passages that've been collapsed since the First Blight. Places I've only ever heard the names of and couldn't tell you a thing about."

"They've been down here that long?" Keili asked, peeking around Kinnon to see the marker he was looking at. "And no one's dug out those passages since?" She supposed she knew that, but wrapping her head around that much time was difficult, when time seemed like a relative thing down here, with no sun or moon to guide them.

"It's not safe to," Ansgar said, shaking his head. "Best to find a safe path and stick to it. You never know what you might dig up."

Candles scoffed from where she sprawled along the bottom of the cart, using their belongings as a mattress and pillow. It jabbed in some places, but at least she could stretch out. "You mean like those walking rock thingies? What did you call them?"

"Rock-wraiths," Ansgar said, and the other dwarves sat up straighter, exchanging looks. "And like them, yes, though they wouldn't be the worst of our troubles." He twisted to glance at Fen'Din. "I never saw anything quite like that, by the way. Trying to calm a spirit with singing. Not that I've had much experience with spirits, but. That was new."

"They like music." Fen'Din shrugged. "Have you seen many spirits? I didn't think dwarves could."

"Well, there's the thing. We don't. Not your freaky surfarce spirits from beyond the Veil, anyway." Ansgar shifted in his seat, trying to figure out where to start. "There's stories, you understand. We... none of us really believed them. The lyrium miners are always a little weird, and when they say things that don't make sense, we just figure they've snorted too much of the dust. That shit'll kill you. Gotta remember, I'm a surfarce, too, these days, so I hear all this third-hand." He reached into a bag behind his leg and came back with a roasted mushroom, which he chewed on, as he kept talking. "All the miners, mostly, say the Stone speaks to them, or at least that they can hear it. It's how they know where to dig. But, the lyrium miners... they say the Stone sings. Actually, it's the basis for timekeeping in Orzammar -- the song of the Stone, not that I've ever heard it. But, there's stories of
dwarves who didn't get returned to the Stone and worse stories about the dwarves the Stone rejected. Weird ghosty things that supposedly roam the passages -- and that's what we saw, back there. Rock-wraiths. I guess they weren't kidding about those."

"So, you have spirits of the dead, just as we do, even though you don't dream." Petra nodded to herself. "That seems important, somehow."

"Means they're a different kind of spirit, I'd say," Ansgar ventured. "We don't go back to the Fade, as far as we know. We've never seen it. There is no back. So we go to the Stone, instead. And the miners talk about stranger things. They call 'em 'gangue'. Impurities in the stone. But, there's a difference between bad rock and the other meaning, which is bad spirits that come out of the rock. I've heard talk of demons, up top, and I'd say they're like that, but I've never heard them split up by vice. There's just the gangue, and it's no good."

"Stone demons." Kinnon looked pale. "That's just great. We're underground with attack rocks and stone demons. How much longer are we down here? Too long. A candle would be too long. Ten moments would be too long."

"Breathe, Kinnon," Candles reminded him, patting what she could reach of his calf. "You give yourself an unflattering number of chins when you scrunch in your shoulders like that."

"What exactly is a flattering number of chins?" Keili asked Petra in a loud whisper.

"One, I would hope," Petra whispered back. "But this is Candles."

Candles pretended not to hear them. "We spent most of our lives locked in a tower that was apparently full of spirits and templars ready to kill us at a moment's notice. Sorry, but I fail to see how this is scarier."

Kinnon huffed but unhunched his shoulders and straightened his chin. "At least you could see the sky from the tower." He sat back and tried to relax, but the way the shadows danced over the wall kept making him jump.

"Well, we brought the spirits with us -- at least the ones that aren't trying to kill us." Fen'Din stretched his legs and nuzzled the skeletal deepstalker sitting next to him. "And it's good, because they can see things we can't, down here. Hear things, too."

"Are you telling me you couldn't hear those rock wraiths?" Kinnon demanded.

"Well, I could hear them the same as you could." Fen'Din shrugged. "But, Dolora ... Dolora could understand them. She could tell me what they needed, in order to calm them. And Sisterhood is trying to convince me to sing a new song it hears, here. It says there's the song of the lyrium, but there's another song in the stone -- so the lyrium miners aren't just snorting the dust, I expect. And then there's another one. Sisterhood doesn't know it, and I don't either. The 'black song'." He shook his head. "I have no idea what it is."

"If it's anything like the rest of your singing, I'll give it a pass." Candles laughed and fished through the bag Kinnon was sitting on, looking for something to eat.

Ansgar shook his head in amazement. "And here I am, not hearing a thing. Well, my sister always said I was tone-deaf anyway." He let out another bark of a laugh before reaching for a second mushroom. "Either that, or you're all out of your minds, which I haven't ruled out either."

"Oh, he's definitely out of his mind," Petra agreed, pointing a thumb at Fen'Din, "but that doesn't make him wrong."
"I think that's the nicest thing she's said to you," Kinnon said to Fen'Din. "About you, I mean. In your presence."

Keili let her hand dangle over the side of the cart, fingers brushing the dry bone of a wolf's skull, the skeleton Dolora was currently puppeteering as she trotted alongside the cart, nuzzling at Keili's hand.

"Sisterhood says the black song is getting louder," Fen'Din offered, twisting around to look ahead of them. "Is there something up here? Legends of something that used to be here? Leniency is hearing it, too. They're trying to sing parts of the song to me, but they don't like it. They say it doesn't feel like a good thing. Of course, they think lyrium sounds like a wonderful thing, so I'm not sure how bad that actually is. Or how recent."

"The black song?" Ansgar tugged at his beard in thought. "Doesn't sound like anything I've heard of. Maybe the gangue sings? But, there's a lot of history caught up in this road. This was the road between the old capital of the empire and the new one. It's the biggest, straightest road down here. And it's the one the darkspawn used to destroy the empire. You can get anywhere from here, if you take the right exits. The other big road goes to the Ambassadoria, in Minrathous. Well, the other big road that's open. There used to be twelve great thaigs, and each one maintained major trade routes with the others. Before the darkspawn came, we were a real empire, like you see on the surface, but without all that sky."

"So, it's fairly likely that there were large battles, wars fought, in these roads?" Fen'Din asked, studying the smooth walls. "Maybe that's all they're hearing. Maybe it's just the history rising up out of the memory of the place."

"Well, the most memorable war in the Deep Roads is against the darkspawn," Ansgar pointed out, gesturing ahead with a half-eaten mushroom cap. "But, the crews re-opening the roads have cleared out most of the bodies."

Keili shuddered at the mention of darkspawn, and Dolora nudged her arm consolingly. "I'd hate to see any rock demons from those battles. 'Most' of the bodies being cleared out isn't the most reassuring thing I've heard today."

"Well, at least now we know how to get rid of them," Petra said, patting Keili's knee. Dolora nudged Petra's arm as well, and Petra turned to pat her on the head, confused. "Yes, hello. What's with you?"

"The black song's coming," Fen'Din said, squinting into the tunnel ahead. "Stop the carts. I don't know what it is, but it's moving. Leniency, Moxie, go up and tell me what you see."

Two nug skeletons hopped down from the cart and scampered ahead, as Ansgar tried to slow the brontos. Dolora began to glow dangerously, edging toward the back of the cart and nudging Keili along.

"Dragons and black blood. I really don't know what Dolora's telling me. A mother eats her brothers. A thousand eyes and only one voice." Fen'Din shook his head. "I don't understand, but it doesn't sound like something we want to walk into."

Candles sat up and tried to peek past Ansgar into the tunnel ahead. "A thousand eyes?" she asked, squinting but seeing nothing in the dark. "That makes me think of a spider or something. Is it a spider? Gross."

"I don't think it's a spider," Kinnon said, still watching the shadows too closely. Still, he looked up to make sure they wouldn't get any nasty surprises from above. No spiders, Maker be praised. "What do you think it is, Ansgar?"
Ansgar's knuckles were white on the bronto's reins. "I think your oddball friend is right. If this is what I think it is, this isn't something we want to walk into." Keeping an eye on the passage, he waved over his dwarf companions, and they whispered frantically to each other in their native language.

"Well, you get to prove your worth as caravan guards," Ansgar muttered to Candles, after a few moments.

Candles stood up, rolling up her sleeves and tying the cuffs to her shoulders. "You point, I'll hit." She looked over her shoulder at the other mages."Fire! Fire with me! Healers with Petra!"

"Arcane and spirit to me!" Kinnon called out, blood draining out of his face, as he climbed over the rails into the next cart. "If you can shield, crush, or stun, I need you!" He shook his head and cracked his knuckles, nervously. "I hope you know what you're doing, Candles..."

"Setting shit on fire." Candles grinned back, eyes gleaming in the orange lyrium-light.

"Keili!" Petra called out. "Take anyone who can't fight to the back! Take one of Kinnon's people with you!"

"You sound like you've done this before." Ansgar sounded somewhat reassured, as he assembled what looked like a large crossbow and mounted it to the shoulders of the bronto at the front of the caravan.

"Never once in our lives." Candles laughed and flames danced along her fingertips.

"I can see them -- they can see them. They're... Well, they're wearing armour, and they all march in perfect step, but I can't make sense of the descriptions. There's nothing that looks like that. ... Dog-faced dwarves and screaming shadows?" Fen'Din shook his head, confused, and shooed a deepstalker skeleton toward Petra. "Sisterhood, go help Petra keep us alive."

"Darkspawn," Ansgar muttered, loading a heavy bolt. "As long as it's a scouting party, it should be easy. I'll take the one with the shield. You get the rest. If it's anything bigger, you're going to need to collapse the tunnel, if we're going to get out of here."

"Bullshit," Candles declared. "Why collapse it, if I can just set it on fire? Roast darkspawn, coming up."

"You set them on fire and they're going to try to run out of it, same as anything." Ansgar shook his head. "Last thing we need is thirty darkspawn on fire running into the caravan."

"There's about half that," Fen'Din filled in. "Only fifteen or so, I think. More of us than them."

"Fifteen's more than enough," Ansgar argued. "They bleed the Blight. You get it on you and we've got a problem."
Chapter Summary

As Ansgar predicted, the darkspawn have come up from the depths.

"Kinnon, how big of a barrier can you give me?" Candles asked, as her smile widened into a deadly grimace. "They want to run, they can run away from us. There's not going to be any blood left in that tunnel. Just ashes."

Kinnon eyed the tunnel, gauging its width. For the first time, he found himself wishing the tunnel was smaller. "Maybe enough to shield our cart. We're going to need multiple barriers if you're thinking of plugging the tunnel."

"Set it up," Petra said. "Whatever happens, we need to keep them off us. Riley, Deirdre, help Kinnon set that up." Two of the mages already clustered around Kinnon nodded, wide-eyed but determined.

At Kinnon's instruction, a staggered series of barriers rose, painting the walls with a blue glow and deepening the shadows. Past the wall of blue light, the shadows shifted. Candles cast, and in the light of her fire, the mages caught their first clear glimpses of darkspawn, sallow skin stretched tight over snarling faces.

Keili clutched her amulet tightly, trying to remember the words to her favourite prayer, never quite getting past the first line.

Fen'Din lobbed hex after hex into the burning crush, and the darkspawn began to fall, tripping over each other and their own weapons, as they tried to flee the fire.

And then the first bolt of lightning struck a bronto.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Kinnon swore, as Petra steadied and healed the beast. "They've got a mage! Hit the mage! It's the only thing that can reach us!"

"Petrify it!" Candles snapped, gesturing for her team to keep adding fire to the corridor.

"I can't see the thing!" Kinnon complained, trying to keep the barriers stable.

Dolora stayed firmly at Keili's side, rubbing her bony muzzle against the mage's leg, as Keili continued to fumble her way through prayers.

"Moxie, can you get in there?" Fen'Din asked, and the only reply was a flare of blue and a scream like a steam-whistle. The spirit didn't want to get near the black song again. The black song was much too close, the singing much too loud. Driving, compelling, a song with a dragon in it.

The air felt close, hot with Candles's fire and the stink of smoke, and Keili felt herself starting to sweat. She gripped her amulet hard enough for the edges to bite into her fingers.

The next bolt hit a mage in Kinnon's cart, and Kinnon swore, shouting at his group to focus on keeping the barriers up. Petra was there the next moment, a healing spell already on her lips.
"There!" Candles shouted. "I see it!"

She pointed at an attenuated creature behind the snarling and limping horde. At a look from Kinnon, a mage from his group cast, a paralysis spell hitting his target...

...and glancing right off with no effect.

"Shit," Candles breathed, and she could swear that the darkpawn mage had opened its mouth to laugh at them. It seemed to pin her with a stare and a grin, and then there was fire on the wrong side of the barriers.

Val, Keili thought. The darkspawn mage had hit Val. Not that she'd ever much liked him -- too smooth, too cocky, and the rumours about the things he got up to in the storerooms -- but he was real. He was one of them. He'd dared to leave with them, and that meant there was something to him. And he was sobbing into his blackened robes, as Petra tried to heal the worst of it.

"No," Keili whispered. "No, we're done here."

The wave of cold from behind the carts was like a breath of fresh air, creeping forward to press against the barriers and snuffing the flames that threatened to spook the already confused brontos.

"I said, 'we're done here'!" The barriers dispelled easily, like popping bubbles, and the crisp, icy air rushed down the burning tunnel, splintering hot metal, stone, and bone. The orange lights burst, spraying glowing droplets through the air, and the darkspawn mage looked surprised for the split second before its skin split and its armour burst.

Dolora sat beside her, hollow eyes watching the tunnel turn into a dwarfwork icebox, filled with meat.

Without the barriers, mages and dwarves ducked behind their carts in the wake of exploding stone and metal. When the rush of ice ended, the tunnel was silent, a layer of frost coating the ground, the carts, the twisted, scorched bodies of darkspawn. Candles brushed off the frost in her hair as Ansgar brushed off the frost in his beard and Kinnon the frost on his sleeves.

Keili could see her breath misting in front of her. She still held her amulet hard enough to hurt.

While the others were still looking around dazedly, trying to figure out what had happened, Petra knelt in front of Keili. Dolora rested her head in Keili’s lap, and Petra took the hand clutching the amulet, gently coaxing it to uncurl.

"Hey," Petra said. "That was great. You saved us."

It took a moment for Petra's words and tone to sink in, and Keili let out a shaky breath. "Is everyone okay?"

"Val's going to live. The brontos are a bit of a mess, but Ansgar knows what to do. They'll live, too." Petra glanced back up the tunnel. "Those were darkspawn, and you..."

"What the fuck was that?" Kinnon demanded, squeezing the ends of his hair until the ice cracked.

"The Maker's wrath," Candles cracked, untying her sleeves and rubbing her arms. "What'd it look like?"

"Can we warm it up a little, now?" Gerda asked, pulling three other healers closer. "I think I've got frostbite on my eyelashes."
"I'm sorry." Keili started to shake. "That's not what was supposed to happen. I was taught control. I was taught not to do that, I swear."

"You like... never use magic. Pretty much ever." Candles climbed down from her cart and made her way over to Keili. "They didn't teach you control, they just taught you not to use it. I wasn't even sure you were really a mage and not just a Chantry sister in mage robes."

"No, the Maker cursed me, too." Keili shook her head.

"The Maker blessed you, and you're doing his work," Candles assured her. "You're here with us to do the things we can't do. The things we're not even going to imagine doing. You got a vision of Andraste and climbed up a straight cliff. You just exploded fifteen darkspawn that were trying to kill us. I'm not sure where that amounts to a curse. I think you should be a Grand Cleric. A Warrior-Mother, doing the Maker's work in ways nobody else would dare. I mean, that was pretty incredible."

"Do you remember the time Anders nearly burned himself to death?" Keili asked, watching Dolora. "It could've been me, the templars said. Said I'd be tranquil, if I didn't make it stop, because they wouldn't have another Anders."

"Which time Anders nearly burned himself to death?" Fen'Din asked, wryly. "Happened a couple times a year. You can't be afraid of it, Keili. The fear will kill you faster than the ice."

"And it's not like there's any templars around to do anything about it," Kinnon added. "And they'd be wrong to if they did. Petra's right. You saved our asses."

Keili shook her head but didn't argue, dashing away the sudden spill of tears with the heel of her hand. They were nice thoughts, at least, and she wished she could believe them. "I can't just will myself to stop being afraid, not when the result is this." She gestured around her, finally taking a moment to look around and take in the extent of the wreckage.

"The result is we're alive and they're not," Candles said, as she raised flames in the tunnel, again, working to burn away any trace of the darkspawn, so none of them would have to touch the Blighted flesh. "And you can start by not beating yourself up about it. You're making Dolora all droopy-faced, and she doesn't even have a face!"

Keili laughed weakly and patted Dolora's skull. "Sorry, Dolora."

"I'm not sure what that was," Ansgar piped up, still squeezing ice out of his beard, "but that's one way to deal with darkspawn." He sounded somewhere between impressed and dazed.
Chapter Summary

Lily and Niall discuss their current predicament over tea.

"It's hard," Lily sighed, holding a cup of tea one of the mages had made for her. "I loved him. I do love him. But... blood magic. And more than blood magic, lying about it!"

Niall laughed a little bitterly. "If he'd been honest that he knew it, even if he didn't practise, would you have gone with him? If you knew, would the two of you ever have gotten as far as you did?"

"I... No," Lily smiled sadly into her tea. "No, I don't think I would have."

"So, it's really kind of no-win from where he's standing, and like you said, he meant to give up magic entirely, once the two of you got out. He's still saying it, now." Niall shrugged. "But, you know my thoughts on it. Just give me a nice little hermitage with a garden, up in the Frostbacks, and I'd be content. Away from everyone. I can't hurt anyone. No one will try to kill me for being a mage -- something I can't help, by the way -- and I can just sit around and eat tomatoes and watch the sun set along the Spine of Korth."

"But, why would he even have learned it in the first place!?" Lily scrubbed angrily at her face with one hand. "It's exactly a no-win! There was no point to it!"

"There had to have been a point. Honestly, I'd point the finger at Uldred. You and Jowan, you were barely more than kids, then, and he'd been one of Uldred's students since long before you were ever assigned to us." Niall shrugged again, shaking his head. "I think he means it. I think he'd give it all up for you. Doesn't mean you have to forgive him, but you've got to know he's serious. And he's... I'd say he's got to move on, but where am I, right?"

Lily shook her head, staring down into a cup of tea that felt, smelled, and tasted real but that wasn't real. She tried not to think about it too much. That would take all the joy out of drinking it. "I just don't think I could trust him again. As it is, I feel like I'm still atoning for my indiscretions with him years ago."

"Would you have rather he left you in Aeonar?"

Lily shook her head again, more forcefully. "No. Whatever I may think of the Fade, Aeonar was worse. Much worse. I was alone." A sip of tea was safer than elaborating on that. "But that doesn't mean I owe him my affection."

"I'd hope not, considering he was the reason you were put there in the first place," Niall drawled. "It looks like he's honestly trying to right his wrong. In typical Jowan fashion, which is to say not typical at all."

"But, is it even possible? I mean, you know what the Chantry says about the last time someone punctured the Veil..." Lily sipped her tea, nervously, looking out the window at the landscape that became more familiar as they stayed.

"It's not the 'last time'. You were already in Aeonar, so you missed the one I know about. Solona"
saved the day again. Mouse and I tried, but we couldn't get out. It was wrong, somehow -- the only things that made it through came back crazed. They were barely even spirits, when they slipped out - - wisps, thoughts, dreams. I think we were too big for the holes -- too solid or something." Niall shook his head and leaned back in his chair, wondering if he could get someone to bring him a cup of tea. "So, yeah, it can definitely be done, and it can definitely be done here. I just don't know if it can be done on the scale Mouse is talking about." He paused. "And that's not really what I meant, either."

"It's the first step. We have to get out of here, before anything else has meaning. Otherwise it's just promises for a time that will never come." Lily shrugged, turning the cup in her hands. It all seemed so real, but so different. "That's how he is, you know. You remember."

"I don't really. I mean, I heard about it, every time he fucked up, but I didn't really know him. He was an apprentice. I was well on my way to Enchanter." Niall studied his own hands, the way they hadn't changed at all, here.

"If they do this -- if they open the Veil, isn't that going to... well, I was going to say something about demons or the Blight, but there aren't any demons here, and ... it doesn't seem blighted, not that I'd know."

"Dangerous words," Lily sighed. "Now you know it will be disastrous. Would be disastrous. Assuming it could happen. And if it should." Lily groaned, wiping a hand over her face and letting her head loll back against the back of the chair. "How did I get here, Niall?"

"I'm not sure, but from what I understand, he summoned geese. It was bound to be downhill from there."

Lily hummed in agreement, shifting just enough to look out the window, glad she couldn't see Jowan from here but still wishing she could check on him. "So Mouse seems... interesting. I'm not sure how I feel about what he's teaching Jowan."

"Technically, as far as I can tell, what he's actually teaching Jowan is ... fairly accurate. I mean, this is what we do. We help apprentices get through their Harrowings, and he's been doing this longer than I have. There's some amount of speculation involved, of course, because who the shit has a live mage to test with, but I really doubt he's going to teach Jowan anything terribly dangerous, outside the part where teaching Jowan anything is potentially dangerous, because Jowan. But, I've seen the notes -- he was a smart kid. Nothing to worry about, as far as anyone could tell, until he got into blood magic." Niall picked at his sleeve, absently, noticing that it had a texture again, with all the mages around. He'd forgotten the texture of his robes, after all these years.

"I mean the magic, of course, but... not just the magic." Lily looked uncomfortable. "The way he talks to Jowan. The way he talks about you. I thought the two of you were friends, but he keeps... telling Jowan not to end up like you."

Niall snorted and stretched his legs out past the leg of Lily's chair. "He does that to the apprentices, too. 'Don't be like this guy'. Of course, with the apprentices, there's also 'don't be like me'. We're basically what happens if you don't finish your Harrowing properly. Except most of them don't last as long as we did. He won't talk about why he's still here. I don't know if he even remembers. But,
he says I'm here because I died angry; I have purpose. Not everyone has it." He ran a hand through his hair and stared at the ceiling. "But, he's also the only person to talk to, around here. Sloth's dead. Valor's boring -- he's got his own purpose, and I just don't care. The desire demons... I could, but I have some sense of self-preservation left. There are rumours that this place is owned, insofar as you can own the Fade, by a pride demon -- I've seen the edges of him, sometimes, during the Harrowings, but I can't say we've met. Really, it's just me and Mouse, however the fuck he talks about me. The poor guy's lost so much of his memory, it's made him a little crazy. It'll happen to me, too, one day, if we can't get out of here."

Lily hummed, unconvinced. "I suppose being trapped here would do that to you, but... what else has he lost besides his memory? I don't mean to speak ill of your friend, but there's something about him I don't trust."

Niall shrugged, not looking particularly insulted. "You don't know him, and really, you shouldn't trust everything you see here as a general rule. But I don't see anyone else coming up with a way out, do you?"

Lily was done with her tea, but she fiddled with the cup anyway.

"He'll grow on you," Niall assured her. "Like a fungus. Or like those blighted flowers that keep cropping up. He's been decent enough company all this time."

Lily thought of her time in Aeonar, of what it was like to be alone. She would probably let Mouse say what he wanted about her too if he had been her only contact.

"It'll be all right," Niall assured her, again. "I just wish, maybe, he hadn't picked Jowan. He's got serious talent. Always did, but his decisions have been..." He shook his head and laughed. "I mean, he broke into Aeonar, everything else aside. What about that nice girl with the spirits? What's her name, Asha? I don't know her from an Antivan Crow, but she seems to know what she's doing." He studied the toes of his shoes, the coarse grain of the leather. "What do you know about her? Is she that friendly to everyone?"

Lily laughed. "Niall, you're dead."

"And you're in the Fade! And she's probably too young for me anyway. I can flirt!" Niall laughed, too. "I think it's the first time I've wanted to since the tower really soaked in. Definitely the first opportunity, here. Well, unless you count the desire demons, but I'd rather stick my knob in a mousetrap."

Lily tried and failed to keep a straight face. "Is that what you and Mouse have been up to? I was wondering how you passed the time."

Niall's eyes crossed. "That's... not what I meant by 'mousetrap'. But thanks, I'll have to use that. 'Shut your mousetrap' or something." Lily laughed politely, and he shrugged. "I'll work on it. The point is, what difference does it make if I'm dead or alive if we're here? Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I can't live a little."

"I like to hope there is some difference," Lily said with a weak smile, "but you're right on that last part. Unfortunately, I don't know that much about Asha. You'll need to find a better informant."

"Rats. Suppose I could do with a challenge."
As the caravan approaches Kal-Sharok, Ansgar spots another trader he knows.

"So, we're going to pass the gates of Sharakovar, soon," Ansgar said, gesturing to the nearest marker. "Or, what used to be the gates of Sharakovar, before they were sealed up. The only way in, now, is through Kal-Sharok. But, as we get closer, you'll see the story of their new king -- 'paragon elect', they call him, but that's just stupid. Who the fuck elects a Paragon? Anyway, they carve their Paragons into the walls. It's pretty good stuff, and the paragon elects... paragons elect? ... whatever, they're carved into the walls leading out from Sharakovar. You get closer to Kal-Sharok, and it's a little less political. They've got real Paragons around the gate market."

Kinnon studied the walls around them. "We're still too far out, right? I mean, this isn't some kind of art only dwarves can see?"

"Up the road another hour or two, according to the markers. It's some good work. Whatever else might be going on with those folks, they've got some really excellent stone-carvers. Almost on par, in the details, with those guys from the Anderfels, but definitely more sturdy than Ander work. The Ander stuff's gorgeous, but two hundred years in the desert would really kick the shit out of it." Ansgar laughed and tossed a bag of smoked deepstalker jerky to the merchant to his right.

"Two hundred years in the desert will kick the shit out of anything," Keili sighed from behind Kinnon, thinking of the Anderfels and wondering, again, if she really ought to be here. She had been quiet since their run-in with the darkspawn and had spent most of the last few days in sullen silence, with Dolora's head in her lap. Kinnon was, at least glad to hear her talk.

"It will be nice to stare at something other than blank rock and the back of Candles's head," Petra said, stretching out her legs as far as she could in the cart.

"There are worse things you could be staring at," Candles huffed, glancing back to stick out her tongue at Petra.

"Like your face? You have a point."

Candles let a rude gesture answer for her.

After days of nothing, the sounds of someone approaching were jarring, and Keili straightened, fear thrilling in her stomach at the memory of darkspawn creeping out of the shadows. Dolora nudged her hip, and Keili reminded herself that the spirits would let them know if any more darkspawn were going to pop out.

"Easy," Ansgar said, noting the mages' sudden edginess. "Just some more carts, probably traders leaving Kal-Sharok. Don't go throwing fire just yet."

Everyone glanced at Candles. "What?" she huffed. "It's not like I'm the only one who throws fire at things!"

"No, but you are usually first," Petra teased, watching the tunnel ahead.
Fen'Din woke up as the carts clattered into view, the brontos grunting and lowing at the other traders' teams. He yawned and rolled over, carefully, displacing four deepstalkers and a pair of nugs as he sat up. "Sorry," he muttered, petting their skulls as he squinted at the scene before them. "I was starting to think you were joking about this being a major road," he called out to Ansgar.

"This bronto looks familiar," Ansgar noted, loudly. "Eldrek, funny running into you down here!"

"If you can't tell me from my brontos, maybe you shouldn't be leading caravans any more, Ansgar!" one of the traders called down from the middle of the other caravan. His accent was very different to the Orzammaran one. Lighter, almost springier, somehow.

"Come down here, you old stone-eater!" Ansgar laughed and climbed down from his bronto, heading to the front of the carvan. "What are you carrying? Goods for Ghislain? Maybe I can take a few things off your hands. I've got pilgrims with me, headed north."

Eldrek was all smiles with a shorter, more trimmed beard than the mages had come to expect, but he seemed to make up for it with the bushiness of his eyebrows. "Pilgrims, eh? Showing them all the sights of the Deep Roads?" Eldrek laughed, a softer note than Ansgar's ringing belly laugh but no less sincere. He climbed down from his bronto and met Ansgar halfway with a hug, clapping him soundly on the back.

"I think some sights left better impressions than others," Ansgar said with a weary smile. "We left the road clear for you, but we ran into some darkspawn trouble a few days back, so keep an eye out."

"How kind of you to clear a path for us." Eldrek patted Ansgar's arm. "I hope you didn't catch too much trouble." He looked over Ansgar's caravan as he spoke, taking in the cartloads of surfacers and the fire damage on the side of one cart.

"Nobody touched them, so we should be all right, unless they're passing the taint telepathically, now." Ansgar chuckled, but Eldrek was looking past him, at something over his shoulder.

"Maybe it's the bronto shit getting to me, but is that an elf with a dead nug on his head?" Eldrek asked, tipping his head curiously.

"Spirits," Ansgar offered, shrugging eloquently. "I guess the elf talks to them. They're a little troublesome, sometimes, but they make good scouts. I guess they hear the darkspawn like some kind of 'black song'. That's what the elf kept saying, and even I didn't understand it, at first, but I'll know it now."

"Weird surfacer shit?" Eldrek asked, still looking utterly befuddled.

"Weird surfacer shit," Ansgar agreed. "You don't happen to be hauling clothes, or cloth, or anything, do you? I'd like to get them wearing something that'll survive the Anderfels."

"Or you could just avoid the Anderfels like the blight-ridden sandy pit of destruction they are," Eldrek suggested.

"I'd love to, but I've got to get an order to Hossberg, and they're going further up. You know the camels are faster. I'm making the trade at Kal-Sharok." Ansgar shook his head and sighed. "And Ancestors forbid we try to take a camel through, underground..."

"I would almost pay to see that," Eldrek chuckled. "As long as you're not clogging up my route with camel spit and camel shit, that is. I'm at least used to the bronto shit." He scratched his chin, glancing back at his caravan. "And no, I'm afraid I don't have much by way of cloth or clothing. If you had caught me on the way back, maybe. The ladies love Orlesian silks, but I can't say there's much..."
demand in Orlais for Kal-Sharok clothing."

"There's not much demand in Kal-Sharok for Kal-Sharok clothing," Ansgar teased. "Ah, well. Doesn't hurt to ask, right?"

"Of course. Sorry I couldn't be of much help." He eyed another surfacer in the cart, this one petting another skull in her lap. Leaning in, so only Ansgar could hear him, Eldrek asked, "Are you... safe with these people?"

"Safer than I would have been without, it turns out," Ansgar replied. "They're good to have around in a darkspawn ambush. They're a little odd, but they're decent people."

"Are they some of those Grey Wardens? There's a whole city of them, even if they do call it a fortress, up in the Anderfels." Eldrek eyed the lot of tired-looking humans and elves with new respect. "I heard some drunk from Orzammar joined up, in the last blight."

"Oghren." Ansgar knew the name at once, even though he'd spent most of his time on the surface. Everyone knew Oghren. "Can't say we missed him. He was Paragon Branka's husband, and I'll say we miss her a whole lot more. He just... it's a good thing the Wardens took him. They helped him find her body and take back Bownammar, but he was never the same after she went out chasing Caridin." He shook his head sadly. "Poor old sod. But, these aren't Grey Wardens, however great they are with the darkspawn. They're mages, if you can believe it. Friends of some little Smith girl who's friends with the queen, of all the weird shit. I picked them up in an Avvar hold. Hired them on as caravan guards, and I am making a killing on this deal. Even if they're doing most of the actual killing. One of the carts is a little singed, but that's it. Fifteen darkspawn in an ambush, and we're fine. Nobody got hurt."

"Gracious Ilona's tits." Eldrek shook his head. "You think they got any more of those up there? I should hire some."

"Mages? Ha! Maybe, but good luck finding them. You might be better off asking around Tevinter."

The way Eldrek's face twisted answered for him. "Hm, maybe not, then." Behind him, his bronto snorted restlessly, nudging him with its snout. "I think I'm being told to hurry up," Eldrek said wryly, turning to pat the bronto's nose. "Listen, we should catch up over a pint sometime. You can tell me all about your wild adventures with your new friends." He indicated the mages and spirits with a tip of his head.

Ansgar's laugh echoed. "I'd like that. Remind me to tell you about the rock-wraiths. You won't sleep for a week."

"What?" Eldrek asked, eyes widening. But Ansgar was already climbing back onto his bronto. "Oh, now that's just cruel!"

"Over a pint," Ansgar reminded him. "I will need alcohol to talk about that."
"So, you... ah... You seem oddly comfortable here." Niall leaned against the table next to where Asha was dreaming up food none of them needed, but all of them wanted. "I mean, I know, it's been a while, but... everyone else is still... struggling."

"I was going to be a Seer," Asha said, as if it explained everything. "I was an apprentice, in my village, but I offended a templar, in the city, and he took me to Aeonar. The Fade is not so different. The spirits tell me -- told me -- how it would be. And here I am. I feel bad for that J-man. He studied the things that Mouse says will get us out, but he doesn't know the Fade. He doesn't trust himself, either."

"Jowan's got troubles," Niall agreed, picking up a cup and studying its contents. "But you... You're from Rivain?"

Asha nodded, reaching out to sprinkle something into the cup. "That's better with a little sweet cinnamon on top."

Niall smiled -- he found himself doing that, lately. These mages were so different to the ones he'd known in the Circle, even if he'd been in the Circle with some. Even the templars were different. He supposed that was what happened when you suddenly got sucked into the Fade. "What is it?"

"It's a tea that's supposed to be good for headaches. Not that I think you get headaches, since you're dead, but it's good for thinking. You drink the tea, and it heals your mind." Asha winked. "You looked like you needed some."

Niall was halfway through a sip when she winked, and he tried to smile while there was tea in his mouth, dribbling tea down his chin and the front of his robes. Asha failed to hide a smile behind her hand and came to his rescue with a napkin that hadn't been there before.

"Yes, I see what you mean about needing to heal his mind," Mouse said at Niall's shoulder, appearing as though from nowhere. "And you could just will away the tea, you know, instead of summoning a napkin."

"It's fine." Niall glared at him meaningfully as Asha dabbed the front of his robes with her kerchief.

"I don't recall asking your opinion," Asha responded coolly. "Maybe I just wanted an excuse to touch his face. Look at these cheeks! Don't you want to squeeze them?"

Mouse stepped back and squinted appraisingly at Niall. "I'd more often like to squeeze his neck, but we're both dead."

Niall looked down into his tea, sadly, studying the ripples in the liquid. That was something real
water did, he remembered. And then he threw the tea in Mouse's face and smacked the cup down on the corner of the table. His eyes lit with a fire he hadn't felt since he was a teenager, rebelling against the idea of the Circle. Before he realised there was no way out, that there was no cabin in the wood, waiting for him. "Knock it off, Mouse. We both know you can still die again, or you wouldn't be so bent on hiding from everything."

"You're right, you know. His cheeks do look squeezable, when he gets excited. He's got a flush to him and everything!" Mouse laughed. "I didn't know you remembered how to do that, Niall!"

"I remember how to do a lot more than you think." Niall folded up the cuffs of his robe, glaring poisonously at Mouse.

"Yes, but do you remember what to do with a beautiful woman? I promise the answer is not drool tea on yourself," Mouse scoffed and gestured as if to suggest a headline. "Dead mage flirts with pretty living girl -- forgets he's a spirit and she's got to go home!"

Niall balled his hands into fists, his cheeks a glowing red and his eyes promising murder. Asha beat him to a response.

"You know, for a Mouse you're acting awfully catty," Asha said with a smile that wasn't the least bit friendly.

Mouse grinned. "Better catty than a pussy."

Niall moved before he could register what he was doing. He had forgotten what this kind of anger felt like. He knew well the cold anger of despair, the helpless anger at a wasted life and what could have been, but this anger was hot, burning in veins he no longer had. This anger had him moving, punching Mouse square in the cheek. They might no longer have bodies, but Mouse felt solid against Niall's fist.

Mouse staggered back, surprised for the barest moment before he started to laugh.

The laugh was cut short by the next punch, and Mouse staggered dizzily back as Niall hammered at him. All those scraps with de Serault's little friends had taught Niall how to lay a man out flat, and he meant to use that now, meant to take the edge off Mouse's constant punchlines at his expense. A decade, nearly, he thought it had been -- assuming Jowan's concept of time was reliable. A decade of Mouse's devastating hopelessness and dreams of a real hero -- like Solona, but better. Dreams of someone Niall very much wasn't, which Mouse never ceased to remind him. Dreams of someone like Jowan, apparently, and wasn't that a laugh.

Actually, it was a laugh, high and sharp, as he stepped in and kicked Mouse in the back of the ankle as the next punch slammed into Mouse's face.

Mouse went down hard on the stone floor of the Enchanters' Library, and Niall followed him down, still swinging, a fountain of fiery rage in his heart. But, something wasn't right. Mouse wasn't swinging back -- he just lay there, unbruised, looking smugly up at Niall.

Smug? Well, that was something Niall was sure he could knock off Mouse's face, if he just hit hard enough. He'd knocked out one of Val's teeth, one time. He knew what that looked like -- that moment when your opponent realises they're not invincible. And he wondered, for a split second, what Val had traded to Anders to get that fixed, because he was sure Wynne didn't hear about it.

But there was no telltale crunch of bone, no wet slide of blood, no matter how hard Niall hit, and his arms were starting to burn. That was something he had forgotten--or thought he had forgotten--about
having a body: it had limits. Being around these mages, alive and whole, helped him remember too well what it was like to be human.

"Is that all you've got?" Mouse asked, still laughing, always laughing, and there was that anger, still hot but cooling into helplessness as Niall grabbed him by the hair to slam him back into the floor.

Through the doorway, Lily caught sight of the commotion, spotting Asha standing, frozen, with a hand over her mouth, and seeing the pair of men tussling on the floor. Mouse she could make out from the laughter, but the other had his back to her and all she could see was dark hair and a flying fist.

"Jowan!" she shouted.

Asha finally looked up. "Jowan? I thought he was with you."

"What?" Lily blinked down at the fight, getting a better look at the combatants. "Is that Niall, then?"

At the sound of his name, Niall looked up, hair stringy and stuck to his face, even though he hadn't remembered to sweat. Somehow, he remembered his hair being stuck across his eyes, and so it was. Before he could get a word out, Mouse finally took a swing and sat up, driving Niall back and flipping him onto the floor.

"Got a bit of a lion in you, after all, don't you, pussycat?" Mouse teased, laughing as he stood and pinned Niall with an unpleasant smile. "It's lovely you'll play, but I have to get back to work. We're never getting out of here, if Jowan doesn't learn to control this place. Which he will. He's meant for great things."

Niall just stared up in horror as Mouse walked away, headed down the stairs no worse for the wear. He could hear the sound of boots coming down the hall from the other side of the tower, where Wynne's office used to be. 'Got a bit of a lion in you'... it's what Leofric used to say to Val's conquests, no matter how many times Val told him the heraldry of Serault was a stag, and the lion was the Valmonts. Everyone had overheard it at least five times too many -- always the Lion of Orlais -- and worse, Niall knew Mouse had known. He wasn't sure how, but that look that passed between them left no doubt. Maybe he'd told the story once. You never knew what Mouse would remember, from one day to the next, but 'meant for great things' he wasn't sure Mouse could forget. Niall said it nearly daily.

Then there was a hand in his line of vision, stretched out in offering, and Niall followed the length of the arm attached to it until he saw Asha's face. He wasn't sure if he felt relief or shame or a bit of both, knowing she had seen all that. Either way, he took her hand and let her help him to his feet.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this," Asha said, "but your friend's a bit of a shit." At her shoulder, Lily nodded.

"It's not news," Niall said with a crooked smile.

The sound of running footsteps caught up with them, and they turned to glance at the mage panting for breath in the doorway. "Lily?" Jowan asked. "Is everything all right? I heard you shouting."

Lily closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Everything's fine, Jowan."

"Oh." Jowan blinked, waiting for an explanation she didn't give. "Right. Okay. That's... good."

"She mistook me for you," Niall told him, after a moment. "Got in a bit of a scrap. Nothing serious."
"You?" Jowan laughed. "You, in a fight? You never get near enough to anyone to get in a fight!"

"You'd be surprised." An embarrassed smile crept across Niall's lips. "I didn't spend my entire career sitting in the back of the Enchanters' Library, swearing about the world. Just the latter half."

"But, you were--"

"Ten years older than you, Jowan," Niall reminded him.


"Deserved it, too," Asha muttered, offering Jowan a cup of tea. "How's that Veil punching thing going, J-Man?"

"It's... really resilient." Jowan's face fell as he accepted the tea. "And all we have are just theories, and half of them we've already proven wrong. I even tried going to sleep, to see if I could make myself go through, but I just ended up somewhere else in the Fade. And no one who's really here can see us, and I can't see them, so it's not like I can just reach out and rattle Torrin until he figures out how to help."

"Torrin wouldn't help us anyway." Niall rolled his eyes, but smiled when Asha handed him his cup, full of the same kind of tea he'd thrown in Mouse's face. "We're demons, as far as he knows. We need Crazypants, and he's long gone."

"Yeah," Jowan sighed. "Any ideas where he took off to?"

Niall shrugged. "I can't say I was paying too much attention at the time, but he mentioned something about finding Anders and Karl. As for where they are? No idea. And chances are, Crazypants is long gone out of reach. It's -- well, I'd say 'it's hopeless', but Mouse seems to have high hopes for you." He tried not to sound bitter, honestly, but he could still feel Mouse's fist and hear his laughter. Niall felt cold then, grateful for the warmth of the tea.

"Of course," Jowan said with a wan smile. "I didn't think it would be that easy. It never is." He tried to make eye-contact with Lily, but she was pointedly busy looking over tea options herself.

Chapter End Notes

The word 'pussy', as 'a harmless person, either gentle or timid or both', dates to 1859 and stems from 'pussycat' -- which is to say, the actual cat, and not the slang for a woman or, later, her anatomy. The meat of the usage is, I believe, the comparison to dogs -- the other popular housepet of the time. (http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pussycat)
The Market of Kal-Sharok

Chapter Summary

The mages finally reach Kal-Sharok, the last stop before they return to the surface.

The gates of Kal-Sharok were set back from the round market plaza, and the Deep Roads curved out from the city in three directions -- one of them still sealed with an enormous metal door. Around the plaza, merchants arranged to sell wholesale goods to each other, as very few outsiders would be permitted into the city proper. Beside the gate stretched a wall of stables and inns, and the smell of bronto-shit permeated the marketplace.

"I've just got to deliver some crates to the city porter, and then we'll see what we can do about getting you something better to wear, up there. You're dressed for Ferelden, which is great if you're in Ferelden, but we're going to come up in the Hunterhorn Mountains -- less brutal than the Frostbacks, sure, but also a lot less cold. By the time we get down to the ground, you're going to want to be wearing half of that. But, I bet we can get you some Ander-style robes. Just... maybe not in your size. The merchants who trade on the surface wear them, but that makes them my size, not yours. We'll figure something out." Ansgar grinned at the mages behind him. "It's not really safer up there, but I won't say it's much worse than this, either. Less deepstalkers, more sandstorms, same amount of darkpawn."

Kinnon leaned over the side of the cart, taking in the sights around him, as the caravan came up to one of the inns. "What's that pink and green cloth that stall has hanging? I'd wear that!"

Ansgar followed his line of sight and pursed his lips against a laugh. The other dwarves in earshot were not so polite, and Kinnon shot them all a blank look. Candles shrugged.

"We could certainly dress you in something like that," Ansgar said, voice heavy with the laugh he was trying to keep in, "but you might run into some difficulties. That's a sign letting you know there's a public toilet nearby."

Kinnon's cheeks darkened as Candles fell over into Petra's lap with a snorting laugh.

"Well, it's a nice cloth," he mumbled.

In a loud whisper, Candles replied, "We should get it for Val and not tell him."

Petra sighed, rolling her eyes to the high ceilings. "We are not putting the toilet robes on anyone. Please don't put the toilet robes on anyone."

"You are no fun."

Ansgar's eyes sparkled with amusement, and he patted his bronto before swinging himself down.

As Ansgar went off in search of a porter, the other merchants entered an inn, to try to get them all rooms for the night, and exchange tokens for their brontos. The mages, left to their own devices, wandered through the market in small groups.

"You speak Common?" Candles asked a merchant showing a wide range of robe packages for
"He's a dwarf," Kinnon cut in. "Of course he speaks Common."

The merchant squinted at them. "I've never heard it spoken like that before," she said, vowels round like smoke rings in every word. "Where did you learn?"

"Ferelden. We're from Ferelden," Petra filled in, eyeing a robe and drape set that looked to be made for someone a full foot shorter than she was. "We heard the road below was safer than the road above, for this journey, with everything going on in Orlais."

"Orlais." The merchant snorted and shook her head. "No idea what they're buying in Orlais. You put a symbol on it that they don't recognise and everyone wants one. 'Fragments of a lost ancient dwarven religion', they tell themselves. It says 'don't dig here'."

"Well, maybe the lack of digging was part of their religion," Candles suggested. "I don't judge."

The merchant gave her an odd look while Petra sighed and rubbed her forehead. "So, don't buy anything with a symbol on it, no matter what the vendor says," Petra said. "That's good to know."

The merchant waved her hand. "You are not Orlesian. Shouldn't be as much of a problem for you."

Candles glanced around. "Well, one or two of us are Orlesian. But you're welcome to lie to them."

Petra cleared her throat. "Regardless, I think these robes run a little short for us. I don't suppose you have anything longer? If not, how much time and money would it take to make some longer versions of these?"

"Too short?" Candles huffed. "Nonsense. They're perfect for Kinnon." She plucked up one robe and held it against him, the cloth reaching to his mid-thigh.

"I can't say I'm quite that confident in my legs," Kinnon drawled.

"You're going up top, if you're buying from me, and that means you don't want your legs out. Not if you like having skin." The merchant shook her head and dug through the piles underneath the counter. "I know I've got some extra large down here, after that archaeological group. Not many, but... They might fit the elf. Maybe you, too." She pointed at Petra and then gestured toward Kinnon. "But, he's going to want to wear trousers under them. Still, they'll be much better than not having."

"These prices are for a whole set of surface clothing?" Fen'Din asked, finally appearing from elsewhere, a skewer of roast meat and mushrooms in his hand.

"You're better off buying an expedition set," the merchant pointed out, taking out a longer list of prices. "It's much less expensive if you buy for more people, because I don't have to sit here wondering if I'm going to sell that stuff. How many are with you?"

"We're... forty? Close to forty, and then our dwarven escorts, but they take this route often, so I suspect they have clothes." Fen'Din chewed bits off the skewer, totally unmoved when Candles yanked off a chunk of meat for herself.

The merchant's eyebrows rose. "Forty of you, you say? That's quite a few robes, though I can't say I'd mind you taking them off my hands." She eyed Fen'Din as though trying to measure him by looking at him. "They may not be the best fit, but it's better than nothing upstairs. Any particular cut or style you're looking at?"
"What I’d like to be looking at is price," Petra replied, pulling herself away from some pretty if impractical blue fabric. "As we said, there are around forty of us. Our funds are not infinite."

"Maybe we should just give robes to the people we like," Kinnon muttered. "That should cut down in cost."

"And the rest can tie our old clothes around their heads?" Fen'Din joked, looking down the list. The prices did seem reasonable, considering what Ansgar was paying them as caravan guards. Petra had all the money -- it would be split up after they'd bought supplies for the rest of the expedition -- and it was definitely enough to buy clothes for all of them, and still have ... hopefully enough left over for bronto jerky and dried mushrooms. But they'd be on the surface, so it was probably less critical to have enough food to get them all the way there.

He nudged Petra and tapped a grade of cloth. "I think we can do it. We'll have to hunt a bit, but I think we can do it."

"Talk to me about this grade of cloth," Candles cut in, talking to the merchant. "Is this something we want to be wearing in the Anderfels?"

"I'd suggest it for coming down on the Orlesian side, not the Ander side," the merchant admitted. "Maybe this one? It's going to hold less heat. It's a little thinner and a tighter weave. I mean, I'd suggest this, to the right of centre, but you're on a tight budget, it seems. Everything after that is custom embroidery, which only matters if you're trying to make a splash in Hossberg's dwarven quarter."

Fen'Din blinked. "Cheaper than I was expecting, for what you'd suggest. Cheaper than what I picked, for certain."

"We'll take it," Petra said, counting coins. "I'll start sending the team over to be fitted."
The Last Day Without Sun

Chapter Summary

A few arguments, some beer, and a whole new perspective on life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In their new robes, the group of mages drew a few stares and a few more muttered comments on their way back to the inn. Petra kept fussing with hers, trying to adjust the drape of the fabric. It was comfortable, at least, loose in places her Circle robes had been tight, but then those Circle robes had been more flattering of her figure. Not that it would matter in a sandstorm.

"So what do you think?" Kinnon asked, disproportionately happy about his choice of robes. "Do we have enough coin left over for a round of drinks? I'd like to try some real dwarven beer while we're here."

It was a tempting thought, Petra decided, walking into the bar at the inn's front. She weighed the coins in her purse. "I think we can manage a pitcher, provided you don't spill anything on your new robes."

Ansgar followed them in, having finally finished his business elsewhere. His eyes skipped across the mages as he made his way to the bar, until they landed on Kinnon.

"Hey, mage! Red!" He made his way over to Kinnon and tugged at his sleeve. "You, ah... You might want to exchange those robes. They've got something written on the back."

"Well she told me it said 'no digging'." Kinnon grinned foolishly. "I thought it was a good warning. Why, does it say something else?"

"Nah, that's exactly what it says." Ansgar blinked and squinted up at the mage. "How many pints did you have before you came to that conclusion?"

"None. Petra said we couldn't have drinks until after she finished buying supplies." Kinnon's face lit up in realisation. "You've been here, before! What's worth drinking?"

Ansgar stared up at him as though he wanted to say something else. "I'm a fan of the gin here, but if those are the kind of decisions you're making sober, I'm not sure Kal-Sharak is ready for you drunk. Maybe you should go for something lighter."

"I'm ordering a pitcher of beer," Petra said, patting Kinnon on the back. "I think that's safe enough."

"To start, sure," Kinnon called after her as she approached the bartender.

Ansgar shook his head, eyeing the other mages. "Do any of you have any interesting labels I can't see from here?" He walked around the small group to check.

"Us? No." Candles beamed. "But we ordered one special for a friend."
"I'm not sure one should say the word 'friend' with quite so evil a smile," Ansgar replied, eyeing her askance.

"On the contrary. That's the only way to say the word 'friend'."

Almost immediately, the tall, blond mage, still with faint burn scars on his face from the emissary's attack, strode in, looking like he meant to declare himself king. After a moment's study of the bar's inhabitants, he snorted and tipped up his chin, making his way toward Petra. "You spent our money buying clothes that don't fit? How many have you outfitted like this, because this is the first I'm seeing it!"

"All of us," Petra replied, smiling thinly, over the lip of her fresh mug of beer. "Yours isn't ready. We got you some special embroidery."

"It's a rune," Candles cut in. "It's for protection."

Val's hand flew self-consciously to his face. "Well. I'll... I'll take all the help I can get."

"And it's still not half the help you need," Kinnon assured him, with a firm slap on the back.

Val's cheeks coloured around the scars, making them stand out that much more, almost distracting from the flash of outrage as he turned on Kinnon. But, then Keili's hand was on his arm.

"It's not worth it. We can't afford a bar fight," she said, quietly.

"Then maybe some of us should stop trying to start one," Val huffed, glaring at Kinnon and smoothing out his robes where Keili had touched him.

Kinnon smiled sweetly. "Then maybe some of us should--"

"Kinnon," Petra interrupted firmly, and Kinnon closed his mouth. She had returned, balancing a pitcher of beer and a few mugs, and she indicated a clear table with a tilt of her head.

"You actually plan to drink that swill?" Val asked, nose crinkling as he eyed the beer.

"Yes," said Petra flatly as she herded her friends to the appointed table. Keili took the mugs from her so she had less to carry. "It is alcoholic swill. That's what matters."

"Alcoholic swill. That's grand. In the tower, I could have wine sent from Val Chevin or Montfort. Now, we are reduced to drinking alcoholic dwarven swill." Val rolled his eyes and glanced despairingly around the bar.

"Well, there's mushroom wine from Kal'Hirol. It's a smithing thaig, but they make a killing on wine, these days." Ansgar chuckled and brought his own drink to the table, taking the seat beside Petra.

"Mushroom. Wine." Val looked like his face might cave in from disgust. "There are so many things wrong with that, I don't even know where to begin. And worse? We're going to the Anderfels, where the only thing worse than the darkspawn is the wine."

"It's also on the surface, so you can get your bloody mother to send you a case," Kinnon huffed, kicking out a chair and dropping into it.

"No, he can't," Fen'Din corrected, once again appearing from nowhere with food in his hands. "We're apostates, remember? But, I'll bet he can buy some nice Tevinter wine in Hossberg, at least."

Petra wasn't sure they'd have coin enough for nice Tevinter wine, but if it would shut up Val for a
minute, it might be worth it.

"I suppose that will do for a little while," Val sniffed.

"Or, you know, we could just leave you in Hossberg," Kinnon said cheerfully. "Or send you up to Minrathous. You'd have all the Tevinter wine you'd like there. Far away from us."

Petra poured Kinnon some beer and pushed the mug his way.

"Wine that's only mostly terrible, and I get to be away from your stink?" Val sneered. "You make it sound tempting."

Ansgar leaned toward Petra as she poured drinks for everyone else. "Is this the friend you were talking about earlier?" he whispered.

"The very same."

Ansgar nodded sagely. "I'm understanding Candles's evil smile a bit more, now."

"Though, you know, we are short on coin." Fen'Din tapped his chin, contemplatively, with that same distant look he had most of the time. "Perhaps you'll have to work for your wine."

"He hasn't got any skills," Candles pointed out. "None of us do, really. Nothing that's legal."

"Of course he does. With everything I watched him do with Anders and a pretty face like that..." A disconcerting smile split Fen'Din's face, and his tattoos twisted around it.

"Watched!?!" Val looked horrified and then outraged. "What is wrong with you? You really are crazy, you know that, don't you?"

"That's 'Senior Enchanter Crazypants' to you." Fen'Din looked entirely unperturbed. "Besides, you can't imagine Anders would've walked into anything with you, without someone to watch his back. For all he might've been, stupid wasn't on the list."

"Wouldn't have walked into anything with me? With me? He's the one you're worried about in this situation?" Val's outrage progressed into stuttering disbelief. "He set an entire room on fire with himself in it! More than once!"

"Never just you, and he knew it. You and Frick really had a thing, didn't you? Just as long as there was someone between you." The smile was no less unsettling many seconds later.

Val shook, cheeks a splotchy red and eyes a shade too wide, but then he smoothed his expression into a smile that fooled no one. "Is this what you do because you can't get it up? You watch other people and have holes stabbed into your knob?"

Ansgar blinked. "Holes?" he asked Petra nervously.

"With rings," Petra verified, cringing as she nodded. "They're... yeah."

Ansgar looked a bit faint, and Petra slid him some beer.

"Maybe you should try stabbing a hole in your knob," Candles suggested to Val. "A nice big one. I'll help you."

"I'm sure the dwarves would let you borrow a few tools for that," Kinnon agreed, just to watch Val's face turn green.
Fen'Din looked into his lap for a moment. "No, I had holes stabbed into my knob so we could get food and a safe route north."

"Safe?" Val shrieked loudly enough that the bar fell silent in the wake of the echoes. The scars nearly glowed in contrast to the darkening of the rest of his face.

"No one's dead," Fen'Din replied. "No one's been smitten, loaded full of magebane, and dragged back to the dungeons. We're free, yet, and we're all still alive." He paused. "I'm sorry about your face. I didn't know that was something darkspawn could do, but we're going to see Anders. He's always been merciful."

"By the shit of my ancestors," Ansgar breathed. "No one's dead? That's your definition of 'safe'?"

"Oh, right, and no one's disappeared in the middle of the night, never to be seen again." Fen'Din wiped his fingers on the edge of the table and reached for the pitcher of beer.

"I saw them bring him up," Keili said, after a moment of silence. "The man he's taking us to see. I wanted to believe he deserved it -- that we all did -- but I can't. Maybe he needed to be locked up. Maybe we all do, but... that was much more than just locked up. He's right. No one's dead, no one's captured, and no one's disappeared. That wasn't something you could always say about three months in the tower."

The table went quiet then, and everyone examined their beer as though it held the meaning of life, expressions grim. Petra even offered Val some of her beer, but he waved it aside without thanks.

Ansgar shook his head. "I can't say I'll ever understand surfacers and how they handle things. A little bit north, and mages are treated like royalty. A little bit south, and they're locked up. And somehow, people with fancy hats are involved."

Kinnon exchanged a look with Candles. "I think he just summed up all of human politics."

"Always blame the humans with the pointy hats," Candles agreed, nodding sagely. "The bigger the hat, the worse the blame."

Keili frowned but didn't bother to argue.

"The taller the hat, the closer to the Maker," Fen'Din quipped, before his eyes settled on Keili, and he offered her a skewer of unidentifiable fried vegetables and meat. "Eat. You look faint."

"You... You're all mad," Val declared, tucking his hands under his arms and retreating to the room he would be sharing with five other mages -- hopefully not those five. He wondered, not for the first time, why he'd thought leaving the tower would be a good idea. The things Senior Enchanter Crazypants said were absolutely true, but... it was never him. Almost inevitably Anders, or Jowan, or some other idiot apprentice who thought outside was a good idea. But, here he was -- outside. What had he been thinking?

Back at the table, Keili nibbled listlessly at the skewer of things more exciting than the inevitable lichen porridge of everyday dwarven living. "So," she said to Ansgar, "tomorrow, we go to the surface?"

"Not quite. There's about a day of road before the outer gates. Kal-Sharok wasn't designed with the surface in mind, like Orzammar was. You know the road we came in on, and how it stretches on past the gates until it hits metal? Not that road. The one to the right, that's open. The one straight out from the inner gates. It goes on about a day, because it winds around to ease the drop. The road's pretty straight, from Orzammar, but the whole thing's on a slight incline, once you get past the sea. All the
up we just did? We have to do in reverse. It's a little rough on the brontos. But, when we get to the outer gate, they'll have our camels waiting for us, all rigged and ready to go."

Chapter End Notes

Rhapsody Fan Chat will be **THIS SATURDAY** @ 13:00 - 17:00 EST. ([What time is that?](https://www.timeanddate.com/)) Keep an eye on [Pen's Tumblr](https://Pen's Tumblr) for the link to join us, when the time comes.
Trouble in Paradise

Chapter Summary

Lily and Brynn air their doubts about Mouse's plans. Niall can hear every agonizing regret Jowan has.

Lily stared out of the window, watching the green and grey swirls of what she could almost pretend were clouds, off in the distance. Asha said she could make it look like a blue sky, if she wanted, but Lily still didn't see how. She was beginning to suspect it was a mage thing.

She could only stare at the not-clouds for so long before her gaze dropped back down to the two figures she was pretending not to watch.

"Any progress?"

Lily jumped, nearly forgetting Brynn was there. He had ensconced himself in a plush chair, balancing a book on his knee that was mostly pictures. She huffed, turning so she could see both him and the window.

"It's hard to tell." She shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not convinced there's even any progress to be made. It's a nice thought, clawing your way through the Veil, but it just looks like a whole lot of scrabbling at air to me."

"It's been done here, before. I mean, assuming we actually are where it looks like we are." Brynn closed the book and set it on the arm of the chair. "Just after the Blight, when your Captain Hadley was in charge, for a while, I got copied on a report of the Veil being damaged in the cellar, here. I guess the Grey Wardens took care of it, somehow. That Warden-Commander, she's from here, isn't she? Anyway, whatever she did, I don't think Hadley'd ever seen the like, the poor bastard. He'll do all right, though. We were all young, once."

"Damaged?" Lily looked interested. "What do you mean, exactly? Just thinner than usual, or...?"

"Well, when that one enchanter lost his shit, pardon my Alamarri, and dragged all those demons through, he did thin the Veil, substantially. But, after he was killed and the demons were all cleared out, no one really thought about what that damage would do, long-term. And the fact they've got some kind of spirits working in the vaults, here, can't be doing them any favours." Brynn shrugged. "As best I can tell, from the report, well, spirits are usually pulled back toward the Fade. It's why we only see the strongest of them. I think the spirit sentinels accidentally breached the Veil, just by existing where it was already so thin. Report says it drove them mad, too. Commander Amell had to slay several of them to get to the tears causing the problem. I don't know what Captain Hadley intended to do, if Amell hadn't come back, like that. He'd just locked everyone out of the cellar."

"Oh my." Lily tried to picture it. She remembered those cellars and those sentinels, remembered running through those halls hand-in-hand with Jowan. It had been chilling enough without the threat of torn veils and mad spirits. "It seems everything got quite a bit more exciting here, after I was sent away."

Brynn hummed. "I'd say everything got a bit more exciting everywhere. But the point is, the Veil is
thin here to begin with, and it's been broken before. I'm not sure if Jowan is the one for the job, honestly, or if it's possible to tear the thing from this side, but we've got nothing to lose."

"Mouse seems fairly convinced Jowan's the right choice," Lily said, perhaps with a bit more vitriol than expected.

The corner of Brynn's mouth twitched in the beginning of a smile. "Not a fan of our new spirit friend?"

Lily opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to find a diplomatic answer to that, only to land on, "No."

"He's a weird one. Something wrong with him, and I can't tell if it's just him being a spirit. I mean, all the time I spent at Aeonar, and all I saw were demons -- abominations, really, and that's a whole other thing, as I'm learning. First spirit I met was that Grace. I hope she comes back, soon. I'm starting to worry the demons got her." Brynn gave the window a concerned glance, as if he could see the ground from it. "But, if that Mouse was a living man, I wouldn't let him date my sister. He's all puffery and I don't know how much substance is in him. His friend Niall makes me nervous, too, but in a different way. I don't know, but it's a much more human way. He reminds me of some of our mages, at Aeonar -- that almost complete surrender, with just enough bite left to make things difficult for themselves. But, Jowan actually knew him, I guess, so he's probably all right. I mean, I'd be pretty bitter if I was dead, too."

"Asha thinks Niall's got cute cheeks." Lily chuckled, quietly, a smile slipping across her lips, gone as quickly as it had come. "But, you're right about Mouse. All grand ideas and how the mages are the only ones who can save us -- it's not that I think they can't. We're in the Fade. It makes perfect sense they would be, but he really makes a big deal of it. And the rest of us are still a step up, because we're alive, not like him and Niall. And Niall! Have you heard that?"

"How he talks to Niall?" Brynn nodded, craning his neck to see if he could catch a look at the ground, where Mouse and Jowan were practising. "I had to send a man back to Val Royeaux for talking to our mages like that. We are not kind, but there is no need to be cruel -- and I hope you experienced no cruelty in our care. At least... nothing unnecessary."

"I..." Lily looked out the window again, avoiding something that wasn't Jowan, for once. "No more than I deserved for my transgressions." Considering what came after, Uldred, the Blight, Lily wondered if being sent to Aeonar had saved her life. She might appreciate the irony better at a later time.

Brynn's sigh was barely audible. "The job of a templar can be a tough one," he said. "We have to make human judgements and so make human errors. But, I've seen my fair share of mages and abominations, and something about Mouse doesn't sit right with me."

Lily frowned, half wishing that Brynn hadn't agreed with her fears. It was harder to ignore something that wasn't just in your head. "So what do we do?"

Brynn shrugged expansively. "I think that's up to Jowan."

It wasn't night -- there was no night, in the Fade. Or, there could be, if enough of the mages could agree on it, at once. But, as it stood, no one felt the urge to alter the unchanging sky too much. Still, as someone living and technically still awake, or at least not sleeping to get to the Fade, Jowan needed rest. He found that a little odd, since he seemed not to need food, which wasn't to say he didn't eat whatever the rest of Aeonar's mages dreamed up. So, every ... he'd say night, but it wasn't.
He had a great deal of trouble with time, here. Every once in a while, he'd head up to one of the rooms he'd never gotten to sleep in, being an apprentice. He thought the one he'd picked might have been Sweeney's -- it was so firmly real as to be nearly unalterable. Even the books had words in them.

The beds up here were nice -- much better than what they'd had in the dorms -- and Jowan found it almost easy to fall asleep in the deep cushion of goosedown and chaff. The only thing missing was Lily. He wanted so much to just sleep beside her, to wake up to her breathing against his cheek. He couldn't figure out how he'd been so wrong, but he'd really believed, in that moment, that she'd run with him, if he could just get them out.

Well, she'd run with him, this time. But, not because she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Just to get away from the demons that were absolutely not his fault, this time. He drifted off with tears in his eyes, just wanting everything to go back to how it had been, before the convoluted maze of shitty choices that had gotten him to this point.

The door creaked open. And that was an odd thing, a door that wasn't really there making a sound, and it occurred to Jowan a moment later that it had only creaked because someone had wanted it to. He turned over to spot someone in the doorway, and for the barest moment, he'd hoped...

"Lily?" But he realised how foolish that was.

"What? Do I look like Lily?" Niall looked down at himself as though to reassure himself that he was still, in fact, Niall.

"Sorry," Jowan sighed, settling onto his back. "I just...

"Yes, yes, I know what you 'just'. I think everyone in the tower knows by now. And -- sorry if this sounds rude, but -- could you try to... not? Your angst is distracting even from down the hall."

"What?" Jowan sat straight up -- or almost straight, he hunched a bit forward as if reflexively avoiding smacking his head on something. "What are you talking about? I wasn't even talking, never mind the screaming I'd have to be doing..."

Niall brought his hands up, gesturing for Jowan to stop, as he stepped in, closed the door, and pulled over the chair from beside the cluttered desk. "I'm a spirit. It's... different. At least I assume that's why it's different because I sure as shit didn't have this problem when I was alive. Every time any of you are feeling hopeless, I know about it. It's why I took a room so far up the tower, so I wouldn't hear it so much. Maker, Jowan, you have to get over her, if only so I can stop feeling like I've been punched in the head, all the time. Asha's tea only goes so far."

"You know, they used to say demons were drawn by grief and fury and arrogance. I wonder if it's the same for spirits." Jowan pulled the blanket up and draped it over his shoulders, which were, he noticed, much wider, now, than Niall's. But, that was the difference in a decade outside, he thought.

"It's not. I'm not drawn to it. It's just giving me a horrible headache. I wish I could forget how to feel pain. That would be great." Niall groaned and rested his head on the corner of the nightstand. "What about those exercises they taught us, with the breathing and thinking of something else, so you wouldn't draw demons? Any chance of you doing that? I feel like my eyes are going to start bleeding."

"It's... I could try? But, really, it's hard to think of anything else. It was all for her, you know? Using blood magic to escape, breaking into Aeonar... All the stupid choices I've made to get here I made because I wanted to make her happy."
"That's nice," Niall said, his forehead still resting on the nightstand. "Really nice. The sort of romantic minstrels write about, but this isn't a song, Jowan." He sat up, rubbing at his forehead where the corner of the nightstand had dug in. "The rest is up to her. You want to make her happy? There's one more thing you can do. Let her go. Well, two things. Get us out of here, and let her go. Let her find her own happiness. I think you owe her that much."

Jowan looked, if anything, more miserable, and Niall wondered if he had made it worse. "I do have to, don't I," he said softly. It was the first time Jowan had realised that this story might not end with him getting the girl.

"You do," Niall agreed. "But, there's so many other things ---" He stopped. "I'm not going to lie to you. There's really not a whole lot going on here that isn't the lot of you. I mean, maybe you could try chatting up Valor, but it's like talking to a knightly wall. Or you could work on getting us out of here, but you're already doing that. At least, I think you're doing that, assuming Mouse hasn't just got his head up his ass."

"You think he's wrong?" Jowan asked, shifting back against the headboard. "I mean, the theory sounds pretty convincing, I'm just not getting enough power."

"I think..." Niall shook his head and tried again. "Lily thinks he's lying to you -- to all of us. It's part of the headache she gives me about the fact that she's never getting out of here and whatever happened, she deserved it for trusting you -- she's... Yeah, she's done. Most people are really focused on themselves and getting out of here. That's a constant dull roar. But, Lily is very convinced that Mouse is wrong."

"She's not a mage. You are." Jowan's eyes narrowed. "What do you think?"

"I think you need blood and lyrium." Niall shrugged. "And however much blood is available by virtue of you and everyone you came with being alive, there's no lyrium here, and there never will be. There are things that look like lyrium, but they're not the real thing. They can replenish a dreamer's magic, but only because the dreamer needs to believe there's a source for the power. There's no actual power -- or madness -- in the stuff. It's made of the Fade, like everything else."

"Yeah, but that was from the other side. There has to be a way to do it from in here. Demons get out, sometimes, even without possessing someone," Jowan argued, pulling the blanket closer around himself.

Niall shook his head with a shrug. "I know it happens, but I don't know how. If I did, I wouldn't still be here, would I?" He gave Jowan an unhappy smile, and to Jowan it seemed like the room's dim light had dimmed even more. It made him think of flowers dying at Niall's feet. "But maybe Mouse is right, and I just don't have it in me."

"I think Mouse's way is worth at least trying," Jowan replied. "Beyond that... I don't know. I had promised Lily no more blood magic, and honestly, I'm terrified of what might happen if I used blood magic here. But after that, I am out of ideas. And I... honestly don't know if you could do what he's asking me to do. Have you tried?"

"Didn't seem much point." And, really, it wasn't something Niall wanted to talk about, but his headache was easing. As least he was distracting Jowan from wallowing in his gloom.

"Niall, really. You were always ... They made you an enchanter, didn't they? I'm technically still an apprentice. You probably forgot more magic since you died than I ever understood in the first place," Jowan argued, pulling his knees up and tugging the blanket back down over them.
"You're not going to win me over with seduction," Niall joked, looking away as Jowan straightened the blanket.

Jowan definitely still knew how to blush, and the colour splashed across his cheeks as he laughed into his hands. "Are you sure? I'm not even trying yet!"

"Yet! You've thought it!" Niall laughed, too, still looking toward the door. "Stay back demon! I'll not fall to your wiles!"

"Demons..." Jowan's laughter calmed, slowly. "Have you ever... I mean, I'm sure there must have been desire demons here, once..."

"There were. And I'd rather slam four fingers and my knob in the door." Niall shuddered at the memory. "It's not something I gave much thought to. You think too much, and they get much harder to resist."

"Still, you did. That's worth something. I mean, they teach us it can't be done but by the most powerful and stoic of mages, once the demons are in the world, but you went to them, and you're still standing here."

"It's a bloody harrowing," Niall sighed. "Just... repeatedly. Often. I'm rather glad they're gone, even if I do miss the breaks from Mouse."

Jowan laughed weakly. "I can't say this was how I thought I'd be Harrowed. Honestly, I was hoping I wouldn't be Harrowed. I was terrified I'd fail, so I... well, that was the other reason why I ran."

That made his thoughts drift back to Lily, and Niall felt the same dull ache in the centre of his chest. A dull ache, at least, he could handle. It was no longer the ringing scream between his ears, and he hoped it stayed that way.

"Well, consider yourself officially Harrowed. And, please, don't go near any desire demons. I haven't seen any around, but the Fade isn't the most exciting place most days, which makes your band of misfits the most exciting thing around. Sometimes spirits get curious."

"I... am not sure if I should be scared or honoured."

"Of demons sniffing you out, or of having me alone in your room?" Niall waggled his eyebrows, just to hear Jowan snort.

"I have other words for that," Jowan countered.

"I'm sure I should be offended by that, but I wore that one out years ago."

They sat in silence, for a few moments, before Jowan asked, "Why do you let him talk to you like that?"

"Less 'allow'. More 'tolerate and sort of ignore'." Niall shrugged and tipped the chair so he was leaning on the nightstand. "I don't know, he was the only thing human here, for a long time. It's not like anyone but that lunatic elf could see me, in the tower. My options were bitchy and crazy, and I'd just go with the flavour of the day. And then crazy left. Now there's just bitchy. And as bitchy as he is, he's still got more of a clue about this place than anything else that's willing to talk. Well, I mean, Valor's always willing to talk, but..." He shook his head. "I might just not be willing to listen."

"I don't see what he gets out of being an asshole to you. You're probably the most inoffensive mage in the entire tower."
"Inoffensive." Niall laughed. "Maybe. I only knocked in one of de Serault's teeth, and it was years before you knew enough to be paying attention to either of us."

"You? Really?" Jowan grinned. "Maybe you need to knock in one of Mouse's teeth. I mean, he's being helpful and all to the rest of us, but sometimes you need to knock something around until it sits right." Jowan's smile twisted. "Or at least that's what my father used to say, from what little I remember of him."

Niall tipped his head back and aimed a tired laugh at the ceiling. "I already tried. He still has all his teeth in that shit-eating grin."

Jowan blinked. "Oh." He had trouble picturing it, Niall being violent, but maybe that explained what he had walked in on earlier. "Well. Next time, hit harder."

Niall didn't have the heart to tell him that he had hit as hard as he could. Jowan couldn't hear Niall's despair, and Niall was content to keep it that way.
Facing the Sun

Chapter Summary

The mages finally leave the Deep Roads and meet their first sandstorm.

"I can't see anything!" Kinnon complained, covering his eyes with his sleeve, as he exited the camel barn balanced on top of a pile of goods bound for Hossberg, which was, itself, balanced on the back of a camel.

"You don't have to see," Petra reminded him. "Just don't fall off."

"Easy for you to say," Kinnon huffed.

As their vision became accustomed to the much brighter light of midday in the Hunterhorn foothills, the mages could finally take in their first glance at the Anderfels -- an endless stretch of red sand and oddly-placed plateaus, beyond the foot of the hills, where the green-brown of the low scrub faded into the expanse of sand.

"It's a fucking wasteland!" Val barked, wrapping the veil around his face as he looked out over the side of the path. "You've brought us to our deaths!"

"We're gonna go north, to the river, and follow that up," Ansgar assured him. "I've been doing it for eight years -- Redcliffe to Hossberg. Nobody's gonna die. It's just a little ugly until we get closer to the river. And sometimes there's darkspawn, but there's always darkspawn in the Anderfels. It's not as bad as being underground, though, on that point."

The veil muffled Val's voice, something for which Kinnon thanked the Maker, but he still heard Val mutter something about how he should have stayed in the tower. Not for the first time, Kinnon wished he had.

Still, as they crossed, the harsh sun and harsher wind made it difficult for Kinnon to remember why he had been so eager to leave the Deep Roads. Ansgar led the way, chuckling at the clustered mages, huddled over their camels. The spirits, at least, were unperturbed by the weather, slipping back into their wolf and halla bones to trot alongside them.

"Hey. Shoo," Val hissed when Dolora trotted too close to his camel. She looked up at him, hurt, before slinking over to the other side of Keili's camel. And that was a stupid thought, Val decided a moment later. How could a skull with empty eye sockets look hurt?

Fen'Din clicked his tongue and Moxie and Sisterhood moved up toward him, at the head of the first train. Each of the merchants they'd been travelling with led a train of camels, loaded with goods and mages, and Ansgar led them all. Still, it seemed the spirits made the camels nervous, so Fen'Din tried to keep them to the outside of the group and out of the immediate line of sight of the camels, which seemed to mostly be working, until they came onto a steeper path, the one that would finally bring them to the vast expanse of red sand, below. The path was only the width of one camel.

"Moxie? Go to the end. I want you to protect us from behind," Fen'Din called out, knowing that the rest of the spirits would follow Moxie, if he didn't call them out individually. Except -- "And you,
Dolora. Don't let anything come up behind us."

Keili watched Dolora slink away, as Fen'Din's train followed Ansgar down the path. Petra's would be the last, and then the spirits. The augur in front and his spirits behind. Each of the trains had a hunter mage to the front and back, and the rest distributed along the camels in between. Kinnon and his apprentices -- Keili assumed that was the way to speak of the way their group had divided -- rode along the centre of the trains, keeping watch for threats and raising shields along the front of the caravan, if the winds grew too strong.

Eventually, they made it to the ground, and the red wasteland stretched out before them, with clouds of sand hovering between them and the horizon.

It was slow going. No mages had fallen off their camels yet, but it had been a near thing for Keili at a particularly sharp dip. She was starting to get used to it, though, to swaying along with the way the camel moved, and despite the sun and the red wasteland all around them, she found herself smiling.

"Why the Anderfels?" Val whinged to himself. "Why not Orlais? We could have found somewhere to hide there, but nooo."

Keili's smile dimmed, and she rolled her eyes, wondering if the Maker would forgive them if Val ended up at the bottom of a ravine along the way.

They'd made it a few days into the desert -- a bleak expanse interrupted by the occasional cliff or varghest -- before Ansgar drew up the lead camel, and waited, holding up his hand and sniffing at the air. After a moment, he called back to the lead mages. "You feel that?"

"Feel what, sweaty? Yeah, for days," Candles complained, laughing.

"The air..." Keili trailed off. "It feels like Dolora. I thought it was Dolora, but she's over there." She pointed toward Fen'Din.

"Storm coming," Ansgar noted, looking around them to find nothing but emptiness, within range. "Shields!" he called, as a red cloud rose up out of the ground, in the distance, a few licks of wind tugging at the edges of his veil. "Draw in the camels and keep that off us! It'll pass in a couple of hours, but I'd rather not get hit with it, if we don't have to!"

The merchants rode back along the sides of the camel trains, shortening the leads until the camels stood neck to tail. Kinnon held his spells as long as he could, waiting for the group to tighten up, waiting for the storm to get closer before he wasted the mana. But, there were far too many camels to cover at once, and he sent two mages to the back, to set up a second barrier, there.

"Wait for it!" Kinnon insisted. "Don't shield against nothing. Wait for it to hit." He glanced at Ansgar for confirmation.

"Cast when you taste sand," Ansgar agreed, having learned in his travels that the mages' power was not infinite. "How long can you keep it up?"

"Not long enough," Kinnon admitted, "but it'll buy us a little more time to do something else. What do you usually do?"

"Turn around and run a line of banners behind us, to catch the worst of it, before it hits," Ansgar laughed. "There's nothing you can do, unless you're by the cliffs, and we're not going to make it. They're hours out. It'll be tomorrow."
"Stone!" Kinnon called to the mages. "Anyone who can do stone armour! We'll keep it off you, you give us something more permanent!"

The winds near them had already begun to turn red. Just dust, first, but that tugging-tingling sensation came with it. Keili was right -- it almost felt like touching one of the spirits.

"Now!" Kinnon called out, voice choking on dust before he drew his veil up over his nose and mouth. All around them, shields sprang into existence in a flash of rippling blue Kinnon could barely make out in the dusty haze. They cut out much of the wind and sand and sound, and Kinnon was left feeling like he had lost some of his senses.

Faces covered and heads down, the primal mages among them cast, rushing through spells and gestures in a way that would have had Wynne shaking her head and clucking. Sheets of stone sprang up to spear the winds, cropping up and around them like jagged teeth, at first, and then up and over to shield them on all sides.

"Fuck, it's dark," Candles said, huddled close to Kinnon. Even with the stone secure around them, he was afraid to let go of his shield.

To his other side, Ansgar chuckled, a soft sound Kinnon almost didn't catch over the roaring of the wind and the hiss of sand hitting stone. "You lot are nuts, but you're worth your weight in gold," Ansgar said. He patted his camel's flank, trying to soothe the twitchy animal and the huffy sounds of distress it was making.

The sand rushed and rattled against the outside of the uneven stone dome, as Kinnon smoothed the seams, absently, every time he felt a trickle of sand. Around him, the camels snorted and shifted, protesting the stuffy darkness they suddenly found themselves in, and the bone-beasts pressed against their ankles.

"And, now we're back underground, except it isn't a tunnel, it's a bubble," Val complained, huffing and poking at the wall that rose up right beside his camel. "How are we supposed to tell if it's over, if we can't see anything? How are we supposed to do anything if we can't see?"

The camel in front of him took a dump, and the room was filled with the smell, almost instantly, the stale air turning foul.

"Oh, this is... This is just idiotic," Val protested. "I'm stuck in an airless room with a couple dozen camels, shitting."
The mages discover glass is more difficult than they thought, but there's another solution to getting a translucent surface.

"If we make holes in the dome, the sand's going to get in," Ansgar reminded him, trailing off contemplatively. "But, I'll bet we can cut them low. I remember something about the smiths using floor vents to get cool air in. Except if a camel steps in one, we've got a camel with a broken leg."

"Isn't glass made of sand?" Petra asked, after a moment, tucking the bottom of her veil into her robe to try to keep the camel stench out of her mouth. "Can we ... make windows? It won't clear the air, but with light, we might need to be less worried about the camels stepping in things."

"Oh, that would awesome," Candles said, perking up. She had one hand on her camel and another hand on Kinnon, just to keep her bearings. "But... how do we do that? How do we get glass out of sand?"

"With a lot of heat," Val answered, trying to sound bored even as he choked on the stench. "That, at least, is something we might be able to do, though Maker knows how you plan to shape the thing. And can we please get some air vents in here while you figure this out?"

In the dark, Val couldn't see how many people rolled their eyes at him.

"Do we need to shape it?" Candles asked, turning in the direction Petra's voice had been in. "Can't we just..." She started to gesture, indicating the rock dome, only to catch herself. "You know. Use the rock and make a dome with it?"

"Hey, Blowhard," Kinnon said, after a moment.

It took Val a moment to realise he was being addressed. "Fuck you."

"That is not, under any circumstances, ever going to happen," Kinnon shot back, considering the pitch-black around them. "Turn the wind. I know that's not going to last long, but there's a shitton of sand in the air."

The light went on in Val's head, but it didn't brighten the dome at all. "And Candles melts it around the dome, and your barrier keeps us from becoming a roast."

"We just need someone to cool it," Candles pointed out. "And I'd say Keili, but it's not going to do us any good if it explodes."

"Explodes? Why would it explode?" Val blinked stupidly, glad no one could make out his face.

"Someone didn't take any potions labs..." Kinnon muttered.

"Just... trust him, it would," Petra sighed, rubbing her forehead. "I can cool it. Just keep that barrier steady. Val?"
"Right." Val nodded and started to cast, pulling along the winds as though they were the strings on a puppet. He shook his head, even though the winds obeyed. "I don't know how you expect me to do this without being able to see what I'm doing."

The other mages ignored him, focused on their own tasks. Like Val, they worked by feel rather than by sight, and though it was unsettling, the magic yielded to them just as easily. Even through the stone and the barrier, they could feel the heat of Candles's fire, if muted. The camels lowed unhappily.

"It's sticking," Val muttered, after a few moments, when he could feel the sand pulling out of the air, slowing down and adhering to the stone, as Candles's fire heated it. He twisted the wind, and it followed a new path, supporting the melting sand as it got runnier, directing it into the places where the wind could still dip in and touch the stone.

Candles kept breathing slowly, trying to ignore the stench of camel-shit that permeated every crevice of the dome, as she held the fire close, pressing it against the stone. "You got it?" she asked.

"It's getting runny. Back off." Val battered the molten sand with the wind, trying to keep it mostly intact, mostly a single piece. "Petra?"

"Six feet noseward," Petra said, as she laid in the ice wall far enough out not to touch the glass, but close enough for Val to cool the wind with it.

Val was starting to shake with the effort, glad no one could see this. The chill came easily into the wind, and he could hear the glass cooling -- a crinkling sound. And then came another sound, flat and sudden, and the wind stumbled around the shards, as the dome burst. "Andraste's holy tits aflame! This is useless!"

"Don't take the prophet's name in vain," Keili warned, only half paying attention.

"Shit," Kinnon muttered. He hadn't felt or heard the glass break, but keeping this barrier up for so long was starting to give him a headache, the kind that started as a pressure on his temples and squeezed. "Can we try again?"

"I don't think that will work," Petra said, cutting in before Val could answer more rudely. "It's too unstable out there. Does anyone have a Plan B?"

"Let's say no one does," Candles said. "Ansgar, how long do these storm thingies last?"

She could hear him shift, drawing in a breath as he considered. "Varies, of course. Usually the better part of an hour."

"Fuuuuck," Candles groaned. "I am not standing in camel shit for the better part of an hour. Someone come up with a Plan B."

Fen'Din sighed and stretched. "The problem is we need light, right? We can't use wisps or we'll scare the camels. We can't punch a hole in the wall, or the sand will blow in. We can't make glass because we just tried that. We could punch a hole in the wall and fill it with a shield, except that's going to be a constant drain on every arcane and spirit mage we have, so that's possible, but it may not be smart. Ice dome? Keili, is that a thing we can do?"

"It's a thing someone else might be able to do. I'd probably just make it snow for a square mile, or freeze the camels."

"Listen, I believe that you've got it in you to be good at this, but you're right. Now's not the time for a
leap of faith." Fen'Din laughed. "What else have we got? Who else have we got? Anyone else for ice dome?"

"I'm not sure that'd work," Ansgar cut in. "If it's as bad out there as it sounds like, it's a good thing we're in stone. Ice is soft enough I'd be afraid the winds would carve right through it. Or it'd melt."

One of the merchants spoke up, after a moment. "The smiths used to do this thing with turning slag and dust into cheap gems. You heat it up until it's squishy and squeeze it. I don't know much more than that."

Petra hummed, considering. "Well, heated up and squishy we can, apparently, do. And we might be able to do the squeezing part, too." She tried to take stock of who was around them without being able to see. "Kinnon? How good's your Crushing Prison?"

"Pretty decent," Kinnon said, rubbing his forehead and trying to ease the distracting ache forming there. "But you know what's better? My shields."

Petra could picture the droll look he would have given her. "Yes, but we have other people who could make shields. The list of people who can squeeze things is much shorter. Unless I'm missing someone." She raised her voice. "Anyone in here know Crushing Prison well enough to make gems?"

There was some muttering and shifting, as well as some gagging from the stench that only seemed to get worse.

"No? I guess it's you by default, Kinnon."

"Awesome," Kinnon sighed. "Please don't let this explode?"

The barrier was doubled, this time, because Kinnon didn't trust anyone other than himself to hold it up. Candles leaned dizzily against a camel, trying to recover the focus she needed, before casting.

"More sand, less heat," Val said, voice muffled by his robes and the front of his saddle, as he tried to stop sitting without falling into camel shit. "Go?"

"Go," Kinnon confirmed, glancing toward the darkness in the direction of the two mages holding up the barrier. "If that starts to collapse, I need to know immediately. In fact, don't even wait that long. If you're feeling weak, tell me. I don't want to crush us all, in some bizarre accident, because you were too embarrassed."

The sand felt more like a pudding, this time, as Val piled it around the dome, again, under Candles's flames. "You might want to start squeezing it. It's too heavy to chase with the wind."

"I can only get about half a moment at a time," Kinnon said, focusing on making sure his starting barrier was larger than the stone dome.

It was odd, squeezing sand from the other side of a stone wall, but there was a finesse to it. Squeeze too much the wrong way, and he put too much pressure on the barriers and stone. Don't squeeze enough, and the sand stayed soupy.

Ansgar stared up at the roof of their dome, trying to look past the wall of black into what was happening on the other side. He didn't pretend to understand this magey nonsense, but it was serving him well so far. "Is it working?"

Val shushed him, but Kinnon tried to find an answer. "It's doing... something."
The sand soup was certainly coalescing into something more solid but whether that was a gem-like solid was something he couldn't tell.

"Something is good," Petra said uncertainly.

"Something exploded, last time," Kinnon reminded her, as one of the barrier mages shouted for him to stop. He paused for a bit, until the barrier was renewed in its double strength, and then returned to evenly crushing the hot sand.

Finally, breathless, he leaned back against the cargo behind him, and called for the barrier to come down. "I'm not hearing any exploding..."

"Can we poke a hole in the rock and see how it looks?" Candles asked, putting her hand on the warm stone wall.

"Just don't touch it. It's probably still too hot," Kinnon decided, trying to figure out if he had enough mana left in him to take the stone down, after that. "And don't cool it! I don't know what it's going to do!"

After another moment to catch his breath, Kinnon parted the stone, high on the dome, to reveal an oddly clear reddish-orange outer dome. The sand clouds still crawled across it, but the light was still blinding after the time spent in total darkness.

"As soon as someone can see, I think now would be an excellent time to let the camel-stench out," Fen'Din suggested, blinking and rubbing his eyes. The stone around them, he noticed, was almost the same colour as the glass -- if that was glass -- above. Not surprising, since the sand was a similar colour.

"That's... actually pretty," Keili murmured, absently petting Dolora as though she were a lap cat. "Can't see much through it, but then there's not much to see in the middle of a sandstorm anyway, I imagine."

"Indeed," Ansgar agreed, stepping out of the way of the mages manipulating the dome around them to create a few air vents. "Can't say I've seen that before."

The hiss of whirling sand changed in pitch, louder now with the air vents. Some sand drifted in, but it was worth it for the air carrying out the stench of camel dung.

Ansgar shook his head in amazement. "You can make gems like this? You could earn some real money doing that, you know."

"There we go!" Candles said, grinning. "Another disguise: travelling gem merchants."

"I don't think anything would be as convincing as our circus group routine," Petra replied.

"True," Candles agreed.
Chapter Summary

The 'Golden City' of the Anderfels

The mages reach Hossberg, where the only thing more impressive than the architecture is the liquor.

The city towered above them, in a way nothing had, since they'd left Kinloch Hold. The red-brown walls at eye-height became decorative tile, below, and gem-studded golden plates, far above. Every wall was dotted with tiles and mosaics depicting the life of Andraste and her disciples. As they entered the city along the wide trade road that buckled out from beside the river, passing through the huge, heavy gates, the most obvious feature of the city nearly glowed, before them: the golden spires of the Hossberg Chantry. Beyond the walls, just a bit further into the desert, the top of the Hossberg Circle could be seen, its dome separated from the roof by golden pillars and topped with a massive statue of Andraste, ascendant.

"The Golden City..." Kinnon breathed, unable to tear his eyes away from the chantry spires.

"Don't be profane, Kinnon," Keili sighed, studying the mosaics along the road, each crafted around the doors of the buildings that lined the street. The designs were easily recognisable, but presented very differently to their Fereldan counterparts.

"A lot of people think it, when they see Hossberg for the first time," Ansgar said, gesturing to the gleaming spires. "I understand it was done on purpose, to give a person the feel of walking into the Maker's presence. It's some grand architecture, but I don't think I'm going to convert for it."

Other merchants chuckled.

"And keep your hoods up," Ansgar warned. "They're not averse to elves, exactly, but they're not real friendly, either. Still, better elves than mages."

"And that's why we're all religious pilgrims, going to see Our Lady of the Anderfels, at the Merdaine." Candles nodded, checking to make sure her veil was secure. "And Petra's going to sell those nice jewels for whatever we can get for them, to fund our journey into the desert."

"And I'm to stay by the camels, and keep our friends from getting into trouble." Fen'Din laughed, glancing around to ensure the spirits stayed close. "But, how much trouble could they be? They just want to help people."

"That in itself could be a kind of trouble if you're not careful," Ansgar teased. "I suppose you could pretend the bones are holy relics or something."

"Yes, the holiest of nug skulls," Candles replied with mock solemnity. "Blessed Andraste herself speaks through it."

Keili elbowed Candles, who cackled, unapologetic.

"Market's down this way," Ansgar said, shaking his head at their antics. "There's a place to rest and water the camels along the way. Fen'Din can oversee that."
Kinnon nearly walked into Keili as he looked around in awe, trying to get a good look at the mosaics and the glittering gold above. The sights were almost worth all that travelling through the desert. Next to him, Val was less impressed, still trying to get sand out of his shoes, as he had been for the past few days.

"I hope there's a better selection of drinks here," he muttered.

Fen'Din, as it turned out, did not know how to water the camels, even after watching the merchants start the process. Leniency, however, took pity on him and leaned into the camels just enough to convince them they should drink and pay no mind to the odd-scented elf among them.

Further into the plaza surrounding the golden chantry, Ansgar stopped to chat with the buyers he'd come to see, and Kinnon and Val stumbled over each other, both looking for a tavern.

"It's a city, therefore there's drink," Kinnon insisted, studying the bilingual signs, until he found one that indicated a tavern could be found down a sidestreet, toward the river.

"That's not the question. The question is whether the drink is worth drinking." Val kept his arms folded across his chest and stalked after Kinnon.

"Did they just go looking for a bar?" Petra asked, looking up from the jeweller's stall, where she had presented the gems for consideration. "They don't have any money!"

Candles sighed. "Come on, Keili, we need to go save them from themselves, and possibly each other. And remind them we're on a pilgrimage, not a pub crawl."

"Oh? Did you come up to see the Cathedral of Our Lady's Song?" the jeweller asked, squinting into a stone.

"The Merdaine," Petra replied, waving Candles off. "But, we've come to Hossberg first. I understand the journey will need significant outfitting, and we brought these to pay for it."

The woman's eyebrows tilted up. "That is quite the journey," she said, holding the stone up to the sun. It didn't sparkle, but it had a lovely glow in the light. "I am certain Andraste smiles upon you for your devotion." As she spoke she counted out coins, one at a time, and Petra counted them too, as though not blinking would raise the worth of their gems.

Keili and Candles caught up to the boys as they were poking their heads into a bar. Val recoiled, lip curled. "I can't go in there. It smells foul!"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this," Kinnon said with forced cheer, "but so do you. We've been travelling in the sand and sun on camel-back. None of us smells like daisies."

Val's face twisted, but he decided that he could learn to ignore the stench after a few drinks and shoved past Kinnon.

"Petra says you're not to spend money you don't have," Keili announced, stepping in front of Kinnon as they entered the bar.

Candles laughed. "Actually, she said to remind you that you don't have any money. Same thing, I guess."

"Well, I'll..." Kinnon puffed out his chest and glanced around the bar. "Work for it. That spicy shimmy's got to be good for something."
"I'd say Val's got a better chance. That blond hair? At least he looks like he could be native."
Candles grinned, as Val turned around at the sound of his name.

"Absolutely not." He crossed his arms. "I will not degrade my family name for a glass of wine. We'll just wait for Petra."

"Unlike you, I don't have a family name." Kinnon smiled brightly, looking around the room. It was a dingy place. Val had been right about that. "And I'm probably some kind of exotic, around here. Classic, solid Fereldan looks." He patted his own cheek, winked at Candles, and leapt onto an empty table. "I am but a poor pilgrim in need of a drink! I will offer an extra spicy shimmy to the person who buys me one!"

"Get down," the bartender called. "Don't need another whore in here!"

"Ah... not... that spicy," Kinnon corrected, clearing his throat.

A group of men in the corner laughed, but they had turned to give him their attention. Guardsmen, Kinnon surmised from the armour, hopefully off-duty, considering the tall drinks in front of them.

"Kinnon!" Keili hissed. "Get down!" But he waved her off. Keili turned to Candles, expecting support from that corner. "Can you tell him to get down? Maybe he'll listen to you."

"Oh, no way. I need to see this." Candles pulled out a chair and took a seat.

"All right, Red," shouted one of the guardsmen. "Show us what you've got, and we'll see about that drink." The others smirked and laughed and lifted their tankards in salute.

"See?" Kinnon said to Keili. "A willing audience."

"Willing only because they haven't faced that nightmare yet," Val grumbled.

"Shut up, Val," Candles said. "You're ruining the moment."

Kinnon bent down to Val's level. "Don't hate me because I'm young and flexible."

"What about because you're an absolute idiot, lowering public opinion of Fereldans all across Thedas?" Keili asked, covering her eyes with one hand and turning away.

Kinnon ignored her and stood back up, hips already shaking to an imagined beat. He took tiny steps, sweeping the heavy Ander-cut robes around him, as he danced. Around him, some of the drinkers picked up the rhythm and pounded on the tables to keep time.

Candles whistled and applauded as Kinnon dropped into a deep squat, tapping one finger against her nose before he stood, again, still shimmying.

"If it wasn't him, that might actually be pretty good," Val admitted, quietly, to Keili. "Except it is him, and this is one of those things I'd hoped never to witness. I couldn't believe it when I heard Anders had passed that stupid dance on to someone else."

"He better get free drinks after this," Keili muttered, still looking away, "because I will need one."

The guardsmen in the corner hooted and cheered while the bartender continued serving drinks as though there were nothing going on. Kinnon had worked up a sweat by the time he finished his first round of shimmying, which he topped with a bow and a wink at his more vocal audience members.

Candles fanned herself dramatically while the crowd laughed. In the back, someone called for an
encore, which a few voices echoed.

"Please, Maker, no," Keili groaned.

"It's been a long journey," Kinnon told the bar. "My friends and I need a drink to fuel the next spicy shimmy!"

Val stared down at the drink slid under his nose. "I can't believe that worked."

Kinnon jumped down from the table, wincing when his knees creaked. "The first drink's on me. If you want another, you get to dance." He waggled his eyebrows, and Val recoiled.

"Not him." The bartender shot a look at Val. "We've had enough Orlesian asses to last a few more ages."

"Aw, but Val's not a whole ass! He's just an asshole!" Candles slapped Val's back, leaving her hand there as she relieved him of his drink.

"I am not an asshole! I'm a member of the Noble House of --"

Kinnon paled and grabbed the front of Val's robes dragging him down toward a kiss Val fought to avoid, but at least the sudden motion stopped him from talking. 'The Noble House of Serault' would've had the templars on them in mere moments -- of all the mages missing, Val was the one with a memorable name, and a historically relevant apostate in his family. "Do you want to die?"

Kinnon hissed into Val's ear. "Shut up about your family."

The bartender raised his eyebrows wryly at Candles. "You were saying?"

Candles shrugged and studied the drink in her hand. "What is this? I don't think I've ever seen a drink that white that didn't come out of a cow or a sheep."

"It's called Anijswater, and it turns white when you mix it with water. It's cheap and strong -- stronger if you drink it straight, which you're not doing in my bar." The bartender smiled thinly. "It's one of the treasures of the Anderfels."

"Hm." Candles shrugged and saluted Keili with her glass before taking a swig. She slammed the drink back to the table, her next breath coming in a choking wheeze. "S'good," she assured the bartender with a croak.

The bartender laughed and poured another for Keili, who eyed it as though afraid the cup would eat her face. "Just don't give it to the Orlesian," he told her.

"Oh, please, he has to have some," Candles said, her grin shark-like. "He's been whining about the lack of 'proper drink' around here."

"Has he, now?" the bartender asked, narrowing a look at Val.

As though cued, Val spun and slammed a hand down on the bar, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "I need to rinse out my mouth," he said, cutting a glare at Kinnon. "I'll take whatever swill you have available. It's on him." He pointed at Kinnon with his thumb.

"No, it's not," Kinnon replied.

Keili exchanged a look with Candles and handed Val her Anijswater.

Val tipped it back and gagged, suddenly, choking as he tried not to spit the stuff all over the floor.
"Water," he gurgled, one hand tight on the bar, as the guardsmen in the corner laughed uproariously.

"It's not wine from Montfort," Kinnon teased, pressing a hand dramatically against his chest. "His poor body simply can't handle it."

The bartender cracked a smile, slowly drawing a glass of water for Val. "You see? I knew he was from Orlais. Typical."

Kinnon sniffed at the drink before tasting it. "Wow. That is..." He blinked a few times. "That is like getting kicked in the face by a cup of licorice tea." He paused and drank more of it. "I kind of like that. It's better than the ale from Kal-Sharok."

"It's because we were drinking cheap ale in Kal-Sharok," Keili reminded him. "This must be better stuff. I hope you're feeling extra spicy, tonight." She looked around him at the table full of guardsmen still watching them.

"I'm always feeling extra spicy." Kinnon wiggled his eyebrows.

"Except when you're feeling extra whiny. Or extra fainty. Can you not faint, here, do you think? Does the spice negate the fainting?" Candles joked taking what was left of the glass back from Val and squinting at it, before she passed it back to Keili. "You better not have spit in this."

Still doubled-over, Val said something that might have sounded vaguely threatening if it hadn't come out in a garbled wheeze.

Keili sniffed the drink. "I suspect the alcohol will have burned away the spit." She took a cautious sip, and her face twisted, scrunching inward. "Wow," she coughed.

"Isn't it great?" Candles chirped before taking another burning sip.

Fortified and fired up after a few sips, Kinnon jumped back up onto the table to cheers from his audience. By then, Val had sunk to the floor, still recovering.

Boredly, the bartender set a cup on the counter. "Your water," he informed the swearing Orlesian mess. Val made no move to stand back up.
Kinnon, like so many other mages, is hung over and can't recall how he spent half the night before. No one tells him, and the party continues on to Kassel, where Fen'Din has a surprising amount of information.

Fen'Din looked on in amusement, as Petra worked her way through an enormous number of hungover mages. She'd run out of potions after the first ten, and seemed somewhat thankful that at least some of them had the sense not to get completely smashed. Still, she and Ansgar had needed to carry several drunken mages back to their camp outside the walls of Hossberg. They'd been far too many to even consider affording rooms at the inn.

"Somehow, you lot have managed to avoid spending all our money." Petra's voice was tight as she moved through the endless line of tents, each with barely any room to walk, between the groaning and snoring mages. "I suppose I should be grateful for that."

Kinnon stumbled out of a tent and stumbled to his knees at Petra's feet. "I think I did something to my back. It feels like I scraped it on something."

Fen'Din, who could see Kinnon's back, the way he wore his outer robe turned down, choked on a laugh, but said nothing. He could see the top of what looked like a fresh tattoo, over the roll of the top of the robe -- part of a rippling sunburst with an eye in it, the word 'SHAKE' inscribed around the top. He smoothed his hair and looked away, still smiling as he sipped his Cumberland roast.

Candles, who had already experienced the life-changing relief of a healed hangover, cackled from where she still laid in the ground. She would be covered in dust later, but that was a problem for future Candles.

Petra sighed, ignoring Candles and already pulling a touch of healing to her fingers, only to pause, blinking, when she caught sight of the tattoo at the small of Kinnon's back. She opened her mouth to say something, paused, and turned to catch Keili's eye.

Keili had a block of ice wrapped in a fold of her robe and pressed to the back of her neck. Through a groggy smile, she pressed a finger to her lips.

"That is... quite a scrape, yes," Petra said, biting the inside of her cheek to keep a straight face. "How did you get that?"

"Damned if I remember," Kinnon grumbled, his whole body loosening at the touch of healing. He reached back to touch his 'scrape', but Petra swatted his hand away.

"Don't touch it. You need to let it heal, and you'll just irritate it."

"Heal it from the outside first," Fen'Din called out, with a pointed look at Petra. "It'll... itch less."

"You don't get itches," Kinnon groaned. "How would you know?"

"Anders told me."
His face, Petra realised. Of all of them, Fen'Din knew what he was talking about. Not about the itching, but about how to keep the ink in, through the healing. Chewing on her lip, not to smile, she began carefully healing the lines, hoping Fen'Din was right.

The headache gone and his back growing less painful with every touch of Petra's fingers, Kinnon sighed and rested his head on the ground between his knees. "Maker bless you. They should make statues of you. One of the Anointed for sure."

The robe pulled down as he bent forward, and the rest of the work was revealed, coming to a stop just above the crack of his ass. 'SHAKE IT', the inscription read, and Petra fell to coughing, not to laugh.

"Just the dust," she croaked, turning away and giving Keili a horrified look.

Kassel, it seemed, was just like Hossberg, but smaller, right down to the Dwarven Quarter. The Chantry was also much less golden and glowy, but the statuary inside was just as beautiful, if not moreso. Even more free of southern influence. Petra stopped to sell some gems to a jeweller, as Ansgar led the last of the caravan down to the camel barns beside the river.

"It seems a lot muddier, here," Kinnon noted, examining walls less tiled than those in Hossberg, but still decorated with images of Andraste.

"Because it's made of mud," Ansgar reminded him. "Here, hold this box for me, a minute. Gotta bring that to a shop in the Quarter. Some guy, up here, is apparently making very regular orders."

"For fine dwarven crafts?" Kinnon asked, with a teasing smile.

"You didn't hear it from me, but... lyrium." Ansgar shrugged. "The contract should've gone through Kal-Sharok, but I got a buddy up here who runs a shop for goods with a very small group of buyers."

Kinnon looked nervously at the box in his hands. "You don't say?"

"Come on, we'll send a few of your friends on to the inn, and I'll introduce you. He's a great guy. Can probably find buyers for those stones, too, if you want to make a business out of it." Ansgar clapped him on the back and headed out of the camel barn.

Out in the market, Fen'Din and Keili had found the table of a craftsman who made little figurines of Ander heroes, Wardens, and people of Andrastian legend.

"Oh, isn't this Justinia darling?" Keili smiled, turning the figure over in her hands. "And look at all the detail!"

But, Fen'Din's eyes were elsewhere and he crouched to get a better look at a Warden and her dog. "Is that Solona?" he asked Keili. "I really think that's Solona."

"It can't be," Keili said on impulse, when, really, it made sense to make figurines of the Hero of Ferelden. It was still difficult to wrap that title around Solona in her mind. Keili followed Fen'Din's lead and crouched down to squint at the figurine. "Or... well, it does sort of look like her, doesn't it? Except for..." Keili trailed off, cupping her hands in front of her chest. "Unless becoming a Warden affects that. Does becoming a Warden affect that?"

"I don't know, but we're in the Anderfels. Someone probably knows, here." Fen'Din shrugged and
tipped the figure back to get a better look.

Keili hummed and considered the vendor, who smiled sweetly up at them. Maybe she would ask someone else.

Now that he knew what was in the box, Kinnon was hyperaware of everyone around him, wondering if anyone there was onto them or could see how nervous he was. His back's itching didn't help him keep calm or still, and he squirmed, hearing Petra scolding him not to touch it even when she wasn't there. Ansgar's exasperated looks filled in well enough.

Ansgar nearly bumped into a customer at the door, a tall Ander with beads in his beard, throwing a parting joke over his shoulder. The man paused, looking curiously at Kinnon, for a moment, before shaking his head and heading for the pho house next door.

"I didn't have this problem in Hossberg!" Kinnon hissed, following Ansgar into the shop.

"You were drunk in Hossberg. You don't know if you had this problem or not." Ansgar chuckled and called out into the depths of the shop. "Hey, I brought your beans! Straight from southern Ferelden, complete with a Fereldan to carry them in." He paused, glancing up at Kinnon. "You are Fereldan, right?"

"Dogs, dogs, dogs, shit, and dogs." Kinnon raised his eyebrows, looking wryly down at Ansgar. "Of course I'm Fereldan."

"Ansgar! You're early!" the merchant came out of the back, wiping his hands on his trousers. "I wasn't expecting you for another week!"

"I picked up some pilgrims, along the way. They made the trip a whole lot easier." Ansgar gestured for Kinnon to put the box on the counter for inspection. "Trovid, this is Kinnon. He's from Ferelden, and I'm leaving him in your care. He says he's got some friends up here, and I thought you might know the names."

Trovid looked expectantly at Kinnon, who stopped trying to not think about scratching his back long enough to pay attention. "Ah. Right. Well, there's -- I mean, we all called him Anders, but that's not really useful. He's like..." Kinnon grasped for an adjective and landed on a gesture, holding a hand over his head. "...this tall and has kind of gold hair and gold eyes and... I just described everyone in this town, didn't I?"

Ansgar ducked his head, but not even his impressive beard could hide the smirk he was making.

"A good portion of it, yes," Trovid said, patiently, leaning on the counter.

"Right." Kinnon scratched behind his ear. "Karl might be easier... His name is Karl, by the way, Karl Thekla. Assuming he's still using that name. Um. He's Fereldan too, about my height. Blue eyes -- I think -- and greying hair. Maybe grey eyes. Lightish eyes of some sort, anyway. He usually has this serious look about him even if he isn't being serious at all."

Still not the best description, but it was more to go on.

Trovid pursed his lips, staring down at the counter in thought. Kinnon waited with hope in his chest only to feel it sink when Trovid shook his head. "Sorry, lad. I can't say for sure. That Karl doesn't sound like much of anyone, and that Anders sounds too much like everyone."

Kinnon sighed, shoulders drooping. "Thanks anyway."
"You'll get him what he needs, if he comes to you. He won't be short of means to pay." Ansgar eyed Trovid sternly.

"Of course! Why would I turn away a customer? Especially a friend of Ansgar!" Trovid laughed. "But, if you're looking for humans, the Chantry might be more help. They've got all kinds of records about everyone who lives around here or used to live around here. If your friends own property, the Chantry will know about it. If they got married? The Chantry will know about it. If they've had children? The Chantry will know about it. You can't take a piss in this town without the Chantry knowing."

"I'll get you back to the market, so you don't get lost. We're staying the night, and then I'm back down south again." Ansgar shrugged, picking up the next list of orders and the pouch of coins from the counter. "Always a good time, Trovid. Come down to the inn, and we can have a few drinks, later."

The Chantry was something Fen'Din had already thought of -- and he had information Kinnon didn't. He kept his hood raised as he approached a sister filing papers. "Can you help me? I'm looking for an old friend who lives near here, but I lost his address somewhere in the journey."

"Of course! What's his name? And does he live in Kassel, proper, or one of the river villages?" The sister moved quickly to a set of shelves filled with volumes of deeds. "It's a different set of books for each of them."

"He'd be in By the Petty Crown. His name is Ewald Haraldsson." Fen'Din could remember the names of both of Anders's parents. He'd actually written them down, completely without context, in two separate books.

The sister nodded, pulling down the right volume. "I am familiar with that name," she said. "And possibly the face, though I can't say I've seen him in this Chantry in a long time. Here, let me see..." She leaned the volume on a rail and flipped through it, mouthing words soundlessly to herself as she scanned the pages. "Ah! Here he is. You'll have to cross the river to get there, but it's not too far."

Tucking the volume under her arm, the sister went to the desk and pulled out a quill and parchment, scribbling down a crude map and directions for Fen'Din.

"Maker's blessings on you, Sister." Fen'Din bowed, gratefully, and accepted the map, cocking his head at the door as he turned back toward Keili. "Come, let us find him. The less time we spend in the inn, the better."
Over the River and Down the Road

Chapter Summary

Fen'Din's inquiries missed their mark ever so slightly, but they're definitely in the right village.

"How in Calenhad's balls do you know his name?" Kinnon demanded, near the end of the boat ride, after sulking most of the way across. "All these years and none of us know his name, except you?"

"I know his name because he knows my name. He was there when I found it." Fen'Din smiled, mysteriously, hood still raised to hide his ears.

"And Ewald? Really? Who names their kid Ewald? I want to have a talk with his parents." Kinnon shook his head, as the ferry was drawn in and tied to the dock.

"You'll have a chance. Ewald isn't his name, it's his father's."

Kinnon sputtered as he stepped off the boat. "You know his father's name? How do you know these things? I'm the one he taught the spicy shimmy to!"

"You were too young when he felt a need to tell the stories. You weren't the new bearer of the spicy shimmy, then." Fen'Din took the map out of his cuff and unfolded it, studying the lines. "Through the market," he pointed with his free hand, "and down the road on the right, half a mile past the last shop. There's a barley farm."

"The road on the right?" Petra asked. "Which road?"

"It's not that big. There's only one." Fen'Din chuckled and handed her the map.

"I think there were more people in the -- in the Hold," Petra said, with a quick glance around to be sure no one had heard her stumble. "How does this even count as a town?"

"It doesn't." Fen'Din led them into the Market. "It's the settlement by that tavern, but it's still treated as part of Kassel. Anders had to explain an awful lot of Ander culture to Karl, at one point."

Kinnon shook his head, nearly stepping on Keili's foot as he looked around. "I never heard him talk about that stuff. Anytime anyone asked him about the Anderfels, he would make a joke and change the subject."

"I really hope he's here," Petra said, glancing at the map over Fen'Din's shoulder. "Not that I haven't enjoyed the sightseeing, after... not being able to for so long, but this was a long way to come on faith."

Keili smiled, even as Candles and Kinnon made vague noises of agreement. "He's here," she said with a certainty she couldn't explain, a certainty that made her think of Hawk Hold and scaling that wall with nothing but belief to keep her up.

The farmhouse was small, simple, a plain mudbrick like the rest of Kassel, but it looked well-tended and clean, at least from the outside.
"Is this the place?" Candles asked, turning as she walked to eye the sprawling fields. "I can't say I know what a barley field looks like, but if I had to guess, it would be something like this."

The sun was still bright, but slowly sinking in the sky, and they could see a man making his way back down the field toward the house, walking slowly and deliberately. Fen'Din stepped into the enclosed space around the door and knocked, anyway.

"He's still in the field, didn't you see?" Candles asked, gesturing toward the side of the house.

"Good. I don't want to talk to him." Fen'Din winked, and after a moment, the door opened, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered woman with greying light blond hair.

"Oh!" She sounded surprised and looked confused. "You're not my son!"

"No, but we're friends of his, from the south. We were hoping you could tell us where to find him." Fen'Din smiled and shrugged, trying the same story he'd used on the Chantry Sister. "I remembered the name of the town, but I mislaid the address, and the woman at the Chantry was kind enough to point us toward you."

The woman eyed the lot of them, stare lingering on Fen'Din's tattoos. From behind everyone, Candles waved cheerfully.

"I did not know Jan was expecting company," she said, glancing over their shoulders, back at the man approaching them. Petra strained to understand her thick accent. "But it is good of his friends to visit him. He and Mack could use the company, but there's only so much a mother can do."

Kinnon exchanged a confused look with Candles. Jan he could guess was Anders, but Mack? He supposed it made sense for Karl to pick a pseudonym, just in case.

"He lives a little ways down the road," she said, gesturing in the appointed direction. "He built himself a house and works the land there."

She beamed with pride, and Kinnon thought about the small, embroidered pillow Anders used to keep tucked away.

"Thank you. We're sorry to have interrupted your supper, but I look forward to meeting you again, under more favourable circumstances." Fen'Din bowed as he had for the Chantry sister, and turned away to lead the group back to the road.
A Pranksters Reunion

Chapter Summary

Fen'Din finally gets the right house. Anders needs a moment to compose himself.

When the knock came, Anders got up to open the door, leaving Cormac sprawled half-dressed on the bench around the fire. "Mama, is that you?" he called out, knowing if it wasn't it would be someone looking for the healer. He straightened his robes, just in case, before opening the door onto the protective tunnel that shielded it from the winds.

And as soon as he saw what was on his doorstep, he thought he might be ill. Already ill. Hallucinating. He choked on his own breath, trying to figure out what he was really seeing. And then the figure spoke.

"What the fuck is wrong with your face, roundear?" The elf, definitely an elf, now that his hood was back, squinted up at him.

"How-- how are you here? What are you doing here?" Anders sputtered, still trying to catch his breath.

"Where else would you be? You always said you wanted to go home."

"Mack! Mack, come quick and tell me what I'm seeing!" Anders called out, reaching out to touch the elf's face.

"What?" Cormac stumbled over to the door, the top half of his robes rolled down and tied around his waist, and ducked under Anders's arm for a better look. "That's an elf. That's an elf with very nice hair and outstanding Falon'Din vallaslin." He paused. "I don't know you, Dalish. You a friend of Jannik's?"

"Jannik?" The elf asked, looking up at Anders. "You have a name now?"

"He's not Dalish. Mack, let me introduce you to my favourite elfhole necromancer, Fen'Din." Anders let that sink in for a moment. "And I don't have a name. I'm borrowing someone else's. Long story."

"Wait, wait, this is the guy with the bees?" Cormac's face lit up. "What are we all standing in the doorway for? I'm making tea! You drink tea, right?"

"With a great deal of honey, when possible," Fen'Din replied, with a small smile. "You should know that I haven't come alone."

"Who'd you get to come with y..." Anders paused. "You always said you weren't leaving until the stones of the tower parted for your will."

"They did. Most of the survivors are with me." Fen'Din shrugged, idly. "I remember you talking about farming. We came to do that."

"You... The Hold?" Anders asked, one hand gripping the doorframe, as the world seemed to spin again.
"It won't be a fortress again, without a lot of work." Fen'Din smiled blithely, for a moment, before his expression soured, suddenly and he tugged Anders's beard, turning his face to the side. "What is wrong with your face? You don't look like you any more."

"It's called a beard," Cormac joked. "I know that's not something you get, as an elf, but..."

"No, not the beard, I know the beard. I've seen the beard before." Fen'Din squinted, as if he couldn't quite focus. "Where's that spirit that used to follow you around? The one that helped with your healing? Your spirit will tell me what's wrong."

Anders's face suddenly slackened in surprised realisation. "She's not with me any longer. I ... you have to understand, I'm ... I'm not just me any more."

"No, you don't look like Uldred." Fen'Din shook his head.

"It's... not a demon," Anders sighed. "Where is everyone else?"

"Most of them are at the inn, in Kassel. Petra and a few others are waiting down the other end. They didn't like the look of the tunnel. Why?"

"I'll go get them, shall I?" Cormac slipped past the elf. "Bring them in?"

"Please!" Anders finally stepped back and waved Fen'Din into the house.

"So, where's Karl?" Fen'Din asked, walking in and looking around. "You got Karl, right?"

Anders closed the door with a shaking hand. "Karl died." The words were thin and breathy, as Anders sank down where he stood, barely out of the path of the door. The thought of Karl hadn't hit him this hard since the morning after, but having to explain it to Fen'Din, who'd been a constant, just as Karl had been, when they were all still together... "They-- They made him Tranquil. I found him. It was a trap. I still ... I still thought I could take him away from all that, but he didn't want to go. He wanted to die. He didn't want to live after everything they'd done. Begged me, and I didn't want to do it. Just for a minute, he was himself again. I don't know what happened. I don't know why, but ... he was just Karl, and not the shell of the man I used to --" He choked up, finally. "He begged me to kill him. Begged me and pleaded with me to do it while his wits were still with him. And I did, just as he started to slip away, again. It was the last thing he ever asked me, and I did what he wanted."

Anders dissolved into tears, curling forward to rest his head on the floor, almost silent except the way his breathing stuttered through his clenching throat.

"I heard what happened in Kirkwall." Fen'Din sat down at Anders's side, stroked his back. "You killed them all, didn't you? They hurt him, and you killed them all."

"I shouldn't have. I killed too many. They weren't all... Some of them could've been saved. Some of them could've been saved," Anders sobbed, quietly. "Every night I see his face, when he came back to me. Just a few minutes. Barely that. And I ask myself if he could've been saved. If I could've done more than he asked of me. If I could've made him whole again."

"He was Tranquil, Ket. You don't come back from that. Once they take away the music, what's left?" Fen'Din pulled Anders's hair back from his face. "You freed him from torment. You did save him. You gave him back the music."

"The music. The fucking song. Everything sings, and fuck all of it singing," Anders snarled, suddenly. "You followed me. You heard. Did they tell you I was a Warden? I hear the song of the Blight, now. One day, that's going to drive me mad. One day it's going to kill me."
"I know. I know what it means -- I read the stories, when I heard about Amell."

Anders's laugh was bitter. "Stories. I read all the stories, too, once, and they used to sound so wonderful and heroic. They don't prepare you at all for the real thing."

Fen'Din, here. Anders still hadn't wrapped his head around it, still expected to wake up, but Fen'Din looked and felt so real, so solid, the lines of his tattoos exactly as Anders remembered them.

Then there was another voice from his past, calling out one of the many names he'd borrowed and passed off as his own. "Anders!"

Anders didn't have time to move away from the door before it opened, slamming into his ass emphatically enough to bruise it, and Anders squeaked, scurrying sideways out of the way in one of the less dignified manoeuvres of his lifetime.

From the half-opened doorway, Kinnon blinked down at the ass he had just hit. Behind him was muffled laughter. "Well, that's not how I -- wow. Let me just close this and try again." He stepped back, pulling the door closed with him.

"What." Anders blinked at the door a few times, before lumbering to his feet and staggering out of the way.

Beside him, Fen'Din wasn't even trying to stifle his laughter. "He's been like that the whole way here."

"He's been like that his entire life, as far as I can tell." Anders chuckled, a little flatly, and pulled the door open. "Kinnon! What a surprise, yes, do come in. Try not to slam anyone else in the ass with a door."

"Don't be too hard on him," Petra said, pushing Kinnon into the room, so she could follow. "He and Candles paid for a good half this trip." She finally looked up and realised why Kinnon had just been staring. "Anders?"

Anders grinned and tugged on the beaded ends of his beard. "Isn't it great? No one will ever know I'm me. Actually, they all think I'm my brother Jan."

"Even your mother?" Keili asked, with a disapproving look.

"What? No! No, no. She just calls me Jan so no one else will notice." Anders waved everyone in and closed the door.

"You look ridiculous," Candles pointed out. "Val's going to shit himself."

"Maker's ass, you brought Val?" Anders groaned, trying to figure out how to handle the fact that there were suddenly five more mages than usual standing in his living room, and however many more waiting in Kassel.

"He's like a leech," Kinnon grumbled, "coming along for the ride whether you want him to or not."

"Quit whining," Candles said. "We all wanted to get out of there while we could." She smacked Kinnon's ass on the way by, making him jump. "Since you're not close enough to the door for me to use that."

Anders ran a hand through his hair, staring around him at the familiar, if older, faces, and for a moment, he was transported back to Kinloch Hold, remembering cold stone walls and vaulted
ceilings, templar eyes around every corner. "I... wow. I can't believe -- no. Wait. I'm being a terrible host. I have a house now, so those things matter. Sit, all of you, on... something." He gestured at the beanbag chairs and bench. "Can I get drinks? Should I get drinks?"

"He's not allowed to get drunk," Petra declared, pointing at Kinnon.

"Hey, I'm not that bad! At least I didn't end up with 'Lord Asshole of House Shut the Fuck Up' written on me!" Kinnon complained.

"Barley milk?" Cormac asked, heading for the kitchen.

"For now," Anders agreed, distractedly. "How many of you are there? Ten? Fifteen?"

Candles cleared her throat and coughed into her fist. "Forty."

Anders paled under his golden tan. "I'm sorry, did you just say forty? As in there are thirty-five unsupervised apostates in Kassel?"

"We left them with Ansgar. He'll make sure they're all right," Petra assured him, hoping it would be true.

"Ansgar..." Anders's eyes lit on Kinnon again. "That was you! I went out for lyrium and pho, today, and I swore I saw someone who looked just like you coming into the shop with a dwarf!"

"Andraste bless me," Kinnon's eyes rounded. "I didn't recognise you at all! Your hair's too light, and that beard!"

"The beard," Anders said, smugly, "is doing its job. The Prince of Starkhaven himself didn't know me, with this beard."

"... Should he have?" Keili asked, squinting curiously at Anders.

Anders gave her a sly grin. "It's been an eventful few years since I last saw you all."

"Becoming a Warden, knowing princes..." Candles shook her head. "This is a night for drinks and stories! I made it this far with only these idiots for entertainment."

"Excuse you," Kinnon huffed, folding his arms. "From what I could tell you found my spicy shimmy plenty entertaining!"

"Never said I didn't," Candles said, grinning as she flopped down onto one of the beanbag chairs, filling it give under her. "But you know what would be even more entertaining? Watching a side-by-side comparison between the spicy shimmy master and the spicy shimmy apprentice."

A weak laugh escaped Anders. He was still reeling too much to do any shimmying, except into a chair.

Cormac appeared with a cold pitcher and mugs hanging from his fist. "Somebody take these from me, before I drop something."

Fen'Din started unhooking mugs from his fingers, passing them to the other mages. He was surprised by the chill of the pitcher, but only in that he hadn't pegged Cormac for a mage. "Did you chill it yourself?"

"Nope," Cormac grinned and started pouring for everyone else, first. "We've got a dwarfwork icebox. It's incredible -- fresh meat a week later. Not quite the same, but much closer than
"Dwarfwork?" Keili looked curious. "I didn't think dwarves had magic. I mean, we've been travelling with dwarves."

"They don't, but they do make runes. There's been some work on a flame-free oven, but it's not ready for actual use." Anders sipped his barley milk and made a small, contented sound. "I spend a lot of time in the Dwarven Quarter. They think I'm hilarious."

"They think you're rich," Cormac pointed out.

"Not to be rude, but... Who are you?" Keili finally asked, studying Cormac curiously.

"Depends on who you ask." Cormac shrugged. "In town, I'm Mack Kestrel, from southern Ferelden. It's almost true. I was Mack Kestrel, for a while, in Ferelden. But, since you know Anders, I'm Cormac Hawke, brother of Viscount Anton Hawke, of Kirkwall. I found him in a sewer and took him home with me." He cocked a thumb at Anders.

"It was a nice sewer!" Anders protested.

"Now I definitely need to hear the stories," Candles said as she accepted a cup. It felt refreshingly cool against her fingers.

Kinnon eyed Cormac curiously, accepting a cup with a polite 'thank you'. "So you're Mack? Anders's mum had mentioned something about him living with a Mack, but I just assumed Karl had..." He shrugged, still wondering where Karl was but unsure if it would be rude to ask. Had they had a falling out and moved on?

"My... mum?" Anders turned round eyed Fen'Din's way. "You went to see my mum? All of you?"

"She was very helpful," Keili assured him. "It was a bit hard to find you, you know."

"Don't worry. Kinnon didn't shimmy for her." Candles patted what she could reach of Anders's leg.

"I knew your parents' names." Fen'Din shrugged. "I didn't figure you'd be using yours -- not in the place you were born."

"Smart man. I can see why you like him." Cormac chuckled and turned his attention to Kinnon. "Karl... didn't make it. Templars got him. And every last one of those bastards is dead. I know. I helped." He paused. "Should I assume you're staying for supper? I think we have enough for a good casserole."

Kinnon's stomach answered the question for him.

Keili had fallen to praying quietly. She couldn't imagine anyone wanting to hurt Karl. He'd been a mild-mannered Aequitarian enchanter, quick with a smile and gentle with mistakes. She'd always imagined him being First Enchanter, one day. What could've happened in Kirkwall?

"I heard you left Kirkwall with a bit of a bang," Fen'Din joked, just to turn the subject away from Karl.

"You mean the part where the Chantry collapsed into the undercity, killing the Grand Cleric, who refused to heed the warnings and leave the building, or the part where the Knight-Commander started snorting corrupted lyrium, turned into an abomination, and had to be destroyed for the safety of all Thedas?" Cormac asked, rubbing his face with his wrist. He set down the pitcher on the
fireplace bench, and sat down next to it. "Please, feel free to drag over some seats, if you want to sit." He gestured at the beanbags around the room.

The rest of the mages followed his lead, pulling over beanbags and sinking into them. Kinnon, whose knees were still a bit sore from his ongoing drunken antics, opted to sit on the edge of the bench instead.

"You weren't kidding about an exciting few years," Petra murmured. She turned her drink over in her hands, still deciding how she felt about the taste. "I swear the world has gone mad. Corrupted lyrium?"

Anders wiped a hand over his face. "It's... a long story. There were dwarves, an expedition. Had no idea lyrium came in red. No one did. She turned into a statue, you know? A statue made of red lyrium. It's... I'm not making sense." Anders shook his head with a laugh. "I just can't believe you're all here. I keep expecting to find out I'm in the Fade and that you're not real. Or that you're demons."

"I'm not sure if I should feel flattered or insulted by that," Kinnon said.

"We're travelling with spirits," Fen'Din volunteered. "Not demons, but I'm sure the sentiment counts."

"You what?" Cormac blinked several times, trying to take that in.

"I know," Anders replied. "I just didn't know if they knew. Wasn't going to mention it until a little later."

"If we knew," Candles scoffed. "Do you know he had halla skeletons pulling our cart until we got to Orzammar?"

"You've been to Orzammar?" Anders's face lit up. "I never got to go, but Solona did. I just got to go to Kal'Hiroh and other unspeakable depths full of mutant darkspawn and their broodmothers." He shuddered. "Horrible. If I never go underground again, it'll be too soon."

"You really fought darkspawn?" Kinnon asked. "With Solona?"

"You should see him do it. It's incredible!" Cormac grinned broadly, squeezing Anders's thigh.

"This one time, outside Amaranthine, I ran out of magic and I punched this hurlock right in its stupid face." Anders laughed and tugged at the ends of his beard. "I don't advise it. They've got horrible breath."

Keili giggled into her cup. "You punched a darkspawn," she said, trying to picture it.

"I'll have you know I have an impressive right hook," Anders said, swinging his arm to demonstrate. "Well, not as good as Pounce -- that was my cat, when I was still with the Wardens, a little red ball of fluff Solona gave to me. Ser Pounce-a-lot once scratched a genlock on the nose! I was so proud." Some days he still missed the little blighter. And Assbiter and Purrcy. At least he knew they were all well cared for. "It was good, for a while, being with the Wardens. At least the parts aboveground. I felt like I was doing something, you know? But the Broodmother, augh..." He shuddered. "That still gives me nightmares."

Once he started talking, Anders found it hard to stop. Over barley milk, he told them his story -- at least the parts they hadn't been around for.
Holding on to the guise of religious pilgrims, the mages approach Mother Yotte for permission to build an abbey by the river.

The next morning found them at the Chantry, this one somehow even more compelling than the one in Hossberg, perhaps because of its smaller size. The images were all so much closer to the ground and the statues were still larger than life, but smaller, easier to take in.

"This is really incredible stuff," Candles said, circling a statue of Justinia.

"I see Hector's very popular here," Keili remarked, spotting an enormous number of offerings in front of his statue.

"They say the spirit of Hector helps people, here. That he comes in the night and rights wrongs. Vandalism and petty theft are down quite a bit since this started," Cormac explained, conveniently leaving out the part where the 'spirit of Hector' was actually Anders.

"Spirits helping people?" Keili looked around. "Really? In a place with no mages?"

Anders nearly choked on his tongue. "The Anderfels is the most religious nation in Thedas. The people here put Val Royeaux to shame, in more ways than one. So, yes. Their faith in the Maker and their will to do right attracts a certain amount of assistance. Or that's what I've heard. I've never met this spirit." He looked away and spotted Mother Yotte shelving a book on one of the walls. "Ah! Mother! How is your back, today? Are those potions still working for you?"

Yotte's face lit at the sound of Anders's voice, her smile as bright as the jewel-toned mosaics Candles was squinting at. "They are working wonderfully, Jannik!" she said, dusting off her hands and turning to face him. "I feel a good twenty years younger, though Sister Ingill discourages me from dancing to prove it." She chuckled. "It is probably for the best. How are you faring? I see you've brought company. I welcome you all to the Maker's home." Her eyes lingered on Fen'Din and his tattoos, but her welcoming smile never wavered.

"Company? No, I just found some rabble in the streets, and they decided to follow me," Anders teased. "They are new friends of mine, the sort that I think could be new friends of yours."

"Thank you for your kind welcome, Mother," Keili said, soft-voiced and reverent. "We have travelled far to experience the wonders of the Anderfels, and we are grateful Andraste guided us here safely."

Kinnon and Candles kept their heads down, the image of pious pilgrims.

"Sister Keili has led our clan through difficult times, on this long road. I do not think we would be here without the Maker's blessing," Petra added, stepping forward to take her place at Keili's side. "It is the strength of her faith that brought us here, when we lost our hold, and now it is time for us to bring that faith to others who have not found it and to strengthen it in ourselves." She offered her hand to Mother Yotte. "Forgive my rudeness. I am Thane Petra, of a hold no longer named. Our
whole clan chose to follow the will of the prophet Andraste from the icy mountains up to your beautiful warm lands. The home of true faith, I am told."

"I'm afraid I do not know enough to understand beyond that you have come from a mountainous place to serve the Maker in the Anderfels. Is this right?" Mother Yotte looked faintly confused.

"Sister Keili was a missionary who brought us faith, when we needed it, and now we wish to help her build an abbey -- a place of quiet contemplation." Petra nodded. "We have come from the Frostback Mountains of Ferelden, beyond the Hunterhorns and Orlais, to serve the Maker here."

"There are few in the Anderfels who lack faith, so your desire to bring the Maker's word to those who do not hear it may not be met here," Mother Yotte explained, gently.

"We mean to bring the word to the Dalish. This can't possibly be a place of no elves!" Keili looked uncomfortable, both at lying and at the idea that maybe there weren't elves in the Anderfels.

Yotte tipped her head, looking thoughtful. "There are some, certainly, or so I'm told. They keep to themselves mostly, out in the desert, and they never seem to stay in one place for long." She shrugged. "If any come to town to trade with us, I certainly do not see them here."

"Ah, then there is a place for us here," Petra said with a beaming smile. "If the Dalish do not wish to come to the Chantry, then we could, perhaps, bring the Chantry to them."

"That is a noble goal," Yotte said, expression softening. "One that, I think, Andraste would smile upon. Do you not think so, Sister?" She turned to address Sister Ingill, who stood just inside the doorway to her office, pretending not to eavesdrop.

Ingill made a sound she tried to pass off as thoughtfulness instead of surprise. She stepped forward reluctantly to officially join the conversation, gaze flitting over their guests and lingering on Fen'Din's tattoos the same way Yotte's had. "I don't know how grateful you will find the elves."

"As grateful as I have been, one hopes," Fen'Din replied.

"The Chantry has long tried to reach out to the elves, but rarely have we been met with other than violence," Ingill declared, scrutinizing the group, after realizing she was speaking to an elf. "For centuries we have offered the Maker's blessings to our poor cousins who will not come in from the wilds."

Anders closed his eyes as Justice took an interest in the conversation.

"For centuries we have denied the elves their role in Holy Andraste's path. Without them, I cannot speculate how far her journey would have taken her, but so often, even now, those who reach out to the elves who placed their faith in our prophet, who travelled south to live in the lands she promised them, do their reaching out with swords in hand." Keili shifted uncomfortably, but her shoulders stayed square. "I've seen the New Cumberland Chant of Light and I've read much of the research that went into it. We haven't offered a gracious welcome to our Dalish cousins since Andraste, herself, fell, blessed be her name."

Fen'Din turned his head and raised an inquisitive eyebrow at apparently nothing. With a subtle nod, he looked back to the conversation.

Ingill pursed her lips, straightening her back in preparation to argue, only for the fight to leave her as quickly as it had come. "I do not know that I would claim as much," she said, "but... perhaps reaching out to the Dalish near here would not end in disaster."
Yotte's eyebrows twitched up in surprise. Sister Ingill was rarely so agreeable. "Hector already watches over us," she said. "Perhaps he will be able to give you guidance as well."

Ingill scowled at the mention of Hector but knew better than to argue the point just now.

"This abbey," Mother Yotte said. "Where would you build it?"

"We were humbly hoping to ask for your advice on that front," Petra said with a sheepish smile.

"Mack and I, of course, will pay the asking price for whatever land you decide is appropriate, but we think, in case things don't go quite as well as Sister Keili expects, that the land should be out a ways from the village. I would hate to see a conflict start between the village and a Dalish tribe." Anders rubbed his forehead, palm shading his eyes, as he struggled with Justice. Between the lies and the Dalish, he was getting quite a headache.

Cormac nodded. "I agree. A few miles further along the river road from us might be a good choice."

Ingill went to fetch the books.

"You realise you're asking after land we have no markers for?" Yotte pointed out, gesturing for the group to follow her into the long office down one side of the building. "The village doesn't extend that far, even in the records. You'd be founding a new settlement, I think."

"Will that cause a problem?" Keili asked, twisting her amulet in her fingers.

"I don't think so. If the Grand Cleric asks, I'll be happy to explain." Yotte smiled and tapped on the book Ingill had opened on one of the tables. "I would like to see you succeed. I would like to see the Maker's genuine love spread to every corner of Thedas, whether or not he returns to us."
Rescuing Lord Poncy Orlesian

Chapter Summary

Kinnon finally learns just how spicy his shimmy was, in Hossberg. Val continues to experience the perils of being Orlesian in the Anderfels.

Once they had left the Chantry, Justice eased his nagging pressure behind Anders's eyes. He still grumbled in discontent, but seeing once imprisoned mages beaming over owning a piece of land for the first time quelled some of his discomfort. Lying was wrong, still, he reminded Anders who agreed only to avoid another headache.

Kinnon and Candles chattered on the way to the inn, prepared to tell the others the good news. Behind them, Anders walked in step with Fen'Din and with the gentle spirit that had followed them into the Chantry.

"That went well," he said. "Especially with Sister Ingill. I was expecting a litany of questions and arguments from her, but I suppose we have your friend to thank for that?" He tipped his head in the direction of the spirit to Fen'Din's other side. He never used to be able to see them, at least not like this. Was this what Fen'Din had been seeing all these years?

"Sisterhood is a spirit of love. She's very big on common decency." Fen'Din smiled in that unsettling way. "You can see her, now? I mean, see her, see her, not just know she's there?"

Anders nodded. "It's one of the benefits of the new arrangement. Justice sees things, and I see them, too."

"We're going to have a talk about that, later, you know. Once I can be sure Kinnon's not stripping and Val hasn't been stabbed for being Orlesian."

Anders blinked and then blinked again. "Stripping? Kinnon stripping?"

"He gets very drunk, if there's no one to stop him, and with the right audience..." Fen'Din sighed. "Although he did manage to keep anyone from stabbing Val, like that, in Hossberg. It's got its uses, at times."

"Why stab Val for being Orlesian, when there are so many other reasons to stab Val?" Anders flicked his hand in annoyance.

"Don't stab Val, yet. He's paid his way, on this trip. The sandstorms would have been much worse without him -- he's really getting a handle on the wind, up here." Fen'Din shrugged, a clearly exaggerated gesture. "He's nearly the same as he ever was, though. Punch him if he offers to pay you, if only because I know he can't. Petra has all our money."

"Oh, I'm sure Val will give me plenty of reasons to punch him before the night is over." Anders said the words lightly enough, but Justice was crowding him again, if for different reasons, peeking into Anders's memories. Justice did not seem to mind the idea of punching Val. "Though I might need to find some reasons to get Kinnon to strip again. Not because I need or want to see anything, but because the idea is hilarious."
Kinnon, hearing his name, glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Fen'Din says you should strip again later," Anders answered.

Kinnon shot a completely baffled look at the elf. "Or I could not. Not is always good." He paused. "What do you mean, again?"

"You didn't tell him?" Anders burst into laughter. "I just heard you got naked for an appreciative audience in Hossberg."

"Hossberg? I did a few spicy shimmies in Hossberg." Kinnon continued to look confused. "And I woke up with the mother of all hangovers and a nasty scrape on my back... Which... No." The confusion turned to outrage. "You let me take my clothes off in front of all those people?"

"I wasn't there," Fen'Din reminded him. "Candles let you do it, and she was drunk, too. And Val. Val was there. Apparently people were so impressed with what they saw that they decided not to do away with the Orlesian."

"That's great. Naked bodyguard for the obnoxious Orlesian. This is not what freedom was supposed to be about." Kinnon crossed his arms and continued to walk backward toward the inn.

"I disagree!" Candles said without a scrap of remorse. "Freedom is all about being able to make stupid choices! And there were certain parts of you that were freer in Hossberg than they had been in years." She tipped her eyebrows suggestively, and Kinnon's cheeks turned a splotchy red.

"Those 'parts' are free enough in robes, thank you very much!"

"Building," Petra warned just before Kinnon accidentally backed into a wall. His steps stuttered, and he turned, trying to salvage his dignity.

Shaking her head, Keili opened the door to the inn, holding it open to let the others pass. She heard Kinnon mumble something about not getting naked the next time Val was in trouble. She couldn't see her, but Sisterhood hung back with her and waited.

Ansgar came in through the other door, from where he'd been examining a merchant's crafts. Definitely worth buying a few pieces and checking the price down south. But, right then, the important thing was the mages. "Lord Poncy Orlesian's been shut up in his room. You've got to get him out of here. The man at the desk wanted him out last night, but we promised to keep him under control."

"Oh, for blazing Andraste's sake. I'm assuming there's just the one poncy Orlesian with you?" Anders cuffed his sleeves. "I'll go deal with Val. I've been meaning to for a long time."

"Please don't kill him," Petra sighed, catching Anders by the hip of his robe.

"I won't have to. " Anders stalked off toward the stairs. "What's the room number?"

Ansgar provided it and Petra pointed at Kinnon. "Go with him so he doesn't do anything I'm going to regret."

"He's not going to," Cormac assured her. "Probably just going to scare the shit out of him. He's very good at that. It's quite effective."

Petra pursed her lips, eyeing Cormac and then Anders's fleeing back. She shook her head and let him go.
"In fairness, if he does die," Kinnon said, "then it's probably his own fault. I wouldn't lose too much sleep over it."

Petra sighed, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. "That's not the kind of impression we want to leave on this town."

"Especially not if we're opening an 'abbey'." Keili muttered, still unsure how she felt about that lie.

"Well, then we just make sure no one finds out," Kinnon countered. At Petra's flat look, he held up his hands, palm out. "Just joking. I haven't actually been fantasizing of ways to give rid of Val without anyone catching me."

Petra shook her head and left to tell the other mages about their new home.

Upstairs, outside Val's door, Anders's thoughts were just as charitable as Kinnon's, and he took a breath to make sure Justice was under control. After a few deep breaths, he popped the peg on the door cuff and opened it. From inside, there were sounds of someone moving -- someone who recognised the sound.

"Dammit, Ansgar, I've said--"

The door swung open and Anders stepped in, closing and latching the cuff on the inside of the door, where it would keep no one in or out.

"Who are you?" Val stumbled back, paler than usual, the scars on his face clearer as the blood left it. "I've done nothing!"

"Relax, Valery, it's just me." Anders crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.

"You? You who--" Val's face tightened in consternation. "Anders?"

"So's everyone up here, but yes. The one you think I am. The one you still owe, after that last time."

"Maker's breath! You were gone before I could pay you! And you didn't get dragged back. Obviously. Here you are." Val crossed his own arms, trying to look offended at the very accusation that he wouldn't pay his debts, but he knew he hadn't meant to pay that last one. That last one had been much, much too expensive.

"Andraste's tits and ashes, what happened to your face? Frick get tired of looking at it, finally? I haven't heard he's with you, and if he was, he'd be locked in here, too. Good for him, getting sick of your shit, but not so good for him staying behind, maybe." Anders shook his head and grabbed at Val's face. "Hold still! Let me get a look at that before it's any worse! Who fixed this, Petra? Going to need to have a talk with her about burns, if Candles is with us..."

Val stiffened, but he waited until Anders had laid a healing spell on Val's scarring face before slapping his hand away. "Leofric's dead," he said, staring out at nothing past Anders's shoulder.

Anders stared at him, watched his jaw muscles twitch as he clenched his teeth. "Well, shit." His hands hung there, healing unfinished.

"It is shit," Val agreed, cutting him a glare with no strength behind it.

Anders sat at the edge of Val's bed, ignoring the annoyed look that got him. "Karl's dead, too, you know," he said, and he wondered how many times he would have to say those words over the next couple of days. "It was a while ago now, but... that was shit too."
"All the things I ever did-- I never--" The wind shoved a cheap chair over to where Val stood and he sat, just not to sit next to Anders.

"I know." And that was the thing, it had never been personal. Val had been crazy enough to get Anders the components for some of his wilder escape attempts, and he'd just had to endure whatever Val and Leofric had wanted to use him for -- none of which had ever compared to the templars.
"Templars in Kirkwall. I swear we almost made it. If I'd been a little faster..." Anders leaned forward, putting his head in his hands.

"Uldred," Val replied, knowing the question was coming. "A fuck-- A fucking--" He choked up again and laughed a little hysterically. "A fucking desire demon and a templar. Solona didn't get to us for hours. I didn't even know she'd come back until she kicked open the door and that drunk dwarf stabbed the demon."

"She didn't tell me. I didn't think to ask." Anders shrugged, face still in his hands. He wouldn't look. He could give Val that much.

"You saw her?"

"Are you kidding? She gave me a big chalice of the grossest thing I've ever put in my mouth, and you know most of what's been in my mouth, and turned me into a Grey Warden. I spent a few months with her in Amaranthine." Anders laughed, tipping his head down to look at his knees. Or his beard, anyway, which did a lot to block the view at this angle.

A bitter laugh punched out of Val. "A Warden? You?"

"What can I say? The world's gone mad. Solona conscripted me so the templars wouldn't drag me back. I traded in templars and the tower for darkspawn and a different set of nightmares. At least the parties were fun."

Anders didn't see Val shiver, but he could hear the chair creak as he moved. "We had some trouble with darkspawn on the way over, once we were out of that dwarf city that stank to the heavens. That's how..." He made a frustrated noise, and Anders looked up in time to see him gesture at the scarred half of his face. "Sometimes, I wonder if I'm the only one who knows how to aim."

"Candles?" Anders blinked.

Val nodded sourly. "Who else?"

"That just... hm." Anders would have to ask her about that. Aim wasn't usually a problem for her, not that he would blame her if she hit Val on purpose. "Anyway, well. You faced darkspawn and survived, and you didn't catch the Blight. I'd consider that a success."

"Still ruined my face," Val complained.

"Val, look at me, you're forty, aren't you? It was just a matter of time." Anders laughed and pushed himself up off the bed.

"You're not exactly twenty-three any more, either," Val shot back. "Not that I can see what's happened to your face under that blight-awful beard."

"Trust me, I still look smashing, but I'm also cheating." Anders wiggled his fingers. "I'm a healer." It was a lie, for the most part, but it was better than trying to explain Justice.

"Oh, because that worked so well for Wynne." Val rocked the chair back for a better angle.
"Wynne wasn't nearly vain enough to try." Anders grinned. "Come on, let's get you out of here, before the locals put your head on a pike by the river. Keili owns some land down the road from my house, now -- we bought it for her, this morning. For all of you, really, but in her name. Sort of. It's complicated, but as long as you don't go to town alone, you should be all right."

"I notice you said 'land'," Val pointed out, as he put the chair back and gathered what little he had into his bag. "No structure?"

"Not yet. I wish Artie was coming up this summer, but we just saw him in Starkhaven. He just helped build a village with magic and dwarven stonework. I can't wait to see it, but he and his husband say it's wonderful work."

"But, we'll work something out. There's enough mages in this group that someone's got to have some useful skills. In the mean time, you're probably going to be stuck living in my orchard, for a while. We're far enough out of town that no one will come after you there."

"Wonderful," Val muttered. "I leave the tower to travel through mud and darkspawn piss, all so I can sleep in the dirt. Your dirt, excuse me."

"Or I could just leave you here for the locals to deal with you," Anders said, forcedly cheerful. "It's just temporary, Valery. You'll live."

"But at what cost?" Sullenly, Val allowed himself to be ushered out of the room and escorted downstairs.

They heard Ansgar's barking laugh before they saw him, sitting at a table with Kinnon and Cormac over a round of drinks. If they thought Ansgar's laugh was loud, however, it had nothing on his singing, which, while occasionally in tune, was loud enough to shake the walls. Worse still was when Kinnon and Cormac joined in.

A few tables over, Keili and Petra pretended not to know any of them.

"And they want to kick me out?" Val huffed.

"No, they want to kill you." Anders patted Val's back. "Mack and I have already been kicked out of this place for being too loud for the other guests, but that was upstairs."

"Mack?" Val asked. "The Riviaini over there with Ansgar?"

Anders nodded. "He's been with me since Kirkwall. Man gave up a noble title and an estate just to come up here with me."

"Man's an idiot." Val sounded amazed.

"Sometimes, but he's a charming idiot. And kind." Anders smiled wistfully.

"You've got a type, don't you?" Val shook his head.

"I do, and it's never been you." Anders chuckled and waved to Cormac, once Candles danced back out of the way. "Come on, Mack, let's get these people out of here, so Harmon can get some quiet."

"We can sing much louder on the boat," Kinnon decided, with a giddy grin.

"And I've got better wine in the pantry, if less of it," Cormac admitted, holding out his hand to Ansgar. "You find yourself up here again, look us up."
"If any of you are heading down south, let me know! I've got plenty of room for guards like these," Ansgar said, beaming at the assembled mages as he shook Cormac's hand.
Breakfast for Forty

Chapter Summary

Val and Fen'Din wind up sharing the spare room with a mob of imposing sand cats. In the morning, Kinnon has thoughts on the night before.

In the end, Val did not sleep in the dirt. He had managed to piss off enough locals with his Orlesianness that Anders deemed it best to set him up in the guest bedroom, along with Fen'Din. He would be safe there, if more of an annoyance to his hosts.

"Honestly," Val huffed, looking around their room and eyeing the large bed in the middle, "did they put this spare bedroom here just for the cats?" The bed was sizeable, but it was covered in the beasts, in a longer eared, narrow-eyed species of cat Val had never seen before. They lifted their heads at the sound of his voice, ears twitching. "Go on! Get out of here! This isn't your bed any more!"

Val shooed them with one hand, pulling on his magic to spritz them with water, which earned him a collection of offended looks from the cats.

Fen'Din crouched next to the footboard, studying the dragon-head endcap on one of the posts. Cats clambered onto his knees, sniffing at him, curiously. "I think this is Tevinter. Look at the curve under the chin, here. It's just like the oldest ones back at the tower, and a really nice reproduction."

"And ten times the size," Val pointed out, watching the cats eagerly lick the water off themselves. "Thankfully."

"What, are you afraid I'm going to get cuddly with you?" Fen'Din laughed and pet the cats, perhaps a little too firmly, but they pushed back against his hands.

"I just want a bed to myself. We've been sleeping practically on top of each other, this whole trip. It's not better than it was in the tower. If anything, it's been worse. We had our own beds and decent food every day. An enormous library of magical texts." Val blinked in confusion as one of the cats ran up and started batting at his hand. "And now look at us. We have nothing but fistfuls of fake gems and an endless desert."

"We also don't have templars, or the Chantry burying our research, now. We don't have constant accusations of being secret abominations." Fen'Din shrugged, chasing the cats onto the bed, as he stood. "We can get everything else back. As you've pointed out, we have fistfuls of gems, and money will buy most of what we need."

Val grumbled, clearly still wanting to complain but having no argument against that. He spritzed the cats again for good measure, but they just licked the water off themselves and pawed at him for more. "I think the cats are broken."

The bed was, at least, comfortable and spacious enough that Val would have to stretch to come into contact with Fen'Din. He had almost forgotten what it was like to sleep on a real mattress, and he laid awake, shifting every few minutes and trying to adjust. He shooed away a few more cats who wanted to snuggle.
Val was finally drifting off to sleep when the screaming started. He sat bolt upright, startling the cats that had curled up at the foot of the bed, and reached for a spell. With his heart pounding in his ears, it took him a moment to realise the scream was taking the form of words and a familiar name.

"Anders! Anders! Yes!" The screams echoed off the walls. "Harder! More! Oh, please, you know it'll fit! Take me! I want it!"

"Oh, by Andraste's grace, he's not that good!" Val shouted. "Shut up about it!"

A choked laugh followed, but the screaming stopped. After a moment, Anders answered him. "Like you'd know? You couldn't fuck right if I'd had instructions tattooed on my back! And you're the one kept paying exorbitant prices to do it anyway!"

A muffled snicker could be heard from under the pile of cats on Fen'Din's side of the bed.

"You're the only complaint I've ever had, and you weren't complaining at the time!" Val snapped, grateful it was much too dark for even the cats to see the colour he could feel rising in his cheeks. "Maker's ass, why couldn't you have picked another mage, at least! Then I wouldn't have to hear it!"

A desperate moan filled the air.

"What makes you think I didn't?" Anders called back. "We're free, Val. It's different, now."

Val laid back down and blinked up at the ceiling, trying to wrap his head around that. "Well, it doesn't need to be that different! Some of us are trying to sleep, and I thought he was being murdered!"

"There are worse ways to die!" Anders shouted back smugly.

"And less painful ways!" Val rolled on his side and folded the pillow over his ear. "Just murder him more quietly, will you?"

He could hear Anders's laugh through the wall, but Anders made no promises.

In the morning, far too early, in Val's entirely un-humble opinion, for someone who'd been getting nailed through every flat surface to be awake, Cormac started cooking breakfast. He put on the bread before anything else and hung an enormous pot of barley and dates to boil. It wasn't much, but they hadn't really laid in supplies to feed forty people, and the kitchen wasn't designed for this. He was taking eggs out of the icebox, tapping them on the counter, and cooking them in his hand, when the tall redhead came in.

"I've totally forgotten your name," Cormac admitted, offering the man an egg.

"Kinnon." The mage stood in the doorway, peeling the egg for a while. "So, ah... last night. I guess you two are fucking. Wasn't sure about that, but we all know, now."

Cormac laughed. "Look on the bright side. Once you've got somewhere to live, you can do that, too. Everything doesn't have to be tomb-silent, any more."

"Not tomb silent, but..." Kinnon shook his head and took a bite of the egg. "Can't you keep it down a little? Sure, Candles was up on the wall to hear it better, but the rest of us were... well... trying to sleep. And of all the things I didn't need to know about Anders..."

Cormac cleared his throat. "Right. Sorry. I'll pretend my sister's here." It was the last that really made
the point -- 'about Anders'. He didn't know how much of Anders's ... exciting extracurricular activities were public knowledge, especially among some of the younger mages, who were still nearly his sister's age, but wouldn't have been old enough to know first-hand.

"Thanks." Kinnon looked relieved. "I mean, I'm sure Val was extra traumatised, which is always fun, but... yes. Thanks." Kinnon took another bite of egg, scowling when he realised he had missed a bit of shell. He watched Cormac work as he ate and debated whether or not he should stay. He supposed he had ended conversations on more awkward notes, but. "Can I help?"

"Depends," Cormac said, dropping another boiled egg into a bowl. "What can you do?"

"What do you mean?" Kinnon asked, around a mouthful of egg.

Cormac lit a small fire in his palm and blew it out.

"Oh! Ah, well, mostly shields and--"

"Arcane?" Cormac looked up, with an excited smile.

Kinnon shook his head. "Spirit."

"The near fade to my far fade. Excellent. It'll be nice having someone around with a different view on it." Cormac shrugged. "Not much for breakfast, though."

"No, I'm not really... You want Candles. Candles kills stuff and cooks it in a single spell. It's incredible." Kinnon remembered his own struggles to catch fish. "I'm not much use with food, but I'm pretty good in the desert. Between the barrier and the stone, the sandstorms never touched us."

"My little brother does stone," Cormac admitted. "Any chance I can get you to make a few bowls? I don't have nearly enough to feed forty people. My kitchen can serve about eight, before things get stupid, and we've never had that many people here at once."

"I... yes, I can do that," Kinnon replied distractedly, caught on the rest of what Cormac had said. "Your little brother's a mage too? What circle were you from? You sound Fereldan, but I know you're not from Kinloch Hold."

"Oh, that's... you thought..." Cormac shook his head and chuckled. "Not Jainen, either. I'm not a Circle mage. My brother and I are lifelong apostates. Our father escaped from the Gallows, in Kirkwall. Long story. Lots of excitement. My other brother, who's not a mage, tells me some idiot wrote a book about dad. Well, a book about him, actually, since he's the Viscount of Kirkwall, but it's got a couple chapters about our dad. He's kind of famous. Infamous, maybe. And you can ask Anders about the grand hidden legacy he left the family."

"Fuck your father's legacy!" Anders shouted from the next room, where he was still plaiting his hair. "Fuck it with a hundred blighted darkspawn cocks!"

"He's got opinions. Mine aren't much different. The Knight-Commander of Kirkwall is ever so glad he's skipped all our family holidays." Cormac laughed and rifled the cupboards.

"Why would the Knight-Commander be on your family holidays, anyway?" Fen'Din asked, wandering into the kitchen with an empty cup in his hand.

"He's married to my brother, the Viscount. Kirkwall's mage experiment is kind of our fault." Cormac paused. "Wait, maybe you know him. Anders knew him from before. Cullen? Curly blond hair, about this tall? Blushes and sputters at the drop of a hat?"
A laugh sputtered out of Kinnon fast enough that he nearly choked on the last bit of his egg. "Cullen? Knight-Commander? I'd say 'that can't be the same Cullen', but all the other words you said describe him perfectly."

"Definitely the same Cullen," Anders called out from the next room. "He was Knight-Captain when I got to Kirkwall, and I was just as surprised as you. He's all grown up now and married to the Viscount!"

Kinnon shook his head in amazement. "The world is a strange place. I remember he had the most painfully obvious crush on Solona. He was such a mess whenever she spoke to him. Guess his tastes have changed if he married your brother, eh?"

They could hear Anders laughing from the next room, and Kinnon turned to frown at the wall between them.

"...what did I miss?"

"Rumour has it my brother looks almost just like our cousin Solona. You know, except for the ... he's not shaped anything like those figures of her from the market." Cormac leaned against the counter, laughing.

"Did you just say your cousin? Solona Amell?" Fen'Din's gaze was unwavering and sharply curious.

Cormac nodded until he could stop laughing long enough to explain. "My mother was Lady Leandra Amell of Kirkwall. It's why my brother had enough of a title to take a shot at Viscount at all. My sister's Lady Amell, now. Princess-Consort of Starkhaven. But, my mother's sister had five children, and the oldest was Solona. The whole family disappeared after the templars took her. I mean, I never got to meet any of mum's side of the family except my asshole uncle Gamlen and his amazing bastard daughter. She's great. He's... I'm voting we wash his ashes down the sewer when he dies."

Val finally left the bathroom, spotlessly clean and in filthy clothing. "You look nothing like her," he accused.

"Of course I don't. I look like my father, not my mother. And I look almost exactly like him, too, which is no end of upset to some people." Cormac shrugged. "Look, if you can do anything useful, we're trying to feed forty people in a kitchen that might serve eight."

"And what would you like me to do?" Val groused. "I can summon storms, not pancakes!"

"Has anyone turned that into a spell, yet?" Kinnon asked Fen'Din. "Because 'Summon Pancakes' would be an amazing spell."

"I don't think so. If that's happened, no one taught it to me." Fen'Din stared up at the ceiling. "But, I'm no good at Creation anyway. I'm a necromancer. If it's summoning anything more complicated than grease, count me out."

"Like you ever use that spell," Val muttered. "And my point remains."

Anders finally poked his head in through the doorway. "You could try seeing if electricity is one way to cook eggs." He gestured, wagging the fingers of one hand. "Or you could just summon a tiny rain cloud over your head to indicate just how much of a morning person you are."

"Honestly, I don't think the time of day matters," Kinnon replied.

"I could throw egg in your face," Val warned.
"Please don't waste the eggs," Anders sighed.

"Wait, storms? Does that mean you have water? If you have water, go fill the cisterns. It'll be so much easier than me doing it with ice." Cormac looked up from where he'd piled all the dried and preserved meats they had. "I'd say go water the dates, but everyone's sleeping on that ground."

"Farming!" Kinnon exclaimed, with no context, nearly dropping the bowl he was shaping.

"That... yes? That is what we do around here." Cormac blinked at him.

"No, no, I'm a stone mage, Petra's a healer, and Lord Asshole d'Orlais is a stormbringer. We're the perfect combination for farming!" Kinnon stacked the bowl on top of the others and counted again.

"I could've been the heir to Serault, and now you want me to farm vegetables in the desert." Val looked distinctly underimpressed.


"My mother," Val said, without thinking.

"Not nearly your mother. Not if you're Anders's age." Cormac shook his head and chuckled. "Not unless she's got your magic, too, and is using it to make herself look even younger than we are."

Val's hands balled into fists, and Anders thought he smelled rain. "My mother is not an apostate," he said, disproportionately offended for someone who now was an apostate.

"Well, then it wasn't your mother," Anders cut in before Val could work himself up. "But she was the Marquis of Serault."

Val's brain seemed to stop, and he shook his head. "You must be mistaken." His mother would be of a certain age, true, but as far as he was concerned, she was and would always be the Marquis of Serault.

"Come on, Val, haven't you mentioned a sister once or twice?" Kinnon gave him an odd look between making bowls. He looked at Cormac and pointed a thumb at Val. "Did she look anything like him? For her sake, I hope not."

"Just like him, really. Cute, though. I thought about it." Cormac chuckled.

Val's fist bounced off the shield, and he swore, clutching his knuckles.

"No, what makes you not cute is that you're an asshole," Anders pointed out. "Otherwise you'd be adorable, and maybe we'd find some room for you in the big bed."

"You assume I'd want to be any closer to your beard and your hairy blubber-mage," Val hissed, still cradling his sore knuckles and bruised ego.

"Bear," Cormac corrected, taking a stack of Kinnon's bowls out to where the barley porridge hung over the fire. "The phrase you're looking for is 'magical bear', according to a certain Tevinter elf who is equally disgusted with the idea. And add that to the list of reasons your sister seems much more appealing. At no point in our brief acquaintance, did she call me a hairy blubber-mage."

"I think that's a duplicate. I think that's still just she's not an asshole," Anders said, with a shrug.
The spirits must be kept out of the way of the townspeople, who are profoundly superstitious folk. Instead, they're invited to play in the yard, with the cats and the camel, for now.

Something had to be done with the spirits. They weren't exactly causing trouble -- yet -- but they tended to crowd Justice the way the cats crowded Anders at feeding time. Their curiosity was understandable, but Justice, for his part, did not know what to make of it.

"I just think," Anders told Fen'Din, "that they would be more comfortable outside, with the cats. And the camel." The camel might not feel as comfortable, but he had adjusted to Anders and Cormac and their shouting well enough. "There's plenty of room for them outside, and right now, in here, it's a little crowded. I mean, I like you, Sisterhood, but we don't need to be this close all the time."

Anders cut a look to Sisterhood, who was hovering at his elbow.

Fen'Din nodded. "We've been so close, this entire journey. It's taken a toll on all of us. I've kept them close to me, so they wouldn't get into trouble, when we travelled through places where people might notice, but you're right. We're not so close to the town, now."

"The walls should keep anyone from chancing on them. Justice also wants you -- all of you, I suppose -- to know that skeletons were a good choice, a much better choice than a fresher corpse or a human one, and he'd know. I know, from how well he knows."

"It's something we still should speak about, you and I. I need to understand it, because this goes against everything we learned. Still, he does not seem to be a demon, and I ... I just don't understand at all, but I'm fascinated." Fen'Din watched the flickers of blue along Anders's hands and face as Justice rose up at the mention of demons. "But, this first. Then that."

One after another, skeletal animals wandered out of the spare bedroom, seating themselves around Fen'Din and Anders -- wolves, halla, nugs, a deepstalker. They were a bit like the cats, the way they gathered around, watching them expectantly. Anders would be lying if he said it wasn't creepy, being eyed by so many skeletons -- assuming something without eyes could 'eye' anyone at all.

"Uh... hello, everyone," Anders said, unsure how he was supposed to address them. Justice flickered just under the surface, but Anders calmed him. "While it's nice having you around, we think you might be more comfortable outside. The camel could use some non-cat company, I suppose." He waited for... he wasn't sure what. Sounds of dissent? Indignation? Instead, the empty eye-sockets watched him placidly. "Right. Uh... Shall I introduce you all to Harellan?"

Anders made for the door, glancing back to make sure they were following, which they were, like ducklings in a row. Anders lamented the relatively non-weird life he had gotten to live for a little while.

Fen'Din followed, the last rat from the tower on his shoulder. "Is that really a camel? Like the ones from the books, with the Orth raiders riding out of the hills to strike against Tevinter on camels and
Anders laughed. "Just like that, but with more spitting and chewing. He'll gnaw the ends off your hair if he likes you."

One of the wolves ran to the front, bony tail wagging, and sniffed at the camel's knees. Or Anders thought it would be sniffing, if there were still a nose to sniff with. Justice reminded him that the form of the host affected the perceptions of the spirit, over time, but with the veil so thick here, they needed the hosts.

Harellan sniffed at the wolf's dusty skull and sneezed, covering the bony beast in snot.

Anything but dismayed, the wolf leapt up and danced in a circle before sitting down in the same spot.

"That's Moxie. It's... well, you get it." Fen'Din crouched and let the rat down.

Harellan, if anything, seemed confused by the bone wolf and its dance of friendship. He tilted his head and snuffled, taking a cautious step back.

"It's okay, Harellan," Anders soothed him, petting the skull of a possessed halla skeleton. He tried not to think about what he was petting, but the halla seemed pleased, judging from the way it leaned into Anders. "They're just some new friends. They're eager to meet you."

Harellan gave Anders a doubtful look. He wasn't sure if 'doubtful' was something camels could feel, but the stiff stance and the side-eyed look implied it. Still, Harellan allowed the rats to sniff at his feet, and he stopped glaring at the wolf once it had settled down in the dirt.

Anders glanced at Fen'Din. "I think it's going well."

"The spirits are pleased." Fen'Din shrugged. "You know I'm terrible with the living."

"Who are they? I don't remember them, but I couldn't see them, then. Not like you could." Anders watched the nugs hopping around the camel's feet. "Mercy and... Compassion?" He pointed to two.

"Leniency and Dolora." Fen'Din turned a cautious eye on Anders. "Dolora's got some trouble, like she can't tell if she's a demon, sometimes. It's best if she doesn't get too close to too much grief. It changes her."

Justice understood at once. "We've had that problem," Anders admitted. "We went through some difficult times."

"Can I meet him? He doesn't scare the camel, does he?" Fen'Din asked, watching Harellan try to deal with his new fan club. Fortunately, some of the sand cats finally wandered over and seemed to be enjoying wrestling with the deepstalker.

"Purrsino! Play nice!" Anders called, as one of the cats chased a tiny bone across the courtyard. "Harellan's... gotten used to Justice. More or less. I'd still rather do that inside, if I'm going to do it."

"In front of Val," Fen'Din teased.

"Haa, well, I do enjoy making Val piss himself, yes." Anders glanced around, taking stock of the spirits and the mages he knew were close by. "I'm just not sure the others would take this as easily as you did." He didn't realise he'd stopped petting the halla until it bumped its nose against his hand.
"They won't," Fen'Din agreed. "But, we can probably convince Val to entertain himself elsewhere. Where's your magical bear? Maybe it's time for the farming lessons to start. Or building. Building seems very important right now."

"Building first," Anders agreed. He turned to the camel and the spirits crowding him. "You're in charge of these hooligans, Harellan. Make sure they behave."

Harellan blinked at him and made a noise that was usually the precursor to a spit.

"I think that's our cue to leave," Anders said.
Cormac demonstrates his exceptional patience. Val keeps trying it.

The sun beat down like the Maker's wrath, just as it had every day since they left the Deep Roads, and Kinnon wondered, not for the first time, if coming up here had been as wise as it sounded. On the other hand, no one knew they were mages, here. No one had the faintest reason to even suspect it. As far as anyone knew, they were Avvar converts to the Andrastian faith. And as their 'abbey' went up, they gained a reputation as hardy and hard-working folk, which Kinnon suspected was at least partially true, given what they'd gone through to get there.

Still, most of the work on the building was his, just yet. He raised the domes, one or two at a time, and then he and his apprentices -- and who the fuck would've thought he'd ever have apprentices -- would shape them, carving out the windows and doors, smoothing over the seams where the domes joined. He'd seen sketches from the ruins of an elven settlement, once -- too long ago to remember properly -- but the general idea had stayed with him: a fortress of domes, although he thought those might've been more onion shaped, with a garden on the inside. A few talks with Anders about the local architecture had settled the details of where to keep water and how to handle waste.

But, they were up to four domes, now. Each was covered in thick Ander mud, on the outside, courtesy of Val, however much he whined about it, because Anders swore it would keep the temperature mostly stable, inside -- which seemed to be working, so far. There wasn't really enough room for all of them, yet, but most of the mages were so accustomed to close quarters that no one complained. They knew it would be a few months before it was really safe to have raised all the domes. Before anyone would believe they'd done it by hand.

The garden was already sketched out in the earth, the ring around it set in little stones, and Cormac worked there, with the mages who specialised in water, ice, and creation. Sometimes, he'd call for one of Kinnon's apprentices to break up the ground, but the water seemed to be enough, usually.

"We're really free, aren't we?" Petra mused, from behind where Kinnon stood in a doorway, sipping water and watching the gardeners work.

"Looks like it," Kinnon said, resting his hands on his hips. With the sun on his face, he felt like a king surveying his kingdom. "Just picture what it will look like in a few months. A year! We'll each have our own space. I don't think I ever had that even before the tower."

Petra smiled and indulged him, trying to picture the land they were working a year from now, garden lush and lined with domes. But that was difficult to picture -- not the completed 'abbey', but being free for that long. Instead she found herself picturing templars taking them away, their work crumbling, unfinished. At least on the move, it had felt like they were moving away. Petra still hadn't readjusted to standing still.

Rather than saying anything, she smiled and answered, "It's going to be amazing."

Across the garden, Val was yelling at Cormac.
"How long you think it's going to be before Mack hits him?" Kinnon asked, offering the cup of water to Petra.

"I'd have guessed yesterday, but here we are." Petra shook her head and took the cup.

Cormac studied Val as he continued to yell about how this was all rubbish and they'd never be able to get enough food for all of them like this. "You know? You remind me of my little brother, when you do that. He's a templar, now. Also, the angrier you get, the more Orlesian you sound, and you need to work on that, or you're going to get killed. Orlesians, as you've noticed, aren't very popular up here. Neither are Tevinters, but we haven't got any of those."

"Are you even listening to me?" Val gaped at Cormac in horror.

"Yes, but I've been living here for two years, and Jannik's lived here for fourteen. You got here last month. Trust me. You're going to be fine, because we're not going to let you run out of food before you get your fields going. Besides, technically, you're a part of the Chantry, and they don't let people go hungry up here, no matter what it's like in Kirkwall or ... I really don't know much about Serault, to be honest, aside from the glass." Cormac looked faintly amused at the outburst. "You'll get the hang of it. It's not that hard, even for me, and I'm ... let's just say water really isn't one of my proficiencies. But, you loosen it up with water and then we break this up and drag compost through it, and in the next planting season, we'll put seeds in, and you'll end up with more food than you expect. There's more here than it looks like, especially with magic."

"The man has the patience of an Anointed," Kinnon muttered. "Val's ranting, and he's smiling."

"Maybe Val will implode before he gets punched," Petra replied, leisurely sipping the water.

"We should be so lucky."

"What do you know?" Val huffed, and by now Kinnon could tell that the man was complaining for the sake of complaining. "Maybe you've been here a couple years, but how many people have you had to feed in that time? Not this many, I can assure you." He pushed his blond curls out of his eyes. "If we die of starvation because you got the numbers wrong, it's on you."

"Faithlessness isn't going to feed you, either." Cormac smiled a little too broadly and clapped Val on the arm. "You don't want to farm? Go hunt wild sheep and antelope. But, be careful -- you get too far outside the valley, and there's darkspawn everywhere."

"There's not a Blight," Val scoffed, "and this isn't the Deep Roads."

"No. It's the Anderfels, ruled by the Grand Cleric of Hossberg, her puppet king, and the Carta. It's the only place in Thedas where the darkspawn don't retreat underground." Cormac's gaze was deadly serious. "And if they so much as sneeze on you, we're going to have to give you to the Wardens, if you want to live. Which reminds me -- blighted sheep are a thing. And they're huge and very angry, and you can't eat them."

"You can't be serious."

"As a head wound!" Cormac's smile returned, full force. "A little faith. I worked the orchards in the Bannorn for a very long time. I know what 'enough food' looks like for a village this size."

Val looked like he was going to be ill. "You better be right," he muttered before slinking away. Hopefully not to hunt blighted sheep.
Chapter Summary

Fen'Din makes some pointed observations on subjects Anders never wanted to think about.

Weeks had passed, and the orchard was mostly empty of mages, now, the majority of them having managed to move into the half-finished complex Anders and Cormac had helped them raise, way out past the edge of town, out where there was little more than duststorms. But, the ring of domes kept most of that out, and magic made the environment more liveable.

Fen'Din had moved first, because they'd follow him, and sure enough, as the walls went up and the rooms became real, the others followed. But, he came back to visit often. Rarely knocked, just let himself in and sat by the fire, until Anders or Cormac noticed him. It didn't usually take very long.

Today, he had a stack of identically-covered books, and Anders spotted him as soon as he walked in, eyes widening as he took in the colour of the books.

"Is that--? Did you--? You saved the sketchbooks?" Anders laughed, putting aside the book he was reading and heaving himself out of the enormous thickly-padded bowl on the floor. The cats had liked the design on a smaller scale, and after a while, Anders had conceded they were correct, and had a few bowl seats large enough for himself made for the library.

"Of course. I told you that, didn't I? Maybe I didn't. I didn't bring much clothing out of the tower, but we brought all the books we could carry. I brought these. Something told me you and Karl would want them, but..." Fen'Din shrugged and offered the books to Anders. "I was sure he'd be with you. For what it's worth, I'm glad they're all dead. I'm very glad you killed them. I wish I'd been there to help, or at least to get a chorus line going, after."

"I wish you'd been there, too. I wish I'd known you survived. They told me almost everyone died. Solona couldn't get an answer about you. Not even the wrong answer, just no answer at all. They didn't know, and then I was... well, maybe someone answered her, but I was in Kirkwall." Anders took the first book off the pile, opening it to a random page. Faces -- not his own, this time.

"Martigan, isn't it? Didn't he come with you?"

Fen'Din nodded. "That was right after you left, that last time. Couldn't draw you if you weren't there. There's a lot more of Karl in the second half of that book. Is that the one with the desire demon? I'm not sure. Might've been the next one. Before he went to Kirkwall."

"Went." Anders choked on the word. "You know he sent a letter to Amell? I wouldn't have known he'd been moved, but she was the only one any of us knew on the outside, and what with her being the Hero of Ferelden... I begged. You have to know I begged her to save him, like she saved me, like she saved the whole fucking world, you have to know I begged her..."

"I do know," Fen'Din replied, watching Anders start to shake. "Sit. Tell me what went wrong."

Sit, yes, of course. Sitting always helped. Anders poured himself back into the bowl seat, completely unsurprised when Fen'Din set down the books and curled up in his lap, like one of the cats.
"Meredith," he said, as if all the horror he'd been through could be expressed in that one name. "The Kirkwall circle would consider releasing a mage to the local Wardens -- especially since the accident in Starkhaven meant they had more mages than anyone knew what to do with -- but the templars were disinterested in sending a Fereldan mage back to Ferelden, even at the request of the Hero of the Fifth Blight. She fought. She was still fighting, I heard later, right up until the letter came that he couldn't be sent because he was dead."

"Not your fault," Fen'Din pointed out.

"Somehow, that just makes it worse," Anders sighed.

"He loved you," Fen'Din said, quietly.

"Did he?" Anders choked on the words. "Was that it? Was that what we did wrong?"

Fen'Din took back the book, flipped through it for a moment, and then pulled another from the pile. A bit more rifling of pages and he tapped on one. "Here. Look at him."

For a long moment, Anders kept his eyes closed and his head turned away. He wasn't sure he could do it.

"You always knew," Fen'Din said. "You were always right about who was getting sent away. And the way he looked at you..."

"Did he?" Anders asked again, trying to ignore the fact that his eyes were watering.

"He did. They sent him away because they were afraid of you, this time. They meant to send me to Nevarra, I think, but ... the old man wasn't giving up all three of us. Not when he'd lost Amell, already. He got to keep me. And then the demons came. I heard Amell came back for that, and Wynne went off with her. I didn't see any of it."

"Where were you? You were still there, weren't you?" Anders blinked, knocking the tears down his cheeks.

"I was downstairs. You know, all those rooms you had to be a Senior Enchanter to get into? Funny thing about the Veil. When you let the demons in, the locks get a little funny." Fen'Din shrugged and picked up another book, paging through it. He tipped it so Anders could see. "I sang to them and they came to me. A lot of them changed -- they changed when Uldred called them, and they changed again when I sang them spirit songs." He flipped through several pages of demons and spirits in various stages of transformation. "They stayed with me in the vaults, because it was safe down there. Nobody thought to look -- not the templars and not any of the demons that were hunting. I guess the Senior Enchanters were more appealing, and they were all upstairs. All the way upstairs. Wynne was going to bring the children out, but when she got to the doors... I heard the templars wouldn't let them out. She got so angry the rage demons came -- and then Amell. Wynne really thought she could get them out. I tried to tell her, but she was so sure. I just headed for the vaults -- if it was going to come to that, all the good Tevinter shit was down there, and then I couldn't go back up, because I'd be leaving demons behind me. They'd have changed again. So, I spent most of the battle in the vaults, playing with old Tevinter toys and singing spirit songs."

"Changed?" Anders asked, eyes lingering on the sketches.

"Uldred tried to take spirits for slaves -- they told me so. He was angry. He made them angry. They look like demons, when they're angry. They look like demons, if you're angry. Me? I wasn't angry -- I got it. I knew why he was so pissed off, but he'd misunderstood the principles at work and acted in
accordance with things that were impossible, because he believed they were real. I was just kind of disappointed. I'd always liked Enchanter Uldred." Fen'Din flicked a hand dismissively. "But, they weren't demons for me. Not for long. I knew what they really were, and they stopped pretending. They weren't afraid of me. Tenderness, Grace, and Charity -- you remember Charity, don't you? Used to work with that other girl Wynne was teaching. What was her name? Younger than us. But, they knew me, and once they calmed down, they were just like they'd always been. I just couldn't leave them alone, because they were angry and afraid, and they'd hurt people if I didn't keep them calm."

Fen'Din eyed Anders. "But, that's not the point. The point is that Karl loved you."

"It wasn't supposed to happen. They told us what would happen if we did, and... and now he's dead." Anders's eyes slid shut again, tears rolling down his cheeks. "I killed him. I couldn't save him. I couldn't make it right. He begged me to do it, Elfhole, and I did. I held him as he died, and he didn't understand -- he'd turned back. He was gone again, and I couldn't get through. I wanted to spend my life with him, and instead I put a knife in his chest."

"There's no coming back from what they did to him. You know that." Fen'Din sounded so certain.

"Really? Are you so sure? Because I'm not. He was with me again, just for a couple of minutes. He did come back -- he came back and begged to die." Anders buried his face in his hands. "But, I don't know why or how -- How can I be sure I couldn't have done it again? He was angry and afraid, but I was there. Who says I couldn't have changed him back?"

"The Chantry," Fen'Din pointed out. "Every book on the subject since the practise began seven hundred years ago."

"The Chantry is constitutionally full of shit in more ways than either of us ever imagined, back in that tower." Anders shook his head, hands moving with it.

"They ruined his body so it would no longer be able to contain his mind or his power. They trapped him in a broken shell that they controlled. You let him out." Fen'Din pulled Anders's hands down and looked him in the eyes. "I just wish you'd kept his bones. I might've been able to do something with those."

"Yeah, well, I thought you were dead, too," Anders muttered, looking away.

"I am dead, Roundear. Look how little difference it's made for me."

Anders laughed wetly, his eyes a swollen red as he wiped his tears away. They were vexing things, tears, still falling even he tried to will them to stop, but they slowed as he pored over Fen'Din's sketches. He had almost forgotten the shape of Karl's face, but there it was, etched in graceful pencil lines.

"No, you are absolutely right," Anders said fondly, turning the page to find another, looser sketch of the two of them. "You are still crazy, dead or not."

"I'm not crazy," Fen'Din argued, for the first time. "You just can't see the things I do. Or, well, maybe you can, now. Maybe he can."

"Cormac?" Anders looked up, still blinking back the last few tears.

"Justice."

And that made Anders pause. "I see spirits," he admitted. "There was so much going on, I didn't
"Then you see other things, too. What do you see when you look at Mack?" Fen'Din's eyes were unusually penetrating, but Anders had learnt to read his subtle shifts in expression.

"He's not possessed. Don't be ridiculous." Anders flicked his hand. "What do you mean, 'what do I see'? He's Cormac. I wouldn't know the difference. Justice and I were already... Well, I suppose he's got a bit of a cheese wheel about the middle, these days, but a man of our age, and besides, it's wonderful -- we're not warriors in some unwinnable fight, any more. We're just two guys with a date orchard, now. And Justice protests that we could be doing more."

"I can tell. Your hair flares when his opinions are strong."

Without thinking, Anders reached up to smooth back his hair. "My... hair?" He wondered then what Fen'Din saw when he looked at him. He had to look different, joined with a spirit, and Fen'Din had said as much but... he had no idea what 'different' looked like, outside of his hair flaring. Apparently.

"I don't think anyone else can see it. It's like your hands, before you cast a spell, but on your head."

Fen'Din paused, flipping through a less-battered book. "But, that's not what I meant, when I asked."

"He's still not possessed," Anders insisted.

"No, of course not. You'd have noticed." Fen'Din reached out and turned the pages in the book Anders held, and then tapped on a page of sketches of Karl. "This. Look at this."

"It's Karl," Anders replied, eyes filling up again. "Andraste's ass, he was handsome."

"It's Karl looking at you." Fen'Din pointed to a note at the bottom of the page and then slipped the book he was holding on top of it. "And this is you looking at Mack."

Anders sucked in a breath. He knew Fen'Din had been drawing him, of course. Seeing a sketchpad balanced on Fen'Din's knee had been a scrap of normalcy amid the insanity, but he had never paid it much mind.

Anders rested his fingers on the white of the page, careful not to smudge the lines. He didn't look like himself, not because of the beard or the longer hair and not due to a lack of proficiency on Fen'Din's end, but because of that look, a look he never thought he'd wear. There was a softness there, a light in his eyes... the same expression Karl was wearing on the other page.

"When did you draw this?" he asked, because it was easier than certain other questions Anders had.

"Yesterday morning. I didn't want to interrupt." Fen'Din looked toward the kitchen. "You were outside and he was baking the bread. I'm surprised he hasn't noticed. You look at him that way often. There's a few more, if you page back."

Anders did, and Fen'Din was right. But, none of the sketches of Cormac had that glow. Cormac's face was warm, definitely friendly -- except that one, where he'd probably been lecturing someone -- but there was never that same ease of feature.

"Does he know?" Fen'Din asked, finally. "Did you?"

Anders shook his head. "No," he said, one answer to two questions. There was a dull ache in his chest, one that, over the years, he had come to associate with Karl. "I... no." Gently, he closed the newer sketchbook as he wondered where he had gone wrong. This wasn't supposed to happen again. It wasn't supposed to happen at all, and Karl had paid the price.
Fen'Din watched, reaching out after a bit to tug on a bit of Anders's hair. "We're free, now," he pointed out. "All of us, here. It's different. You said it yourself." All of them, there, yes. All of them who had left when he'd opened the wall. And he knew that didn't mean they were safe, but this, he thought they were safe from, along with so many other things they'd tolerated over the years, Anders more than most. Or at least as safe as any non-mage would be. "I bet you could have it, if you wanted. You already have the quiet house and the farm."

Anders chuckled softly. "Plus the cats and the extended family?" He tipped his head in the direction of the abbey under construction. "Sorry, I already turned down his last proposal. And the goat he brought my mother was strictly platonic."

"Platonic... goat?" Fen'Din's gaze intensified. "I've missed something, surely."

"You're the one who knew all about goats, back then!" Anders accused. "Telling me I had a taste for them, because Karl had a beard!"

"So, there's a non-platonic goat?" Fen'Din's eyebrow arched up, comically.

"Fereldan wedding goats...?"

"Oh!" Relief broke across Fen'Din's almost immobile face. "I forget he's Fereldan."

"So does he, sometimes. His brother's the one with the dog." Anders eyed Fen'Din. "Although I suppose I have a dog, now, too."

"Where?" Fen'Din glanced around. "I've met the cats and the camel, but where would you even fit a dog?"

Anders blinked slowly and then poked Fen'Din firmly in the forehead. "Well, a wolf. You think that counts?"

Fen'Din tipped his head back and bit Anders's finger. "You tell me."
The garden had started to take shape in the curve behind the domes, and outside the ring, Anders had been trying to get the ground to open up for grain. The balance was different, he'd said, than the way the soil was prepared for herbs and vegetables.

"There's nothing out here you can hurt," he reminded Keili. "If you turn it into a sinkhole, Val and Mack will fix it."

"Val's not fixing anything without more wine," the Orlesian in question grumbled from the shade of a bit of cloth stretched on sticks.

"Do you remember what happened last time you couldn't lay off the wine?" Candles asked him. "No, you don't. And it's a damn shame, too, because Kinnon was dancing."

"Now, I definitely need more wine." Val leaned against the wall and sulked. "And I wasn't drunk for nearly enough of the dancing part. It was terrible."

"You mean Kinnon's dancing wasn't the reason you were drinking in the first place?" Anders asked. "The man was all elbows the last time I saw him try. I thought he was going to poke Solona's eye out."

"Is that when you were teaching him your spicy shimmy?" Candles asked, waggling her eyebrows. "He's learned to... tame his elbows, then. His spicy shimmy might even be better than the original. Right, Val? Val agrees."

"I am not drunk enough to even be having this conversation," Val grumbled, "let alone to be offering Kinnon a grade for his performance."

Anders turned an offended look in Candles's direction, resting his hands on his hips. "You take that back!"

"Nope!" Candles answered, popping the 'p'. "Let's put it to a vote. Keili, what do you think?"

"I think I agree with Val, for once," Keili answered.

"What are we talking about?" Kinnon came outside, carrying a bowl of dates and a cup of water. "Why is anyone agreeing with Val?"

"Keili won't judge your spicy shimmy," Candles said, rolling her eyes. "And neither will Val."

"I'll judge my spicy shimmy! It's extra spicy. Do you know how many amazing nights I spent in better hands than any of you, on the way here? No? Neither do I. I was drunk in Hossberg, and I don't remember anything," Kinnon laughed and sipped his water. "But, Hawk Hold? Did any of you even see me after the first night there? Behold the spice of my shimmy."
"Thanks, I'd rather not," Val drawled. "The original was spicy enough for me, and I'm not even sure I'd want a repeat of that, at this point."

"It's even more excellent than you remember," Anders informed him. "Not that I'd do it for you without being paid, in advance."

"I would pay you more not to do it," Val shot back. He turned to point at Kinnon. "And the same goes for you."

"How much?" Kinnon asked with a speculative look.

Val floundered. "What? I was speaking hypothetically."

"No, you weren't," Anders cut in. "And if you're not paying me to stop, the implication is that I should spicy things up until you do." He swivelled his hips as he spoke, and Candles whistled.

"That's not... dammit."

"Kinnon," Anders said with a dramatic sweep of his arm. "I challenge you to a shimmy-off!"

Candles cheered, nudging Keili in the arm hard enough to bruise in her excitement. Val looked at the lot of them and went off in search of alcohol.

Kinnon shrugged out of his outer robe and tossed it to Candles. "The apprentice has become the new master." He stretched and followed by shimmying to the ground and back up.

"I doubt that." Anders untied his hair and shook it out. "I definitely still win on endurance, if nothing else. It's a Warden thing. And I do win on everything else, because I am the master of the spicy shimmy." The shimmy started in his shoulders and by the time it reached his hips, his shoulders were still, and the smooth undulations travelled up and down his body.

"He's what!?" Cormac choked on the sudden squeak in his voice, somewhere beyond the domes, but Anders could hear him clearly. He'd know that voice anywhere -- and Cormac really was that loud.

But, the dancing continued, as Val kept complaining to the folk in the garden, while he looked for something stronger than barley-milk to drink. A few more of the mages wandered out to the front of the abbey and joined Candles in providing a rhythm for the two, clapping and stomping as master and apprentice shimmyed challengingly at each other.

Anders smirked with the confidence of someone who knew he had victory well in hand, even as he eyed Kinnon and admitted -- if only to himself -- that he had improved. Kinnon had at least learned to stop flailing his elbows, for which Anders was grateful on behalf of his ribs, considering how closely they shimmyed. But then Kinnon added a twist that would have had Anders's knees complaining, and Anders finally admitted that he might have an actual challenge on his hands.

Candles laughed and cheered as Anders upped the shimmying ante, putting a bit more swish into his hips. Petra appeared at Candles's shoulder, looking dazed.

"Tell me this is the Fade," Petra said, and Candles strained to hear over the sound of clapping and stomping... and the occasional wolf-whistle. "Tell me this is a strange dream conjured by a lust demon who's bad at his job?"

"Are you kidding?" Candles blinked at Petra. "If this is a desire demon, it's got me for sure. Anders is a little broad to be that delicate, any more, but that's a talent. And Kinnon... well." She stopped talking to whistle appreciatively. "Did you know he could move like that? Even I didn't know, and I
should know!"

"I'm afraid I just never took that much of an interest in either of them. Or the shimmy." Petra's eyes remained glued to the scene before her.

"Well, it's time to fix that!" Candles whooped in amusement.

Another voice interrupted from under the arch at the edge of the property. "Ho, there! I come seeking Elder Keili!"

"Elder?" Petra muttered, and Candles shrugged, but they waved over the man in the red and black robes.

Cormac stopped whooping and cheering long enough to glance at their visitor. The first thought was that it was a templar. The second was that it was none other than Ser Peryn. "Peryn!" he called out, waving.

"Is that you, Mack? What do you at the abbey?" Peryn smiled, confused, as he walked past the two shimmying men. "That is Jannik?"

"That is, as you say, Jannik. And he's doing a great job. It's a dance contest," Cormac explained.

"And I'm just here to teach these nice people how to farm. They're from the south. What about you?"

"I am... ah..." Peryn's eyes had landed on Kinnon's hips, and he looked completely distracted. "What did you ask?"

Cormac chuckled. "What are you doing here?"

Peryn turned his head to address Cormac, but his eyes stayed fixed on Kinnon's hips. "I... thought to stop by the abbey. It is on my route. I can to get supplies for the..." He struggled with the word for a moment, the noise and the shimmying not helping his concentration. "For the pilgrims."

Anders and Kinnon were shimmying back to back now, much to the enjoyment of the crowd. Peryn swallowed and shook himself.

"Why is... ah... Is this common? Dancing contest?" Peryn regretted not travelling this way sooner.

Cormac shrugged. "I guess Jannik used to know this guy, in the south, and this was their dance. Maybe it's common with them, but I've never seen it."

"It was better when he was twenty-five." Val appeared on Cormac's other side, a glass of thick date wine in his hand.

"You don't want to know what he says about when you were twenty-five." Cormac shot a sharp look at Val, and then returned to watching Anders. "And it's still good. Maker, he's really got that, doesn't he?"

"He had it, once, but it looks like he left it in his other belt pouch," Val argued.

"Who is the name of the other one?" Peryn was sufficiently distracted by the hypnotic flow of Kinnon's robes to be picking the words next to the ones he wanted.

"That's Kinnon," Val told him. "He's an idiot, too. They're both idiots."

Peryn hummed. "Apologies to you, Mack, but the other one -- Kinnon -- wins."
Val scoffed, nearly spitting some date wine. "Wins what, the idiot contest? That's impressive. This 'abbey' is full of contestants."

"The dance contest," Peryn replied politely. "Someone else wins the idiot contest." Peryn glanced at Val, finally looking away from the dancers long enough to remember why he was there. "But... Elder Keili." He looked around, still seeing the shimmying out of the corner of his eye.

Val frowned, trying to figure out if that had been an odd turn of phrase or if Peryn had just called him an idiot.

"Keili's on the other side. You see the elf with the blond hair? The human woman with the dark hair next to her." Cormac pointed. "And on the other side is Thane Petra, who handles the more... earthly matters. If you're here about supplies, it's probably Jannik and Petra you want to talk to."

"Ah! Yes. Take my thanks." Peryn idly wondered how long the two men would be shimmying, and if it would be rude to interrupt. He edged around to the other side of the group and Cormac followed.

Cormac tapped Petra's shoulder. "Thane Petra, this is our friend Ser Peryn, with the Hossberg Circle. He travels the river, to do his duties --" Here, he could see Petra's face grow pale. "-- and he wants to know if you need anything from Hossberg or Tallo."

"I have also come to meet your Elder. Mother Yotte has told me of the remarkable woman who wishes to preach to the elves." Peryn glanced at Candles, as he spoke, assuming Elder Keili had already been successful, somewhere.

Candles's eyebrows twitched up, but otherwise she kept a straight face. "Yes, Keili is very good at preaching," she said, the irony subtle enough for Peryn not to pick up. Keili cut her a flat look.

Peryn beamed. "That is good. And you are Elder Keili?"

Keili blinked, finding the focus on her. "I... uh. Just Keili, Ser Peryn. It is a pleasure to meet you, but Mother Yotte exaggerates if she describes me as 'remarkable'."

"What's remarkable is that you didn't run off when Kinnon started shimmying again," Candles teased. "You haven't stopped complaining about it since the last time he was drunk."

"Who says I'm watching Kinnon?" Keili shot back.

Peryn smiled politely. "Shimmying?" he asked.

"What they're doing," Petra said, finally getting over the shock of the words 'ser' and 'circle' to speak. She'd thought, for a moment, that it had finally happened, that they had been found. She pointed at Anders and Kinnon. "You could also call it dancing if... you had a loose definition of the word 'dancing'. But, yes, it's... a pleasure to meet you, Ser Peryn."

"It is an honour." Peryn nodded deeply to Keili. "I did not think an abbey would come to the river. There are sisters and brothers out there, along the road to the White Lady, and other holy places, but... they rise and fall with the Maker's will and the coming of the darkspawn. It is good to see you have chosen civilisation."

Keili smiled awkwardly at the templar, who seemed to be having trouble staying focused on her, watching the shimmy contest, instead. "It's time for us to live among good, civilised people. The edges of the land are good for only so long, and they make savages of those driven to them. We will learn to live well, here, and then we will teach those who wish to know, like my good elven sister, here."
Candles chuffed in amusement, but didn't interrupt her clapping, as Anders bent back far enough to touch the ground behind him and Kinnon rose from an artful crouch in a way that looked like he was pulling himself up on the air, which she hoped he wasn't, with a templar here.

"I will be in the village for three days. If there is anything your abbey needs from the cities, please, bring a list to the Chantry, and I will make for very sure you have the items. I will bring them back, myself," Peryn promised, smiling distractedly at Keili, before his eyes turned back to Kinnon.

"Which one do you think is winning?" Petra asked him, noticing his distraction.

Peryn cleared his throat and ducked his head, realising that they had caught him staring. "They two are worthy, ah, dancers. Shimmy...ers. What do you call 'one who shimmies'?"


Peryn laughed. "You sound like Mack's friend, there." He pointed back at Val, who was watching the dancers, just as sour-faced as before.

Petra looked horrified at the comparison.

"I notice you didn't answer the question," Keili said, the corner of her lips curling up. "A-- Jannik, right? Kinnon's a bit too... gangly for the motions."

"What?" Candles laughed. "Jannik's gotten a bit too bulky for all the..." She wiggled her shoulders and hips in her own approximation of a shimmy. "Not that I'm complaining."

Peryn watched for a moment longer. "Your Kinnon. He dances well."

"Hah! I'm right!" Candles laughed again.

"You do look a little entranced," Cormac teased. "You all right, there?"

Peryn shook himself and straightened up. "Yes, I am sorry. My interest... Where comes he? It is not a common look, here. That red is very..."

"He's from Ferelden. Like, really native Ferelden." A wider smile teased the corners of Candles's mouth as she spoke. "He's got some wild story about his family being horse-lords of the Clayne. Some kind of used to be important before there even was a Ferelden. I mean, he's full of it, but it's a great story."

"And I thought all Fereldans would look like Mack." Peryn smiled faintly, still watching the lanky Ferelden with the bright red hair.

Petra laughed so hard she coughed. "Mack doesn't look Ferelden at all! Are you even Ferelden, Mack?"

"I'm so Ferelden my brother has a dog and I sniff people before I say hello," Cormac drawled. "But, I look like my father, who was not Ferelden at all. Inland Rivaini." He pointed at his hair. "It's not like anyone in Ferelden cared. In a bad week, someone might mistake us for Chasind, which is only bad if you know how people treat the Chasind, in the far south. But, you get into the Bannorn, and as long as you're not Tevinter, you're just like everybody else."

Peryn blinked, head tipping in realisation. "So... Fereldans... They look more like Kinnon, yes?"

Behind her hand, Candles chortled. "Is this inspiring you to visit the south, Ser Peryn?" she teased.
"Or at least to go south in another way," she added in a loud aside to Keili, who nudged her in the ribs.

The shimmying had slowed into swaying by then, both Anders and Kinnon red-faced and breathing hard amid their laughter.

"Would you like us to introduce you?" Petra asked. "I think the shimmying is winding down."

Peryn shifted his weight as he considered, only to shake his head with a regretful smile. "Next time?" he suggested. "I should return to my duties. But... next time. Yes."

"Be well, Peryn. I'm sure we'll see you at the tavern!" Cormac waved as Peryn made his way back toward the road.

Candles grinned at the mages around her. "So when do we tell him the templar likes his shimmy?"

"Never?" Keili suggested.

"I want to see Jannik's face, when we explain." Cormac laughed.

"You can't see his face anyway, with that beard," Petra argued.

"Was that Peryn?" Anders called out, wiping his face on his sleeve. "What did he need, more healing potions?"

"No, just some spicy Fereldan shimmy," Candles answered, falling into an incomprehensible cackle.

"He thinks Kinnon's exotic and interesting." Petra choked on a laugh.

"Well, up here I probably am!" Kinnon argued. "It's about time someone noticed!"

"Someone is a templar," Keili pointed out, and Kinnon stepped behind Anders.

"I'll let the master keep his title on that one."
Cormac makes a ridiculous mistake. Anders makes a ridiculous confession. Nothing is quite what it seems.

Anders had been weird for days. Which wasn't to say Anders wasn't usually weird, but weird for Anders was a whole other level. Cormac watched him finishing up a discussion with Kinnon, by the door, something about structural support and mudbrick, and the way Anders kept making these abortive half-gestures. That must be it, then. The spicy shimmy wasn't the only thing between them, which was fine with Cormac, but he couldn't figure out why Anders hadn't mentioned it.

"So, the two of you...?" Cormac cut in, when it looked like Kinnon was about to leave.

"The two of us what?" Anders blinked dumbly.

"Have we got the supports for the composting chamber worked out? Yeah, it'll be fine. We'll make it work." Kinnon's smile was always a little wider than his face looked like it should take. "I'm just glad you two got here first, so I don't have to go digging in the archives, myself." He laughed.

"No, I mean, back in the tower. That shimmy wasn't the only spicy thing between you two, was it?" Cormac lifted an eyebrow curiously, as the other two looked uncomfortably at each other. "Not that it matters at all! I mean, we're..." He gestured at Anders. "Help yourself, if he's into that."

Kinnon inched away from Anders, sputtering with laughter. "What? Him? Gross..." Glancing back at Anders, he added, "No offence. I mean you're... I'm sure you have your charms. To other people."

Anders cut him short with a wave of his hand. "Don't worry. I was thinking the same thing about you. I mean your shimmy's improved and all, but, uh..." He trailed off, eyes darting to Cormac and away again. He was being twitchy. He knew he was being twitchy and was trying desperately not to be twitchy. He wished Fen'Din had never shown him those drawings.

"Yep, sorry to disappoint," Kinnon continued when Anders didn't finish his thought, "but this is as spicy as it gets. For him and me, that is. I have a lot of extra spice, for other people."

Cormac laughed. "Wow, all right. Sorry. I just... need glasses or something." He cleared his throat and fluffed his hair, absentely. "So, the composting chamber's going to work out for you? Good. It would've been so much easier if we'd been able to do it with magic, here, but..."

"Yeah, it's going to be much easier than digging it out by hand. Less dangerous, too. Just had to make sure of some last measurements." Kinnon tapped a roll of papers against his forehead. "And on that note, I have to go shovel shit. I'll see you two in a couple of days."

Anders saw Kinnon out and came back to find Cormac still standing by the inner door watching him.

"What?"

Cormac shook his head. "Something's been off, these last few days, and I can't tell if that's you being weird or me being a lifelong fugitive. Is it Val? Did Val pull some shit? You say the word and I'll
Anders scratched his beard and tried to laugh off Cormac's concern, but that laugh came out nervous and strained. "Val? No, he's being no more of a shit than usual. Possibly even less of a shit to me, ironically. So... please don't rearrange his face. You know I'm the one who would have to put it back together anyway."

There was something satisfying in the offer, regardless, and it was always nice to know that Cormac had his back. Still... Anders glanced at the door, wondered if he could make an excuse and leave long enough for Cormac to forget his question or at least to not notice that Anders hadn't answered it.

"Me, then. Huh." Cormac shook his head and made his way toward the kitchen, carefully avoiding Purrino, who wove between his feet, silently. "What do you want for supper? I can make some flatbread and I think we have leftover sweet mutton from the other night. Or there's eggs and barley, if you want me to make casserole, but that's going to take a while." He crouched down in front of the icebox and shoved things around. "Your mum brought us goat milk. We should use that, soon."

Instead of retreating, Anders followed, watching Cormac move around the kitchen in the home they had made. It was a scene he knew well, but there was something different about it now -- the lighting, maybe, the way the sun spilled gold across the counter-top and highlighted the tight curls of Cormac's hair.

There was a growing tightness in Anders's chest, the words building up pressure inside his lungs before spilling out, all at once. "So, I love you. Apparently." Then the words were out there, hanging -- oh Maker, had he actually said that? -- and Anders scrambled to bury them. "That is... that does not answer your question about dinner. The mutton, I think, would be... good. Simple. We can make the casserole tomorrow."

Cormac stood, slowly, setting the bowl of leftover meat on the counter. A long moment passed, before he turned to look at Anders, concern and confusion on his face. He'd tended to regard Anders like he regarded Anton, except sexy. And really, it was for the best that Anton wasn't sexy -- their family was fucked up enough. This, though... he didn't think Anders meant it like that.

"I'm so sorry," he said, quietly, wrapping his arms around Anders's waist. "You have to know I never meant to do that to you. You're my family, Anders. I'm so sorry."

"I know. You don't need to... I know."

Cormac looked up with the cheesiest grin he could muster and unwrapped one arm to hold up a finger. "One? It's not your fault. I'm just irresistible. Two? Who said anything about endings? I mean... you -- you're all right, aren't you? Are you all right?" He reached up and cupped his hand around the beard fluff on Anders's cheek. "You were meant for so much better than you got."

Anders's smile was weak but genuine. "What could possibly be better than this?" he asked. "Living on a date farm with you, a camel, and way too many cats, with goat milk from my mum in the icebox, and a circleful of mages to babysit?" Anders reached up to squeeze the hands on his cheeks. "I'll be fine. I didn't even notice until Fen'Din pointed out the obvious."

"How'd he know?" Cormac looked surprised. "Isn't he, you know...?" He raised an eyebrow. "And you should give me back my hands if you want supper before the sun goes down. Don't worry, I'll put them all over you after supper. I mean, assuming that's something we still do. We still do that, right? I don't have to bring you the head of a dragon or anything, first, do I? I don't really know how
"If I say 'yes', will you go out and try to find a dragon?" Anders teased, letting Cormac take back his hands. "Wait, you're a Hawke. Of course you would. But, yes, that is something I would... very much like to keep doing, if you're... fine with that."

Anders was just relieved Cormac was still here. He wondered what he would have to do to actually scare the man off. Lesser mortals would have already run screaming.

"If." Cormac snorted as he scooped flour into a bowl. "You'd have to be covered in dragon-shit for me not to be fine with that. And even then, it's just long enough to wash it off. Creators, haven't I said it, before? Varric brought me down to your place, that first time, and my first thought was 'where are all the exits', but my second thought was 'I want to put my hands on that incredible ass'. And then, you know, you turned around and threatened my life with the blue and the glowing, and I was sold. Entirely sold. Even then, there was something about Justice that made my skin tingle, and everything about you... well, it's a good thing I'm not a Warden, or I'd have to start wearing smalls, to keep the folk in town from talking."

"I'm sure they talk anyway. And why wear smalls when you know I'll just rip them off of you later?" This was easy, going back to bad jokes and dirty commentary. It was familiar, comfortable, and Anders stopped feeling like he needed to crawl out of his skin. That light ache in his chest was still there, but he doubted it would go away soon. He cleared his throat. "Anyway. I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner preparations, speaking of Warden problems."

"Well, keep the cats out of my way, and I'll see about filling the gaping void in your gut. And then after, we can see how many more holes I can fill, hmm?" Cormac kept his hands to himself, this time, if only because they were covered in dough.
Lord Barfy Orlesian

Chapter Summary

Val gets drunk and stupid. Ser Peryn to the rescue.

The guy at the bar had been surprisingly nice, considering this tiny village and the local opinion of Orlesians. Val figured it must've been because he actually had money, for a change. Not much, but nothing seemed expensive, here. Cheaper than in Kal-Sharok, for sure. Probably cheaper than in Hossberg, but he couldn't remember. Kinnon had dealt with getting them drinks in Hossberg. But, a few copper pieces had bought a bottle of the local not-wine, and then another, and after the second, he finally started to feel a bit more like himself, for the first time since he'd left the tower.

Conversation continued around him, as he picked at a plate of sticky-sweet fried cakes, and he realised he couldn't understand most of it. Who the fuck didn't speak Common, these days? Or at least didn't speak it in public.

As he licked the syrup off his fingers, he felt the faintest stirring along his thigh and wondered if he was drunk enough to even consider that. The demons had ruined the thought for him, but this was a new town. These were people he'd never met. None of the rooms here had any memories attached to them. Maybe if he took a bottle with him, he'd be able to go through with it.

He turned to the nearest person who seemed to be speaking Common. "Where do you go to get laid around here? Do I have to go back across the river?" He was concerned, though he'd never say it, about being too drunk to find his way in the city.

The towering man looked down at him and laughed. "You go home to your wife, like everyone else." The Ander cocked his thumb at Val and chuckled to his companion, amiably.

Val frowned into the drink in his hand for a moment, wondering why he hadn't thought of that, until he remembered he wasn't married. He lifted a slightly swaying finger, and the Ander, more amused than patient, turned back to listen to whatever point Val was about to make.

"I don't have a wife," Val informed him, his lips taking longer than usual to form the words. "Maybe I could borrow yours?"

Val watched the amusement die on the Ander's face. He wasn't surprised when his answer came in the form of a fist. Val's vision sparked white, and he fell to the floor, cheek smarting.

Val looked up, up at the towering Ander scowling over him. He'd lost his drink somewhere in the fall, and his heart ached at the loss. "That wasn't a 'no',' he said.

The bartender threw a wet rag at the Ander. "Don't kill anyone in my bar, Hanne. Sister Ingill would not be happy."

The Ander, presumably Hanne, replied in Ander, but the tone left little to the imagination.

Suddenly, most of Val's vision was filled with a swirl of red and black, and for a moment, he thought he was bleeding from his eye. Then it stopped moving, with a faint scrape of hard leather. Armour. He squinted up to find he could see up the nose of a man in red and black robes who seemed to be
trying to calm Hanne.

"He is drunk and foreign," were the only words Val could make out. He thought the rest might be in Ander, and then the armoured man was crouched beside him, picking him up. "You are very drunk. Can you stand? I do not think I can carry you all the way back to the abbey."

The voice made sense, as it filtered through the haze. That templar, from the other day. The one who kept staring at Kinnon. Outside, a crack of thunder split the clear sky, and the patter of droplets against the hard earth could be heard. There was a templar touching him, Val realised. Offering to take him somewhere. Home, he thought, but he wasn't sure he wanted to go anywhere with a templar. Still, outside might be enough. The rain would be cool, and maybe he could sober up a little.

Val grunted something that might have been a 'yes' -- or any other combination of syllables, really -- and Peryn hoisted him to his feet, one hand still clutching Val's robes when he swayed. The other members of the bar were not sad to see him go.

In the doorway, Peryn paused to pull up his hood and Val's, opening the door into a torrential downpour where there had been clear skies minutes ago. Hood or not, the wet and the cold was enough to lift some of the cottony haze from Val's mind.

"M'fine," he insisted, making a weak attempt to pull away from Peryn's grip. "I can get back from here." That was probably a lie, but he figured it was safer than walking back with a templar.

Peryn smiled politely. "I am sure," he said, but he did not let Val go.

"'S not that far. Only one road. Can't get lost." A sudden look of horror crossed Val's face and he lunged for the corner of the building, holding onto his knees as his stomach tried to rid itself of some of the wine and an awful lot of the cakes. And then he was glad for the hands, because they were the only thing keeping him from falling into his own vomit.

"Maybe we will stop to see the healer. I am told he has potions for this." Peryn nodded, sagely, gently patting Val's back, before turning the drunk back toward the road.

Val groaned pitifully, but as horrifying as the idea of Anders seeing him like this was, even Anders was better than being alone with a templar. And Anders was much closer to town than the abbey. He debated suggesting the Chantry, as Peryn steered him toward the road leading down the river, but he could see two figures ahead of them on the road. It was foolish, but he very much hoped they would be other mages. Someone he could trust to get him home without a problem.

The rain seemed to be focused on the tavern, oddly, and Val tried to ask about it. "Rain usually just in one spot like that?" Somewhere in the middle of the sentence, he realised the other reason he'd gotten hit was that he was drunk enough that he no longer sounded Fereldan. That was a thick helping of the accent specific to Serault, but generally recognisable as some kind of Orlesian. Great. This was going well.

"Oh, sometimes." Peryn nodded. "The rain is rare and strange. Sometimes it floods. Sometimes it rains on the house of one man."

"This place makes no sense," Val muttered, just to be petulant. He squinted at the approaching figures, certain that the first one looked familiar until he remembered that everyone looked like Anders around here. But getting a good look at the second figure made him think that first assessment might have been right after all.

"Ah!" said Peryn, waving at the pair. "There is Jannik. His timing is good." After a bit of squinting
in the dark, they waved back. Peryn leaned into Val as they approached. "And the other one... his name is Kinnon, yes?"

Val sent Peryn a flat look, doubting the templar even knew his name. He considered lying and telling him the wrong name, but that took too much effort, effort that he needed to put into arguing with his complaining insides.

"Well, if it isn't one of my favourite people in town!" Anders greeted them, arms wide. "And Val."
He saw the way Peryn was holding him up, and his smile grew a little strained. "What did he do?"

"He offered to 'borrow' Hanne's wife. He is very drunk." Peryn shifted, nudging Val forward, like he was holding out a wet kitten.

"Maker, Val, how many teeth this time?" Anders rubbed his face, and Kinnon fell to cackling, beside him.

"None!" Val protested. "But, I think he broke my--" He leaned forward suddenly, grabbing for Anders, for balance, but Peryn held him up.

Anders, knowing what came next, hopped back a few steps, as more of the wine returned.

"No teeth," Peryn promised. "Only vomit."

"Great impression you're making on the locals," Kinnon groaned. "Can't you keep your shit together?"

Val lunged like he might punch Kinnon, but Peryn held onto him. "I don't know why I even came up here with you people! We had a home! And it was safe for everyone but him!" He jabbed a finger at Anders.

"Yeah, and our home isn't really there any more, so it's kind of a moot point," Kinnon argued. "Your options were stay and be killed or come away and maybe live."

"And it's that stupid elf's fault!" Val shouted, shoulders tipping forward as he started to shake. "I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have left him there, alone."

"Oh, crap." Anders sighed and pulled Val away from Peryn. "I'm sorry. He's had a bit much. His friend died and..." He shrugged helplessly and tried to support Val with one hand while he dug in his bag for the sobering potion he knew would be there. At least one was a constant companion when he came down to the tavern. Just in case of emergencies.

"Ten years ago," Kinnon clarified. "Blood mage. It was pretty horrible, actually. But, we were just coming to see you! Jannik says you're one of the best templars he's ever met." He still stumbled on the name. 'Jannik'. That was Anders, but here, everyone was 'Anders'.

Peryn straightened, puffing out his chest before he realised what he was doing. "Does he?" he asked. "I think, it depends on 'best templar' meaning. There are not many mages this far north." He shrugged sheepishly.

Against Anders's shoulder, Val let out a hysterical laugh, but Anders patted his back and offered Peryn a one-shouldered shrug in return. Keeping Val propped up with one arm, Anders pulled the potion's cork free with his teeth and shoved the vial under Val's nose.

"I meant," Anders clarified as Val gulped down his potion, "that of the few templars I've met, you're the best, as a person. You're a great guy." He was glad Cullen wasn't there to hear that, but this was
really for Kinnon's benefit. Carver, at least, would have known he wasn't even in the running. Well. Maybe in the top five.

"Gross," Val muttered, handing back the empty vial. "Stop flirting with the templar."

Kinnon shrugged. "It's personal, for him. Blood mage." He tried to smile, but it came off a bit strained. "Why don't we get a drink, or something, while An-- Jannik finishes cleaning up that mess? Yes, I mean you, Val. You're a mess."

"Fuck you," Val muttered into Anders's shoulder.

"Not a snowball's chance in Tevinter." This time the smile was much more genuine.

"Either way, you're probably going to want to turn around in a minute or five," Anders warned, still supporting Val. "The potion's really a fastest route solution."

Kinnon thought about that for a moment. "Oh. Ew." He tossed an arm around Peryn's shoulders and nudged him up the road a bit. "You don't want to see this. Why don't you come talk to me about being a templar? Is it exciting? What are the mages like? It's the Anderfels -- do you know any Wardens?"

Peryn hesitated only a moment before ascertaining that Anders could handle Val on his own. With a parting wave, he was more than happy to let the pretty red-haired foreigner steer him back towards the tavern.

Stooping, Anders hoisted Val's arm across his shoulders, ignoring his muttered protests. The man smelled like booze, vomit, and sweat, which brought back fond memories of Kirkwall's clinic.
A Reason for Everything

Chapter Summary

Val has problems. More problems than just getting punched in the face. Kinnon has a little too much templar.

"So, do I want to know why it's raining over the tavern?" Anders asked, nudging Val forward.

"Ask the Maker," Val groused. "He's the one who made this blighted place."

"I'm not asking the Maker, Val, I'm asking the stormbringer who'd better not piss down his leg, before we make it back to the house." Anders's voice was quiet, but sharp. "Maybe the only nicer Templar I can think of is Cullen, but Peryn is still a Templar, and if you can't control it when you're drunk, maybe you shouldn't be drinking in public."

"It wasn't me," Val insisted, but he felt less sure of that. Had it been him? Had he had enough to drink that he'd called the storm because he was pissed off? He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this drunk, but he didn't think he'd done that in Hossberg, or Kal-Sharok, or Hawk Hold. Of course, no one had punched him in the face in any of those places, either. "And you know what I really can't control when I'm drunk?" He gestured at his crotch.

"Whiskey makes the worm play dead," Anders sighed.

Val was strangely silent for a bit. "No... not at all. That wouldn't be a reason to drink."

Anders watched Val out of the corner of his eye and tried to make sense of that statement. "So, what, it has the opposite effect?" he asked.

This time Val's silence was answer enough.

"I guess that explains you trying to borrow someone's wife," Anders said, trying to keep his tone light and getting a glare for his efforts. The crunch of their feet on the ground was loud in the silence. "Though I don't remember that being a problem for you before."

"It wasn't," Val bit out.

Anders considered making a joke about getting old, but this wasn't the time. "How long?"

Val squirmed uncomfortably. "How far is the house?"

"Too far," Anders answered, quickly, knowing exactly what was about to happen, and steering Val toward the side of the road overlooking some farmer's field. "I'll hold you up, if you can handle the rest."

The road was silent except for the splash of water in the gutter, and when that stopped, Val stood a little straighter. "What do you put in that?" He paused and raised a hand to his face. "And why didn't you let me stay drunk until we got to a healing potion?"

"Because I needed not to drop you in a ditch and break your neck before we got back to the house."
"That's probably fair," Val admitted, looking up at the stars.

"How long?" Anders asked, again.

"Uldred," Val answered, still looking up. "Desire demons. Do you have any idea--?"

"I met one of the oldest desire demons in Thedas, while I was in Kirkwall." Anders laughed. "And an assortment of pride demons, rage demons, thousand-year-old walking dead. But, yeah. I know. You're not the only one to come out of that a little fucked up, although I wouldn't have expected it of you, really. You and me and Frick. We were different."

"Leofric's dead," Val reminded him.

"And that's the problem, isn't it?"

Val let out a dry laugh that was more miserable than amused. "And there's another good argument for staying drunk," he muttered. "Easier to forget that that matters." He rubbed at his head, as though he could will his hangover away if he just pressed in hard enough.

"Until you start asking to borrow someone's wife. Then when you sober up, you still remember, but you also have a hangover and a bruise on your face."

"Fuck you," Val grit out.

"I'm just saying, as far as escaping your problems goes," Anders replied, "this doesn't seem the way to go if you want to keep all your teeth."

Val's glare didn't faze Anders. He was used to far worse from Fenris.

"Come on, speaking of your teeth. We should get inside so I can fix your face." Anders huffed. "You should know I don't really want to fix your face because I think you absolutely deserved that. Of course, I've thought you deserved it just about every time someone actually bothered to hit you, so you know how that's going to work out, in the end."

"I did not," Val argued, stepping out from under Anders's arm and continuing down the road. "Well, maybe this time. But, not most of the others."

"What about the time you told Niall he was only an Isolationist because he was too ugly to be in proper company?"

"I stand by that, to this day."

"Why isn't he with you guys? Did he finally fuck off into the mountains, by himself?" Anders asked, pointing toward the right house.

"He's dead."

"Well, I can definitely see where that might ugly him up a bit, but that's a recent development."

"He was thick in the middle and he had a stupid nose! The Maker would never have cursed anyone intended for better things with a face like that!" Val paused as they came up to the dark passage to the house. "Is your bear here?"

"Probably. Cormac said he was going to put on a casserole for breakfast and then go brush the camel." Anders nudged Val forward, but Val didn't move. "What?"
"None of this is his concern." Val's spine straightened, his eyes narrowing.

"No, but certain of my talents aren't the neighbours', either." Anders nudged Val again. "You really think I'm going to tell him everything, don't you? I was just going to tell him you're too Orlesian to go to the tavern by yourself."

"Fuck you," Val snapped, again, finally heading in toward the door.

"Pay me, first." Anders sounded amused.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Val sneered. "Once a whore, always a whore, hm?"

"This 'whore' could either fix your face or add a few bruises." Anders spoke lightly, smiling as though he were joking, but there was something sharp in his look that said he wasn't. "That's up to you."

"You don't plan to charge for that too, do you?" Val grumbled as Anders helped him manoeuvre through the house.

"For healing? No. For cleaning up after you being an idiot? I might, if you make this a habit."

"I didn't ask you to clean up," Val replied as Anders dropped him onto a bench.

Anders bent over Val, taking hold of his chin and turning Val's face towards the light. "No, but if I hadn't, a Templar would. Would you have preferred that?"

Val grumbled, incomprehensibly, as Cormac appeared in the kitchen doorway, behind him.

"Jan? What are you doing home alr--" And then he spotted Val. "Ah. Looks like someone rearranged his face for me. Good look, that. You need anything?"

"Water in the bath?" Anders asked, with a pleading glance. Justice could not understand why they were helping this vicious, self-absorbed fool, and it was half of Anders's attention just keeping him out of the conversation. "And maybe a bucket, just in case."

"I'll get that, and then I'm going to go read to Harellan, some more. He's really into the story of Justinia." Cormac fluffed his hair, with one hand. "Just yell if you need anything."

"A bath?" Val muttered, under his breath, turning his eyes to Anders, even as Anders kept his face from turning back.

"You just had a detox potion. You need a bath," Anders pointed out, the healing flowing evenly from his fingers. "And you need to stop talking a moment, or your cheek's going to come out with a ding in it."

Anders could tell Val wanted to complain some more, but instead he wisely pursed his lips as Anders's glowing fingers traced his cheek, mending the battered and swollen skin he found there. At least it made Val quiet for a few minutes, something that helped to placate Justice. Anders considered only healing his face and leaving the hangover, only to decide it wasn't worth the whining later.

When the spell touched his headache, Val's scowl softened in relief. "Proper wine never gives me headaches like these." And there Val went, back to complaining.

"You're welcome," Anders drawled, checking to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

Val shifted, uncomfortably, as Cormac passed through the room again, on his way back out.
"Seriously, if you want me to punch him more gently than the last guy, I'll do it," Cormac volunteered. "But, the bath's full, and it's hot like you like it."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Val demanded, twisting around to see Cormac.

"Probably the part where you're an asshole, and I'm not related to you," Cormac retorted. "Unless you're going to try to convince me you've changed in the last ten or twelve years, which so far, you're doing a terrible job of demonstrating. You're an extremely lucky man, I just want you to know. But, that ends, the day you piss him off."

"What, because you're going to punch me?" The words came out in a singsong with a thick northern Orlesian accent. "I've had worse."

"No, because you'll have pissed off the best healer you know," Cormac smiled and fluttered his fingers, as he turned and headed out the back.

"I've pissed him off before!" Val shouted after him, and Anders thwacked him solidly between the eyes.

Val groaned and clutched his throbbing head.

"Go and wash," Anders advised him. "You smell like a sweaty, drunk corpse."

When Kinnon appeared in the doorway, he was humming under his breath, a tune to a bawdy drinking song Anders suspected the locals had taught him at some point. Val was, by then, cleaner but no less scowly.

Anders failed to hide a smile. "Did we have a nice time?" he teased.

"Mm?" Kinnon shrugged, finally realising he was humming and stopping himself. "Oh. Well. It wasn't terrible. I mean, I got a few free drinks out of it."

"Only 'not terrible'?" Anders prodded as Kinnon made himself at home on one of the chairs.

"Not terrible isn't a bad thing," Kinnon replied. "It might even have been nice, except, you know, for the Templar thing. It's a bit hard to trust anything he says."

"Do you remember what Cullen used to be like?" Anders asked, wiggling his fingers at the sand cat that hopped in the window.

"You mean before he turned into a shrieking horror that gave us all nightmares and got packed off to get his head unscrambled?" Kinnon raised an eyebrow, pointedly. "Actually, I don't much. Other than that he used to watch Solona with those big dopey puppy eyes. And, well, I guess that one time he walked in on Solona. And me. I mean, at least he had the decency to just close the door and apologise."

"That was you?" Anders snorted and covered his mouth. "I mean, I heard about that, but... You and Solona, really?"

"I promise she was only playing nice while people were looking. You could've taken a lesson." Kinnon grinned smugly.

"I was too busy being directly in the way and purring obnoxiously. I took my lessons from Mister Wiggums." Anders clicked his tongue at the cat, but it was more interested in Val. "But, for all that
Cullen was pretty forgettable, it’s because he wasn't an asshole. He really believed he could do good things. Peryn's like that, too. I just hope he handles violent disappointment a little better."

Kinnon chuffed. "Well, at the very least I can say our 'date' wasn't a 'violent disappointment', so there's that."

"Doesn't change that he's a Templar," Val muttered, fussing with the ends of still-damp hair. "He could have a heart of fucking gold, and that would be stupid."

"As much as I hate to say it," Kinnon said to Anders, "our resident asshole has a point. Getting involved with a Templar is kind of... I mean, it was one thing tonight, to distract him from the aforementioned asshole, but, in general?" He shook his head. "All it would take is one slip-up from me, and we're all being packed off to another Circle."

"Maybe," Anders said, shrugging. "But it's also good to keep tabs on any local Templars. Trust me, he's a good friend to have. Plus he's nice and kind of cute. Not necessarily my type, but..."

"So, what, I should be juggling his eggs to keep us safe?" Kinnon shot Anders a sour look.

"Didn't say that. He's already something of a friend of ours. It just seemed like his infatuation might loosen his tongue a little more." Anders shrugged, watching the cat climb carefully into Val's lap, around the shoving hands and prodding fingers.

"As long as that tongue stays in his own mouth." Kinnon shook his head. "How'd you manage, all those years?"

"You don't want an answer to that. On the other hand, I can tell you I'm always pleased when Commander Cullen's had enough to drink that his tongue doesn't stay in his own mouth. If he didn't taste like used lyrium, I might give that some actual thought." Anders raised an eyebrow and scratched at his beard, along his jaw.

"Oh, that's just... Really? Why?" Kinnon looked pained, and Anders laughed.

"Spin-the-bottle," Anders replied, with a shrug. "And then I needed to hide my face from someone trying to kill me, and he was convenient. He's really starting to get the hang of it. My compliments to his husband." He paused. "Not that I would. But, I'd definitely think about it."

Val's face twisted, but the cat climbing over him had his attention. It nudged his hand in a pointed suggestion, and, reluctantly, Val scratched behind its ears. "What is with you and these cats? Did they think you were one of them now that you have all that fur on your face?"

"I don't think I'm quite prissy enough to pass for a cat," Anders replied, rubbing his fingers together and trying to entice the cat back over his way, "but, they seem to have accepted you."

Val's scowl deepened, and he nudged the cat off his lap. The cat whined and trotted away, ears back and tail flicking.

"Anyway," Kinnon muttered, rubbing his chin, "I don't know if I'm quite the guy you want seducing the Templar. Or not seducing him or whatever. But... if he asked to get me another drink, I would probably let him."

"That's disgusting," Val grumbled, trying to wipe cat fur off his robe.

"Oh, because you're really in a place to declare something disgusting?" Anders raised his eyebrows.
"Okay, if you're about to bring up what he's like with his robes up, stop right there." Kinnon held his hands up defensively. "I don't need to know anything more on that subject."

"Anything more? What would you already know?" Val demanded, the tops of his cheeks taking an irate tinge.

"Uh-uh." Kinnon shook his head. "If you haven't told him, I'm not telling him, but I heard it from Doreen..."

"Lies. All lies," Val protested. "How could you imagine it was true?"

"Maybe because you didn't ask what I heard, before you started denying it." Kinnon grinned smugly.

"I'm still the only person in the room not screwing a Templar!" Val shot back.

"And I know exactly why," Kinnon continued to smile.

Cormac appeared in the kitchen door, a cat tucked under one arm and a book in the other hand.
"Present tense? None of us are screwing Templars. But, at various points in the past... well, yes, you're still probably the only one in the room. I mean, assuming things went well for you, tonight, Kinnon?"

Kinnon's cheeks turned a shade of red that clashed with his hair. "We just had a couple of drinks! There was no rattling of armour going on!"

"Yet," Anders said with a wink at Cormac.

"Still gross," Val muttered.

Standing, Kinnon rolled his eyes. "Right. I'm off to find some saner people. Good night!" With a half-hearted wave, he took his leave.

Anders waited until he was gone before saying, "He's going to be looking for a long time, then."
Chapter Summary

The mages learn about weddings. Fen'Din learns something about himself. Val learns not to eat what Anders is eating.

They sat in the courtyard of the abbey, circled around the enormous table covered in rolls of bread and dishes most of the mages had never encountered, as Anders and Cormac told stories of the weddings they'd been to, together. The idea that not just any mage, but an actually terrifyingly dangerous one, like Bethany, had just married into a royal household was so much more than any of them had imagined.

"And then there was my brother, Artemis, who married an elf from Tevinter." Cormac waited for the gasps and murmurs to make their way around the table. "No, his husband isn't a mage. Well, not... practically. Not the way you'd think of it. But, my brother definitely is. Creators, that was a wild party. We had to set a magister on fire." He laughed and cocked his head at Anders. "Was that the one where you brought up your man, here? Something about Jethann not being pretty enough for my brother's appreciation of elven culture?"

"No, that was Anton's wedding. And you weren't anywhere near me. How'd you hear about that?" Anders squinted at Cormac.

"Artie told me you were giving Jethann a hard time. Why do I think that was his wedding instead of Anton's?"

"I don't know, but you're wrong. It was the wedding where I figured out there really is still such a thing as drinking much too much." Anders laughed. "But, yeah, the party, the night before, was in the best brothel in Kirkwall, because the viscount -- I mean, he wasn't viscount, yet -- hung out in there all the time, playing cards. And, there's a lot of elves working there, like you might expect, but Jethann was really something else. And I don't remember, he called me arrogant, and I said he wasn't that pretty, because I knew the Dead Wolf of Halamshiral."

"Halamshiral?" Fen'Din looked quizzically at Anders, even as he stuffed another bite of runny greens in cream sauce into his mouth. "What makes you think I'm Orlesian?"

Val snorted. "As if."

Anders had just stuffed a large piece of bread into his mouth, and he paused in his chewing to consider Fen'Din across from him. He held up a finger in a request for patience as he finished chewing. "Right. You never... So, back when I first became a warden, I had a conversation with one of the merchants at Vigil's Keep. We were trading stories, like we are now, and he told me one about a mage, a little elf kid in Halamshiral." Anders gave Fen'Din a meaningful look.

"Really?" Fen'Din looked fascinated. "I didn't think anyone would remember that. It wasn't such a big production. Not like you. You set a barn on fire. I just stopped to play a game of dice with some old soldiers. Green Knights, or something. One of them had the best hat. But, it wasn't... it wasn't a big deal, really."
Anders laughed so hard he had to rest his head on the edge of the table. "Not a big deal? That's not what he said."

"My sister healed herself with the corpse of a wolf. We're just lucky nobody but my brother saw it happen," Cormac said, helping himself to some more fruit and barley. "Me, I... well... I'm lucky nobody saw that, or I'd never have made it as far as a tower."

"Okay, I've heard both of these stories, and no, Cormac. You're wonderful, but he's actually terrifying." Anders laughed some more.

"Says the man who set a barn on fire while he was still in it," Candles teased from the other side of the table.

"Yeah, a barn. Just a barn." Anders shook his head between chuckles, brushing his hair back from his face. "But you don't understand. By 'Green Knights', he means Emerald Knights, as in the old Dalish warriors. As in old, dead Dalish warriors. According to the merchant I was talking to, it led to a full-on battle between the knights and templars. Hard to forget, he said. I think that beats burning down a barn, but what do I know?"

Fen'Din shrugged. "They killed me and I woke up in the tower of spirits." He didn't remember much at all, before the tower. He remembered his friends trying to save him, though. The part about the knights sounded right, and obviously the templars had come, but... "Halamshiral? Really? How very strange. All I remember is ringing metal and the shouting I heard with my ears and the shouting I didn't. And the sky was open, and then I couldn't hear anything at all, because I was dead."

"How many times do I have to tell you you're not dead?" Val groaned. "If you were dead, you wouldn't be nearly as much of a pain in the ass."

"I might be. If you were dead, too." Fen'Din smiled at his own wit. "You are, you know. This whole journey has been some exercise of your own fears."

"Maker's shit," Val grumbled. "I am not drunk enough to deal with you."

"Funny," Kinnon replied, "that's what most of us usually say about you." Smiling sweetly, he reached over Val's plate to grab the plate of greens. "I'm sorry about being Orlesian, Fen'Din. We still love you."

Val gave him a sour look and then eyed his drink as though contemplating whether to dump it into Kinnon's lap.

"I just want you to know you are all very strange people and I have no idea why you followed me here," Fen'Din reached over and speared a bit of the mutton no one else seemed to be eating off of Anders's plate. "Which isn't to say I'm disappointed at the result." He took the bite and stared into the distance, considering it. "The peppers are roasted, aren't they?"

"I don't know how he does that." Cormac shook his head. "The last time I made the mistake of trying to eat that, I think I spent half a candle hallucinating and the rest of it praying for death."

"I think it tingles," Anders said, trying to chew and talk at the same time. "He can't feel it at all, just taste it."

Val muttered something about Fereldans and their weak stomachs, as he jabbed a fork into the mutton, as well, taking some for himself.

"Oh shit." Kinnon's eyes widened.
"Don't!" Petra held up her hands.

"Fucking do it!" Candles cheered. "I bet he catches fire."

Val scoffed. "If I catch fire, it's his fault," he said, pointing at Anders. "Now, please, let an Orlesian show you how it's done." He cut a glare in Kinnon's direction as he shoved a forkful of mutton into his mouth.

The table watched and waited as he chewed. At first, there was no change in expression, just the slightest tightening of his jaw and then he inhaled shakily, flushing from his hairline down his neck, the scars standing out in sharp white against his cheek.

"How is it?" Anders asked, smiling around another bite of mutton.

"It's not the spiciest thing I've had," Val said in a voice that only shook a little, but his white-knuckled grip on the table said otherwise. He waited a moment before lunging for his drink and guzzling it while the rest of the table laughed.

"Don't mind him," Fen'Din teased, taking another bite, before he picked up his pencil, "he's not Orlesian enough for this."

Val croaked angrily in Fen'Din's direction, before stuffing his mouth with bread and grabbing for the nearest glass that still had anything in it.

"Nope," Candles said, with a cheery smile, moving her drink out of the way.

Val tried to glare at her, but the tears streaming down his cheeks ruined the effect. As his wit caught up with his struggling body, he flicked a hand and filled his empty glass with ice water. Unfortunately, his aim wasn't so good, in the shape he was in, so he also filled his plate and his lap. Still, enough of it ended up in the glass that he could pour it into his mouth.

Anders finally felt some nagging sympathy and shoved the cucumber and yoghurt salad across the table. "Eat some of that before I actually have to heal you."

Val gargled something that could have been either a "thank you" or a "fuck you", but he took the salad regardless, shovelling it into his mouth as though it could smother the taste. After a fair bit of wheezing, plus more guzzling of water and eating of salad, Val managed to regain his voice if not his composure.

He pointed, still red-faced, at Fen'Din. "What are you doing? Are you drawing me?"

Anders straightened, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Fen'Din's sketch pad, and laughed. "Yes, he is, and I want this framed and put on my wall."

"No. Do not." Val tried to transmute his horror into disdainful disapproval. "I will blow your house down."

"You'd have to blow me, first," Cormac quipped, around a mouthful of beans.

Half the table eyed Cormac contemplatively.

"Is everything that comes out of your mouth about sex or violence?" Val griped, serving himself from the safer platters.

"Not when he's on a boat!" Anders grinned and Cormac groaned.
Val narrowed his eyes at Anders, not asking the question, but waiting for the answer anyway.

"Can we not talk about me and boats?" Cormac put his face in his hands, and Anders clapped him solidly on the back.

"When he's on a boat the only thing that comes out of his mouth is the same thing he just put in it, but slightly used."

Candles smirked and raised a finger. "Does that include--?"

"Yes." Anders cackled until his cheeks turned red with it. "We're not much for boats, these days."

"Well, considering the alternate route involves darkspawn and dwarves," Kinnon replied, "I'm not sure that was the worse option."

"The camels were cute," Candles reminded him.

"The camels didn't spit on you," Kinnon grumbled.

"No, but watching them spit on you was part of the charm." Candles smiled sweetly and stole a piece of bread off Kinnon's plate.
Never a Peaceful Evening

Chapter Summary

A great deal of shoving and licking. Peryn is terribly confused.

Amid the friendly bickering, Val tried to make a grab for Fen'Din's sketchpad.

Fen'Din turned away from the hand, smoothly, and as Val made another grab, he hooked his foot around the bottom of Val's chair and pulled. The chair fell back, knocking Val's legs out from under him and the table got suddenly quiet for a moment as everyone looked to see what had happened.

"No more beer for him," Fen'Din quipped, pencil still moving as he tipped the sketchbook differently.

"Stop fucking drawing me!" Val barked, still trying to untangle himself from the chair. "You always make me look terrible!"

"Lies," Fen'Din replied. "And would you rather I drew you fucking? I've done that. But, that really doesn't look good on you. I have drawn you looking good, but I'm fairly sure your mouth was closed in all of them."

Val stilled in the middle of righting his chair, face turning red again from something other than the food. "What do you mean, 'you've done that'? You pervy elf shit!"

"Please don't hang those on the wall," Kinnon muttered to Candles, who smirked.

"At least I looked good in all of those," Anders offered, with a one-shouldered shrug.

Val blinked at him.

"Yeah, I've seen them. Doesn't seem to matter what I was doing, I always looked good. You, though..."

"I'm not sure 'good' is the word I'd use for the one where you've got your face jammed in his crotch," Fen'Din pointed out, licking the tip of his pencil and rolling it on the edge of the page before he went back to shading Val's curls.

"I think I looked amazing, under the circumstances. I dare anyone to look better than I did, while swallowing a knob," Anders argued, rolling more spicy mutton into a piece of bread.

"Yes, you always did look better with your mouth full, didn't you. Sounded better, too. Always a good way to get you to shut up." Val's bitterness dripped from every word.

"Maybe you should stuff something in your mouth and shut yourself up?" Kinnon asked around a bite of bread. He paused mid-chew, thinking over what he had just said. "By which I mean food. I was not volunteering my knob. I don't want your teeth anywhere near my mage staff."

"That's the smartest thing you've said all day," Candles said. "By the way, Val, you have mutton in your teeth."
Val glared at her, mouth shut as he sucked at his teeth. "That better not have made it into the sketch."

"Are you questioning my accuracy?" Fen'Din's expression never changed, but he also didn't stop to erase anything. "I could turn my back, right now, and draw this table and everyone at it. And it would include the green spot on Kinnon's lip, the stripe of beer foam in Anders's beard--"

"You've got to stop calling me that, or someone's going to notice. Like Peryn, who has the list. We made some jokes about how stupid a name 'Anders' was." Anders tried to look down his face as he blotted at his beard.

"That is the longest possible way to tell me you drew me with meat in my teeth," Val grumbled, taking another swipe at the book.

"I'd say something about drawing you with more interesting meat in your teeth, but I'd rather not get bit. I don't need to catch anything Orlesian," Cormac drawled, between bites of pudding.

Anders stuffed more mutton in his mouth to keep from making a comment about Cormac not wanting to be bitten.

Val's lip curled in disgust. "As if I'd put my teeth anywhere near you," he huffed. "It doesn't seem... healthy to make a habit of biting bears."

"You're missing out," Anders said, still with his mouth full. "I recommend biting bears on a daily basis."

"Ew."

"Ew."

Val pushed his food away in disgust. Candles reached across and stole the greens he had left on his plate.

Kinnon studied Cormac, curiously. "Really? I mean, not my type--" He gestured at Candles. "--but, good enough to do every day? Looks a little fluffy to be chewing on. Not that I actually want to know. You know what, forget I said anything at all."

"Oh, I think he's cute!" Petra admitted. "But, you're right. Definitely fluffier than I want in my mouth."

"Well, if either of you decide otherwise, you know where to find me." Cormac grinned brightly, eyes sparkling with the compliment.

Fen'Din finally looked up from his sketchbook. "Does he taste good?"

There was an awkward pause as everyone else at the table exchanged furtive glances. Anders ducked his head to keep from laughing.

"Well, personally I think so," Anders answered, "but I don't think he would be to your, uh, tastes."

"Do we really need to discuss this?" Val asked with a sour look. "I only just ate and do not need to picture this."

"I've just never gotten the hang of the taste of people!" Fen'Din protested, pointing at Anders. "He tastes like salt and ... something. Elfroot, maybe. But, not the kind of thing I'd be compelled to -- well, you know! All of you with your licking the insides of each other's mouths and sucking on body parts. I don't understand it. It just doesn't taste good enough for that to make sense."

"My face," Anders responded. "He licked my face, one time. And if I tasted like elfroot, it was because I'd just washed it."
"That's disgusting. I don't want elf-spit on me. Don't lick me." Val leaned away from Fen'Din just in time for Candles to lean over and slurp his cheek.

"Too late!" She cackled and reached for her beer. "You... what do you wash with? That's horrible!"

Val cursed, wiping his cheek with his sleeve and leaning away from her. "Well, it's not for making my face taste good! At least I remember to actually wash my face, unlike the rest of you Fereldan dogs."

"How would you know?" Candles asked. "Have you been licking Fereldan faces?"

"What? No!"

"Go on! Give Kinnon a lick!" Candles took Val's chin and nudged him in Kinnon's direction. "I'm sure he tastes better than you, at any rate."

Val slapped her hands away. "I am not licking Kinnon!"

"I'll lick Kinnon," Fen'Din volunteered. "Does he taste better than Anders?"

"People don't taste better than Anders," Cormac protested, crossing his arms. Of course, Artemis tasted better than Anders, but Artemis wasn't people, he was a god incarnate.

Fen'Din tossed his sketchbook into Anders's lap as he got up and walked around the table to where Kinnon was still too busy watching Candles wrestle with Val. With Kinnon sitting and him standing, he could actually reach, and he dragged his tongue along one scruffy cheek, just as Ser Peryn arrived.

"Oh, ew!" Kinnon bellowed, swatting next to his head, but Fen'Din had already straightened up.

Somehow, the response made Peryn feel a bit better. He cleared his throat. "Good evening, friends! I am bringing some of the supplies you mentioned."

"He tastes like cider vinegar and sugar," Fen'Din muttered to Anders, loud enough for Kinnon to hear.

"Of course I do! It's what I wash my face with!"

"Ser Peryn! How good of you to come!" Petra was all smiles, even if they were awkward and accompanied by glances at the pile of wrestling, drooled-on mages.

Peryn eyed the squabbling mages and addressed his question to Petra, who he deemed the sanest of the lot. "Is this a good time?"

Petra grappled with an explanation, only to give up and shrug her shoulders. "As good a time as any, around here, to be honest. Don't worry; you're not in danger of being licked!"

Peryn glanced at Kinnon and almost seemed disappointed. "That is good to know."

Anders cleared his throat. "Kinnon, maybe you could help Ser Peryn bring in the supplies?"

Kinnon didn't appreciate being volunteered, but he offered Anders a tight smile for the sake of their guest. No matter how much he rubbed his cheek, he couldn't quite get the feel of saliva off of it. "Sure. Fen'Din, why don't you give Candles a lick?"

Fen'Din eyed Candles contemplatively. "Not until she stops rolling around on the floor with Lord
Poncy Orlesian."

Peryn smiled awkwardly at Kinnon. "The Chantry in Tallo sent food, as well. They were pleased to hear of the mission, here."

"What do we owe them?" Kinnon asked, thinking he'd have to tell Petra, later. He hefted a crate to carry it inside.

"Owe? No, nothing. No money." Peryn shook his head and unloaded another crate, carrying it after Kinnon. "The Chantry gives freely to people in need. You are spreading the word of the Maker. They wish to see you succeed!"

For a moment, Kinnon almost wished their mission was real, if it inspired people to give them free food and building supplies. He almost felt bad that they weren't really giving anything back, but on the other hand, he figured the Chantry probably owed them for all those years in the tower.

"Listening to Sister Ingill, I didn't think we'd be so popular."

"Ingill doesn't like anyone," Peryn scoffed, setting down his crate beside Kinnon's. "That box is preserved olives. There are more with dried and salted vegetables. A few sacks of lentils, some millet. Mother Amira wanted to be very sure you would be well until your first harvest."

"That is very generous," Kinnon said, again with that twinge of guilt. "I'm still learning how to cook the food here, but it's growing on me. I still wouldn't touch those peppers A-- Jannik seems to like."

Peryn laughed, retrieving another crate. "That is safe. You would be on fire."

"As Val just learned the hard way."

"Which is Val?" Peryn asked as he set the crate down with the others. "The Orlesian with the sour face?"

Kinnon barked a laugh as he set down his second crate. "Yeah. He's the one whose ass you saved back at the tavern."

"Ah, yes. That is Val. His face looks good." At Kinnon's startled look, Peryn clarified, gesturing to one side of his face. "The bruise is gone. Healer Jannik does good work."

"Er. Yeah." Kinnon searched Peryn's face for any hint of suspicion, but the man merely smiled pleasantly back.

"But, to speak of the tavern," Peryn said, walking a bit more closely to Kinnon than necessary on their way back outside, "we should do that again. If you like. Without your friend being punched. Unless you want him punched."

"I'd like him a lot better punched, if he wasn't so whiny about it. Always something about his fine Orlesian heritage." Kinnon grabbed a sack of grain and slung it over his shoulder. "I think everyone in Orlais must have a title, the way he talks."

"Who understands Orlais?" Peryn shrugged and took another box. "But, I very much liked our last chat. You are a very funny man."

"That's me. A laugh a moment; forty laughs an hour." Kinnon chuckled, uncomfortably. "Listen, I'm not sure what you're expecting, but I'm not to be had with just a few drinks. Which, most of the time, wasn't actually the case at all, but this was a templar."
"Just the company of a handsome man. I travel alone. It is a long circuit, and not very exciting, most of the time." Peryn stacked the box with the others. "You have taken vows? Forgive me. I should have known."

"Vows? No, no vows. Nothing like that. I just..." Kinnon shrugged, as he set down the sack, and grabbed at something near the truth. "This is a new life for me, and I want to make sure I live it right."

Peryn nodded with a patient smile. "Of course," he said. "There is no rush for anything. I only ask for a drink. It is nice to share a drink with someone so pleasant."

And Kinnon couldn't think of a good reason to refuse that, not when Peryn asked so sweetly.

"And perhaps, after a drink, you could explain the licking," Peryn teased, startling a laugh out of Kinnon.

"You are welcome to try, but I don't think I could explain that even after three drinks."

Peryn grinned. "One way to find out."
A Rough Ride Down Memory Lane

Chapter Summary

Dolora dislikes what she finds in Anders's memories. Fen'Din's sketchbooks bring out more awkward questions.

The tall one with the many names and no name was sad, today, Dolora noticed. She always noticed. There was another spirit with him, in him, but Justice didn't seem free to see justice done, to make the sadness go away. But, Dolora knew she could do it. She could bring the sadness back on the one who caused it. That was just, wasn't it?

The memories were loud, a bearded man shouting at two young boys. Both of them were Jan, but only one of them was Jan. The older Jan looked away and the younger Jan looked up to him and held tight to his hand as the man yelled more. Their father. He was supposed to take care of them, wasn't he? A sharp sting, a loud slap. Jan who wasn't Jan had stopped listening. The father-man was supposed to be celebrated, soon, and all-name-no-name didn't want to celebrate him. Wanted to call out his injustice and wrong-doing to everyone, but it would harm the mother-woman, and he cared about her. Harming her would be wrong.

Dolora would bring the sadness back on the father-man, without harming the mother-woman. This she could do.

Ewald paused to stretch his back and wipe the sweat from his brow. Weeding was tough on his joints, seemed to get tougher every year, but he was making good progress today. Another hour, he decided, squinting at the sun. Any longer and the sun would burn too hot for him to continue.

He was just stooping to continue his work when there was movement in the corner of his eye. He glanced over, but all he saw were stalks of millet swaying in the wind. Ewald shook himself, rubbing one eye with the heel of his hand before reaching for the next weed.

There was movement again, this time from the other side, and Ewald whipped around to catch the edge of someone's shadow before it disappeared. "Hello?" he called out, grip tightening on the clawed tool in his hand. "Is someone there?"

The millet moved in the wind, and this time, he was sure he'd seen a flash of golden hair, but much lower than he'd been expecting. Somebody's kids in his field, probably. That's why they weren't talking.

"Damn kids," he muttered to himself, before raising his voice. "Get out of my fields, you little bastards! Don't your parents grow enough millet for you to steal?"

As he turned back to the weeds, his memory lingered on his own sons. He'd expected so much more of them, but no amount of slaps and instruction would cure laziness. There was no other word for it. Neither of those boys had amounted to anything. The one came crawling home from his dead wife's funeral and the other was cursed by the Maker.

And there was Ket's face, screaming and crying as the templars dragged him away. It slammed into
his mind like a mallet. The damned kid deserved whatever came to him. Cursed! There'd never been
a curse like that in his family, and if anyone asked, there wasn't now. At the time, he'd thought Ulla
had been going around with someone else, but that nose had to come from somewhere. Maker, he
couldn't get it out of his head! Maybe it was getting too hot early, today.

Just as quickly as it had come, the screaming and crying stopped, abruptly enough to make Ewald's
ears ring in the silence. He rubbed his eyes with the bend of his wrist, smearing dirt along his brow.
There was no one there. Ket was long gone.

Shaken, Ewald retreated into the house earlier than usual, certain the heat was going to his head.

Fen'Din had the sketchbook open on the table, pointing out his favourite new drawings from the
abbey. The scars on Val's face were fading with time, and the shading on them got more subtle as the
had changed so much since they'd left the tower, but they were all still recognisable.

Cormac poured him another glass of tea, a strong mint and barley blend, and tapped on a sketch of
Keili. "That one's nice. What's she looking at?"

"That brother who keeps the Chantry donations in order. I forget his name." Fen'Din laughed. "She
looks like she's staring into an eternity of cakes and cream, doesn't she?"

Anders huffed. "She might as well be, don't you think? She's a sister, now. He's probably taken his
vows."

"Creators, do you remember how Sebastian always looked whiffy, if anyone even mentioned the
idea to him?" Cormac cackled and tossed a sliver of candied fruit into his mouth. "If she even thinks
it too intensely, he'll probably faint."

"Oh, that sounds fun. We should get her to try it out!" Anders grinned wickedly and turned to the
next sketch. It took him a moment to recognise himself. He was used to the beard by now but not to
seeing it from that angle. "Is that what my beard looks like from the side?" Anders ran his fingers
over it as he spoke, smoothing it down.

Cormac leaned over the table. "Yeah, exactly that. It's why I keep telling you it's better with those
other two beads in it."

"I miss the rest of your face," Fen'Din admitted. "Which is foolish, because as long as I can see your
eyes, I don't need it."

Anders forced himself to stop fidgeting with his beard. "My eyes, huh?" Fen'Din always did have a
marvellous way of rendering them. It always amazed him that his friend could put so much
expression onto a page with just a few well-placed lines. "Well, my eyes are rather dreamy."

"Not quite as dreamy as some other parts of you, but yeah," Cormac agreed, with a wicked smile.

"Oh, I think I do those parts fairly well, too." Fen'Din got up and went for the stack of books he'd
left here. The old sketchbooks were safer here, with less people around them. After a moment, he
were busy, for that one. It's almost half the book."

"Ah, I had forgotten about those sketches," Anders lied, pulling the book closer and tilting it towards
Cormac. Anders cleared his throat and tugged self-consciously at his beard. "He liked using me as a
reference. Us. Karl and me. As good friends, we were happy to oblige."

With a smirk, he turned to a page filled with quick studies that hinted at all sorts of naughty poses. He remembered the day Fen'Din had drawn this, remembered the taste and feel of Karl, his voice in Anders's ear. The memory ached, but it was a sweet sort of ache.

Cormac studied the pictures, looking more at Karl, whose face he hadn't gotten much of an opportunity to notice. "Your dwarf friend from the Wardens has a point. You do have a type." He laughed. "You sure I'm still good enough, now that I've started shaving?"

"I hated that beard!" Anders protested. "It made him look like a goat!"

"Mmm, so now I'm less goat-like? More deserving of your unceasing lusts?" Cormac teased.

Anders hummed. "'Less goat-like' is usually a good direction to go in," he said, nodding sagely before he paused, tugging at his beard again. "Though considering Fenris's comments on my beard's goatly status, I think I just insulted myself."

Fen'Din was lost in the images on the page. "I should do more of these. You were always so different like that. I wonder if I could still see it, with the beard in the way."

"Oh, he's definitely still 'different'." Cormac grinned and turned the page, this time to find what was unmistakeably Val and ... someone he didn't recognise. And this time, he didn't much like the look on Anders's face.

"Different to that, I mean," Fen'Din clarified, into Cormac's sudden silence.

"You didn't stop this? You didn't stop him?" The violent disgust on sketched Anders's face, which neither of the other two people in the scene would've been able to see, hit Cormac viscerally. Anders didn't talk much about what went on in the tower, beyond great pranks and occasionally getting dragged to the First Enchanter's office by the templars.

Fen'Din pointed at Anders. "He didn't want me to. I was there for other reasons."

"It doesn't matter," Anders said, keeping his voice level. "I got what I wanted, and they got what they wanted. It was a fair exchange." Not always fair, but he didn't want to give Cormac another reason to punch Val. Anders would only end up needing to heal him. He turned the page to try to end the conversation, relieved to find Val wasn't in the next sketch.

"Has it been too many years?" Fen'Din asked, looking over the lines of yet another mage who hadn't made it through the demons. "Would you let me do this, again?"

Anders blinked at Fen'Din before darting a look at Cormac. He shrugged. "You know I don't mind an audience," he said, "but that's up to Cormac. Also, be forewarned that, although I am still roguishly handsome, I don't quite look like that now." He gestured vaguely at a sketch of him from what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"He means he looks like a hero instead of a pile of sticks," Cormac joked, pinching Anders's leg, affectionately. "I... Huh." He stopped and thought about it. It wasn't like they'd never been on display. Fenris and Artemis certainly didn't mind watching, but they were usually also helping, and he knew that wouldn't be the case, here. But, he'd been young and stupid for long enough and in enough public places to cure him of most of his modesty, if he'd ever had any. So, what was it?

The answer came to him, suddenly. "Most of the time? Yes. Sure. Shit, I want a mural of this gorgeous Warden mercilessly pounding my ass painted on the wall of the bedroom. But, there are
things you don't get to draw. There are things I don't know you well enough for you to be in the room for." Although all of those involved concerns for Anders, rather than himself. It seemed a bit stupid, given the things the elf had drawn.

"As the man says," Fen'Din replied, "it's up to you. And thank you. I look forward to learning your face better."

"And more than just your face," Anders said in a loud aside as he continued flipping through the sketchbook.
Val discovers that the local fashion isn't just fashionable, and that Helewyse does decent impressions of expensive Orlesian perfumes in salves designed to preserve foreigners from their idiot mistakes.

There had to be a shop that did lotions somewhere in this Maker-forsaken excuse for a town, Val was certain. He had no idea how people would survive without it, especially here. His own skin had been splitting and peeling since they'd come out of that stupid cave in the mountains, and finally, he'd drawn blood scratching. He had no idea how everyone else wasn't suffering right along with him, but there hadn't been any complaints that he'd heard. Finally, he'd just taken a few pieces of silver from Petra's hoard and gone off to the market.

Rugs. Decorative camel-shaving. Clothing for giants. Fifteen kinds of lentils. Tevinter imports... That might be worth coming back to. And then finally, he saw the tins of salve at the front of a stall manned by a shapeless pile of cloth, which seemed to be everyone, outdoors. But, having travelled through the sandstorms, he wasn't sure he could blame them. It was still ugly. He was sure a nice Orlesian mask would serve the same purpose.

"Oooh! Just look at your face!" The voice from the cloth sounded feminine, at least. "Come here and let Auntie Helewyse take care of that! Your poor Southern skin! How are you not wearing your hood, in the middle of the day?"

"Hood?" To Val, hoods were for when it rained or when the wind was bitter. Anders had said something about wearing a hood in the sun, but that had seemed counterproductive. Plus it did terrible things to his hair. "Haven't thought about it." He eyed her closely, trying to figure out the shape of her features beneath all the cloth. "I'm looking for something for my skin. Do you have anything like that, or should I keep looking around?" Not that his search had too fruitful so far.

Helewyse smiled, or at least Val assumed she was smiling from the way what little he could see of her face moved. "I have something for that," she said. "In fact, I have quite a few somethings."

"Do you have anything with violets?" Val asked, thinking of the cream his mother used to send, so he wouldn't wind up looking like some peasant child. Eventually, he'd gotten someone in the tower to start making it for him.

"Sweet violets or Par Vollen violets?" Helewyse asked, offering a pair of oil-soaked reeds.

"Sweet violets," Val answered, without smelling either. He knew what he liked. "And... lemon? Cedar?" Unfortunately, he couldn't remember quite what went into the stuff. He hadn't ever had to pay attention.

"Ahh." Helewyse nodded, or at least the cloth bobbed at the top. "That Orlesian violet cream, Fleur de Ghislain, yes? Lemongrass and Maker's staff. But, that won't be enough the way it's made in Orlais." She gestured toward his cracked lips and tattered fingertips.

Val blinked, surprised anyone in such a... remote place would be familiar with his mother's Orlesian
creams. He shrugged helplessly. "Fine. Then don't do it the Orlesian way. Can you just... can you make something that smells similar?" He licked at his chapped lips, but that only made them sting.

Helewyse regarded him, still with those smiling eyes. "It won't be quite the same," she cautioned, "but I can make you something that will smell lovely and soothe your skin."

At this point, Val put on lotion that smelled like dung if it would make his skin stop splitting. Well. Maybe not dung.

"Why don't you go get something to eat? I can have a pot of it worked up before you return. How much would you like?" Helewyse asked, setting a small pot on a stand Val could only see the top of, behind the rack of oils.

Val picked up a tin of lemon salve from the table and pointed at it, with a shrug.

"Five pieces of copper," she said, with a nod. "Go and eat! You'll need to put food in your mouth if you want to keep the rose on your cheeks."

His cheeks, which had started to feel unpleasantly warm. Maybe she was right about the hood. But, he definitely needed a drink, first. Maker, how did anyone live in this?

On the way home -- if he could call the 'abbey' they were building home -- Val gave in and drew up his hood, letting it hang low over his eyes. Sweat made the fabric stick to his temples, but at least it had cut off the sun's sharp stare. He would be loath to admit it, but the lotion helped, even if it was stronger smelling than he was used to.

"Val, my pal!" Candles hailed him from her spot in the shade.

Val was content to ignore her, pushing past her through the archway, wearing a scowl that he hoped would discourage more rhymes, but she turned to look after him, nose to the air.

"What is that?" she asked, voice shaking with laughter. "Were you attacked by flowers? Flowers and..." She sniffed again. "...sheep?"

"It's a rustic interpretation of Fleur de Ghislain, if you must know," he retorted. "I should've known I couldn't get the best of Orlais reproduced in this Maker-forsaken, dusty hiccup in the road."

"The perfume lady does Orlesian scents? I'm impressed!" Candles blinked, eyes widening, as the corners of her mouth tipped up. "Do the locals know? How has she not been strung up for consorting with Orlais?"

"Oh, shut up. My money's as good as anyone's," Val grumbled, hissing as he rubbed at the itch on his cheek. "Which storeroom did Petra decide the potions went in? I think I've caught a rash on my face from something in this barbaric demon-kingdom."

"Hey, Gerda! C'mere and take a look! Lord Fancy-pants has a rash!" Candles shouted, roughly in the direction of the abbey. "She'll do something with it," she assured him. "I mean, it's her or Petra, and I think Petra's going to choke the life out of you if she has to look at you again this week."

Val rolled his eyes. "You say that almost every week."

"It's true almost every week." Candles folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow.

Gerda came bustling over, her hood slipping. "Did you call me, Candles? Something about a...
"rash?"

Candles pointed at Val, and Gerda immediately looked down.

"On my face!" Val snapped. "A rash on my face!" His cheeks burned from something other than sunburn. "And, really, I would much rather you just give me a potion."

"Let me take a look at it first," Gerda insisted, stepping closer and reaching for his chin, only for Val to recoil.

"Don't touch it!" Val barked.

"How much of your face?" Gerda asked, squinting under his low-hanging hood.

"All of it. And my neck. And maybe the top of my head, too." Val shifted uncomfortably.

"So, just the parts that would be covered by your hood?" Gerda reached for the hood, this time, slowly. "It doesn't feel like a different material to the rest of your robes. Did you get something on it?"

"No. I wasn't even wearing my hood until it got too hot to be outside. My face already hurt, by then."

Gerda blinked at him, but Val just continued to glare bitchily at the dirt.

"You... how long were you in the Circle?" Gerda asked.

"Thirty-something years. I think I was... seven or eight? What's that got to do with anything?" Val shrugged and turned a confused look on Gerda.

"I'm guessing you didn't play outside much as a kid, did you?"

"Of course I did! We had wonderful gardens with enormous trees! What does that have to do with anything?"

Gerda exchanged a look with Candles, who looked somewhere between pitying and uncomfortable. "It's called 'sunburn', Val," Candles told him. "As in, if you're in the sun too long, it burns your skin, especially if you have skin light enough to glow in the dark." She gestured up and down his body.

"The sun... burns?" Val eyed the ladies dubiously. "You're making this up. Just how gullible do you think I am?"

Gerda shook her head, amazed and horrified. "Why do you think we wear the hoods?"

Val threw out his arms. "I thought it was the fashion!"

Candles massaged the bridge of her nose. "Orlesians," she muttered. "It's to block the sun, you idiot. It's not like we're in Orlais, where people wear masks for no Maker damned reason."

"It's rude to show your face to the lower classes!" Val insisted, knowing there was much more to it than that, but not having been in Orlais long enough to understand.

"And here you are showing your face to the sun..." Candles raised an eyebrow.

"I'm a mage. It's different." Val turned back to Gerda, not wanting to finish that thought. "Well, can you fix it?"
"We've got a potion for that. I got Anders to make a bunch, when we got here. I knew it was going to happen eventually." Gerda shook her head, in disbelief that the oldest of them was the first to make that mistake. "Soak a rag in it and drape it over your face. Lie down for a bit. It'll sting, at first, but the itching and peeling should stop in a couple of hours. I don't know what it's going to do to the scars, though. Those were looking so much better..."

"Well, if she didn't set my face on fire--!" Val jabbed an angry finger at Candles.

"Me?!" Candles blurted, startled and affronted. "If I was going to set anything on fire, it would be your ass!"

"Oh, don't deny it!" Val snapped, his sneer pulling uncomfortably at burned cheeks. "Was your aim that bad or did you hit me on purpose? It's about time you owned up to it!"

"Owned up...?" Candles straightened, shoulders stiff and fists balled. "I never hit you! It was that darkspawn that turned you into an Orlesian torch, you jackass!"

Val took a breath to continue shouting, certain that... Except he wasn't. Certain, that is.

"Have you seriously been blaming me for this all this time?" Candles snapped. She craned her neck, as though trying to peer in through Val's ear. "Is there a brain in there? Sometimes I can't tell!"

"How could she have missed by that much?" Gerda asked, shaken by the idea that Val could possibly have blamed any of them. "You know she misses by inches, if she misses at all! But, none of us knew they had magic until the lead bronto got hit. That poor thing. I'm so glad Petra was with us, but Wynne would've been even better. Wynne might not have left you with scars."

Val did sort of remember one of the dwarves saying something about darkspawn and magic, but he'd been having so much trouble hearing anything beyond his own screaming, at that point. He still had dreams about it. At least they broke up the dreams about the demons. "I didn't know darkspawn had magic," was all he said, but he looked shaken. "I thought we had them, and then everything was on fire."

"You're an idiot," Candles reminded him. "Maker, if there was ever a reason for me to wish Frick had made it, at least he had the brains of the two of you."

Val wasn't inclined to argue with that, but he glared at her anyway.

"I suppose you think I gave you the sunburn too," Candles added, just to watch his scowl deepen. "Yep, that's me. Powers so great, I control the sun, just to piss you off."

Val tossed her a rude gesture. "Just get me the potion," he told Gerda tightly.

"Of course," Gerda said, ushering him inside. In a small voice, she added, "By the way, I like the new scent you're wearing."

Val swore under his breath.
Ewald was napping in the chair by the fire, a thing he'd taken to doing after supper, as he got older. Too many hours in the day, and not enough of him left to fill them. The warmth crept into his bones, soothing and settling, as the air outside began to cool. The crackling of the fire was almost a pleasant sound, these days, not like the years just after that stupid kid set the barn on fire. And then he could smell it in the smoke, the change from the usual burning straw smell to the smell of roasting grain. He was getting too old, he thought, shifting in the chair and drifting off again. He probably missed a few grains.

But, there was the boy, in his mind’s eye, glaring at him as the bales of straw went up around them. In seconds, the barn had gone from cool and dim to a raging inferno that threatened to swallow them both. But, Ket didn't move a muscle, and Ewald had suddenly been unsure the fire could hurt the boy at all. It wasn't his son. It was never his son. It was a demon living in his house.

The dream twisted around him, Ket got older, the walls were stone, but the fire still burned -- crawling up the curtains to the sound of exploding bottles. There was a woman's voice with a strange accent and a soothing tone, but he couldn't make out the words. As a chill began to creep in around the edges, the room changed again, and so did Ket, but the fire was always there, burning brighter, closer. Furniture collapsing, men in armour, a wooden dragon breathing flame...

Ewald startled awake, screaming and choking on smoke that wasn't there. He looked around, eyes wild, knuckles white on the arms of his chair, but the fire still crackled merrily and safely inside the fireplace. The pleasant warmth had become too hot.

Ulla came running in from the kitchen, a saucepan held defensively in hand as she looked around for what had made her husband scream. "What? What is it? You look pale as a ghost!"

"Bad dream," Ewald assured her, even as the word 'ghost' stuck in his head, alongside the accusing stare of his -- no, not his -- that boy.

Ulla finally lowered the saucepan. "Well, that chair is not meant for sleeping in," she chided him.

"The chair is fine," he snapped as he pushed himself to his feet and wandered out of the room, away from the fire and the smell of smoke.

Anders held the huge Chantry door open for Keili. "You sure you don't want to fix your hair before you go in there? I mean, Brother Derek's..." He glanced to the side and waved with his free hand. "Right there, actually. He looks good, today!"

Keili blushed and shoved past Anders, her hood still up. "I'm here to talk to Sister Ingill," she reminded him, without so much as a glance in Derek's direction, somewhat to the brother's dismay.
"You keep telling yourself that," Cormac said, a low chuckle underlying the words, as he clapped Keili on the back.

Keili ignored him as well as Brother Derek, seeking out Sister Ingill in her office. Anders hung back, content to stay out of Ingill's line of fire.

"Looks like Hector has been getting some more offerings," Anders pointed out, keeping his tone neutral. The statue waded in a sea of gifts and votive candles, his newest supplicant still kneeling at the statue's feet. The man's back was bowed, bent as though in fear of punishment as he prayed, and from this angle, Anders wished he could see under the hood. Justice pressed forward, just as curious.

"... and preserve me as once you protected Andraste," the man recited, as he stood.

Anders knew the voice, and then the face, as his father turned toward them at the end of his prayer. His father? Praying to Hector for protection? He thought he might drop in on his mother, when they were done here, if nothing else then to prove to himself she was all right. Even as a healer, he couldn't count on his father coming to him for help, if she was unwell. As a son, he certainly couldn't expect news.

"Okay, but, are you going to do it?" Cormac hissed, eyes wide, one hand covering the combination of horror and humour on his face. "Whatever it is?"

Anders just blinked, stunned at the thought his father was actually praying to him for help. Well, how useless was he now? But, at the same time, he didn't want to solve this problem. He didn't want to get close enough to be recognised.

Ewald finally noticed his son standing in the aisle. "It's called praying. Maybe if you did it, you'd still have a wife," he snapped.

Anders clenched his jaw, turning away in case his eyes decided to flash blue. Not now, Justice. Not here.

"I do pray," Anders said once he trusted that the voice coming out would be his. "But the Maker clearly doesn't answer my prayers, as you're still here." The smile he offered his father was tight and unamused.

Ewald bristled, eyes narrowing in a way that used to terrify Anders as a child, that still made his stomach twist even now. "And why should the Maker answer the prayers of a lazy, ungrateful brat?"

The insult was too old, too well-used for Anders to feel its sting any more. "So, should I pray or not pray?" he asked, voice tired. "You're sending me mixed signals."

Keili reappeared from Ingill's office, shooting Cormac a questioning look when she spotted the two men glaring at each other.

Cormac dropped a hand between his hips, made a rude gesture, and rolled his eyes.

"Do what you like," Ewald snapped. "You always do, anyway. It's too late for it to make any difference."

"It is never too late for change, Ewald." Mother Yotte's voice filled the air inside the muffling mud-brick walls. There was no echo, but there didn't need to be. "That's something you might consider."

Anders dug the potion out of his bag and offered it to Yotte, without a word. His eyes stayed aimed at the floor.
"Thank you, Jannik," Yotte said, voice kind. "Maker watch over you. Is there something you need, Ewald?"

Her smile never faltered, but as Anders watched, his father seemed to diminish under her stare. He wondered how she could do that, bring down a man so much larger than herself with nothing but a smile and a look.

"No, Mother," he said, his gaze turning to the floor as well. "I ask only that you keep me in your prayers."

"I always do," Yotte replied.

Ewald didn't so much as glance at his son on his way out. Anders sagged as though only just remembering how to breathe.

"Who was that?" Keili asked, hesitant.

"According to local legend, that's his dad," Cormac drawled, his face demonstrating all the credence he gave that. "If I hadn't met his mother, I'd have been certain he actually crawled out from under a rock, if only because I've known a multitude of rocks with better manners than the old man."

"I wonder that he wasn't enchanted by the tower, if that's what he was getting at home," Keili breathed, staring after Ewald. "It was strict, but it wasn't that!"

"No, it wasn't that. But, I don't think it was the same for you as it was for him, if you can still wonder."

"Well, I certainly never got marched down the middle of the hall, naked and dripping wet!" Keili protested.

"You know, I'm standing right here," Anders finally cut in.
Casserole of Poor Judgement

Chapter Summary

The abbey is finished, at last. A party breaks out. Val eats too much casserole and follows by putting his foot in his mouth.

It was only one window, identical to the dozens of other windows they had already put up, but it had the great and singular fortune of being the last window. It was the last piece, and as it slotted into place, the abbey went from being a work in progress to being a work completed. There was a beat of silence, and then the mages who had gathered around to watch erupted in a cheer.

"Finally!" Kinnon breathed, using his sleeve to wipe the sweat off his face. They had had to take their time to keep the magic from being obvious, but the slow pace had been excruciating. Now, finally, finally, they had a space, a home, that was theirs.

"This calls for some celebratory booze!" Candles called out, earning another round of cheers from the crowd and an affectionate eye-roll from Kinnon.

"Booze?" Anders scoffed. "This calls for a whole party!" He clapped a hand on Kinnon's back. "You don't mind if we lock your boyfriend out, right?"

"What boyfr-- He's not my boyfriend! We are not dating!" Kinnon threw his hands up in exasperation. "Keep your friends close and your Templars closer, isn't that what you always used to say?"

"Don't keep them as close as I kept them. It's pretty gross. Even Cullen, which is a damn shame. He grew up some kind of pretty." Anders smiled fondly into the distance, just to gross out Kinnon.

"Cullen. You're full of shit about Cullen, and one of these days, I'm going to prove it." Kinnon shook his head. "Can you imagine? Ser Cullen? Ser I'm-so-upright-I've-got-a-stick-the-size-of-your-leg-up-my-ass Cullen?"

"Well, I know a lot more about what goes in his ass, these days," Anders joked. "Mostly his husband, as I understand it. Possibly some inordinately bizarre dildoes."

"Why do you know this?" Candles asked, squinting at Anders in horror.

Anders turned her to face Cormac. "That's his husband's brother. We were right down the hall." 

"Well, in honour of our first day in a Templar-free fortress with locking doors, I propose we do a great many exciting things of the sort the Templars would never have permitted. Which isn't to say we weren't doing them anyway, but now we can do them loudly and drunkenly and entirely without fear or remorse." Kinnon tossed an arm around Anders on one side and Candles on the other.

"How many eggs have you got? Do I have to run to the market?" Cormac asked, rubbing his beardless chin. "I'm feeling a pot of boner casserole coming on."

"Boner... casserole?" Candles repeated, head tilting. "Is it made of dicks?"
Kinnon guffawed, but Candles merely shrugged under his arm, still eyeing Cormac and Anders expectantly.

"The only dick involved is the one who makes it," Anders said, pointing a thumb in Cormac's direction.

"Then why is it called...?"

"It's... very protein heavy," Anders said, barely suppressing a smirk. "And it can have certain effects."

Val glanced up from where he was sulking nearby, looking entirely too hopeful, though no one seemed to notice.

Candles snorted a laugh. "Are you trying to start a magey orgy, Mack?"

"That is my purpose in life. I am always trying to start a magey orgy. It's a shame my brother's not here, though. He's the one who doesn't even need a casserole to get things going." Cormac laughed and let Kinnon lead him toward the pantry.

"His brother, Cullen's husband?" Candles asked.

"No, his brother who married a former Tevinter slave -- definitely the sexiest elf I've ever licked, and I've licked some elves in my time. I've also licked his brother. That brother, anyway. The other three siblings were already off-limits, by the time I thought of them." Anders grinned broadly.

Candles cocked her head and counted on her fingers. "I think you're going to have to draw me a picture. His family's way too complicated."

Anders shrugged. "Mine probably is, too, but I haven't seen my brother in almost thirty years, so I have no idea what he's up to."

"I wonder, sometimes, if I have any brothers or sisters -- if anyone ever told them about me, what happened to them, if they turned out to be mages, too..." Candles shook her head and looked toward the door Kinnon and Cormac had disappeared into. "And sometimes I wonder what he's got beneath those robes."

"Kinnon? I thought you knew." Anders squinted at Candles. If Kinnon had been making shit up, he was never going to hear the end of it.

"What? Of course I know what Kinnon's got under all that. I've seen more of Kinnon than anyone hoping to keep their sight should see at once. I was thinking I might like a look at your dark and fluffy companion. Just a look. He's probably not my type -- not nearly tall enough -- but the way those robes fall in the back... is that even real?"

Anders grinned, picturing what was under those robes in great and accurate detail. "It's real, and it's spectacular," he announced. "It is also hereditary. Three of his siblings have the same glorious ass. It's no wonder that family runs Kirkwall."

Candles hummed contemplatively. "You are making me really want to visit."

"Just come prepared for blood magic and demons as well," Anders advised. "Then you'll be golden."

The mages were well on their way towards making their makeshift celebration into a full-scale party when the boner casserole made its appearance, held aloft in Kinnon's hands like an offering.
"Now the party can begin!" Kinnon announced.

Fen'Din took the first serving, eyeing the heavily spiced casserole with intense curiosity. "Well, if it works on me, it should work on anyone!" he teased, as he took a bite. "That's really good. I mean, I think it needs molasses, but it's definitely edible without. Where did this recipe come from?"

"My mother," Anders volunteered, groaning and covering his face at the thought. "She came over while I was out and taught Mack to make it. And then he had to serve it to his brother, who was in town and staying with us."

"By which he means he's never been so embarrassed in all his life," Cormac filled in. "And this from the guy who got dragged down the hall naked and dripping wet."

"That was my fault." Gerda put a hand up. "Solved the problem, though. I don't know if I ever got a chance to thank you for that, by the way. You were just... gone."

"Places to go, people to see. Jowan made that exit so much quicker. Everyone was too busy looking at him to keep an eye on me." Anders laughed and took a large scoop of the casserole for himself.

"Jowan... now there's a name I haven't heard in a while," Candles said as she scooped some casserole onto her plate, a small portion just to try, for now. "I wonder what he's up to now, assuming he hasn't managed to get himself killed yet."

"He was still alive last I heard," Anders said between bites. "Did you know that Solona ran into him in Redcliffe while the Blight was still going on? According to her, he was just as much a walking disaster as he had been back in the Circle."

As he spoke, Val wormed his way between them to get to the casserole himself. As he heaped a double helping onto his plate, Val pretended not to notice Anders's raised eyebrows or the look he exchanged with Candles.

"Someone's got a date with his hand," Kinnon cracked, between bites.

"At least I don't have a date with a Templar," Val shot back, "and it's none of your business where I mean to spend the rest of my evening, since it's not with you."

"More Kinnon for me!" Candles declared, still chewing, as she threw her fist in the air.

"I do not have a date with a Templar!" Kinnon complained, grabbing the wrong pitcher and pouring half a glass of barley milk into his beer.

Between Keili and Petra, Gerda started to giggle. "Has he got a sweet bottom, Kinnon, or is that just the armour showing through?"

Kinnon's eyes crossed. "I don't know! I don't fuck Templars! I don't grope their bottoms, either, sweet or not!"

"The robes are most of his armour," Anders offered. "They're really heavily enchanted against magic and demons. The Templars clank and jangle a whole lot less, up here. They dress more like archers."

There was an incredibly uncomfortable pause, as Kinnon realised something. "He's... not the one, is he? I mean, he seems a little young to be..."

Anders looked blankly at him for a moment, before it sank in. "No. No, that's... he's much too young. I don't think he's even my age. I didn't get picked up by an Ander team, anyway. I don't
remember. Orlesian or Nevarran, maybe. They wouldn't speak to me in anything I could understand, but they talked fine to each other. I don't think my Common was that bad, even then, but they sure as shit didn't speak Ander. They were what you're used to -- head-to-toe heavy plate. The robes barely fit over it, but you can't run around up here in uncovered metal." His hands shook and he held onto the edge of the table to hide it. Justice noticed Moxie and Dolora edging closer, to add their support, but Dolora looked different, somehow.

Kinnon took a sip of his inadvertently mixed drink and choked on the taste. "What--?"

"Dumbass," Candles assured him, from across the table.

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Eating all that boner casserole ended the way Val should have expected it: with vomit and disappointment. He had had enough presence of mind, at least, to stumble outside to hurl in a corner of the garden.

"Mrrgh," he complained to the plants, one hand holding him up against the wall, the other clutching his sore stomach. It was official: this entire country was trying to kill him.

"I told you not to go for that second helping."

Val glared over his shoulder in direction of that smug voice, Anders's voice, and of course Anders had seen all that. "Fuck off," Val grit out through his teeth, turning back to his vomit-stained corner, in case it needed another coat.

"Seems to me like that was what you were trying to do," Anders said, his voice closer now and still so gratingly cheerful. "Or maybe that was 'fuck on'. Who did you have your eye on, anyway? No offence, but I don't think you had many options."

"I thought I'd be able to afford you, again. Swipe a few jewels from Kinnon -- he won't miss them. He can make more." Val shrugged as if he hadn't suggested anything out of the ordinary, and to be fair, if it were ten years ago, it would barely be worth a raised eyebrow.

But, Anders's eyes glowed blue, a brilliant, electric blue that crawled out across his face and ran down out of his sleeves. "YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO AFFORD ANDERS AGAIN."

The voice echoed in the corner of the courtyard, and it sounded nothing like Anders, despite coming out of his mouth.

Val's mouth fell open and a verse of the Chant spilled out as he stumbled to his knees, gazing up in horror. "Eyes sorrow-blinded, in darkness unbroken, there 'pon the mountain, a voice answered my call. 'Heart that is broken, beats still unceasing, an ocean of sorrow does nobody drown. You have forgotten, spear-maid of Alamarr, within My creation, none are alone.'"

He'd seen it before, felt the crush of a demon's power against his mind and his bones... but this thing that had been Anders didn't press into his mind. His senses remained sharp and clear. Nothing was out of place but that demon-glow.

"HE IS NOT FOR SALE. THERE IS NO PRICE FOR WHICH YOU MAY MISTREAT HIM AS YOU ONCE DID."

Okay... nothing was out of place except that demon-glow, that demon-voice, and that wet warmth Val could feel sticking his robes to his legs. Val swallowed heavily, darting a look past the glowy not-Anders towards what would be the quickest exit, which still brought him much closer to the creature than he wanted to be.
"What... what are you?" Val lifted his chin, wrangled the quaver in his voice into submission. "Some sort of rage demon?" He knew as he said it that that wasn't right. If this were an abomination, how could it still look like Anders?

"I AM NO DEMON," Justice answered, looking affronted. Val edged backwards until his foot found his puddle of vomit. Lovely. "I AM JUSTICE, SOMETHING YOU WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND."

The warm dampness was quickly becoming cold dampness. "You're a spirit?"

"YES." Justice looked like he might still fight about it, but he made no move toward the cowering mage.

Val still looked unsettled, but curiosity lit his eyes. "How? How did you do it? You still look like Anders -- act like Anders, most of the time. I knew, well, no. I knew of someone else who tried, but he turned into an abomination! Murder, mayhem, the usual. But, you...?"

"I DO NOT ACT LIKE ANDERS," Justice protested. "ANDERS ACTS LIKE ANDERS. ANDers... is right fucking here and would prefer if we stop talking about him in the third person, thanks." One hand, more dimly lit, reached up to rub at the glowing blue eyes, which faded after a bit. "I'm not talking about it, Val. You don't need to know. You want me to do something about your stomach, stop kneeling in puke, and I'll see if I can settle it."

"But, I do need to know," Val insisted. "I watched it go wrong. I was in the hall. I thought we could make it out. And you know who I am. If you know Crazypants is from Orlais, then you know what my name means."

"Sorry, Orlesian history isn't my strong point." Anders shrugged and slapped at another creeping blue flicker on his hand. "Knock it off, Justice. He's not trying to hurt me. That's in the past."

"For what it's worth, I never thought we actually hurt you. You never fought or bit or anything." Val studied the ground, trying to find somewhere safe to put his hand, so he could get up. "You just... You were you."

Anders's lips twitched, but there was no humour in his smile. "I needed what you were giving me in exchange. I wasn't about to mess that up unless I had to."

Using the wall as leverage, Val pushed himself to his feet, grimacing at the slimy feel of his robes and the heavy weight of his stomach. He didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't. He was also determinedly not thinking about the last time he had had Anders on his knees because that immediately led him to thoughts of Leofric.

Sighing, Anders reached out a glowing hand. Val flinched until he felt the warm touch of Anders's healing and realised that it wasn't the jagged blue glow of that-- of Justice. His stomach still felt heavy, but it had stopped churning.

"I met your sister, heard some scandalous rumours," Anders replied, drawing his hand back and not bothering to wait for a 'thank you'. "I think I know all I need to about your family, Val. Just like you know all you need to know about Justice."

"No, you don't understand." Val caught one of his curls and twisted it around his finger. "My mother's grandfather was trying to do what you've done. He... It's why we -- well, why the family doesn't have a title any more. Not properly, anyway. The stories say he became an abomination. I've been trying to figure out where he went wrong since I was seven, and here you are -- you've done
"I don't know how." Anders shrugged. He was doing that a lot, tonight. "I'm not sure I'd tell you, even if I could, but I really can't. What I can tell you, though, is that it didn't involve dragging a spirit out of the Fade, directly. Justice had already passed through in an accident. We were friends, once, and now we're ... this. I can't complain, really. Combined with being a Warden, he really makes sleep an optional part of my day. But, he's the pure concept of justice. It's taken him years to learn that you can't just walk in and inflict that on this world, that it doesn't bend as easily as the Fade. I really don't advise doing what I did. It's stupid and dangerous, and I had a death wish."

"But, you still did it," Val argued. "It's a success. What did you do?"

"I don't know. I remember the next half hour in excruciating detail, but I can't tell you what I did, because I really don't know." Anders rubbed the bridge of his nose and tried not to think about the smell of boiling metal and searing flesh.

Val pursed his lips. "Then let me ask your-- is Justice his name?"

"Close enough," Anders replied. "It's what and who he is."

"Then let me ask Justice. Maybe he remembers!"

"No," Anders answered with the force of two voices. "He is even less likely to tell you this than I am, and he's not interested in discussing it."

"But--"

"Val, please, don't push your luck." Anders rubbed the middle of his forehead, where a headache was gathering. He kept his eyes closed in case they decided to glow again. "He's not exactly thrilled with you being here under the best of circumstances."

Val looked affronted. "Why, because he thinks I hurt you?"

"Because he knows what you did. Every sensory detail of it, he remembers." Anders looked a bit grim as he tried to heal the pain in his head. "Right down to the way your fingertips used to get cold right before you went off and the taste of Frick dribbling on the back of my tongue. He knows all of it."

"Don't talk about Leofric," Val snapped, stepping back into the pool of barf again. He really needed to get out of this corner.

"It's nothing I wouldn't say to his face," Anders scoffed, still trying to get that one spot behind his eye to stop swelling, like it did when he was tired.

"That's not the point." Val gripped his own arms tightly, so his hands wouldn't shake.

"Loved him, didn't you?" Anders asked.

"What, like you loved Karl?" Val taunted, knowing how hard Anders used to laugh at the idea of being in love.

Anders's eyes snapped open, finally gold, as they landed on Val. "Yeah. I did. I do."

Val scoffed at that, but it was a weak, flimsy thing, all bravado. "Right. Whatever. I'm done talking in circles." He pushed past Anders out of his vomit-stained corner, ignoring the look on Anders's
face that he refused to acknowledge was pity. Val would not get anything out of the idiot right now, but maybe some other time, after a few drinks...

Val bumped into Kinnon in the hallway.

"What's the rush, Valery?" Kinnon asked when Val's glare didn't deter him. His stare dropped to the wet patch on Val's robes. "What, did you piss yourself or something?"

Val's glare darkened, and even though Kinnon wasn't in his way, he shoved him aside for good measure. "I don't want to talk about it."

Kinnon stopped laughing long enough to raise an eyebrow. "Wait-- did you really? I was just joking!"

"Pretty sure I just said I wasn't talking about it, horse-fucker." Val offered a single finger, as he made his way down the hall.

"That's gonna put a smile on Gerda's face." Kinnon grinned wickedly.
The sun had begun to sink in the sky, and Ewald took one more look around him, before he headed back through the field, toward the house. The harvest would be soon, and he hoped he could get enough help to bring it in, but with so many younger people doing as his son had done, moving to the cities, it was getting more and more difficult to find enough hands. Maybe those religious crazies from up the road would help. But, then, they probably had their own fields to worry about.

Grumbling, he stopped when he heard the stalks rustle, beside him. "Who is in my Maker-damned field? Show yourself!" he demanded.

The grain parted to reveal a young man, wearing nothing but smalls. At first, Ewald didn't recognise him -- one of the neighbour's kids maybe. And then the boy staggered forward and spoke, and in that voice, he knew.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Ket demanded, voice shaky and cracking. "I'm not a demon! I've never met a demon!"

Ewald staggered back, holding his gardening fork in front of him like a weapon. "What? Get back!" He wiped a hand over his eyes, ignoring the sting of dirt, but when he looked again, Ket was still there, nearly naked and shivering, tears carving paths through dirt-stained cheeks. "What are you?"

But Ket stared through him as though not seeing him, lips forming barely whispered words. It took Ewald a moment to make them out and a moment more to recognise them as a part of the Chant.

"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."

Ewald stared at Ket's hands clasped in prayer, at the scars on his wrists that spoke of heavy shackles. "Hector preserve me," Ewald breathed, still backing away.

More scars sprung up, and Ket seemed to age before his eyes, this time, his voice more firm through a different verse of the Chant.

"Lady of Perpetual Victory, your praises I sing!
Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable
Of your glory! Let me be the vessel
Which bears the Light of your promise
To the world expectant."

Vain as ever, Ewald thought, but the scars continued to rise up. What was it Jan had said about his wife? A reformer, tortured to death. Had they found Ket? Was that the thing Jan wouldn't say, that sat behind his eyes in judgement? But, how? Ket had been sent to the Circle Tower -- Hossberg, he thought, not that he'd ever checked.
"You've taken my magic!" Ket cried out, again looking past Ewald. "What do you expect me to do? There's nothing left!"

Ewald turned, meaning to run back home or maybe to sprint for the Chantry as quickly as he could, but then Ket was there again, still in front of him, scarred and thin and haggard. And still he prayed and prayed as more scars appeared and his back hunched.

"You who have followed me into the heart of evil,  
The fear of death is in your eyes; its hand is upon your throat.  
Raise your voices to the heavens! Remember:  
Not alone do we stand on the field of battle."

How could someone like him expect Andraste to aid him?

"I'm not an abomination," Ket said through grit teeth, eyes flashing and alive. "And I'll never be one! Do your worst!"

There was more in that look than Ewald had ever seen in the boy, a transformation from lazy and ungrateful to terrifyingly determined, although probably still ungrateful. Gratitude was something neither of his sons took to. But, the way the scars piled on... Ket couldn't have survived this. What was he, maybe nineteen, here? Ewald was surprised he'd even lived that long. If Ket had lived, he'd be nearly forty, now. But, he hadn't, had he? This was a ghost come back to torment him, to decry his righteous decision.

He turned, again, already in motion this time, making for the house. The house would be safe, he told himself, remembering the statues of the disciples and the shrine to Andraste. But, would it be? Hadn't the ghost come for him in his home? No, no. Just a nightmare.

The rows of grain were lined with Ket. Every time he passed, another appeared ahead of him. Everywhere he turned, he could see the rising scars, hear that voice raised in prayer.

Ulla found Ewald kneeling in front of the shrine, feverishly reciting passages from the Chant, arms up over his eyes as though to block out the world.

"Ewald?"

But when he looked up, it was to stare over her shoulder at something that wasn't there. He clutched at Ulla's robes.

"Tell him to leave me alone," Ewald pleaded. "He always listened more to you. They both did."

"Tell who?" Ulla looked, but there was still no one there.

Instead of answering, her husband went back to his prayers, his hands still tight on her robes.

"Andraste's flaming ass, Kinnon, we're busy, can't it wait for morning?" Cormac made it most of the way through opening the door before he finished opening his eyes, and then he pulled the sheet around his waist up higher and tied it tighter. "Ulla! What a surprise!" He stepped back and held the door open, peering down the passage to ensure she was alone. "Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

After a moment, Anders staggered out of the bedroom wearing a blanket, his lips kiss-swollen and an unmentionable stain on one of his arms. "Mama? What is it?"
Ulla huffed in amusement that didn't quite reach her eyes. "You boys." She shook her head and took a seat by the fire. "It's your father, Ket. He's..." She paused, uncertain how to continue. "He's convinced you've come back from the dead to torment him, and I'm not sure how to tell him you're not dead. Well, how do you know that? 'He's living right down the road!' It's not what I want to tell him. It's not what you want me to tell him."

Cormac blinked in confusion. "I'm sorry, what? Come back from the dead?"

"He's seeing ghosts, he says! My husband has never seen anything more spooky than an angry sheep in his life." Ulla put her hands on her hips. "I just don't know what to do! I thought maybe... you two are mages. Maybe you can make it go away. If he made someone angry enough, maybe they put a curse on the house or something." She held her tongue in her teeth as if there were something she didn't want to consider. "Or maybe he's getting old. Seeing things, like Jannik the boatman used to."

Anders wiped a hand over his face. In the back of his mind, Justice was darkly pleased with this development, Ewald haunted by the child he had abused, and, if Anders was honest with himself, so was he. But this was his mum, coming to him with that worried look on her face.

"I don't suppose it's just his guilty conscience getting the better of him?" Anders asked with a wry smile that Ulla mirrored. "Wishful thinking? Ah, well. I need to see him, if there's something physically wrong. I... don't know if I can... well. I can't make predictions until I see what state he is in."

"And he is in quite the state," Ulla replied, looking tired.

"Ghosts..." Anders looked at Cormac. "You think we should bring Elfhole?"

"If he's really seeing ghosts, are you going to be able to tell?" Cormac asked, shrugging. "You know he can."

"Do I have time to get dressed?" Anders asked his mother. "We were, ah... sleeping."

"I don't remember you being such a messy sleeper," Ulla teased with a quick glance at the smear peeling off of Anders's arm.

Anders flushed all the way up to the roots of his hair as he spun and walked back into the bedroom without another word.

"I should also wear something. Especially if we have to get Fen'Din," Cormac excused himself, turning toward the bedroom just in time to catch a robe to the face. "Thank you, sweet thing!"

Ewald was still praying, when Ulla returned, his voice almost gone and the candles burned low. He still cowered at the shrine, intermittently begging for Hector's protection, between verses of the Chant.

"Ewald, I've brought Jan and Mack. They know someone who can help you. They've brought him from the abbey." Ulla crouched beside Ewald, her knees cracking as she gently patted his shoulder and stroked his hair. "We'll take care of this, Ewald. Whatever it is, we'll get through it."

Ewald looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes, shaken enough to actually look grateful until he spotted Fen'Din past Anders's shoulder. "An elf?" he rasped, addressing Ulla instead of their guests. "There are already demons haunting my house. I don't need an elf hanging around too!"

"This elf can help you better than anyone if you're actually being haunted by a ghost," Anders said,
arms folded across his chest. He had never seen his father like this, but he was having a hard time feeling pity. "He's a... um." He glanced back at Fen'Din. "...a ghost hunter. A Dalish ghost hunter."

"It is an ancient elven profession," Fen'Din said, with a nod, trying to hide the faint glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "The ghost of your son? This is what I am told, but is this not your son, here?" He gestured at Anders, knowing full well that Anders was the son in question.

"The other son, you stupid knife-ear!" Ewald snapped -- or at least, that was what the broken sounds could be interpreted as.

Fen'Din pretended not to hear the last. "And you have a reason to believe it is this son, and not some other figment of the Beyond?"

"Well, it looks like him and it talks like him! Who else would it be? It's not Hector!" Ewald seemed more and more irate at the idea that anyone had seen him at his weakest.

No one saw fit to tell him the 'spirit of Hector' was in the room, and was, in fact, the son he thought was dead.

"He's just trying to help, Ewald," Ulla gently reminded him.

"Help? What help is this, bringing Jannik and his friends to gawk?"

Ulla squeezed his shoulder and smoothed back his hair as though he had not just snapped at her.

"What exactly is Ket doing?" Anders asked, arms still defiantly folded, fingers tight on his arms. "In your vision. What does he look like?"

"He looks like Ket!" Ewald snapped, but he looked more tired than angry. "Older, though. A teenage version of him. He's scarred and... praying. Begging pathetically for his life."

Anders's lips thinned. He didn't need to try hard to picture that.

"So, it follows that he must be dead. When did you last see him?" Fen'Din asked, noting in the corner of his vision how Cormac's arm settled around Anders.

"Half my life ago! What does it matter?" Ewald's face twisted in frustration.

"I am trying to determine why a son you haven't seen in so long would return from the dead to haunt you, but not your wife. I would ask if he was close to you, but I expect he was not, the way you speak of him." Fen'Din's eyes remained unreadable as the rest of his face, in the dim light. "Why would he not haunt his killers or visit someone closer to him to ask for vengeance?"

"How should I know what that stupid, shiftless demon-child thinks?" Ewald folded his stiff arms against his chest. "Can you make him leave me alone or not?"

"I'd have to find he was real, first." Fen'Din's smile was uncanny as ever. "While I check, why don't you read the first book of Transfigurations a few times? It should put your mind in the right place."

Cormac nearly bit through his tongue struggling not to laugh. The first book of Transfigurations established magic as the Maker's gift to his children.

Ewald stared at him, his expression darkening as he came to that same realisation. Anders expected him to kick them out, but after a look from Ulla, he ducked his head and started praying quietly to himself. Anders's eyebrows arched up. The man must be terrified to be acting like this.
Ulla looked between him and Fen'Din, wringing her hands. Anders reminded himself that they were here for her.

Fen'Din stared at Anders for a long moment, some unspoken conversation passing between them in almost invisible twitches of lips and eyebrows. When Fen'Din was sure it would be safe to leave Anders alone with his father, he finally spoke. "You make sure he's well. I'll take a look around." He turned to Ulla. "Would you show me the house? Anything you can tell me might be helpful."

Ulla shot a concerned look toward her husband and son, but Cormac's arm tightened around Anders's waist and he nodded. Still looking uncertain, Ulla led Fen'Din toward the kitchen.

"So, you're supposed to waste my time while that hooligan robs us?" Ewald grumbled.

"I'm supposed to make sure you didn't hit your head and start seeing things," Anders shot back, offering his father a potion. "Drink half of that and tip your head up so I can see your eyes."

"I didn't hit my damned head," Ewald roared, trailing off into coughs as his throat protested the treatment.

"I'm just ruling out the possibilities," Anders said, keeping his voice level. "What do you think is more likely: you hit your head and didn't realise it, or your dead son's ghost has come back to haunt you?"

Anders stared down his father, still holding out the potion in an offer. Ewald snatched it, scowling.

"I didn't hit my head," he snapped.

"Well, at the very least the potion will help with your throat," Anders said, fighting not to lose his patience. He had had his share of stubborn patients, but none of them had been his father. "It won't hurt, either way."

Ewald harrumphed, and Anders waited for him to throw the vial at his face. Anders considered it a victory when Ewald sipped at the potion instead, even if his scowl was anything but trusting.

"He's a very skilled healer," Cormac said, quietly. "He saved my life, and my brother's. I don't know what we'd have done without him. I'm sure he's not going to make a mistake, now."

"Saved your life," Ewald harrumphed, as Anders's hands tapped at his head. He could feel that twinge of magic from the potion -- some plants were the Maker's gift, Mother Yotte had always insisted, and you could tell because they gave you that feeling. "Did he put it in danger, first?"

Cormac laughed, a bit too loudly. "No, my brother and I were skilled enough at that without the help. Rushed out into the middle of the invasion to save as many people as we could."

"If more people led good and decent lives, there'd be a lot less of them ending up half-dead in the street," Ewald grumbled as something in his chest loosened up. He hadn't even realised that was something that could loosen up.

"And more other people entirely dead," Cormac argued. "As long as there are conquerors, someone needs to protect the people. Someone needs to be there to overthrow corruption. I'll settle for keeping the Qunari out of the neighbour's garden, though."

"How long have you had the pain in your elbow?" Anders cut in. "Or that trouble breathing? Andraste's holy elbows aflame, you cranky old fart, if you'd tell mama these things, you wouldn't be dealing with them any more, because she'd have come to me!"
"Because I didn't need your help!" Ewald protested, even as he marvelled at the feeling of air filling his lungs. It was a simple, wonderful sensation that he had never paid much attention to.

Anders was unimpressed. "Like you don't need my help now? How long were you going to let this go on before you tried to do something about it?"

"I am doing--"

"Praying is all well and good, but the Maker gave us brains to use them." Anders shook his head. "Is that why you were at Hector's shrine? Has this been bothering you that long?"

Ewald pressed his lips thin, and Anders wished he could blame the man's stubbornness on a head injury too.

"There were vengeful spirits in Kirkwall," Cormac said, leaving out the part where Kirkwall was a demon-infested nightmare designed, as far as he could tell, to summon and trap a god. "My sister's husband lost a friend to them. We've fought things like this before."

"Well, what if you brought it with you?" Ewald demanded. "Did you think of that?"

"It's not us, if it took this long to get around to you," Anders huffed. "If it came with us, it would've been on your doorstep within the day." Still, he suddenly wondered if it was one of Fen'Din's, if the thing had been harassing his father this long.

Fen'Din stepped back into the room, face unperturbed, to the casual observer, but Anders suspected he could see the irritation. "The bad news is that you do have a ghostly visitor. The good news is that it's not your son. In fact, the spirit seems to think he's very much still alive."

Ewald wasn't sure he was actually relieved at that latter revelation, and the thing with his son's face flickered into view again, beside the elf. "There it is! Make it leave me alone!"

Cormac squinted in the direction Ewald was looking. "I don't..." But, he did. Almost. There was something wrong with the way the air sat. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it tugging at the Veil around it.

Anders, on the other hand, could definitely see it -- him? -- and staring back at a younger, more haunted version of his face was more than a little disconcerting. But past the face, his face, was something else, a Fade-tinged glow that Anders associated with Justice. A spirit, then, and one Anders thought he recognised.

Dolora.

Anders cut a look at Fen'Din. "Do you know why the spirit is doing this?" he asked as though he didn't already know.

"It was overwhelmed by the echoes of grief, in this place," Fen'Din said, face still impassive. "But, I will take it away with me. It will trouble you no longer. Please come to us at the abbey, if you have any more trouble with spirits. I will speak to Sister Keili, so she knows to expect you."


"I am the one leading the spirit away from your home. Perhaps you might give some thought to whether I might be correct." This time, Fen'Din smiled.

"Papa, I'm going to bring you some salves and potions, early next week. Try not to get into
arguments with any more spirits before then. Or workmen. Or merchants, really." Anders rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Just go a week without starting any fights, please."

"I don't need any salves or potions," Ewald snapped, though with less heat than Anders had braced himself for, "and I certainly don't need a lecture from you!"

"Great," Anders said with false cheer. "I'm glad we had this talk."

Over Ewald's head, Ulla gave Anders an apologetic look, but he shook his head with a small smile. "He will take those salves and potions," Ulla said, smacking the back of Ewald's head, "and he will be grateful." Ewald twisted to glare up at her, affronted.

"I'll just settle for him being healthy," Anders replied as he steered Cormac towards the door.
Will, Wisdom, and the Fade

Chapter Summary

Niall and Lily have a talk about the nature of the Fade and how to escape it. Fen'Din and Anders try to convince Dolora that scaring the shit out of Ewald is not the best idea.

Morning? Evening? It didn't matter. The sky was unchanging as ever. The mages kept a room set with food and drink at all hours -- it cost nearly nothing to affect the body of the Fade, and it comforted many of them to be able to pretend they were living a normal life. Lily poured a pot of tea from an urn that held the Rivaini spice tea she knew she'd need and set it on a tray with an assortment of small cakes and a pot of blackberry jam. Today, she'd find out if she had an ally or another impediment to work around.

Niall lounged in a chair that had become soft with the coming of the mages, reading a book someone else had never written, beside a fire that finally seemed warm. It was the little things that made him remember living -- that made it so much harder to forget being alive. Soft footsteps echoed regularly on the stone of the hall floors, the scent of fresh teas and cooking roasts permeated every corner. He felt like he'd come home. He felt like he'd never left.

"Niall?"

He knew the voice -- that was Jowan's... regret. The man had to give it up, soon, or Niall was going to lose his mind. "Lily! I'm sorry, I haven't seen Brynn lately. You might try the library downstairs. I know he was interested in the books that keep reappearing."

"No, I'm not looking for Brynn." Lily smiled, perhaps a bit awkwardly, tense around the edges. "I brought you some tea and cakes. I-- I wanted to talk to you. About... all this. About going home. About Mouse."

"Oh." It took a moment for Niall's brain to catch up with the words. "I already helped where I could. I'm not sure what else I could offer you." He watched her, waited for her to turn around and mutter an apology, taking that deliciously steaming tea with her.

"Doesn't mean we can't talk over tea and cakes," Lily replied, undaunted, as she set down the tray on the coffee table in front of him.

Niall offered her a rare smile. "I can't argue with that logic."

"I've been looking at the books and talking with Asha," Lily said, as she sat in the next chair over, straight before the fire. "And some of what Mouse says makes sense. With enough concentrated power, it should be possible to push through the Veil. Captain Brynn says the Veil was already torn here, after what happened with Uldred."

"It was. Mouse and I tried to get out, then, but it was too small. And then Solona came back, and I tried to get her to help us, but she couldn't hear me." Niall shook his head. "We've been trying. That time, it was really just wisps that got out. Little fragments of ideas, and they came back all scrambled,
when they came back at all. It took us ... I don't know, a long time, to put things right again, after."

"Did this place always look this way? I mean, this is where Harrowings are done, isn't it?" Lily asked, trying to figure out how much control Niall and Mouse actually had over the Fade around them.

"Not... quite? I mean, yes, but no. Harrowings are weird. The Fade is weirder." Niall picked up a cake and dropped a dollop of jam on it. "Okay, so, you know how they say the Deep Roads run under all of Ferelden? It's like that. This is ... basically the Ferelden of the Fade, and Harrowings happen in the Deep Roads, more or less. Except, every time there's a Harrowing, it makes a new place. But, they're all right here, and after a while, some of them go away. Most of them, I guess. Most people pass their Harrowings. But, it's like an island and everybody living nearby gets dragged into it. Valor's always there. Mouse and I usually go along. And from somewhere around here, they can usually find some demons. There's only supposed to be one, but ... a lot of the time, the demons will use a mage to get back at each other, so there might be two or three, each one offering to help you beat the other ones. Or presenting itself as willing to be bribed to help. But, really, all a mage has to do is not die and come back. And then prove they're really them and not a demon, and for some of us, that was really the hard part."

"How do these islands get made?" Lily poured tea for both of them. "It seems like a lot of trouble to cut off a piece of the Fade and use it like that. I mean, how would that even be done?"

Niall shrugged and made a fart noise with his lips. "Don't ask me. I never made it to Senior Enchanter. But, I am sure it's the Senior Enchanters doing it. And that's part of why Mouse is right -- you can shape the Fade with magic, right up to inventing places no one can get in or out of without you letting them."

"But, why Jowan? You're talking about mages with much more magical training than the world's unluckiest apprentice."

Niall laughed, choking on a bite of cake, and washed it all down with tea before he tried to say anything. "Power." He shrugged. "Other than that, I don't know. Asha honestly seems like a much better choice. She's... I don't know for sure, but she seems like she's got power, and she definitely knows what's going on, which is more than I can say for Jowan. But, she also knows that she knows, and I don't think he likes that. He doesn't like it when I do it, either."

Lily's fingernails clicked against her tea cup. "He doesn't like what? He doesn't like for you to know what you're doing?"

Niall thought about that, tipping his head to the side. "Maybe he just likes being the one with all the answers. These are good, by the way." He pointed at the cakes, encouraging her to try one. She hadn't even sipped her tea yet, and it was a bit unnerving the way she just sat there, tapping her fingers against her teacup.

Lily took a cake and nibbled at it, but her eyes were far away. "If he really had all the answers, he would want to work with someone powerful and capable, so we could get out of here."

Niall arched an eyebrow. "You think he's lying?"

"I don't know what he's doing," Lily confessed with a helpless shrug. "That's what concerns me."

"So, look at what we know," Niall said, spreading jam on another cake. "He wants to part the Veil. I
know that, because we've been trying to get out of here since I got here, and he's been here longer. The tears that Solona came to fix weren't ... large enough? Stable enough? Something. We couldn't get through those, but we know -- he knows -- it can be done here. As if place really has meaning in the Fade."

"We know he wants to use Jowan to do this. Why? What's special about Jowan?" Lily finally sipped her tea, looking a bit surprised at the taste of it. "He's really kind of a fool. He'll try anything, because he never thinks any of it all the way through. I mean, he broke into Aeonar on the heels of summoned geese, and... " She blinked. "It's Jowan because he's done it before. Just, from the other side."

Niall shook his head. "It's Jowan, because he doesn't think before he does things. He'll believe anything, if it lines up with what he wants."

"It's both," Lily decided. "He's already proved it could be done and he's a fool who can be led about by the nose. I..." She sighed. "Maker knows, I did it, whether I meant to or not."

Niall wiped a hand over his face. "I'm not sure this will end well," he muttered.

"It might not," Lily agreed, shaking her head at the thought of Jowan, of the man who had torn up the Veil just to save her. To save her from something that was his fault, anyway. "But, right now Mouse wants the same thing we do, and we don't have a lot of options."

"No, you have plenty of options," Niall assured her. "They're just all terrible. And you're unlikely to find any other helpful spirits in the vicinity, except for maybe Valor, who... well, he has a different concept of 'helpful'."

"Valor? That spirit you were complaining about being boring?" Lily asked. Not that he'd been talking to her when Valor had come up, but she'd heard.

"It is boring." Niall rolled his eyes. "The Circle is cowardly and rigged for failure. I'm a product of a shitty system and I should have resisted it harder. The continuing trend of Harrowings is a personal failure on my part. Blah blahblah. Honestly, I've been there. Tell me something I don't know." He sighed. "But, he makes weapons for the apprentices willing to be bored to tears by his rambling. Wait, no, he'll duel them for the right to wield one of his weapons. That's great, just weaken someone who's got to go fight a demon."

"Do the weapons help?" A shrewd look settled on Lily's face.

"I don't know. I think the average mage who gets the opportunity to use one would be well enough without it, but I didn't get the opportunity. Valor isn't always there for a Harrowing, and not all Harrowings can be solved with a solid stabbing. Mine, for instance, was a bit more complicated. A demon of pride trying to lure me into overconfidence, tempting me to believe the way out of the Circle was just to stay in the Fade. I mean, all told, he was right. Might've saved me a lot of trouble. But, now that I'm here, all I want to do is leave. Nothing tastes like anything, here -- except what you lot have brought. It's like you've brought the art of living with you. Maker knows we've both misplaced it pretty badly."

"What do Valor's weapons do? Are they just swords, then?"

"Staves, more often. We're all mages." Niall thought on it as he licked the jam off a cake and then added more. "He'd make a speech about the weapons being the solidified need for battle, for a
specific battle, I think. And then he'd offer the apprentice the opportunity to fight him for it. The apprentices who won would get a staff that was supposed to help them fend off the demon. Usually rage demons, you know? They're not too quick. Pretty easy to fight off with a solid staff and a few well-placed spells."

"Do you think Valor could make a weapon to fight the Veil?" Lily asked, the hint of a smile dancing in her eyes.

"I... um." Niall looked doubtful, but Lily was encouraged when he didn't immediately say 'no'. "I don't know if he would consider that suitably 'valorous'. What kind of weapon would that be, anyway? A massive ballista?"

"Or maybe a sword," Lily suggested, sitting up straighter. "The weapons are tailored to whomever is challenging him, right? We have Templars, Templars who are 'suitably valorous', as you put it, so why not a sword?"

"Would have to be a giant fucking sword," Niall muttered into his tea. "And I can't say I've ever met a valorous Templar."

Lily's brow knit. "Not even Brynn and Owain? They kept me in Aeonar, sure, but they are not bad people."

"I can't dig into them, too hard, without sounding like Valor, but do you know what happened here, after the two of you got packed off to opposite ends of Thedas?" Niall could feel the heat rise under his collar, which was a pleasant change.

"Uldred, of course." Lily set down her tea. "But, he was defeated. That mage who went to the Warden came back to help, right?"

"Solona came back and did it all, herself. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I've never seen anything so useless in my life as our Templars," Niall spat, and the cream in his tea curdled. "The young ones fell like they had no training. The older ones left. Left! They gathered all the mages into the heart of the tower and sealed it from the outside. They meant to call in support from Val Royeaux and murder us all!" Niall choked on a laugh and rubbed his hand over his face. "I'd still be alive, if they were worth a damn. A lot of us would be. So few of us fell to temptation. We'd been warned about this all our lives. But, them...? Possessed, trapped, crying in the corners like children. 'Valorous Templars', my ass."

The room seemed to get colder, and Lily clutched her teacup tighter to leech its warmth. "I'm sorry," she said in a soft voice. She had heard a few details before, but... "I didn't realise."

Niall waved the comment aside. "I'm dead. I'm going to be a bit bitter about that." He offered her a stiff smile. "I can't make any judgement calls about Brynn or Owain, but they had the same training."

"More training," Lily pointed out. "The Veil is thin at Aeonar. They are better prepared for demons than the average Templar, I imagine. And they are good people."

"Right," Niall mumbled, unconvincing. "If you want to send them Valor's way, be my guest. But don't say I didn't warn you when they die of boredom."

Dolora remained uncontained, invisible to the villagers and most of the mages, but clearly visible to
Fen'Din and the cats. And the cats, suddenly, wanted no part of her.

"You want to explain that to me?" Fen'Din asked, pouring a bit of lyrium potion into a saucer, between them.

Dolora remained silent, but changed shape, rapidly, performing a quick history of Anders's childhood. Then she took Ewald's form and glared angrily, before letting it fall away.

"So, you wanted him to know what he'd done? You wanted him to feel sad, the same way he'd made Anders sad?" Fen'Din reminded himself it was Dolora he was talking to: an Antivan name, but no less a spirit of sadness.

Dolora nodded and dipped her fingers in the potion.

"You just wanted to help, didn't you?" Fen'Din sighed, leaning against the garden wall.

Dolora nodded again, looking confused.

"You can't just scare the shit out of people, like that. That's what demons do. You don't want people thinking you're a demon, do you?"

Dolora pointed insistently at Fen'Din.

"It's different, when I do it. It makes people laugh."

The doors slammed, at the front of the house, one and then the other, and a moment later, the back door whipped open to reveal Anders, who did not look entirely enthused with the state of the world.

"Oh, sorry, didn't realise you were back here," Anders said, rubbing his hands over his face.

"Sit. What is it this time? Sister Hates Everyone, again?" Fen'Din chuckled and offered the open potion to Anders.

"No," Anders sighed. "She's off hating everyone somewhere else." He eyed Dolora as he took a seat, blue cracks flickering over his skin. He slapped at them idly. "My father is simply being his usual charming self."

Dolora gave Fen'Din a meaningful look and edged closer to Anders.

"It doesn't make it any less of a demonic thing to do, just because Anders is suffering. Look, he's still suffering. Weren't you trying to help?" Fen'Din searched his memory for an exasperated look and put it on, for Dolora. "Remind him there's something to hope for!"

Dolora's edges riled, black and smoky.

"I don't know! You're the one who can read his mind!" Fen'Din paused. "Oh. Yes, I suppose Justice might be in the way." He squinted up at Anders, trying to focus as the light shifted. "She's really trying to help. She just doesn't know how. What would be good? What would make you feel better?"

Anders ran a hand through his hair, wrestling with himself, wrestling with Justice. On the one hand, Justice was pleased to see the man suffer, but Anders?
"You know, there was a time I thought that would have helped," Anders admitted, turning to address the spirit and unsure where his eyes should land. "Making him pay, making him feel what I felt... I thought that would balance things somehow. But now I just pity the poor idiot."

Dolora wavered, head tilting in confusion.

"Hurting my father doesn't make anything better," Anders continued. "It doesn't undo what he did or what I went through. If you want to help, remind me that there are people in my life who aren't such raging assholes."

Dolora looked distrustful, but put on Cormac's face. Anders couldn't see it, but Justice could, and the blue glow picked up around them.

"She says you should think about Cormac," Fen'Din clarified, given that Anders was still looking a little to the side of where Dolora stood. "Or what about your mum? She seems like a very ... helpful and kind person." He chose his words carefully. The woman reminded him of Wynne, in some ways, but sadly she was far less magical.

The black smoke around Dolora shifted, lightened, taking on a more purple cast, as she took the shape of Anders's mother. The mother was friendly and round, even if she was sad, Dolora thought, and she tried to indicate as much to Fen'Din, who just nodded.

Anders had to smile at that, at how hard Dolora was trying. And she was right, of course. it was much better to think about Cormac or his mother than to think about Ewald. "Thank you, Dolora. You are very right."

The smoke around Dolora quavered at the sight of his smile, and Anders could have sworn its colour lightened.

"I appreciate all that you've tried to do for me," Anders said, "but do you think now you could leave Ewald be?" He kept his voice light, friendly.

Dolora became formless, again, a roiling black cloud.

"Yes," Fen'Din agreed, "he's a right camel's ass. But, he knows what he's done. It's not worth being a demon, just to see if it sticks. Demons are terrible, Dolora. You remember what happened in the tower."

The cloud grew darker, casting an eerie shadow on Anders.

"That's not very hopeful. What are we to look forward to? The future should be bright -- look at us. We've escaped it all." Fen'Din offered an uncanny smile. "Sure, we might get caught. And that camel's ass might turn us in. But, he's a lot more likely to, if he's scared and unhappy. Either way, we have a new home -- really new, built from the ground. And the Chantry likes us, the Templars respect us, we can go outside any time we want to... Why give that up, for something so far in the past?"

Dolora wavered, still leaning towards Anders.

"He's not worth getting worked up over," Anders assured her. "He's definitely not worth you becoming a demon." She shifted, seemed to bristle, and through Justice Anders understood what she
was trying to say: she was getting worked up over him, not Ewald. "I know. But that's not the way to help me."

The smoke around Dolora stilled then, as though she had turned pensive.

"She wants to know why you can stay angry, but she can't," Fen'Din translated. "Dolora, you're not him. He can be angry because it happened to him. Yes, I know you care about him, but it's not your fight. Just help him be happy. Help him remember the good things, when he gets that look -- that one. Right there. It's better now, but he forgets, sometimes, right, Anders?"

Anders chuckled softly under his breath, wondering which face he was making. He could probably ask. He was sure Fen'Din must have drawn it at some point. "I do. And that's what I need. Hope, not anger. I have enough reasons to be angry."

Dolora wavered again, the smoke around her changing colours in a play of light. Anders wondered if that was the spirit equivalent of turning things over in her head.

The door swung open again, this time to reveal Cormac, holding a casserole dish and a wide bread pan. He paused and looked at the two he could see. "Is this a bad time? Dinner can be later..."

"It's the perfect time," Fen'Din assured him. "It is never too soon for supper. And Anders... well, he went to see his father. You should distract him with happier things."

"Well, he definitely knows where I keep my happier things and he's welcome to them, as soon as I get these in the oven!" Cormac laughed as he came down the two steps into the kitchen garden, shaking his head as he brushed through the edge of Dolora's presence. Just a chill. A good thing he was out here to warm things up.
The Convictions of Spirits

Chapter Summary

Niall brings Lily and Brynn to meet Valor. Anders explains his opinions on his father to Dolora and the cats.

This close, the spirit's glow burned Niall's eyes, and if he didn't know better, Niall would think the asshole was doing it on purpose. "Hello again, Valor," he greeted, squinting at the glowing pile of metal in front of him and hoping he sounded more enthused than he felt. "I've brought some people who want your help." He gestured behind him at Lily and the Templars.

Behind him, Owain was practically radiating nervous energy, one hand clenching and unclenching as though missing the weight of a sword. Valor regarded him impassively, his gaze sweeping over Brynn and Lily before returning to Niall.

"Because you do not have the strength of self to help them yourself?" Valor said, his voice echoing strangely. But then he glanced back at Lily, and through his visor, she was just able to see the beginning of a furrowed brow. "Hold. You come into the Fade wearing your flesh? Has the test changed? Are you to battle demons with your hands as well now?"

"Test...?" Lily blinked, and her eyes darted to Niall, hoping for a hint of what the spirit was talking about.

"It's not a Harrowing," Niall assured Valor. "It's a cosmic accident, and I'm trying to help them get back to the right side of the Veil."

"Is that what we're calling Jowan, now?" Lily muttered, studying the blades that hovered around Valor.

"I fail to see how I can help you. My purpose is to seek perfection, creating the ultimate weapon in pursuit of valor." The spirit gestured to the racks around him.

"Excuse me, Ser Valor," Brynn cut in, addressing Valor as he would a Templar from another circle, "but, we seek a powerful weapon. We seek a blade that will sever the Veil itself, so we can return to the place we belong."

"If that were possible, it still does not sound like valorous combat. You need a tool, not a weapon. I am not a maker of cheese-knives," Valor protested, another sword springing to being between his hands, shifting and flowing as he studied its edge.

Brynn tried again, hazarding a step closer. "There are mages who are trapped here, and as a Templar, it is my duty to see to their safety and security. I need to bring them home. Is that also not a valorous pursuit?"

Valor eyed him over the new sword. "If they are here and not safe, then you have failed in your duty. Fixing your own mistake is not valorous."

Brynn's jaw tightened, but he didn't argue, couldn't argue.
"Well," Niall cut in, "certainly you would find the mages' leader valorous."

Lily blinked. Leader? He couldn't mean Jowan?

When Valor didn't immediately dismiss the idea, Niall continued. "He travelled far, battled demons, broke into a fortress on his own, all to rescue his girlfriend--"

"Ex-girlfriend," Lily corrected.

"Right. All to rescue his ex-girlfriend. And the 'ex' makes it more valorous, you see, because he doesn't have the reward of-- oh blight, who am I kidding."

Valor was unimpressed.

Brynn picked up on where Niall was trying to go with that, and if they wanted Valor's help, they'd have to impress the spirit somehow. "But, whatever the reasons, he broke into the most heavily guarded magical prison in Thedas -- I'd know, I was Knight-Captain there -- and saved us from an invasion of demons." He left out the part where Jowan might have been responsible for the demons breaching the Veil in the first place. It was Aeonar, after all. One never could be sure how stable the Veil was.

"Did he fight them? Did he prove his true valour in combat?" the spirit asked, looking slightly more interested.

"I fought them!" Owain chimed in, hands clutching his belt to keep from drawing his sword just to calm himself. "Not many of us survived, but I sliced my way through as many as I could." And several mages he'd judged to be maleficars -- it was Aeonar, they were all supposedly maleficars anyway.

"Jowan... brought us here, to protect us. Owain and I came along to protect the wounded and the weak!" Brynn almost managed to sound certain of himself.

"If he did it once, why does he not simply do it again? I understand the power of will is rarely strong enough for such feats, on the other side of the veil, but here, strength of will is the true measure of power. If he could make a hole large enough for you to pass through from that side, it should be even simpler, here."

"He... can't," Niall filled in, after a long silent moment. "He's been trying for months, but..."

"The battle must have harmed him in some way we didn't see," Lily suggested, but beside her, Niall sighed.

"It's Jowan. Big ideas, big magic, no brains," he muttered.

"Yes, I am familiar with his work," Lily drawled.

"Perhaps, if he were here, I could better judge his worth for myself," said Valor. "If he is your leader, why does he send you in his stead?"

"We're not-- We came here on our own," Lily answered. "He's been trying to open the Veil with his own magic."

Niall shook his head. "I told you this was pointless." Around them, the air seemed to get colder and darker, if such things as cold and dark existed in the Fade.
Valor drew the sword he had just made, angling it towards Niall. "I have suffered your presence in my domain long enough. I find none of you worthy of my help. Return with someone who is worthy, or return not at all."

"Suffered--!" Niall huffed, drawing up his shoulders. "Go fuck yourself, Valor, and when you're done, make sure you take the stick out of your ass." He turned and stalked off, muttering, gesturing for the rest of the group to follow. "I'll be glad to get out of this place, even if I turn into smoke and blow away, at first contact."

"Maybe we should send Jowan over to talk with him. He seemed to like the idea of Jowan, at least," Lily suggested, as they drew closer to the tower again.

"We'll have to hope the idea of Jowan survives actually speaking with him," Niall grumbled. "And we'll have to get Jowan away from Mouse to do it."

Anders balanced the basket on his arm and braced himself as he knocked on the door. He had come to dread these 'visits', but if he didn't help his father, no one would. Justice didn't feel particularly bad about that idea, but this wasn't about Justice or even about Ewald, really.

Ulla opened the door and greeted him with a beaming smile that didn't quite mask how tired she looked. "Ket! Always so good to see you. Come in, come in! I will fetch your father."

She ushered Anders inside and disappeared again before the door had closed behind him. "Really, mama, I'm just here to drop these off," he said, trailing off when he knew she wasn't listening. "Right. I'll just... put these here." He set the basket down on the table.

Anders found last week's empty bottles back in their basket, beside the fire, and as he bent to pick them up, he could hear his father come into the room, like a wave of muffling silence. Justice bristled, but stayed low. "Sit down," Anders sighed. "I just came to leave more potions, but if you're here, I might as well make sure I haven't poisoned you."

Ewald's shoulders squared straighter than Anders had seen them since he was ... since before the Templars. But, the man got as far as a deep breath, before Ulla had pulled out a chair and herded him into it.

"Now, you sit right here and you tell your son what you told me, last night." Ulla's eyes were kind, but firm, as she smiled brightly.

"My feet are cold?" Ewald grumbled, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back.

"You know, I've treated Sister Ingill, up at the Chantry, and even she had better manners than this," Anders remarked tartly. "And you know Sister Ingill."

Ewald didn't have time to look offended before Ulla added, "I've been spat on by camels with better manners."

And then Ewald did look offended, but it was a look he directed at his wife instead of his son. Ulla met his stare with her hands on her hips and indicated Anders with a tip of her head.

"Well?" she said. "Prove me wrong, then!"

Ewald's lips thinned, and he turned back in his seat as though pained, fixing his stare at Anders's feet.
Over his head, Anders exchanged a look with his mother, wondering if he should be worried. "The potions don't seem to hurt," Ewald said gruffly to the floor while Ulla rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Ewald cleared his throat, leaning away from Ulla in case another smack was coming his way, and tried again. "That is, they... help. I can breathe better than I have in years." His gaze flicked up to Anders's face and then down again. "So... thank you. I suppose."

"Well, good. Maybe you'll be less of an asshole, if you don't feel like shit all the time, Andraste bear my words to the Maker," Anders huffed, leaning in to prod a few joints and listen to his father's breathing.

"Do you hear the way he talks to me?" Ewald complained, loudly.

"Then maybe you shouldn't start things you're not willing to hear the end of," Ulla suggested, holding one of the potions up to the light. "How did you ever learn to do this? It just seems like magic to me!"

"I had an excellent teacher. First she made sure I could look after myself, and then she taught me to look after everyone else. The last I saw her, she was on her way to help at Ostagar. The soldiers needed her more than we did." Of course, Anders knew Wynne had survived Ostagar -- Solona let him know right away, in Amaranthine -- but, he still hadn't seen her since they'd left Kinloch Hold in opposite directions.

"Still some kind of witchery," Ewald muttered, with a sidelong glance at his wife. "Witchery I feel much better for," he added, quickly.

Anders stood in the kitchen, talking to one of the cats, as he washed the bottles he'd brought back. "It's not that he isn't a monster. I mean, he's obviously a monster. It's just that he's a very old and pathetic monster, and I just don't care any more. You see what I mean, don't you, Ser Meowchismo?"

The cat leaned over and lapped at the water spilling from the pump.

Both of them startled at the knock on the door. Anders dried his hands on the front of his robes and grabbed his staff as he made his way to the outer door, only to put aside the staff as he found Fen'Din and a smoky blue glow waiting for him. "Sorry, it's been a little interesting lately. There were bandits, last week. Now there aren't."

"They tried to rob Val." Fen'Din paused. "That went about as well as you'd expect."

"He had no coin and they broke his teeth anyway?" Anders shook his head.

"Nothing worse than Petra could handle. I wonder what drew them away..." Fen'Din waved the spirit ahead of him, as they came into the main room.

"Hector," Anders answered, with a lopsided smile.

"No doubt." Fen'Din took a seat on the edge of the bench around the fire. "Dolora remains unconvinced that you retain the sole right to be angry with your father. She has questions. I expect Justice should be able to hear her, but, if you like, I will translate. She can present things strangely, sometimes."

Anders ran a hand through his hair, taking a moment to confer with Justice. There was a tangle there, when he pressed, both in his hair and in his head. Justice agreed with Dolora's anger but also agreed
with Anders's concern over this turning Dolora into a demon. Indecision was a distinctly human problem, and Anders could tell that Justice -- that the part of him that was Justice -- was discomforted.

"Honestly, Dolora, the man really isn't worth your anger," Anders said, finding a perch across from Fen'Din. "Or even my anger, to be honest."

The blue glow wavered, and Anders had a distinct image of a human Dolora narrowing her eyes dubiously.

"Which isn't to say that I forgive him," Anders continued. "Not for what he did all those years ago. Not for how he still treats me. But..." Anders shrugged, unsure what he was trying to convey for a moment. "I think now I pity him more than anything."

Dolora looked a bit dimmer, and then brighter, wavering a bit, before she swirled in confusion.

"It's like I was telling Ser Meowchismo," Anders said, wiggling his fingers at the cat, who remained firmly perched on the other side of the room, regarding the spirit warily. "He's terrible, but he's terrible and old. He's too weak to really hurt anyone, now. Whether or not I forgive him, there's no point in trying to make him stop doing something he can't do. If he gets out of hand, any of his fieldhands could lay him out cold, and so could more than half the sellers in the market. I don't bother, because he's run out of sons." He shrugged. "Jan's gone away and I don't live there any more. There's nothing he can use against me, now. The only person he could hurt is my mother, and he'd never do that. The worst thing he's ever done to her was to send me away."

Dolora did a fine impression of Peryn.

"What's Per-- Templars?" Anders laughed bitterly. "He'd have to know which son I was, to try that. He doesn't pay enough attention."

Dolora shifted back, and her shimmering slowed, turned almost pensive.

"I appreciate you looking after me, Dolora," Anders added, finally giving up on trying to charm the cat in his direction. "But I'm okay." For the moment, he believed that, and he tried to convey that in the weight of his tone.

There was something still confused in the way her smoke curled, but it was an inward-looking confusion... if spirits were allowed such things. Either way, she was not arguing.

Now that Anders had stopped paying attention, Ser Meowchismo crept over, bumping Anders's hand with his face on his way over to sniff at the spirit. Anders smiled, ran a hand down the cat's back and watched his tail twitch. "See? I have my guard-cats to protect me."

"He's still sad," Fen'Din pointed out to Dolora. "I'm sure you could give him something to be happy about. What's he forgetting? Where's the hope?"

Dolora's confusion resolved first into an image of Cormac.

Anders laughed. "Yeah, but I never forget how grateful I am for that."

A series of flickering images darted by as Dolora tried to represent all the people needed -- a mage healer hanging out a sign in the market, fieldhands making their way through a good harvest, a feast with smiling people around the table and full tankards of ale for everyone, lightning striking a Venatori leader...
Fen'Din cleared his throat, and Dolora switched to a young woman with a staff being coronated.

And that did make Anders smile. "That's a good look on you, Dolora," Anders teased. "And... thank you."

Ser Meowchismo tried to befriend Dolora, face-first, consternation crossing his face when it met only smoke.
Chapter Summary

Kinnon gets a controversial kiss. Val gets nightmares.

Kinnon stumbled down the dirt road, Peryn standing only a little straighter at his side, the two of them still cackling over the last round in the tavern.

"But, that dance you do, that is traditional, yes? It is Fereldan culture?" Peryn asked, words coming together a little worse than usual after one too many shots of anijswater. "You will teach me, so I can dance the Fereldan dance with you?"

"Yeah, it's very Fereldan. Invented in Ferelden." That part was true, at least. Kinnon was pretty sure Anders had come up with the spicy shimmy, himself, and for all that Anders was... well, Ander, by the time they'd met he was as Ferelden as Kinnon himself. "You know, they say Ferelden's full of dog lords, right? But my family, we're from the north of Ferelden. The north-west, up just past the Ciriane. We're the Clayne, you know. It's different to the Avvar or the Alamarri or the Chasind. The Clayne aren't dog lords. The Clayne had horse lords. And that's where my name comes from, you know. My family's named for the horse lords of the Clayne, because that's what we were! Brave, spear-wielding kings of the Southern Lands. They tell me the Theirins are Clayne, too, but Cailan's way too big on dogs for that. Man's got like four horses. Four. Pathetic." Kinnon shook his head and immediately regretted it.

Peryn watched Kinnon's face as he spoke, and Kinnon was surprised by the open interest he found there. "So, this was the dance of the horse lords, yes?"

Kinnon's face twisted as he tried to keep a serious expression. "Sure," he said. He had heard enough comparisons between Anders and horses anyway. Kinnon tried to shake that thought from his head and staggered, bumping into Peryn, who steadied him with an arm around his waist. "Ever ridden a horse, Ser Peryn?"

They both stumbled as Kinnon leaned too much against Peryn, but the Templar quickly righted them both. "I ride more camels, but yes."

Kinnon's slurring words dropped to a lower register. "What about a horse lord?"

Peryn blinked. "Sorry?"

"Ever ridden one of them?"

That startled a laugh out of Peryn. A crooked smile pulled at his lips as he looked Kinnon up and down. "Not yet," he answered.

"Well, you know what they say in the south. Save a horse; ride a horse lord." Kinnon managed a lecherous grin before stumbling in a pothole and nearly spilling them both over.

"Another night," Peryn suggested, laughing, "when the horse lord can carry himself."

Kinnon cackled and rubbed at his own reddening face. "Another night, when I'm not so drunk I can't
give you a good ride. Make sure you bring enough water and hold on tight, because it's going to be long and rough." And that brought back memories of Anders, again. "Unless you've been getting your good times with Wardens. Can't really compete with that..."

"I have heard the rumours about the Wardens, but I cannot say I have the opportunity. Had. Had have?" Peryn huffed. "Common is a fool's language."

"But, it brings all the best fools together." Kinnon grinned again, utterly lopsided as he could barely feel his face. "But, if you want, I'll tell you some dirty stories in Fereldan. Dirty Fereldan stories are the best kind. Way better than anything out of Orlais."

Peryn's eyes twinkled. "Dirty stories of horse lords and dog lords? I will enjoy that."

Kinnon wondered why the world had stopped moving by them, only to realise that they had stopped walking. He recognised the walkway to the abbey and wondered how they had managed to get there so fast. Or, from the way Peryn propped him up, how they had gotten there at all.

"So... er..." Kinnon considered inviting Peryn inside, but something clenched in his stomach at the thought. A Templar. In his space. He'd found that, now that he finally had his own space for the first time in his life, he guarded it jealously.

Peryn saved him from flailing for more words, noting the shift in Kinnon's expression. "Another night, then, you will tell me these stories? And teach me that dance?"

"Another night," Kinnon agreed, wrapping an arm around Peryn's waist and studying his lips contemplatively. Hadn't he said something to Anders about not kissing Templars? But, Peryn was kind and seemed dedicated to the idea of mages as people who just went to a different school and had different skills, which was definitely appealing. At the same time, Peryn didn't, and hopefully wouldn't, know he was a mage.

"You are having second thoughts?" Peryn asked, making no move to step away. His tongue flicked over his lower lip, invitingly, in the dry Ander air.

Kinnon made up his mind, dipping Peryn with one arm while he held onto the gate with the other, for balance. When Peryn made no move to protest, Kinnon leaned down for a firm kiss. A warm, contented sound settled in Peryn's mouth and his hands clutched at Kinnon's shoulders. As Kinnon's lips began to part, the two were interrupted by a shout from an open window.

"For Andraste's sake, get a room, Kinnon!" Val's voice rang out across the courtyard in the ambiguously southern accent he had, more often than not. "Stop doing that in the courtyard where we can all see it!"

"Mind your own damn business, Val!" Kinnon shouted back, ignoring the way his cheeks burned. "And don't pretend you don't like the show!"

It was hard to make out Val's scowl in the dark, but Kinnon was sure it was there. Finally, Kinnon straightened, bringing Peryn with him, and Peryn clung to him a moment longer, his soft chuckle hitting Kinnon's cheek before he reluctantly pulled away.

"Sorry about that," Kinnon sighed. "Val's... well..."

"We have met," Peryn assured him ruefully, nodding in agreement with whatever adjective Kinnon would have picked. Curling a hand around the back of Kinnon's neck, Peryn pulled him in for another kiss, one that ended much too soon.
Kinnon cleared his throat. "Val's going to start throwing things at us next."

"Ah," Peryn nodded. "Well, when I pass through again. We will find somewhere with less watchers." He chuckled quietly and untangled himself from Kinnon. "You can get to the door?"

Kinnon squinted across the distance separating them from the abbey. "I was drunker than this in Hossberg. I'll be fine." He smiled at Peryn and took a few loose steps away from the gate. "Next time, maybe."

Peryn watched the first few stumbling steps, to make sure Kinnon would really make it, and then headed back out to the road.

When Kinnon made it in the front door, Val was there, waiting for him, and his back collided sharply with the edge of the door, slamming it behind him, as Val shoved him against it.

"A Templar, Kinnon. That is a Templar. I just looked out the kitchen window and caught you sucking face with a Templar in the front yard of our home. Forty mages live here, and I'm one of them. You're one of them. And you were going to bring that in here? Why don't you just use Crushing Prison! It'll be faster!" Val's face was flushed around the scars; his eyes gleamed with rage.

"If I was going to 'bring that in here'," Kinnon snapped, shoving Val back, "we wouldn't have been kissing out in the courtyard!"

"You shouldn't have been kissing, period!"

"What are you? Guardian of my virtue?"

Val scoffed, lips curled in contempt. "The only thing I'm guarding is our necks!"

"Hey, this is the same Templar that hangs around with Anders," Kinnon pointed out. "He's the kind of person you want on your side, and it would be more suspicious if we didn't allow him around here!"

"There's a big difference between being nice to the Templar and shoving your tongue down his throat!" A harsh wind picked up just outside the door, and Val's shouting was attracting an audience.

"What the blight is going on?" Petra hissed from the opposite doorway, absently smoothing down her sleep-mussed hair.

"I'm fucking wasted and I decided Ser Peryn needed a goodnight kiss. As in a kiss that comes right before the part where he goes away. And he has gone away, because I am not, contrary to Valery's delightful opinions of Fereldan intelligence, stupid enough to bring a Templar in here!" Kinnon shoved Val again, this time so he could get out of the foyer and into the hall that led to his room.

"Why is he still allowed to drink?" Val demanded, gesturing after Kinnon.

"Maybe because when he gets drunk, you don't get killed by rioting Anders who hate everything about Orlais?" Petra suggested.

"That was once!" Val snapped.

"Twice," Kinnon corrected from down the hall, before a door slammed shut behind him.

Val threw a rude gesture in the direction of Kinnon's room, while Petra tried to rub away the growing headache in her forehead.
"Contrary to popular belief," Petra said, "Kinnon is not stupid. I'm sure he knows what he's doing."

Val sneered at her as he stalked past her. "Are you willing to bet your life on it?"

Suddenly, things came into focus -- a sharpness where everything before had been a gentle, comfortable smear. The light was dim, as it always was, in the spirit research rooms, not that Val could remember what he was doing in one of those rooms. He'd never been permitted to study Spirit magic, because everyone had heard of the Shame. Had he said he was going to meet someone? Why couldn't he remember...?

He heard the voice, first. The words from so close behind him, he didn't know how he'd missed the footsteps. "Did you miss me, Valery?"

"Leofric?" Val's eyes filled with tears, even as he struggled to look unaffected, but he couldn't do it. He turned and reached out, pulling the man to him, in a warm hug. "I thought you were dead. I thought they killed you."

"You know me. I'd never leave you all alone. It's always better with two of us." Leofric smiled, bringing one hand up to caress Val's cheek, his eyes dark with desire.

On the one hand, Val had never felt so warm and safe and whole, since he was first taken to Montsimmard. On the other hand, all the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end, and cold sweat ran down his spine. This wasn't right. Leofric didn't look at him like that, except-- But, they'd been separated since--

And then the memories sputtered to life, stabbing through the muffling waves of want and warmth that washed over him with every touch of those blunt fingers. Leofric writhing and pleading on the floor, between him and the demon. He'd been so sure it could only handle one of them, that the two of them, together, would be safe. But, where Val had made a career of exploiting the desires of others, to get what he wanted, and expected anything the demon could offer, whatever the thing had pulled out of Leofric's head had crippled him at once. He'd been sure, right up until the end, that he could handle it. He cast instinctively, slicing away the things he knew weren't real. They'd both get out alive. They just had to hold out until Torrin and Wynne got to them.

"You're not you. You're not Leofric." Val tensed, curling in on himself, as he unwrapped his arms from whatever was in them. "Leofric died."

"Ah, don't think about that," Leofric sighed. "I didn't mean to leave you alone so long. I just couldn't find my way back to you." His eyes were gentle, apologetic. His hands were soft. "Come on. I'm back, now. It's the same as it ever was. We'll go find some pretty things and trash a storeroom. I can't think of a better way to celebrate my homecoming than watching you gag something gorgeous with your fine Orlesian pike."

It definitely sounded like Leofric. He'd give it that. They'd had their way with a good fifteen years of the tower, or at least what of those would hike skirts and bend over for them. Which was a fairly substantial number of people, even if most of them would only do it once. And he'd overlook a lot to be able to do that again.

But, he remembered Leofric on his knees, clawing at the floor, getting ravished by a reanimated Templar's corpse. Leofric had been moaning his desire, spit dribbling from his lips as he pleaded for more, but the demon had eyes only for Val, at that point. 'But, look at him. He wants it,' the thing had told him. 'He can have anything he wants, and so can you. It doesn't have to be the same. Just show me what you want, and I'll make it yours.'
Leofric's voice cut into the recollections, and his touch pressed the memory down. "This isn't like you. You're always up for a bit of the old in-out. Come on, Val. Please? I'll let you pick."

"You aren't real," Val insisted, and it broke his heart to do. "None of this is real, and I have to wake up. I have to wake up!"

He remembered when he'd finally carved through the last of the demon's illusions to hear the words Leofric was howling, instead of just the generic sounds of pleasure. 'Ohhh, Valery. Val, please! Just like that!' And he'd known, then, how to break the demon's hold. He'd called to Leofric, stripped off his own clothes and offered himself, aching hands desperately trying to stroke life into his horror-stricken knob, but the demon's grip on Leofric's mind was too strong. For Leofric, the illusion was more real than the reality, and Val couldn't spare any more magic to break it. His fingers burned and his arms ached, just keeping his own head clear enough not to fall under the demon's illusions, but he pushed again, all the same... and knew nothing until he woke up screaming, wrapped in a warm blanket, with Wynne standing over him.

Maybe it was real. Maybe this really was Leofric. It wouldn't be the first time the tower had sent someone away and lied about it. Especially with how they must've been found, after that. But, that terror clawing at the base of his skull was insistent. "Leofric?" he inquired, his voice small.

"I'll never leave you alone, again," Leofric promised, running a hand through Val's curls.

Val turned his face up, raising his eyes from the floor, along the length of Leofric's favourite robes. That stark white skin, the typically Fereldan angle of his chin and jaw, the wisps of glowing blue and purple swimming in his eyes.

With a strangled gasp, Val sat up in his own bed, alone again.
Jowan knelt in the middle of a vast expanse of garden that spread outward from him. The few single flowers around his feet had given way to vines and fruit trees and sprawling meadows, always with temporary scars from whatever he was working on. The air before him rippled and buckled as he commanded it to part for him, to let him pass back to where he belonged, but the best he'd managed was to tear holes into the realms of powerful demons who were not entirely entertained by the intrusion. It wasn't that he couldn't do it, he was sure, it was just that he couldn't aim -- that 'aim' meant something very different when you were trying to aim along an axis that wasn't up-down, front-back, or top-bottom, and he just hadn't figured it out, yet. But, Mouse had faith in him. Mouse really believed he could do it, and given the things they'd had achieved, Jowan was slowly running out of reasons to doubt him.

As the edges formed and parted, Jowan was greeted with a horde of darkspawn, and for a moment, he thought he'd done it -- not where he wanted to be, but darkspawn had to mean he'd reached Thedas again! ... Except for the part where they were demons in the shape of darkspawn. The fears of the living. He glanced around for a dreamer, but not finding one, he let the rift slide closed and vanish, again.

"That was... actually pretty good."

Jowan turned towards the voice, finding Niall standing behind him, eyeing the scar where Jowan had opened the Fade moments before. Jowan blew the hair from his face and sat back on his heels.

"Not really," Jowan replied, toying with a flower at the edge of Niall's shadow. "I just keep finding other parts of the Fade. What we need is a way out of the Fade, but I just feel like I'm chasing my tail." He pinched a soft petal between his fingers, waited for it to shrivel, but there was no change, at least not right away. He glanced between Niall and the flower. Huh.

"It's more than the rest of us have been able to do," Niall said ruefully.

Ah. There. Slowly, the petal started to crisp between Jowan's fingers.

"I have to get us out of here -- all of us. I just... don't know how." Jowan shook his head. "Tearing the Veil sounded good. I mean, obviously it can be torn, so why wouldn't we be able to do it? Except I keep tearing things that aren't the Veil. I can't even get into anyone's dreams. I'd count that! We'd at least be able to talk to someone on the other side. I just... Nothing ever works the way I meant. Ever."

Niall staggered and rubbed his eye, a crushing pain in his chest and a throbbing at his temples. "Jowan, you're doing something. And you're doing it really well. It's just... it might not be the thing you need to be doing."

"Great, now I'm doing the wrong thing and I'm doing it wrong," Jowan muttered, sprawling back
into the grass and flowers behind him.

"Not the point," Niall insisted, crouching at Jowan's side. "The point is I have an idea. Actually, I think Lily had an idea, but I think she might be onto something."

Jowan looked up at the sound of Lily's name. She'd had an idea, and she'd told Niall and not him? Not that Jowan could blame her, really, even if he wanted to, but the realisation was like a hand in his chest. Just one more thing he had done wrong. "Idea?"

"Mouse isn't the only spirit here. Well. Mouse and I aren't the only spirits here. I'm sure you've heard me whine about Valor in the past..." Niall reached down to play with a dried out blade of grass.

Jowan's brows knit, but Niall had his attention. "I think your words were something along the line of 'the tin head with a stick up his ass'."

"Yeah. That guy." Niall's lips twitched towards a smile. "He still has a stick up his ass, but he might be able to help us. Or help you."

"By what, pulling the stick out of his ass and beating the Veil into submission with it?" Jowan snorted and tossed a flower at Niall's face -- a tigerlily, he noticed, as it drifted down.

Niall's faint smile gave way to a full-on cackle. "Andraste's blessed ass, maybe that's what I should ask for! The most powerful stick ever made!" After a few snorts and failed attempts to stop laughing at the image of Valor beating the Veil with his ass-pole, Niall finally got his face under control, though a faint glow suffused his skin. "But, no, a sword."

"I could just borrow Owain's. He's offered to teach me to use it a few times, but I keep turning him down because I like having all of the parts of my body connected to each other." Jowan's hand wandered through the flowers over his head, and he tried to see if he could identify them by touch.

"Right. No. You need the background. Valor makes weapons -- specific weapons for specific battles. That, he claims, is his purpose -- to make the ideal weapon for any fight, for the perfect expression of valorous combat or something. So, we went to ask him if he'd make you a sword to fight the Veil." Niall's eyes dulled a bit as he thought of that conversation. "He's got a stick up his ass, but he's willing to meet you, to see if you can impress him enough to be worthy of one of his weapons for the battle that will define your life. I mean, assuming you're the kind of person whose life would be defined by battles, and no offence, but ... you've got other things going for you."

Jowan just looked more weary than hopeful. "You expect me to impress a spirit of Valor with my... valorousness? He's more likely to laugh and try to use me as a pincushion."

Niall agreed but tried not to let it show. "Jowan, you broke into Aeonar, on your own, and single-handedly tore down the Veil to save the woman you love. That's as valorous as anyone gets, plus it's a great idea for a romance novel if we ever get out of here."

"When we get out of here..." Jowan sat up at the sound of Mouse's voice. "...it will be without Valor's 'help.'" Mouse stood over the two of them, his tone perfectly pleasant but his smile rigid. "Niall means well, but he doesn't have the faith in your abilities that I do, Jowan."

"I don't have the faith in my abilities that you do," Jowan shot back. "Look, what's wrong with just trying it? If it's a stupid idea, it's not like we'll have wasted that much time. You've been here forever. I've been here... I don't know how long, but another day or two isn't going to be a big difference."

"Valor... well, I'd rather he not mislead you. The spirit has never lived up to his name." Mouse sniffed and looked off in the direction of Valor's tiny domain.
"I don't see him having much of an opportunity. We're just trying to get a sword," Niall argued, standing up from the surprising ring of tiny purple flowers that had bloomed around his shadow, a far smaller ring of death and shade than could usually be found around him. "We get the sword, we stab the Veil. It either works or it doesn't. If it doesn't, it's back to Plan A. But, Jowan's the only one Valor's even willing to consider giving a weapon to -- I mean, you? Me? Lily? Not really on the list of valorous individuals. He's done something crazy enough that it might actually impress the spirit into giving us a sword. And we've both seen Valor's weapons in action -- he gives you a sword, and you're winning that fight."

Mouse pressed his lips into a thin smile, and Niall steeled himself. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to try," he said, cutting a glance at Jowan, "but I still don't think we need him. Seeing what you have accomplished here so far... Many have come through, but you're the first in a long time to give me hope."

"Thanks, Mouse," Jowan said to the flowers, never quite sure how to take Mouse's adulation. He looked to Niall. "So where is this Valor?"

Valor raised his eyes to the three men approaching him, recognising Niall at once. "You have returned. What do you hope Valor can do for you, when you are valourless?"

Mouse snorted and Niall rolled his eyes and stepped forward. "We bring you Jowan, the leader of the mages, who has done many valorous deeds!" Niall insisted, shoving Jowan toward Valor.

"I... uh... hi?" Jowan offered a weak, wide-eyed smile and raised a hand. The spirit was dressed as a Templar, and the line of the sword on that armour shot a chill down his spine.

"You are the bold leader I am told of?" Valor did not look convinced. "Tell me of your deeds."

"Well, I fought my way into Aeonar -- that's a magical prison -- to rescue someone who didn't deserve to be there. That probably counts. And I fought demons and darkspawn in Redcliffe, one time. And, um... I escaped from the mage tower. That took balls. And I smashed a bunch of phylacteries on the way out, to make it easier for everyone else." Actually, that had been Solona, but he took both the blame and the credit for it. It wasn't like she was here, and if she was, she'd be the valorous one of all of them.

It was impossible to read Valor's expression through the helmet, and Jowan focused on keeping his posture straight, his chin up, trying to exude a sense of... valorousness.

"Explain your more recent actions," Valor demanded, glancing at Mouse before focusing on Jowan again.

"M...my more recent...?" Jowan glanced at Niall, who shrugged. "I told you. I fought my way into Aeonar. But the, uh, Veil was thin, so when I summoned -- well, it doesn't matter what I summoned. Anyway, the Veil tore and brought us here, and now I'm trying to get us home."

That sounded valorous, right?

But Valor shook his head in frustration. "No. I meant, explain why you have chosen the counsel of a demon."

Niall blew out a sigh, about to rally to Jowan's defence when he realised that Valor wasn't pointing at him. "Wait, what?" He followed the trajectory of Valor's finger. "No, no, that's Mouse! He isn't..."

"What--!? What are you talking about? Demon?" Mouse sputtered, stumbling back and holding up
his hands. "I am what the Fade has made me! Am I to blame for that? I am but a small and simple mouse!"

"Lies," Valor declared. "Cowardly lies! You have devoured those who were lured by your weak pose! You draw power from the arrogance of others, meaningless and unfounded. You lie to them and consume them in the hope of following the silver cords back to their flesh."

"And what if I do?" Mouse asked, puffing up and folding his arms across his chest. "It's not like I've found any other way to go home! If I replace the weakest of them, I've done the world a favour! But, now I don't have to! Now, there's another way!"

"The demon is using you," Valor pointed out, to Jowan. "Would you unleash him on an unsuspecting world?"

"But..." Jowan turned wide eyes on Mouse, silently begging for an explanation. Replace the weakest of them... "Is that what you've been doing with me? You singled me out as the weakest one and went to work on me?" He hoped his voice sounded less shaky to their ears.

"Use your brain, Jowan," Mouse said. "What use is possessing you if you're stuck here, too? Tear open the Veil, and I don't need a body to leave. We both win. What does it matter what kind of spirit I am if I help you and your friends escape?"

"It matters," Jowan said in a small voice, thinking of blood magic, the tower, and the look on Lily's face. "Sometimes it matters how you do things, no matter how they turn out."

"Maybe you're smarter than you look," Mouse admitted, "but that's not going to help us get out of here. Help you get out of here. And this is stupid anyway. I told you he wasn't going to help."

"I do not owe my assistance to anyone. I do not grant my assistance to demons or those who do their bidding," Valor clarified, none too thrilled at the accusation of uselessness in there.

"You've never turned down an apprentice before!" Mouse shot back, gesturing at Jowan.

"This is obviously not an apprentice. And the apprentices are fighting their own battles, not a battle to bring you home with them. Were any of them even aware of your existence? You spend so much time lurking and scurrying, I thought they might not have seen you until it was too late."

"Ah, technically..." Jowan cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his head.

"Technically, he's an apprentice," Niall finished the sentence. "He escaped to avoid the Harrowing, because it was an unjust and cowardly ritual, and he tried to take others with him."

Jowan hadn't, really. At least no one who would've been affected by the Harrowing, but he nodded along. "The problem here is that whether or not Mouse travels with us, there are ... a decent number of physical people stuck in the Fade, right now, and I mean, I may not be a senior researcher or anything, but that sounds like it's probably terrible for the local environment. The best thing to do is to get rid of us."

"Jowan, no!" Niall's eyes widened.

"There are easier ways to do that," Valor noted, reaching for a rack of swords at his side.

"That is not at all what he meant, and you know it," Niall cut in. "If you're going to cut down defenceless mages, how does that make you not a demon? Is that a valorous thing to do?"
"If he is as valorous as he claims, he's hardly defenceless. And he consorts with demons threatening to enter the physical world," Valor argued.

Mouse's irritation spilled across his face. "This is idiotic! I'm an apprentice! Just like him, but deader! You've known me for longer than I can remember!"

"I know the souls you have destroyed," Valor boomed. "I cannot count the number. And I know you will bring ruin to the world outside if you are let loose." Valor stayed close to his sword rack, one hand poised to grab the nearest weapon if need be.

"I told you he would not help us," Mouse scoffed.

"You've told me a lot of things," Jowan replied, proud of how strong and steady his voice came out. "Were you ever actually an apprentice?"

Mouse stared at him as though insulted by the question. "What? Of course I was!"

"You sure about that?" Niall asked, and around him the air grew colder. "You told me yourself, if you get stuck here long enough, your memory gets a bit... muddled. I've been here a few years, but you... Or have you always been here?"

"Then how would I know about the Templars!? How would I know their blades and what it is to die? That never goes away! I wish it did!" Mouse shouted, eyes tearing up as he folded his arms across his chest.

"You swallowed their memories," Valor declared, voice clean and sharp, damping the sounds around it.

"What? That's ridiculous!" Mouse's shoulders distorted and flicked back into shape.

"Is it?" Niall asked. "You always told me that's how you lost your memories. That the demons nibbled away the pieces of you. It's not that ridiculous. Is that what you do? Steal the memories of apprentices who don't make it?"

"You've seen me, Niall. Is that what I do?" Mouse's jaw seemed to lengthen and then his face was the same as it had always been, but his voice still didn't sound right. "Have you ever seen me eat an apprentice's memories?"

"I've never seen an apprentice fail," Niall realised. "So I don't know what you do."

They had one more look at Mouse's face, at the way it crumpled in supreme disappointment, before his shape flickered again. His outline blurred like heat shimmer, and when his shape came back into focus, it no longer looked like Mouse.

Pride demon, Jowan's mind supplied as he stared up, up at the twisted, spiky creature in front of him. He had to crane his head back to follow the line of his horns that curved towards a green sky.

"You could have been so much more," Mouse -- the demon -- boomed.

Next to Jowan, Valor nodded decisively. "If you wish to prove your valour," he said, "then defeating this demon is an excellent way to do it."

Right. Defeat the demon like it was nothing. Defeat the tall, spiky demon with claws longer than his leg. Jowan sucked in a deep, steadying breath and proved just how valorous he was -- by shrieking like a child and ducking for cover behind Valor.
Jowan tries to fight Mouse. Niall is more than he seems. Asha rescues Jowan and then Niall.

"I don't know if I'll ever feel right about it," Lily admitted, carving a slice of the gurn roast Asha had created with a flick of her hand. "I'm just a normal girl -- no magic, no excitement. The most exciting thing in my life, before Aeonar, was getting left on the Chantry steps as a baby."

"Don't be ridiculous." Asha laughed and poured tea for both of them. "You're selling yourself short. You had a love affair with a handsome young mage! You tried to help him escape! Everything that got you sent to Aeonar was proof that you're not just some normal peasant. You've got strength in you. You see wrong and you try to make it right."

"But... it's so... There's magic everywhere, here. You're all mages. I can't even make myself a cup of tea." Lily sighed and glanced out the window at the swirling green sky.

"Mouse is lying about that," Asha told her, over a bite of the roast. "I think you can. I think you just need to believe it. You make whole worlds when you dream, don't you? Same thing. Here you are, standing in the Fade. All you have to do is believe it's real. What could it hurt? Worst case, I'm wrong, and you don't have tea."

"I'm not a mage. I shouldn't be using magic. I'm not even sure magic is a good thing!"

"It's natural, just like eating and sleeping. Some people have two hands, some people only have one. Some people have magic, some people don't. Besides, is it really magic, here?" Asha shrugged and then followed Lily's gaze out the window. "The sky's not usually that colour. That your J-man out there doing something?"

"I... possibly," Lily replied, frowning. She still wasn't sure if she liked or trusted whatever he was getting up to with Mouse, but...

A high-pitched shriek pierced the air and Lily's thoughts, and she exchanged a look with Asha, tea forgotten. "Definitely Jowan," she decided, already halfway out of her seat.

Asha followed her out of the tower as they made for that voice and that swirl of green overhead, but, with her longer legs, Asha quickly outstripped Lily. More shrieking made their trail easy to follow, but they stopped at the crest of a hill, where they could finally look down and see what was going on.

"Are those demons?" Lily gasped, clutching Asha's arm. They seemed to be fighting each other, one made of muscle and spikes and the other of smoke and ice.

And there, at the centre of it all, was Jowan, swinging a sword at the spiky demon's feet and screeching with abandon. The demon kicked him out of the way, unharmed, before taking a swing at the smoky figure circling it.

"Yes." Asha squared her jaw and squeezed Lily's shoulder. "Stay here."
"Look around you," the smoky demon commanded, eyes firmly on the other. "You've been here forever. An eternity. And you are still nothing. You are less with every passing moment. There's no one coming to free you. You've driven away your only hope. Look at him! He's going to kill you, because there's not enough of you left to hold him off. You're fading, and no one will even remember your name."

Asha rushed to Jowan's side, shooting a sharp look at the spirit lingering nearby, busy crafting weapons, but not participating in the fight at all. "Let them fight each other. Come away, before you get hurt," she insisted.

"You don't understand -- that's Niall." Jowan pointed to the billowing smoke and ice. "When Mouse turned on us, he tried to help me. I'm not running again! What good did that ever do? Lily went to Aeonar because I ran. We're stuck here, because I ran."

"No, we're stuck here because you stopped running," Asha corrected him, eyeing the demons. "That's really Niall?"

"Can't you see him?" Jowan looked confused.

"Now that you mention it..." Asha tipped her head and peered at the demons. "And that other one is Mouse. I see him -- this is what always bothered me about him, but now it's standing here, instead of creeping around behind his eyes. Huh. I didn't recognise it. Who would've thought that slimy little man was a demon?"

Even through the fear in his eyes, Jowan managed to look miserable, and before he could follow up with something self-deprecating, Asha wiggled her fingers at him.

"Give me that sword thing," she demanded, and Jowan pressed the hilt into her palm. It wasn't like she knew the first thing about wielding a sword, but she would rather have something sharp and pointy between her and a pride demon. "Where did you even get this...?"

Jowan pointed at Valor with a thumb over his shoulder, and Asha spotted the rack of swords behind him. Asha had quite a few other questions, but she would save them for later. "Right. I'm going to see what I can do. Do you have any spells you could throw at the demon without getting too close?"

Jowan snorted. "I don't know how many will help..." All the same, he stepped back and rained hexes down on Mouse, things to make his demonic former-mentor weaker and clumsier. Another day, another demon, just like it had been when they first arrived in the Fade, but this time it was Mouse. He'd trusted Mouse. Mouse had believed in him.

"You're lucky the demons went away after Uldred summoned them, that they didn't come right back here when Solona cut them down. How did you ever make it that long by yourself, I wonder? But, the shadows got you in the end, didn't they? There's nothing left of you, now, just this thin, weak shell of a mage that might have been." Niall kept Mouse from landing a solid shot on Asha or Jowan, always drifting into the space before Mouse could quite cross it. What he couldn't stop, he certainly slowed down.

Asha drew strength from Valor -- something that finally made the spirit set down his work and take an interest. This mage, like so many before her, tugged at his very essence. Usually it was a faint enough pull to ignore. Usually it was on the other side of the veil. But her certainty and courage resonated through him as she dodged around the demon's legs, calling for hexes and driving a sword that didn't fit her into one of the demons again and again. He wasn't sure it would help, but she was certainly trying.
The demon's talons swiped for her, more viciously than it had kicked aside Jowan earlier. That very viciousness told Asha that some of what they were doing was getting to Mouse, and Asha didn't flinch, side-stepping the strike and only stumbling a little.

Niall darted in again, drawing the next swipe his way, away from Asha, and this time talons rent smoke. Jowan sucked in a breath, but Niall seemed unharmed.

"You turned me into this!" Niall spat, and his words seemed to sizzle in the air. "I should have known! How had I not known?"

While Niall spoke, Asha darted behind Mouse, her sword finding the soft spot behind the demon's knee that made its leg buckle.

Jowan cheered and slammed down another hex. The thing he'd learnt, above all else, in the Fade, was that he very rarely had to stop casting. The power was everywhere and all he had to do was command it. Which did, for a moment, make him wonder about Mouse -- Mouse had always claimed he couldn't change things because he was dead, but demons had entire kingdoms at their disposal. If Mouse was a demon, where was his control over the Fade?

Around them, everything that had looked organic had died and greyed with the force of Niall's despair, as he wielded it against Mouse. Trees that should never have been were suddenly no longer, flowers and fruit fallen around them. And as Niall began again and the edges of his shadow reached the hill where Lily stood, Mouse collapsed completely before him.

"Killing is a warrior's job, Niall," Mouse panted, the demon shape caving in on him. "Is that what you mean to become, or do you think you'll stay a demon? It's quite fetching on you."

Asha's sword slammed down again, and the crumpled mass that had been Mouse shrunk further.

"The real dangers of the Fade are careless trust, preconceptions, and pride... How many times have you heard me say it? How many times have you repeated it to apprentices?" Mouse laughed, even as he continued to shrink, his voice remaining just as clear as it had been. "True tests never end, and yours is just beginning!"

Spikes turned to fur and whiskers, and finally Mouse was living up to his name. He was small enough to squash with a boot, and Asha tried, but he scurried away and disappeared, his voice still hanging in the air.

"Dammit," Niall cursed, spinning around, trying to find Mouse's path. The ground under Niall's feet turned to ice.

"I can't believe he was a demon," Jowan murmured, looking as cracked and crumpled as the fallen fruit around him. Asha hooked a hand around his elbow and tugged him out of Niall's shadow. Lily was approaching them, now, coming down the hill, and as much as Jowan needed her, he wasn't he wanted her to see him like this, in this light. Not that she would be surprised, he was sure.

"Marvellous!" He jumped at the sound of Valor's voice. "A most excellent display of valour!"

Jowan started to laugh, a choked and garbled sound that rose into full-fledged hysteria. He tried to start a few sentences, but never got past the first syllable.

Valor stepped forward and offered a staff to Asha.

"Now you give me a staff?" Asha snapped, tossing the sword aside. "I needed a staff half an hour ago, when this fight started! All you had were swords then! For someone who's never going to meet
any people who aren't mages, you put an awful lot into swords, don't you?"

"I make what is necessary," Valor replied, apparently unoffended, and still offering the staff.
"Through your valour, your need has become known to me. Though this will not pass out of the Fade with you, it will serve you well against any other demons you encounter on your journey."

Asha took the staff, still unsure what to make of it. It was light and seemed to fit her hands as though made for them, but she didn't know what good it would do them now.

"Great," said Jowan, finally managing a full word, his voice still high and quavery. "Is that supposed to get us home, then? What is she going to do, beat the Veil into submission?" He had to laugh again at that image, but from the looks he was getting, he was the only one to find it funny.

"I make weapons to help you defeat your enemies," Valor answered proudly, if unhelpfully. "That staff will aid you against your foe."

"My enemy is the Veil!" Jowan snapped, picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. Loose thread... in the Fade? Did that happen? Clearly it did. He remembered his sleeve whole, and the thread vanished. "I just want to go home!"

"You can't," Niall told him. "You're stuck here, now, just like me."

"Niall, you're usually pretty cute, but shut up." Asha sighed as Lily reached them. "It's fine, Lily, but we might want to get moving again, soon. Mouse isn't too happy with us, right now."

"There's still a demon..." Lily gestured at Niall.

"Oh, that's no demon. Niall just got a little worked up. He just needs a cup of tea and he'll have those sweet cheeks back in no time, isn't that right?" Asha flashed Niall a toothy smile.

"Everything's shit," Niall muttered. "Why even bother?"

Asha gave Niall a measuring look, sizing him up as though preparing for battle. When she stepped forward into Niall's frozen ring, it was a deliberate movement, and she shook off the weight of despair that fell across her shoulders to pull Niall into a kiss, or as close to a kiss as she could get when his mouth was three layers of teeth that took up half his face.

"Not everything's shit," Asha told him, clearing her throat and trying not to figure out what part of him she had just put her mouth on.

Niall didn't blink for a long moment, and then he blinked all at once. She was still standing there, no matter how many times he blinked, and the ice under his feet began to thaw.

Jowan watched them, disgust overriding any thought of how much he wished Lily would still look at him like that. "I'm not watching this. Get a room, you two." It was a shitty thing to say, but it just reinforced that things were normal, which... damned if he knew, but maybe that would help. Help Niall, anyway. Wasn't it loneliness or sadness he always complained about giving him headaches?

Lily continued to look utterly horrified, as Asha talked about going back to Rivain, one arm casually draped around Niall's too-loose shoulders.

"And I'll take you with me, too," Asha promised. "I was just at a point where I'd have to pick my companion spirit, and who better than someone I've known already? You think you're up for it? Helping me save the world, one little village at a time? I mean, this ice thing's gotta go, but..." She shrugged and dusted a hand across Niall's chest.
"We'll come visit!" Jowan decided. "Right, Lily? I mean, assuming you can still stand me, after all this."

A trail of ice slithered toward Jowan, but he stopped it with the next sentence. "But, even if she won't, I will. I mean, you... you saved my life. Both of you. You're heroes, kind of. Okay, you're my heroes. That counts, right? But, if -- when -- we get out of here, I'll definitely come out and check on you. Hey, maybe I'll move to Rivain, too. I mean, at this point, it's that or Tevinter."

"Definitely Rivain, then," Asha assured him. "You don't want to end up in Tevinter. Trust me. What is it with Southerners and wanting to make a break for Tevinter?" She asked the question breezily, as though she didn't know exactly why. "Rivain has much better beaches."

"Beaches," Niall echoed, his voice losing that frosty edge. "I can't remember the last time I've seen a beach."

"Ah, and I bet it was one of those rocky Fereldan beaches," Asha tsked. "No, no. I'll take you to a proper beach and show you how to soak in the sun. Imagine it: sun on your skin, sand beneath your toes..."

For a moment, Jowan could have sworn that the air smelled like the ocean.

Niall's face -- what there was of it, anyway -- blurred at the thought, and he tipped his head up, as if turning toward the sun. "What's it like? What's it really like?"

"It doesn't smell as bad as the lake," Jowan teased, thinking of the dead fish smell of the edges of the island that held Kinloch Hold. "And the air's warm. Well, warmer than it was in the tower, anyway. I haven't been to Rivain, but I've seen some Fereldan beaches."

"The most famous beach in Thedas is on the Antivan coast, just across from Rivain," Lily finally managed to say, her face still pale with the horror of the day. "I haven't been to any beaches -- not really -- but I hear the sand is soft like fennec fur and it's always sunny, in Antiva."

"I still don't want it in my smalls!" Asha laughed. "There's no sand soft enough for that!"

Jowan cackled along with her, remembering the first time he'd come to the shore after escaping the tower. He'd run straight into the water and gotten knocked about by the waves, until one of the refugees he was with dragged him out, with his smalls full of sand and his pockets full of tiny crabs.

"I want to go with you, so I can see the ocean. I want to go on a boat." Niall's shoulders crept up to a more human height and his face seemed to be getting a bit runny as his far too many teeth reordered themselves.

"Of course," Asha said, her smile softening in relief when the shape next to her started to melt into a familiar outline. "I hope you're a morning person, because there's nothing like a Rivaini sunrise when you're out on the water. I'll even show you how to fish."

"I'd like that." It was a relief to see Niall's hesitant smile on his own lips, with only one set of teeth.
Out of Dreams

Chapter Summary

The morning after the night before. Kinnon's hung over. Val's still pissed. Fen'Din's just trying to help.

Kinnon could feel the weight of one pale, muscular leg draped over his hip as Peryn's warm body writhed in his arms, that thickly accented voice against his ear, gasping in wonder and pleading for more. And Kinnon was happy to provide, rocking his hips and nibbling at the curve of bone behind Peryn's ear. His hand slowly caressed the length of Peryn's throbbing knob, tempting and teasing. He wanted so very much, the desire settling like an ache in his bones, a tension in his thighs, and everything Peryn whispered in his ear was something he meant to give. All night, all day, however long it took. The smell of sweat, the taste of salt, and the sight of Peryn's kiss-bitten lips and dazzled eyes drove him. His perfect desire --

There was rough, drooled-upon cloth stuck to the side of Kinnon's face, and everything smelt of sour drunk-sweat. There was no leg tossed over his hip and the knob in his hand was his own. Warm light streamed in through the stained glass above the bed -- his bed. He was in his bed, alone, and Peryn... His knob throbbed and his stomach rolled. He'd gotten stupidly drunk, the night before, and kissed Peryn, before getting into a fight with Val over it. He could remember that. Mostly. And sure, he'd argue with Val over anything, but this... Val was ... almost right. Except about the idea that Kinnon could be drunk enough to bring Peryn inside. Somewhere in the back of his mind, even at the time, he still very clearly knew he was with a templar. However good it was, however much he wanted, he couldn't -- wouldn't -- have done that here.

Ser Peryn was a templar, and whatever Kinnon's knob might think of how good that hard body would feel pressed against him, Kinnon's mind rebelled at the thought of it. He thought of Anders, all those years of Anders trying to keep the rest of them safe, all those templars Anders had led off with a smile... Coffee. He needed coffee. And maybe he should go offer himself to Candles -- they'd been each other's naked mental mouthwash before, and this time, they'd have the exciting bonus of an actual bed. And no templars. And a door that locked. It seemed like exactly the sort of thing that would settle his mind about Peryn, and if that didn't, Candles punching him in the face over the templar aspect definitely would.

Val clutched the blanket to his chest, gulping at the warm air around him. This wasn't the tower at all. It was too hot. The walls were the wrong colour. He could reach the window... A window he cranked open onto the warmth of another Ander morning. The air spilled in, full of the scents from the drying racks out in the courtyard. But, it wasn't calming at all. This wasn't where he wanted to be. This wasn't just a short walk from where he'd last seen Leofric's face. And he could never go back.

Leaving hadn't even made a difference, really. Not even a year gone, and already the dreams were back. The demon had followed him -- maybe it was even one of those things Fen'Din kept around. They'd come from the tower, and no matter what Enchanter Crazypants had to say about them, he'd seen that one show its true form on the road to Kal-Sharok. Demons. He'd run to get away from the blood magic, the templars, the nightmares -- but the demons had come with them. And then Kinnon
brought back the templar.

Val slammed his palm into the wall, just to hit something, just to ground himself where he was in this shitstorm of a country. It didn't help -- it never did -- and he tore himself away from the window and from the hot air that only made him choke.

Coffee. There was only bitter Ander coffee, but it would help burn away the last of the dream. Unless one of Fen'Din's pets decided to haunt his waking hours too, Val padded through the halls, slammed the kitchen door behind him for good measure, and that felt a little better.

A pained grunt from the table told him he wasn't alone, and Val spared Kinnon a glare as he rummaged through the cabinets, moving things around with perhaps a bit more violence than necessary.

"For fuck's sake, Val." Kinnon gritted his teeth, winced as though each noise hurt him. A hangover, then. Good. "Can you keep it down?"

Val all but threw the cabinet door shut.

"Knock it off!" Kinnon snapped, one hand pressed to his head, as he was far too loud for himself.

Val slammed a coffee press onto the counter and glared at Kinnon. "Oh, so I should be merciful because you're hung over? Maybe you should try being sensible when you're drunk!"

Kinnon was almost willing to give him that point. He'd put his mouth on a templar. Intentionally. "I'm perfectly fucking sensible," he hissed, far more quietly. "It was a goodnight kiss, not a welcome to my house let's fuck in the inner magical sanctum of an unapproved tower kiss! I'm not as stupid as you look!"

"You'd be smarter, if you were!" Val roared, heating the press far too fast and swearing as it split, leaking weak coffee and grounds all over the counter.

"Says the man who just exploded a coffee press." Kinnon snorted and grabbed a roll from the previous day to dip in his own coffee.

There was pressure building at Val's temples, his vision sparking white at the edges. He gathered up what was left of the coffee press and threw it in Kinnon's direction. Kinnon swore, a small shield flickering to life on instinct as glass clattered to the table and the floor.

"Val, what the--?"

"I should have stayed!" Val snapped. "Between you and Fen'Din, I would have been better off!"

"Maybe you should have," Kinnon agreed, eyeing Val as though he were a wild animal, sitting straighter in his seat and assessing the nearest escape route. "Look, can you go slam things somewhere else? I just came in here to have some coffee and mind my own business."

Fen'Din appeared in the kitchen doorway, an empty glass with smudges of cocoa and honey on it hanging from one hand. "Did somebody drop a --" His eyes took in the scene and the spatter in a perfect circle around where Kinnon sat. "Oh. Val, it's too early in the morning for throwing coffee. And much too indoors." He set the glass on the side of the sink and made his way to the icebox, looking for some bronto shoulder. The fatty parts fried up nicely with a bit of honey and fruit.

"Well, maybe it's too early in the morning for your Maker-damned demons!" Val yanked Fen'Din's loose hair and spun the elf around, slamming him into the door of the icebox.
"I don't have any demons. We almost had a demon, but I think she's recovered. Why? Are you having troubles? Have you seen a demon?" Fen'Din managed to look concerned, which was a neat trick this early in the day. "If you'll take me to it, I'll see what I can do."

"Take you to...?" Val's laugh came out sharp and not at all amused. "Like you don't know. Or maybe you don't, and you're just that careless, dragging demons around. I'm not sure which is worse!" His hands were balled into fists at his sides as though he longed to punch something.

Slowly, Kinnon rose to his feet, abandoning the rest of his coffee to cool on the table. He sent Fen'Din a concerned look over Val's shoulder.

Fen'Din's eyes lit on Kinnon and flicked toward the door, before he focused on Val. "I can account for all twelve spirits travelling with us. If something is bothering you, it may be local, in which case I'd be more than willing to deal with it before it gets to anyone else. But, you have to tell me what's going on, Val. What kind of demon is it? Where did it show up?"

Kinnon paused, considered the two of them only to decide that Fen'Din could handle himself. This was the same elf who had put holes in his dick, after all.

And that was not something Kinnon wanted to remember while his stomach was still trying to decide if it wanted to behave or not. He shook the thought from his mind and slunk out while Val was distracted and had nothing in his hands to throw. Maybe Anders could do something for this hangover.

Val wiped a hand over his face and scowled when it came away wet. "The nightmares weren't supposed to come with me." Val said it like an accusation, still glaring at Fen'Din.

"Shit," Fen'Din sighed, extracting himself from the icebox door and grabbing what he thought was the meat he was looking for, before closing the door. "Val, you know that doesn't mean it came with us. The Fade isn't..." He sighed again. "The Fade exists, on one level, like you expect it to -- there's a place in the world and there are spirits that stay close to the Veil there. But, dreams don't happen so close to the Veil. There's a story that Tevinter once tried to map the Fade -- something, you should know, that we picked up and continued right up until Irving's death -- but the problem is that nothing stays in the same place, once you cross between the near Fade and the far Fade. The farthest fade is where arcane magic comes from and where the most inhuman spirits keep their kingdoms. In between, there's pockets of dreams, kingdoms of demons, the Harrowing -- all sorts of things that are neither here nor there and keep changing their relation to everything else." He paused. "The demon didn't have to follow you. You're still dreaming in the same place."

Val stared at him as though he didn't quite understand the words and then as though he wanted to throw something a bit more dangerous than coffee grounds. Then he seemed to crumple, not so much sitting in the nearest chair as falling into it, looking like he might be sick.

"So I left for nothing?" he said, still more an accusation than a question. "I came to this sweaty stinkhole and left... left the tower, and it doesn't fucking matter?"

"Of course it matters." Fen'Din stepped into the space Val left behind and uncovered one of the ports on the stove, dropping a pan onto it, so he could make some breakfast. "You've left behind the templars and centuries of oppression that would insist you stop trying to find a way to solve this problem and commit yourself to Tranquility instead. You've shown up at the door of one of the best healers in Thedas. Probably the best, since Wynne died. And you're in the company of at least two people with an intimate understanding of spirits and twelve spirits who would like to help you." He looked over his shoulder as he dropped a fatty strip of meat into the pan. "You should have said something sooner. We can find a way to make the demon leave you alone. What's it after, anyway?
Giving back your family estate?"

Val scoffed, rubbing a hand over the scarred side of his face. "No," he said, because he had barely thought about his family or their estate, because that seemed like another life, no matter how proudly he proclaimed himself de Serault. But as for what it was after? "I... don't know."

Val didn't want to think about it, didn't want to prod at his dream for clues, not when he could still see Leofric when he closed his eyes. His stomach turned to lead at the smell of food.

"You've been dreaming it since before you left the tower and you don't know? That thing must be subtle. I'm surprised you noticed it's a demon. Can you tell what kind it is? It would really help to know what we're up against. I don't want to go in expecting pride and walk into despair or rage."

Fen'Din hopped up on a counter, knee first, to rifle the upper cupboards. "It's one demon, Val. You're surrounded by harrowed mages, and we made it through darkspawn. All we have to do is figure out what it is and what it wants, and then we can make it stop."

His concerns were more for their settlement than for Val, specifically. While Val had obviously been fending off this demon for a long time, all it took was one slip, and they'd have an abomination and templars breathing down their necks. Which was a weird turn of phrase, now that he thought of it. Was that something people actually noticed?

One demon. Right. Something Val should have been able to handle, but then, how many demons had it taken to take down Leofric. Val shuddered and turned to look out the window, just so he would have a different image in his mind. The demon had disguised its shape the whole time, but...

"Lust." The word came out thick, as though he were scraping it off the back of his throat. "And what could you possibly do, anyway?"

"... Huh." Fen'Din poured a golden syrup into the pan and then put the bottle back. "Anything to do with the fact that you haven't gotten laid in nine and a half years? The dearth of rumour speaks volumes."

Val stared at Fen'Din's back, unsure at first if he had heard that correctly. Then he lamented the fact that there were no glasses within arm's reach to throw against that back. "Fuck you," he grated out instead and settled for slamming the door on his way out.
Feeling Safe

Chapter Summary

Kinnon gets advice from Anders. Val inherits a formerly-dead cat.

Kinnon had one hand on his head and the other on the potion Anders had pressed into his hand, after just a few words traded in the entryway. He leaned against the wall before tipping his head back enough to swallow the potion.

"So, don't you have a stock of these back at the abbey?" Anders asked, concern clear on his features. "Even with forty of you, I'd hate to think of how drunk you'd have to be to have gone through all of them."

"Left without one." Kinnon slid down the wall and sat beside the door. "They're there. I'm not. I got in a fight with Val over coffee. Second one since I got home last night."

Anders snorted. "What's his problem, this time?"

"No, it's definitely my problem. I kissed a templar. He was just watching." Kinnon gazed mournfully up at Anders.

"A templar--?" Panic flashed across Anders's face and a hint of blue lit the corners of his eyes.

"It's just Peryn. I mean, I meant to do it. It was my idea. It was just a really bad idea." Kinnon laughed and rubbed his face as the potion started to kick in.

"Oh, I don't know. I've had worse ideas." Anders wrestled Justice back down, forcing a smile.

Kinnon wasn't about to argue the finer points of Anders's bad decisions. "Anyway, Val got huffy about the templar bit. He was convinced I was going to invite Peryn in for a horizontal shimmy but even drunk me isn't that stupid. Keep him around that many mages? Please." The kissing was stupid enough, really. The whole going out with a templar thing was stupid enough.

Maker, he was actually agreeing with Val.

"So you took off while Val was still frothing?" Anders asked, keeping an eye on the lines of tension on Kinnon's face and using them to gauge the potion's work.

"Fen'Din seemed to have the situation under control."

Anders blinked a few times, his expression shifting toward mild horror as he realised Kinnon wasn't joking. "Andraste's knickerweasels. You're serious. I'll be surprised if genuine Orlesian pastry and wine from Montfort can get Val out of his room at any point in the next week."

"Serves him right," Kinnon grumbled. "He threw coffee at me! Coffee! Still hot! In the press!"

Anders couldn't quite hold back a snicker. "He didn't hit you, did he?"

"Not the point." Kinnon shook his head without instantly regretting the motion. "Definitely not what
I'm doing here. I don't know what I'm doing. I mean, it's stupid. It's really pretty unforgivable. But... Peryn... He's... I'm definitely thinking about that horizontal shimmy. Parts of me are really pretty enthusiastic about the idea." He gestured at his lap. "But, the thought of it makes me sick. I mean, he's a templar! And I'm not that into blonds. And I'm much more interested in slinky women than burly men. Or any men, really, the six times in the closet with half that shielding class aside. It was a good time, but I don't know if I meant to repeat it. And I definitely didn't mean to repeat it with a templar. Even if he does turn my knob."

"Well, some blond men are hard to resist no matter what you do," Anders teased, making a point of running his fingers through his hair.

"Ha ha," Kinnon said flatly with a look to match.

Anders shrugged and sighed, turning more serious. He slid down the wall to sit next to Kinnon. "I don't know what you want me to tell you, Kinnon. Peryn's a good man. You could do worse. In fact, I'm pretty sure you have done worse."

"Repeatedly," Kinnon agreed. "But... templar."

"Yes," Anders said, just as ruefully. "Templar. And your spicy shimmy didn't scare him away?"

"If anything, it had the opposite effect," Kinnon sighed. "I think he thinks it's some sort of Fereldan mating ritual." Not that Kinnon's commentary had helped disabuse him of that notion.

"Am I going to have to correct that notion?" Anders asked, squinting at Kinnon and crossing his arms over his chest. "It's a perfectly Ander thing to do."

"You were in Ferelden at the time," Kinnon reminded him. "It's cross-cultural, like Common. Which Peryn thinks is a stupid language."

"It is a stupid language!" Anders threw his hands up. "You'd think a language meant for people to talk to each other when they don't speak each other's languages would have consistent and reasonable rules! But, no! And then it's got Tevene mashed in to fill the cracks!" He huffed and nudged Kinnon. "Horizontal shimmy, huh?"

"I don't know. Probably not. That's just asking for trouble, isn't it? He's a templar. I'm-- you know what I am. It's wrong. It's definitely illegal." Kinnon groaned and stared at the ceiling.

"I can think of at least three dozen other things you've done that are illegal, so that's not really an argument against it. Justice thinks you shouldn't do it, because he's got a stick up his ass about templars. I mean, I've got a stick up my ass about templars, but..." Anders shrugged. "If you're going to bone a templar, better it be your own idea, and really, Peryn's a good choice. Cullen wouldn't be a bad choice, either, except he's really a one-man man, and he's got one. Come on, it could be worse. Your knob could be throbbing for Ser Karsten or something."

"Ugh," Kinnon said with a face to match the sound. "Thank you. That image has put me off any thoughts of a horizontal shimmy for the rest of the day." He couldn't say the same for tomorrow. Or for the next time he got drunk.

Anders patted his shoulder consolingly. "Just don't do any horizontal shimmying with templars in the 'abbey', all right?"

"Of course not," Kinnon muttered, rolling the empty potion bottle around in his hands. "I wouldn't want Val within whining distance, anyway."
"Or coffee-throwing distance?"

"Definitely not." Kinnon offered Anders a wan smile.

Anders scratched at his beard, hoping the words he found were helpful ones. "If you're this unsure about it, then maybe hold off on the shimmying for a bit? Take it slow? There's time for future shimmying, should you choose to shimmy."

He suspected he was saying the word 'shimmy' too much.

"I'll try to restrain myself to vertical shimmying," Kinnon drawled, glancing around the room. "Where's your fluffier half? I didn't get you out of bed, did I?"

"Justice got me out of bed at an hour I'm pretty sure you were still stumbling home from the tavern." Anders yawned. "And Mack's probably around here, somewhere. Reading books to the camel or something. I'm waiting for him to start debating philosophy with the poor beast."

"Does he really? Does the camel appreciate it?" Kinnon glanced over, trying to figure out if Anders was just fucking with him.

"Of course! He'll put something on to cook and then go read to the camel. The cats sometimes go to listen, too. Have you ever seen a camel covered in cats? It's the kind of thing I never even imagined, even a decade ago. It's like some weird Antivan children's story or something." Anders shook his head and grinned. "But, you know, I'm mostly happy. I know it's not over. I know I'm going to have to go down to Hossberg, one day, and sell Cullen's ideas to them, but for now? Now I can just have a date farm and some gorgeous Fereldan who reads books to my camel. It'll take a while to really sink in, but you're free, Kinnon. You can have a nice, quiet life without the tin buckets up your ass all the time. ... Or, you know, only the tin buckets you want there." He cackled.

Kinnon shoved Anders, knocking him sideways. "Oh. Ew. That. You had to go there, didn't you?"

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Val's eyes were getting gritty as he stared at the wall, afraid to sleep. Sleep brought the Fade, dreams, and that blighted demon with a sick sense of humour. He considered getting up, finding something to do, but his body was perfectly content to stay where it was, curled up in a soft bed. It seemed he would just lay here in limbo then, until the choice was taken from him.

The door creaked, just softly enough for Val to think he'd imagined it, but the weight settling by his foot was harder to ignore. Val peeled his eyes from the wall to squint at the foot of his bed, where he found one of Fen'Din's pets happily curled. How a pile of bones managed to purr, Val would never know, but purr it did.

"Hey! Get off!" Val hissed at the... cat? Former cat? He tried to nudge the thing off his bed with his foot. The last thing he needed right now was a dead animal stinking up his sheets.

The cat hopped up and danced around his feet for a moment, before making its way up the bed, still purring. It rubbed its bony cheek against his thigh and curled up beside his hip, rubbing its cheek on his belly.

"No?" Val flapped the blanket, trying to shoo the cat. "That is not -- What are you doing? You stink! I don't even like cats!"

But, the cat purred louder and swatted at the billowing bit of blanket next to it, trying to pin it down.
Val folded the blanket over the cat-thing and tried to get up, but his feet were still caught in the bottom of the bedclothes, and he toppled before his feet ever touched the ground, dragging the blanket and the cat down onto his back. "Get off me," he muttered against his arm, suddenly even more tired after the sudden collision with the floor.

The cat made an odd chirruping noise that might have been a meow in its former life. Rather than obeying, it continued to purr and started to knead its claws into the blanket, just between his shoulder-blades. It was like getting an odd and slightly pointy massage.

"Go bother Fen'Din," Val suggested, turning over as best he could in the tangle of sheets. He sounded more tired than threatening, and the cat continued to ignore his wishes.

Val decided to focus on one hopeless cause at a time and worked on disentangling himself from the cocoon of sheets. The cat, of course, decided this wasn't a difficult enough job on its own, and Val found it sitting on whatever fold of fabric he was trying to move.

"See, this is why I don't like cats," he told the thing.

It purred and rubbed its cheek against the back of his head, the sound vibrating through his skull.

It was the closest anything had been to him in years, when he wasn't drunk out of his mind or hurt, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. The thing smelled funny and it was annoying and in his way. But, at the same time, the noise was kind of soothing. Working one hand free, he reached up and grabbed his pillow, just to keep his face off the floor. The fluffy feathers muffled the sound of the cat still curled up between his shoulders and purring against the back of his head, and he wondered if he could fall asleep like this. And then he wondered if he should. There was still a demon waiting for him somewhere in the Fade. A demon he couldn't run away from, if Fen'Din was right.

The cat shifted and stuffed a paw into his hair, kneading at the curls, claws still almost as sharp as when it had been alive. And even that was soothing, too, reminding him of when his mother used to run her hand through his curls, even if her nails hadn't... scraped against his scalp in quite the same way.

Val shifted, just enough so that the tug on his hair didn't pinch and decided that he was content to stay here the rest of the night. He could just as easily stare at the wall from the floor, and the cat's purrs rumbled through his bones in a way that made him feel safe, as ridiculous as that thought was. What would a pile of bones do against a demon in his nightmares?

"Good kitty," Val mumbled into his pillow, and the cat responded with another happy chirrup, still purring and massaging his hair long after he had fallen asleep.
Kinnon decides he needs to have a long talk with Peryn, who is pretty laid back about the whole thing.

The tavern was dimly lit, as usual, which was a refreshing change from the unbearable sun pounding down on everything outside. But, apparently, this was the time when the few wildflowers that would grow in the dry, red earth started to sprout. This close to the river, Anders had said, there would be flowers and groundcover all over the place, in another month. Kinnon almost wished it was that month, so he could at least offer flowers before the things he was about to say to Peryn.

He picked up a drink at the bar -- just the usual watery beer, as this was hardly an occasion to get drunk again -- and headed over to Peryn's table, which was spread with an assortment of little plates of finger-food.

"We, uh..." Kinnon cleared his throat and didn't sit down. "I'm really sorry about the other week. That was ... I didn't mean to... Wow, I'm just really sorry about that whole thing."

Peryn smiled up at him, polite but confused. "Sorry? For the whole night?"

Kinnon tried not to trip over his tongue. "That's... well. Not the whole night. There were parts that were, well, uh." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and, dammit, Peryn was still smiling when he gestured for Kinnon to join him at the table. Kinnon slumped into the chair all at once, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. "I was very drunk."

"I remember," Peryn replied, watching the way Kinnon's fingers tapped along the side of his tankard. "Do you... regret the shimmy?"

"No. Well, yes. I always regret the shimmy." Kinnon grimaced through a laugh.

"You were very drunk. Maybe you are remembering wrong. I once thought I had done a dwarven dance through the mess hall while using my chestplate for a drum. I was a recruit, and it was the first time I had strong drink. Instead I had passed out in my seat and dreamed it." Peryn laughed and patted Kinnon's back. "What are you afraid you have done?"

Kinnon looked up from his tankard and snorted. "You really thought you'd been dancing? You must have been even drunker than I was. No, I'm sure. I got an earful from someone else as soon as I got inside. I mean, I really... I shouldn't have kissed you."

"This is not the first time I have heard that." Peryn chuckled and nudged a plate of deep-fried meats toward Kinnon. "I am very glad you are here to say this to me, and you did not send Elder Keili to do it. Or that she did not come to do it because you were in trouble. I kissed a girl from Laysh, once, and the next time I came to the town, her father was waiting for me." He shook his head and chuckled again. "You are worried for nothing. I will not have my way with you because you are drunk. If you tell me to, I will stop you from having your way with me, when you are drunk. You are a religious man. I know the Chantry looks badly on this sort of thing. I am a Templar. I know the rules."
"I... yes," Kinnon said, poking at the food on the plate without actually eating it yet. "That is why I shouldn't have kissed you. I am a Chantry brother." He cleared his throat, took a drink to wash down the words that were stuck there.

"A kiss is harmless," Peryn assured him. "At least, most of the time. Your Val did not throw anything at us."

Kinnon stoppered a shrill laugh with a bite of deep-fried meat. He could only taste the batter. "Well, he did throw some coffee at me the following morning, but that might just be because he's a shithead."

Peryn chuckled. "Val is... complicated, yes?"

"That's one word for him."

"You have others that are less kind?" Peryn took a drink and smiled.

Kinnon had expected more ... anything -- blame, anger, regret -- but Peryn had moved the conversation on as if this revelation were the sort of thing that happened every day. "I could put together a scroll from here to the abbey of words I'd use for Val. You... don't seem upset."

"About Val? It is you he was throwing the coffee at." Peryn teased, taking a dripping, green roll of something and stuffing it in his mouth, to stop it leaking on the table.

"About me. This really isn't what I'm like. I don't want to make offers I'm not going to keep." Kinnon licked the grease and crumbs off his fingers and reached for his tankard.

"But, you aren't." Peryn smiled again, holding up a hand while he finished swallowing what was in his mouth. "You have always been very ... you tell me what I should expect, and then when you behave drunk, I know it is not what you mean. It was still a very nice kiss. I was surprised."

Kinnon pressed his forehead against the back of his hand, staring down into his drink as he chuckled. "I was pretty surprised the next morning, too."

"You are not from the Anderfels, so you ... I think maybe you do not know what it is to be a Templar, here." Peryn leaned back in his chair. "First, you must know the villages -- a household does not survive long with only one person in it. A household needs a family, and where the family isn't enough, there are always the poor from the cities who will come and work, but they must be paid. A Templar cannot be a part of a household. We must go where the mages are. I cannot take a wife and make a farm, because I would be taking a wife from her household and leaving her to do for herself. It is not a right thing to do. There is not enough money to make up for this. So, Templars do not marry. There are rules." He shrugged and dipped a piece of bread in one of the yoghurt sauces. "I had something nice with a girl for many months, until one day I came back and she said we could not go on, because she would be wed to another man in the village. I knew him. I liked him. I could not be there, when they went to the Chantry, so I sent a gift. I stay with them, when I am in their village, because they are my friends."

Kinnon sat back to absorb that. He knew that Templars rarely married but hadn't given it much thought, not when mages didn't marry at all. But, past Peryn's smile, it sounded terribly lonely, and Kinnon wondered why anyone would become a Templar on purpose. "And... I don't have a farm of my own to worry about."

Peryn shrugged. "You are handsome. I like your company. If you kiss me, I will enjoy it. If there are no more kisses, I will miss it but still enjoy your company. Do not worry."
Kinnon sipped at his beer just to give him time to think. "You make that sound so much simpler than it is."

"It is simple, right now," Peryn assured him. "If it gets... unsimple, we can worry then."

Kinnon hoped his laugh didn't come out desperate. 'Unsimple' didn't begin to cover it.
And then, there was Isabela

The whole place was made of mud. Mud roads, mud buildings, mud fences... How could any people so famed for their art live with so much... mud? But, she made her way up the tunnel that stretched from the gate of this complex to the door, the light streaming through windows stained with pictures of the story of Hector. That was weird. Was this even the right house? How were you supposed to tell, anyway? Everything was mud!

She banged on the door, loudly, one hand on her knife, just in case, but the bearded giant who swung the door open looked friendly enough.

"Andraste's tits, Izzy?" Those suddenly-round eyes were definitely the right colour.

"... Noooo, is that you?" Isabela let go of the knife and patted at the enormous Ander before her. "Anders?"

"Jannik, to the people in town. They think I'm ... someone else." Anders smiled and scooped her up in a hug. "Mack! We've got company!"

"Does that mean I have to put on something other than this sheet?" Cormac called back, from the kitchen.

"It's Isabela!" Anders put her down and closed the door.

Cormac burst into the room, tripping over a cat, a bowl in one hand and dough all over the fingers of the other. "Ow, shit, hi! ... Knock it off Meowedith!"

Meowedith sassed him back with a meow and a flick of her tail, and Izzy bit her lip to keep from grinning. "You know, Anders, I always knew you were a fur magnet, what with the cats and the bear, but the beard might be a bit much." She gave it a teasing tug on her way over to Cormac. "Speaking of bears, put that down and give me a hug, dammit!"

"That's... ah..." Cormac froze the dough on his hand and made a fist, shaking it off into the bowl, before he grabbed Isabela around the waist and dipped her into a kiss. "How in the blight are you?"

"Much better, now! You can keep doing that, you know..." Isabela raised her eyebrows expectantly.

Cormac laughed and stood back up. "Later, when I'm not cooking. It's time for the evening bread. What are you doing here? ... Did something happen to the crew?"

"What, I can't just come visit some old friends?" Isabela glanced toward the gated bookshelves, sizing up the ornaments lined up on the shelves. "Your mages are fine. They're having a nice time in Tallo. I mean, we had to sink a dreadnought to get here, but... nothing serious. Not to us, anyway." She laughed.

"A dreadnought?" Anders asked, eyebrows raised. "Still doing your part to piss off qunari, I see."
"Excuse me," Isabela huffed, prodding Anders with a finger, "but they were attacking Carastes. We were doing a public service!"

"Mhm, I'm sure it was entirely selfless of you."

"What can I say? I'm a giving person." Her eyes twinkled, and then she snapped her fingers as though just remembering something. "Speaking of all my good deeds..." She reached into the bag at her hip, pulling out a few envelopes, all of which had already been opened. "I've brought you your mail."

"Our...?" Anders eyed the envelopes with a blank look. "And how did you end up with our mail? Or is this straight from Kirkwall?"

"Oh, you know me. I've got a hand in everything." Isabela winked and gave Cormac an appraising look.

He cleared his throat. "After supper. Maybe. I might have to run down to the abbey, though."

Anders plucked the letters out of Isabela's hand and started sorting through them.

"Abbey? Does this have anything to do with those Hector windows out front?" Isabela pressed a hand to Cormac's forehead. "Are you sure you're all right? All this heat hasn't scrambled your brains? I don't remember you being all that Andrastian."

Cormac pointed to Anders, and then went back to kneading the dough in the bowl, as he talked. "He's the Andrastian in the house. And the abbey has nothing to do with Hector. Well, mostly. Except the part where Hector built it. But, there was definitely Hector before there was an abbey."

Anders cringed through a laugh. "It's a long story. Blame my glowier half." He recognised Artie's handwriting on one envelope and placed it on the bench next to Cormac. The rest were for him or for his brother, and Anders tucked those aside to read through later. "As for the abbey, that's... another long story. And I know your attention span for long stories."

"Give me the summary, then!" Isabela made herself at home on one of the bean chairs. "Unless there are steamy bits, in which case give me all the details!"

Anders exchanged a dry look with Cormac. "Well, in short? Half the mages from Kinloch Hold escaped and made their way up here, pretending to be pilgrims. The abbey is... not really an abbey."

"Kinloch Hold? As in 'everybody was kissing everybody'? That place?" Isabela grinned broadly. "Well then there's definitely steamy bits, and if you're not going to tell me, I'll have to go make some of my own."

"Is that the only thing you remember after everything I said about it?" Anders looked completely offended.

"Of course not. It's just the only part worth repeating." Isabela looked over at Cormac, as he opened the letter from Artie, fingers still sticky with the dough he set next to the fire to rise. "You and your brother, hmm? The two of you have been holding out on me!"

"And that is why no one will ever know it's me he's writing to." Cormac smiled blandly, as he took in the usual reports of Fenris stabbing slavers and Orana trying to teach Artemis to cook. "Why would he ever write steamy letters to his own dear brother? Scandalous."

"Ooh, that's slick. But, I still like my version better. I'll be thinking of that before I go to bed, for sure.
Maybe even with some of those kissing mages." Isabela rocked sideways in her sack-seat, tipping her head toward Anders. "What do you think? Am I kissable enough for your experts?"

Anders gave her an appraising look. "That depends on where they're kissing you."

Isabela swatted his leg, the very image of wounded pride. "I'm going to take that as a 'yes', whether it was meant as one or not." She spotted the cat -- Meowedith? Honestly, Anders -- sniffing at her boot, and Isabela waggled her toes to make her jump.

"Please don't go corrupting the other mages," Anders sighed. "I have to heal enough questionable injuries over there, and I would rather not have to heal something else." As an afterthought, Anders tossed some general healing her way.

"Oh, Maker's balls, I'm clean!"

"Of course you are. I just healed you."

"Artie's not coming to visit, this summer," Cormac cut in, with no mind to the fact there was any other conversation in the room. He sunk down onto the bench, beside the bowl of dough, looking like he'd been hit with a stun spell.

"What?" Anders leaned over and grabbed the letter. "What could he possibly--"

"He's going to Ferelden," Isabela answered, picking a bit of dough off Cormac's hand and eating it. "Some big construction thing in a place with a weird name."

"Gwaren," Cormac filled in, still dazed. "He's going to Gwaren to do some work for Delilah. Your man ruined that tower, I guess, and now they need a new one."

"Delilah?" Isabela looked up, a bit surprised. "Isn't that what's his name's sister? The guy, with the face, works for Solona?"

"Nathaniel," Anders supplied automatically, sitting down next to Cormac, reading the letter too quickly to absorb it, at first, before trying again. "She must have been impressed with the rebuilding in Kirkwall," he said, like that would help, like that would make his absence okay.

Anders squeezed Cormac's doughy hand.

"I'm sure he'll come see you when it's finished," Isabela said. "Assuming it's ever finished. This is Artie. In the meantime, he will keep writing you saucy messages that I would be happy to read for you."

"I have to go to Ferelden." Cormac's fingers tightened around Anders's hand, his grip turning the tips of Anders's fingers white. "I wanted to go on holiday, one of these years, but... You... you won't mind if I send things home, will you? I mean, if... anything's left. It's not far, if I'm already in Ferelden. It's really not far, from Gwaren... assuming you can actually get out of Gwaren overland, which I've heard is questionable."

"Ooh, see if that scarf I gave Anton is still there!" Isabela's eyes lit up. "Assuming he didn't turn around and lose it in a game of Wicked Grace."

"Is that where he got that?" Cormac's face tightened, like he might smile, but it never happened, his eyes still wide, his jaw still trembling. "You don't want to know what he was doing with it. Or if you do, you should ask him, not me."
"Well, now I'm definitely intrigued," Isabela said, sitting up. "Oh! Please tell me you and Anton are exchanging steamy letters too."

Isabela waggled her eyebrows, and Anders made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh.

"Just... is that safe, Cormac?" Anders had to ask. "No. No, of course it isn't. And we did manage to survive Bethany's wedding."

"Safe?" Cormac looked confused at the idea, and then the smile finally broke across his face. "Well, maybe you'd better come with me, Warden, and protect me from horrors only found at my brothers' weddings, and possibly in towns left to the Blight." He paused and glanced at Isabela. "We're living in blighted blightville, if you hadn't noticed, in the middle of the blightlands of the Anderblights."

"Should I be concerned about rampaging darkspawn in the streets? It doesn't secretly turn into Fifth-Blight Denerim, around here, when the sun goes down, does it?" Isabela asked, remembering the thickness of the wall, outside.

Anders tipped his head as though considering. "Not quite as bad as that. But do watch out for the sheep."
Isabela negotiates a trade deal with the abbey, and a little something extra for herself.

A day earlier, and Isabela would have said that knocking on an abbey door was the last thing she was going to do. Well, maybe not the last thing, but it was up there on the list of 'unlikely things'. With a Hawke involved, however, perhaps she should have known better.

"Hello?" The woman who opened the door was dark-haired and pretty, and Isabela met her polite, if suspicious, look with a beaming smile of her own.

"And hello to you," Isabela purred, leaning against the door frame as though she owned it.

Behind her, Anders cleared his throat. "Good morning, Keili. This is Isabela. She's an old friend of ours who's come to visit."

Some of the nervous edge bled from Keili's expression, though she still took a step away from Isabela. "I see. Welcome to the abbey, Isabela."

"It's, ah..." Isabela looked around, taking in the mud-coated walls and Andrastian décor. "It's a nice place. You build it yourself?"

"Yes, we did." Keili smiled and nodded, still looking uncertain. "So much can be accomplished with faith and hard work."

"And forty-two mages," Anders filled in. "Relax, Keili. She knows me."

"I know him like Andraste knew Maferath and in at least seventy-four ways explicitly forbidden by the Chantry." Isabela laughed and squinted at the details of the mural in the entryway. "Especially that electricity trick."

"Lalala, more than I needed to know!" Kinnon passed through, holding a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches. He paused and looked right at Anders. "If she wasn't a friend of yours, I'd say we should introduce her to Val."

"She's got her own stormbringers, Kinnon." Anders laughed and eased around Isabela to steal a sandwich. "She's the pirate queen of the Waking Sea, and she sails around with a ship full of stormbringers, sinking qunari ships. We met in a brothel in Denerim."

"And I paid an awful lot for the privilege." Isabela grinned wolfishly. "Worth every copper piece."

"Copper?" Kinnon asked while Anders cleared his throat and tried to change the subject. "Hang on, something naughty was going on between you two, money changed hands, and it was because you paid him?"

"And yet still you underestimate the spice of my shimmy," Anders replied.

"Oh, it wasn't the shimmy I was paying for, Sparklefingers." Isabela waggled her fingers at him and
blew him a kiss. "But like I said: worth every copper piece."

"So what brings you to our abbey?" Keili asked on the end of a pained sigh. "Or did you just come to put images in my head that I really did not need?"

"What makes you think I didn't come here to pray?" Isabela asked, sending Anders a fake scowl when he guffawed.

"Because the Chantry's just as close, in the other direction, and a much more appropriate and likely place for that," Keili replied, chin tipping up proudly.

"She's got a point," Kinnon admitted, balancing his plate on top of his tea to free up a hand so he could actually eat a sandwich, before Anders relieved him of all of them. "And we're not exactly a hot spot for holidays."

"I heard you might need some things the Chantry might be averse to supplying you with. Depending on what you need, I might be able to arrange a mutually profitable situation for us both."

Keili nodded, uncertain whether Isabela's intentions could be trusted. "Why don't you join us for lunch, and then we'll pull the books and see what you can do for us?"

"I'm always up for a free lunch with beautiful people." Isabela cast a glance at Kinnon and then at Keili, sizing them both up.

"Do not touch Sister Keili," Anders sighed, turning Isabela to face Kinnon. "You'd have better luck groping Artie, which I still don't advise."

Anders had placed Isabela as far away from Keili as he could, but, as he passed around the platter of sandwiches, he wondered if he had made a miscalculation. Instead, she was sitting next to Val, and Anders was so used to associating Val with 'asshole' that he had forgotten that the man was actually fairly attractive, at first.

"So," said Petra, accepting the platter and setting it down at the end of the table, "I understand you are interested in a business arrangement?" She looked Isabela up and down, still unsure what to make of her.

"Very interested," Isabela said, slipping a wink in Val's direction. Across from them, Kinnon's face twisted.

"Unlike wherever you met Anders, this is not a brothel," Keili remarked, sharply, passing a pitcher of barley milk to Candles.

"She's right," Candles agreed, solemnly, as she poured herself a drink. "We're much less expensive than Anders. Especially Val."

"Yes, because I was paying him, not the other way around," Val muttered, picking the squishy green whatever that vegetable was out of his sandwich.

"Well, if you were selling, I'd pay for a piece." Isabela nudged Val with her elbow and then returned her attention to the women across the table from her. "But, that's not why I'm here. That's just an added bonus. I've got a clear route from Tallo to Val Chevin, and I'm not afraid to take on Rivaini goods."

"Wine." Val looked up, suddenly, almost desperately. "If you can bring me a case of wine from
"Compensated', hm?" Isabela asked, eyes sparkling in amusement. "I am sure we could come to an arrangement."

Keili threw Petra an exasperated look. "Maybe I'm wrong," she huffed. "Maybe this is a brothel." Sullenly, she took a large bite of her sandwich.

"No," Isabela laughed, "but rebranding yourselves as one might make you more popular with the locals."

"Oh, I think some of us are popular enough," Candles said, poking an elbow into Kinnon's side. "With the 'locals', that is."

Kinnon was relieved when Gerda broke the subject back around. "Maybe you could bring us some books?" she asked in a small voice. "We had to leave so much behind when we left the tower..."

"Depends on the book," Isabela said with a smile that was part grimace. "The last time I smuggled a book... well. Kirkwall ended up on fire."

"That was an ancient holy book," Anders pointed out. "And you stole it from the qunari."

"I stole it from the Orlesians!" Isabela argued. "I just didn't give it to the qunari."

"Practical books," Fen'Din suggested, reaching over to relieve Val of his avocado slices. "We need books about Tevinter infrastructure: sewage and clean water and irrigation. We seem to have done all right, so far, but if this is going to become a stable and independent community, we need to make sure we can support ourselves, even if the Chantry withdraws their support."

Kinnon nodded and pointed at Fen'Din, his mouth too full for comment.

"And pick them up some weird stuff, too. Your mages should know what qualifies as weird. Forbidden, but not blood magic." Anders added, opening his sandwich to add in a thick, chunky, green sauce. "There's all kinds of things we weren't allowed to learn that don't have anything to do with demons, just because they were afraid we'd use it to escape. I mean, I learnt some of it, as a Warden, but Ferelden's pretty deprived as far as ancient Warden knowledge goes."

Isabela hummed around her sandwich and waited to finish chewing before speaking. "I think I can arrange some of that," she said before stuffing the rest of her sandwich into her mouth and licking her fingers. "I'll even throw in some lighter reading for some variety. Have any of you read the *Hard in Hightown* series?"

As the sun set beyond the walls of the abbey, Isabela sat on the edge of the garden with a beer and watched the sky change colour. Candles lingered by her side, leaning on a pillar of the cloister that ringed the garden.

"You should really join me and Cormac, while I'm here. That man's up for anything that doesn't remind him of an animal." Isabela cut a sly look at Candles.

"Mack, and not Anders?" Candles shook her head. "Not that I'm all *that* interested in the shimmy-master, but cutting him out doesn't seem wise. How about you, me, and Kinnon, instead? He's always up for a good time. Just can't let his pet templar find out."
"Pet templar?" Isabela looked curious. "I wouldn't think you'd want anything to do with the templars."

"Peryn brings us our rations out of the Chantry tithes, and he's got his eye on Kinnon's gorgeous Fereldan thighs. He's a sweetheart, but he doesn't know, you know? He thinks we're a bunch of crazy southerners who came up here to convert the elves." Candles shook her head. "You know, they say there's no halla in the Anderfels, and the Dalish all ride dracolisks."

"Do they?" Isabela took another swig of beer. "I want to see a dracolisk. That would be great. And a blightram, but I'm pretty sure Cormac was pulling my leg about those."

"There's definitely wild sheep in the hills. They're huge, even without the blight -- I saw a ram the other week that must've weighed three sack." Candles grinned at Isabela. "You any good with those knives? We could go sheep hunting. Maybe if we hang around in the hills a while, we'll see a blightram."

"Am I any good? I survived six years in Kirkwall after ten on the Eastern Seas. I've gone one on one with qunari warriors. I can take a sheep." Isabela held up her beer and clanked it against Candles's glass. "Now, you've got to tell me all about that Dalish that's with you... He's good looking."

"He's not Dalish; he's Orlesian. And he's also not interested." Candles shook her head and laughed. "Not another one who's only interested in hard-bodied men!" Isabela huffed and drank more. "Everywhere I go, these days..."

"He's not interested in men, either. He's... not right. Not that, just in general. He was one of our senior enchanters, and he's good at what he does, but he's... dead. If you listen to him, anyway. And listening to him is usually a good idea, if it's got anything to do with spirits or demons. But, he's really not all there. I think the templars hit him in the head too hard when they brought him in, or something."

"... Dead? That's not like any necromancy I've seen, and I've had many wicked ways with some Nevarran-trained cuties." Isabel glanced over her shoulder at the building behind them.

"He's his own necromancer. I don't think he's actually dead. Anders doesn't seem to think so, either. They go way back, I guess." Candles finished her beer, trying not to mention Karl.

"Alright, so what about the other Orlesian? The one who wants more wine?" Isabela asked, grinning wickedly.

Candles whistled, eyes wide. "Well, if you ask Anders, he'd tell you not to. And I haven't tried. Val's... kind of an asshole, honestly. I guess he's pretty in that Orlesian way, but I've got a taste for Fereldans, myself. But, I heard everyone got sick of his shit, after..." She trailed off. "We had some problems at the tower around the Blight. He's been lurking in the restricted books room with his robes all the way on, ever since."

"I'm sure he just needs a good time. I wonder how good a time a case of wine from Montfort is worth, because that's more than I paid for a whole week with Anders..." Isabela laughed and tipped back the last of her beer, as the last rim of gold crept down below the top of the wall.

"Yeah, well, you should make him pay cash, from what I hear," Candles scoffed. "But, I'm free and Kinnon's easy, if you're looking for something to do."

"I'm always looking for something to do."
Blightrams and Alamarri Culture

Chapter Summary

Isabela and Candles go hunting blightrams. Cormac and Kinnon try to explain Alamarri culture to Peryn, who is considering a holiday in Ferelden.

Morning found Kinnon in the kitchen, looking exhausted, roughly-used, and frustrated. He clenched his fist and the whole beans in the bottom of the coffee press turned into a powder.

"The Pirate Queen not all you hoped?" Fen'Din asked, from the doorway, yawning.

"No, she's great. Lots of fun. Real riot, that one." Kinnon wrestled with the pump a moment to get it to fill the press with water. "I just... she's talked Candles into hunting blightrams with her. They left at the asscrack of dawn. They're going out into the Blightlands to hunt blighted sheep, and they expect to make it back without catching the Blight."

"You're worried the sheep will get her." Fen'Din nodded, sitting on the edge of a counter to peel a rubyfruit -- these were the Andraste's Heart variety, said to be the sweetest and darkest, and only grown up the river, near Nordbotten, and Fen'Din was developing a distinct fondness for them. "Candles will keep them safe. You know her aim."

"I know how many sheep are in a flock, and about how many she can hit hard enough to kill, at once." Kinnon rubbed his face with one hand, the other heating his coffee. "It's not enough."

"When did she say she would return?"

"Tonight, probably. Izzy has other things to do, in town. I think she means Mack and I don't want to know."

"Then they're not going to reach the Blightlands." Fen'Din's eyes sparkled with amusement. "They might make it over the hills, but entire flocks of blighted sheep aren't going to be that close to town. That's too close to where the local shepherds graze their flocks. The worst thing out there is feral mountain sheep."

"And you know this how?" Kinnon sipped his coffee straight from the press.

"Because I talk to the people in the market about the camels and the sheep. They think I'm Dalish and they all want to be the civilising influence. Sisterhood helps quite a lot." Fen'Din stuffed a quarter of the rubyfruit into his mouth at once and made a contented sound as he wiped a dribble of red juice from the corner of his mouth, and then an imaginary one from the other corner. "With her, people suddenly want to tell me things," he mangled out.

Peryn's arm was a familiar weight around Kinnon's shoulders, the drink a familiar weight in Kinnon's hand. Kinnon wondered when this had become his new normal, sitting with a Templar, laughing, drinking with him, and he wondered when the nerves and awkwardness had settled into companionable nerves and awkwardness.
"Is that Mack?" Peryn asked, stopping Kinnon short in his rant about blighted sheep and the idiots who chased them.

"Where?" Kinnon followed Peryn’s line of sight to the corner of the room where Mack sat alone in its shadows, the very portrait of misery. Just out of the way enough for Kinnon not to have noticed when they walked in. "Where’s Jannik?"

Judging from the way he was looking about the tavern, Peryn was wondering the same thing. "I think he is not here. Jannik is... difficult to miss."

Kinnon hummed in agreement, in some way relieved that Anders was weirdly tall even by Ander standards. He chewed his lip, shooting another glance at Mack. The man looked like he wanted to be alone, but sitting back and ordering pickles as though they hadn't seen him just felt like an asshole thing to do.

"He does not look happy," Peryn observed, watching Mack press his face against his hands again.

"Shit," Kinnon grunted, shoving his chair out. "I'm going to go see what's wrong. Maybe he just needs somebody to talk to. I hope he didn't get into a fight with Jannik..."

Kinnon crossed the room to the small table, where Mack sat with his back in the corner. For a moment, he just towered awkwardly at the nearest polite distance.

"Kinnon?" Mack's voice was phlegmy and rough, but still curious, as he looked up to see what was causing the shadow across his beer.

"None other. Jan do something stupid?" Kinnon asked, cautiously, gesturing at the damp rag sitting next to Mack's pint.

"Not Jannik, my brother." Cormac rubbed his face with the rag, trying to clear away not just the snot from not crying but the grief itself. "What're you doing here? I'd have thought you'd be crippled in bed, recovering from Isabela."

"Izzy's gone out on some idiot adventure and taken Candles with her. I'm here with Peryn." Kinnon paused. "Come have a drink with us. I'd feel bad leaving you here alone. You can tell us all about your brother, and what a heartless dick he is. Which brother, anyway? Don't you have like six?"

"Three brothers and a sister." Cormac stared at the bare table, for a bit, and then picked up his pint to follow Kinnon. "It's the brother Peryn's met."

"I have ordered pickles," Peryn announced as they sat down, eyeing Cormac's bloodshot, watery eyes.

"Mack's brother is being a heartless dick," Cormac rubbed his face with the rag, trying to clear away not just the snot from not crying but the grief itself. "What're you doing here? I'd have thought you'd be crippled in bed, recovering from Isabela."

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"I have ordered pickles," Peryn announced as they sat down, eyeing Cormac's bloodshot, watery eyes.

"Mack's brother is being a heartless dick," Kinnon announced in kind, as though discussing the weather. "The one you met, he says."

Peryn's eyebrow twitched up. "Artie? He did not seem the... dick kind."

"That brother is distinctly fond of d**cks. If there were a 'dick kind' it would be him. Or maybe he'd have boned it." Cormac waved the thought aside and took another swig of beer. "But, he's going to Ferelden, instead of coming to visit, this summer."

"You are from Ferelden. He is going home without you?" Peryn caught on right away to that little detail.
"Yeah." Cormac nodded. "That too. I just... he's my little brother, you know? Thirty-something years we were right in each other's pockets, and now I live halfway across Thedas, and he's going back across the other half, and who's there to take care of him?" He buried his face in his hands again. "I know it's stupid. We're nearly forty. He's got a husband with a big sword to watch his back. I just worry. He's my brother."

When the platter arrived, Peryn offered Cormac first choice of pickle in consolation. "You are worried, and you miss him. You have a large family, yes? It is hard to be surrounded by them and then only see them one or two times a year. The journey here is no more safe than the journey to Ferelden."

Kinnon sipped his beer, wondering if Peryn was sure of that.

"But," Peryn went on, "if you still worry, you could meet him. Divine Justinia is holding a conclave in Ferelden, and I consider going."

"Really? When?" Cormac tried to figure out how to get himself into ... or back out of an official Chantry event. "And where? My brother's going to be working in Gwaren for months."

"In the winter. I do not remember the days, just now, but if he is still there, when it is time to go, I would be pleased to travel with you, at least as far as whatever port one must go to, in order to end in Haven." Peryn patted Cormac's arm, sympathetically.

"Haven?" Cormac looked confused. He didn't know anywhere by that name, but he supposed he didn't know everywhere in Ferelden. "Never heard of it. I wonder if it's a refugee settlement. A lot of people left the south, after the Blight. I know. I'm one of them." He chuckled drily.

"There is... an important temple there, from what I hear," Peryn said, with a shrug.

Kinnon made a noise around a sip of beer and managed to dribble some of it down his front. "I think I heard a little about that, actually," he said, scowling down at the wet spot on his chest and daubing at it with a kerchief. "I mean, all sorts of rumours were passed around when S-- when the Hero of Ferelden stopped by in our, uh, town. I think it's called the Temple of Holy Ashes, or something. Supposedly where Andraste's ashes were kept."

"Andraste's ashes?" Peryn echoed with awe in his voice.

Kinnon nodded. "The story goes that the people of Haven were supposed to protect it -- the urn with her ashes and stuff -- but went crazy and formed a dragon cult instead. I dunno. I'm not sure on that last part, since I was a few drinks in."

"The Ashes of Andraste?" Cormac looked interested. "Wait, I heard a story, down around the docks, and I always thought it was crap -- one of those weird legends that gets blown way out of proportion. I heard the Arl of Redcliffe -- who was? is? a nice guy, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise -- got sick, and the Hero of Ferelden saved his life with a tea made out of Andraste's ashes. I always just assumed it was a fancy name for a plant or something, but you're telling me the Wardens really found her ashes?"

Kinnon shrugged. "What do I know? I wasn't there. But, whatever they found, I heard they found it in Haven. Brother Whats-his-nuts wrote a book about it, too. Not that I've read it, but I think Val did. I couldn't get my hands on it, once we got a copy."

"Brother Whats-his-nuts?" Peryn looked confused and amused, as he so often did around his Fereldan friends.
"Oh, come on, you know the guy, the one who wrote that book about the Dalish. He travels around to historical places and writes about the history behind the legends." Kinnon snapped his fingers a few times and looked expectantly at Cormac.


"Well, Genitivi can't write everything," Kinnon laughed. "Maybe you should write a book about your own, uh, experiences. Between your stories and Jannik's, that is a book I would read!"

Peryn nodded in agreement, more out of politeness than anything. "It is better to read about demons than to experience them. But, there will be no demons at the Conclave, so if you wish to go, I join you."

Kinnon made a disapproving sound as he pulled the platter closer to him. "Come on, Peryn. Saying 'there will be no demons' is exactly how you end up with demons."

Peryn tilted his head curiously. "I do not think that is how demons work. Ah! But talk of Ferelden reminds me... Kinnon, I have something for you."

"For me?" Kinnon looked surprised, his eyes widening as he gave Peryn a cautious look. "Why?"

"Oh, I was standing in the market in Hossberg, and I saw this, and it made me think of you." Peryn patted his pouches until he came up with a pair of small, glazed clay figures, which he put together on the table. "It is a children's toy, but it is meant to be a warrior of the southern barbarian tribes. I thought of your talk of the horse lords, but I could not find any Fereldan horse lords. Only dog lords."

Cormac looked on in horror, fist pressed against his lips as he snorted in amusement. The axe-wielding 'warrior' was mounted on a giant mabari, and both the dog and rider were smeared with a primitive-looking pattern of blue paint, obviously meant to represent the traditions of certain Avvar tribes. The rider wore what Cormac could only imagine was meant to be a Clayne-style kilt, but wore his black-enamelled hair like an ancient Alamarri chieftain of the Bannorn. "Well," he choked out around a laugh, "it's... definitely Fereldan. Don't you think, Kinnon? He's got a dog and everything."

Kinnon's face twisted as though it didn't know what expression it needed to land on, but somewhere in there, he managed a glare in Cormac's direction. "Just for that, I'm going to Hossberg and getting a Rivaini one." He finally settled on a smile for Peryn's sake. "That is, er, thank you. That's very sweet of you."

And it was, at least in theory. Kinnon slid the toy closer and wondered just how hard Candles was going to laugh when she saw it.

Peryn tilted his head, wearing that politely confused smile Kinnon was getting used to. At least Cormac was laughing. "Have I done something wrong?"

Cormac was the first to respond, while Kinnon opened and closed his mouth, trying to find the words he wanted. "Okay, so... I'm going to put this in terms of the locals. Imagine if someone made an 'Ander barbarian' toy, and it was big and had a blond beard, but dressed like a Yothandi trader, and rode a dracolisk."
"That would make no sense at all!" Peryn protested. "It is... that could be a person, but it is not an average Ander!"

"That's the point." Cormac pointed to the toy. "Now, the clothes? That's the kind of thing Kinnon's people used to wear, back before there was a Ferelden to speak of. Stop me if I'm wrong, Kinnon."

"No, that's... kind of. It's not right, but it's a kids' toy, and I'm sure 'right' and 'a kids' toy' don't go that well together. It'd come apart terribly." Kinnon lifted the rider and studied him. "Blue eyes and black hair is a really... central Alamarri thing. You see some noble families like that, but it's kind of considered generic Fereldan looks. But, it's not Clayne. I'm Clayne, and the King of Ferelden's got to be Ciriane to be that kind of blond, no matter what the legends say. Ex king. There's a queen now, and her dad looked kind of like this." He tapped the little figure's face.

"The Howes look like that, too," Cormac noted, "but without the face paint. The Chasind and the Avvar are into the paint, but it never really stuck in central or northern Ferelden. It's a southern and mountain thing. I actually lived in a Chasind village for a few months, one winter. They've got the most amazing--" Mages, he'd been going to say. "--dessert foods."

Kinnon wasn't sure how much of that Peryn caught with all the foreign names for foreign peoples, but his slow nod said he understood the gist. "I see," he said, reaching again for the figure and turning it over in his hand. He chuckled. "So it is inaccurate and perhaps... not polite. Well. Maybe instead of all southern barbarians, this one can be one southern barbarian." Peryn's eyes sparkled with amusement as he handed the toy back to Kinnon. "You should give him a name."

A laugh sputtered out of Kinnon. "A name? I'll, uh... think about it. He needs a terribly generic Ferelden name, doesn't he?"

Peryn reached for the pickles. "You should call him Bran."

Kinnon laughed harder and Cormac joined in.


"Bran the Multicultural Alamarri!" Kinnon exclaimed, between cackles, setting the toy firmly in the middle of the table. "He'll be the new symbol of the abbey!"

"Val," Cormac wheezed, blotting his eyes as he continued to laugh uproariously.

"Can go fuck himself, because I'm pretty sure no one else will." Kinnon tried to keep good enough control of his mouth to eat a pickle roll, without dribbling oil and vinegar down his chin.

Just then, the door of the tavern slammed open and two backlit figures staggered in with a dead sheep between them.

"Oh shit." Cormac choked on the end of a laugh.

"Did somebody order a party?" one of them asked.

"Because the party's on us, tonight!" the other declared, as the two stepped up into the light inside the tavern.

"Candles!" Kinnon jumped up, knocking over his chair and rushed across the room, tripping over two tables and a support pillar, before he crashed into the elf at one end of the sheep, throwing his arms around her. "Are you all right? You didn't get bit by anything, did you? Look at me. Are you bleeding? Do you have the Blight?"
"The only thing she got bit by was me," Isabela answered, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

"Yep, turns out pirate queens are more dangerous than sheep," Candles said with an exaggerated wink in Isabela's direction. "Now stop fussing! I'm fine!" She swatted aside Kinnon's hands with a sigh that managed to be both fond and exasperated.

"You are insane. Both of you." Kinnon stepped aside so they could hoist the sheep onto the counter, making the glasses rattle. That was certainly a dead sheep, one that didn't look particularly blighted, but then Kinnon wasn't sure what a blighted sheep would look like. Probably uglier.

"Your friend has impressive aim," Isabela said, nudging Candles's ribs before reaching up to wipe the sweat from her brow. "I love a woman who's good with her hands!" She grinned up at Kinnon, but the way she panted for breath was distracting, and he found himself staring a bit south of her eyes. "Now, let me talk to the keeper of this fine establishment, and then you can buy us each a drink."

Peryn turned a bemused look Cormac's way. "Do we know the... sheep-tamer?"

"She's a friend from Kirkwall. Ship's captain. Good with a knife." Cormac shook his head and laughed. "And if you're at all interested in preserving your virtue for the Maker, I'd strongly suggest investing in a codpiece with a lock. Several locks."

Peryn studied Isabela, noting the thickness of her arms and the way she stood like she expected to kick someone in the crotch. "She looks like she is accustomed to getting what she wants."

"More like she's accustomed to not getting what she doesn't want. If she wants, she'll ask. Just maybe a little more hands-on than is usual in polite company." Cormac nibbled at a slice of some sort of pickled root vegetable. He hadn't quite gotten those sorted out in his head, yet, but they were all good.

The bartender seemed to be trying to decide how to deal with the sheep suddenly on his bar. It definitely smelled cooked, but it didn't seem to have been opened in any way.

"Sheep are a little bigger than I'm used to handling," Candles apologised, "so you'll have to tell me if I didn't cook it all the way through. Pretty sure I did, though."

"With... what?" the bartender asked.

Candles realised her mistake and shot a look at Isabela.

"Runes!" Isabela grinned broadly. "It's a little something I picked up in Rivain. Good old dwarfwork."

"It's like magic, but less illegal!" Candles chuckled nervously.

Kinnon glanced at Peryn and tried to look like he wasn't holding his breath, but the Templar was talking to Cormac and didn't seem to have heard either way. Runes. He supposed that was plausible as long as they didn't need to supply them.

The bartender was still struggling with the sheep when Kinnon followed Candles and Isabela back to the table. The table was on the small side for so many people, but Kinnon would label it more cosy than uncomfortable.

"I was telling Candles," Isabela said, slipping a chair next to Cormac, "about that time in Kirkwall, with the dragon? The real dragon. Not the smaller, baby dragons, or that stone one we found with all
"What?" Kinnon and Candles asked at the same time.

Isabela waved a hand. "Ancient Tevinter altar. I'll tell you about it later. Anyway, dragon. Feasts. Candles here is convinced that I am making shit up!"

"I wonder why she would think that," Kinnon muttered, sliding his drink and Peryn's gift closer to him.

Cormac shook his head, mouth still full of pickles. "Mmh-mm." He swallowed and tried again. "The dragons were real. Including the altar to Urthemiel with hundreds of dildos. Cullen was there. He'd tell you. Actually, he probably wouldn't tell you. He's probably trying to forget any of that happened. Cullen was there for the other dragon, too. We killed it. He ate the heart. Well, part of it. Do you know how big dragon hearts are?"

Isabela pointed at Cormac and looked smugly at Candles.

"I'm sorry, did you say Cullen?" Kinnon blinked in confusion. "Killed a dragon?"

"You also know of the great Ser Cullen?" Peryn asked. "Ferelden must be a small place!"

"You've got a very small and intimate subsection of Ferelden here," Isabela offered, with a wink. "Very intimate."

Kinnon cleared his throat and stared intently into his beer. "Not that intimate. Not with Cullen. None of us were. He wasn't like that."

"Anyway, yeah, Cullen actually killed that dragon. I mean, the rest of us helped, but... they call him the Dragonslayer. Among other things... But, we couldn't just let all that meat go to waste, so we got the miners -- we found the dragon in a mine -- to cart parts of the dragon back down into Kirkwall, to our favourite tavern, and we had a big party and gave almost all the meat away. And Cullen got completely wasted because everyone was buying him drinks, and he's not much of a drinker, so my brother had to carry him home." Cormac laughed and snatched a pickle from under Isabela's fingers. "Hey, not those, they're my favourite kind."

In retribution, Isabela grabbed Cormac's wrists and snatched the pickle back with her teeth. She hummed in exaggerated pleasure as she chewed.

"I'm starting to seriously doubt that Kirkwall is an actual place," Candles said, shaking her head in amazement. "I think you two and An-- anyone else who says they've been there are just making up more and more ridiculous stories, just to see how much we believe." Candles plucked up a pickle, inspected it before popping it into her mouth. She gestured as she chewed. "So, go on. Tell us more ridiculous stories. What was this about an altar with dildos?"

"I am sorry," Peryn cut in, "but... you keep saying that word which I do not know. What is a 'dildos'?"

Kinnon made a sound like he was choking, and Candles guffawed, hitting the table with an open palm.

"Dildo," Kinnon corrected him, voice still sounding strangled. "Dildo is the singular. It's a toy. A sex toy."

Peryn just blinked at him, not quite understanding.
"It's a fake knob," Isabela filled in, leaning over to wrap an arm around Peryn's shoulders, pointing at his lap with the other hand. "I'd be happy to introduce you to my collection and show you all the best ways to use them."

Peryn shot a look at Kinnon, who glanced at Isabela, looked back at Peryn, and shrugged.

"That seems like a valuable thing to have, at sea." Peryn nodded, agreeably. "You can always trust a thing to be there, when you have time away from your duties."

"Oh, I can always trust Cormac to be there, too, as long as 'there' isn't on a ship!" Isabela laughed and blew Cormac a kiss.

"Can we please not talk about me and ships? Ever?" Cormac groaned, covering his face with one hand.

Peryn blinked at the name but didn't question it. 'Mack' had always sounded like a nickname, he supposed.

"Why, what happened to you on a ship?" Candles asked, smile disconcertingly wide. "Another dragon? A sea monster? A gaggle of mermaids try to lure you into treacherous waters?"

"Gaggle?" Kinnon repeated to himself.

"No, the poor man just gets seasick," Isabela replied. She tsked and stole some of Cormac's beer. "And I believe the proper term is 'school of mermaids'."

Kinnon squinted at her. "I'm... not sure that's right."

Isabela shrugged. "Does it matter? Would you prefer an 'orgy of mermaids'?"

Kinnon glanced at Peryn and decided not to say 'yes'.

"Oh, that's a much less exciting story," Candles huffed. She nudged Kinnon. "Weren't you supposed to buy us a round? And yet here I sit, drinkless." She followed Isabela's lead and stole Kinnon's drink, brows knitting mid-sip when she caught sight of the clay toy Kinnon had set next to it.

"Oh, what's this?" Isabela snatched up the little clay warrior. "Is that a Ferelden barbarian?" She laughed and showed it to Candles. "Isn't that the cutest thing? Just look at his little kilt!"

"That's ridiculous! Where'd you get it?" Candles asked, eyes wide as she grinned foolishly. "Oh, man, you should send these anonymously to the Queen!"

"I wonder if I can get Solona to dress up like this. I bet a certain Antivan of our acquaintance would love it!" Isabela kept turning the figure over in her hands, squinting at the details.

"Can you not talk about my cousin like that? I haven't even met her and all I've heard from anyone is that she's hot, they've slept with her, or she's terrifying. Sometimes, more than one of those." Cormac kicked Isabela's chair, under the table.

"Well, all of those things are true!" Isabela argued. "And she looks just like Anton, so you know she's hot. Or maybe you don't. You should spend more time looking at your gorgeous brother. Maybe a little magic will happen."

Cormac looked at Peryn. "You see what I put up with?"

"I think we could all use that round," Kinnon sighed, pushing away from the table to check on the
bartender and his sheeply burden and maybe see about getting those drinks.
It Was a Wizard!

Chapter Summary

Anders and Cormac tell ridiculous stories about magical things, and Isabela backs up most of them. Keili starts learning to get her magic under control, rather than suppressed.

"So there I was," Anders was saying, wine slushee in hand and suppressed laughter in his voice, "surrounded by charred darkspawn, and I turn around, and there's Solona in the doorway, all dolled up like the Hero of Fucking Ferelden and giving me this look -- you know the look, Keili. The one she picked up from Wynne."

Keili cleared her throat between sips. "You mean the kind of look Wynne gave you when you marched out of the archives naked?"

Anders beamed and pointed at her as though she had won a prize. "That look! Anyway, there I was, my fingers still smoking, and I looked her square in the eye and said, 'I didn't do it! It was a wizard!' I'm not sure what part of that convinced her I was Warden material, but there you are."

"Maybe it was the time you walked out naked that convinced her," Isabela suggested. She lazed back, feeling the warm earth beneath her toes, and tried to entice a cat over to her with soft clicking sounds.

"That might convince her he was coat-rack material, but not much else." Val snorted and swirled the icy sludge in his glass.

"Don't be a shit, Orlais." Izzy nudged Val. "I happen to like his mage staff, and it's great for a lot more than just hanging coats."

"'More than', she says." Cormac chuckled and held up his hand. "I don't need to know how many coats. I've seen this. Also a horrible accident. But, speaking of horrible accidents, have I told you about my brother?"

"This is going to be an Artie story, isn't it?" Isabela clapped her hands excitedly. "You two are such assholes about each other."

"I am not! I'd drown someone in my chamber pot if they talked about my brother the way I talk about my brother." Cormac took a swig of icy wine. "So, there we were, somewhere in the Bannorn, I think, and he gets it into his head that he's going to make a snowman, except with rocks instead of snow -- don't laugh, he can actually do it, now. But, you know Artie. And suddenly there's like ten sackweight of rocks. It's a hill, where there didn't used to be a hill. I don't know how he didn't pull someone's house down. And I go to say something to him about it and he turns without dropping the spell, and I don't even know because the next thing I know, there's dad." He laughed. "I guess he accidentally knocked the top of the hill off and I didn't move fast enough. Little shit. I can promise you I mashed all his food together for a week after that."

"That... actually sounds horrifying," Keili said, looking around at them all as though she couldn't believe they were laughing. A cat head bumped her hand instead of Izzy's, only to slip away again the moment Keili showed an interest in petting him.
"Oh, that's nothing," Isabela replied, now trying to coax the cat over by holding out her cup. The cat's ears flicked back, but he sniffed at the iced wine in interest. "I have heard all sorts of rumours about those earthquakes of his. And then there was that time Anders set an ancient magister on fire. What is it with you and fire, anyway?"

"Guess I'm just too hot to handle. ...Purrsino, no." Anders scooped up the cat and set him in his lap. "Can we not? Both with the flaming magister story and with the trying to get my cats drunk?"

"Flaming magister?" Val almost looked interested. "Don't they frown on that sort of thing in Tevinter?"

"Yes, both in the way you're thinking and in the way he meant." Cormac grinned. "No, really, we -- and she was there, too -- met this darkspawn who claimed to be one of the seven magisters who visited the Black City." He reached out and scratched Anders's back. "And then we set him on fire until he melted."

"You're making that up," Keili decided, taking another sip of wine.

"He is absolutely not making that up, and if you shave his chest, you can probably still see the scars." Isabela clapped a hand against Cormac's chest and squeezed.

"I don't think you can." Cormac shook his head and rubbed his chin with one thumb. "The one on my chin's definitely gone. Jannik takes good care of me."

"Jannik also set you on fire," Isabela reminded him.

"It was an accident!" Cormac protested.

"And it wasn't fire," Anders added. "It was lightning. And I'm very sorry, but it is entirely the fault of that magister that I distinctly remember I asked you not to bring up."

"Shit happens. At least he didn't throw me off a cliff like some people I could name." Cormac shrugged and laughed.

Keili shook her head in amazement. "How in the Maker's name are you all still alive?"

"Well, you might have to ask the Maker that," Anders drawled. "And if he tells you, let me know. I would be very interested in the answer."

"Mages," Isabela said in an impressive approximation of Fenris's voice, just to see Anders's smirk widen.

Anders twisted to look at Keili, who in turn suddenly found her drink fascinating. "So. Still worried about your magic, or do I need to remind you of the time I set the library on fire? You were around then, right?"

"I... yes. I mean, yes I was around."

"Moral of the story: if I can survive so much of my own stupidity, you should be fine."

"I'm just afraid I'll hurt someone!" Keili protested, twisting the glass between her fingers.

Isabela grinned at Val. "I think that's our cue to get out of the way. You want to show me which window's yours?"

Anders opened his mouth, like he might protest, and then closed it again. If Val said yes, it'd be his
own fault.

Val picked up the bottle from beside his chair and stood. "And what kind of man would I be to turn down an offer like that?" he asked, taking a healthy swig of unfrozen wine, straight from the bottle. "Maybe I can show you a few other exciting features of my home."

"When's the last time you healed her?" Cormac hissed to Anders, as the two made their way around the side of the building, back toward the doors.

"Every time I haven't seen her for more than an hour," Anders drawled. "Don't worry about him."

Cormac paused, sure there was more to that idea, but the rest of it never came out of Anders's mouth. "So! Freezing stuff, huh? Not really a speciality of mine, but I'm decently competent. Let's see what you can do!"

Keili hesitated, still twisting the glass as she glanced at Anders. He beamed in encouragement, and Keili tried and failed to find any worry there. "I don't know..."

"Come on, Keili," Anders coaxed. "We're in the Anderfels! It's always hot as balls here. If you're going to work on your ice magic, this is the place to do it."

Keili didn't point out that 'the place' would be somewhere farther away from where people lived and slept, but... a small spell wouldn't hurt, surely? She set down her wine, sucked in a calming breath like Wynne had taught her. She reached into the Fade, a chill making goosebumps rise on her arms, and then a pillar of ice shot out of the ground in front of them.

She had known a senior enchanter who had perfected the spell, summoning not chunks of ice, but delicate sculptural masterworks that melted too soon.

"Nice!" Cormac circled the ice, leaning his back against the pillar and letting the coolness soak through the layers of his robes. "So, that's not too bad. Pretty controlled. You can definitely hit one person with that, even in a group, if your aim's any good. And if it's not, I can help. My brother..."

He shook his head and shrugged.

Anders also draped himself against the pillar of ice. "This is great. So, can you do smaller? What about ice you can hold in your hand? If you get good at that, we can work on the density, and then you can summon snowballs and hit Val every time he says something stupid."

As Keili looked sharply at Anders, Cormac interrupted. "Or you could put date syrup on them and eat the snow. We used to do it with honey and berries in Ferelden."

"You can eat snow? Why would you eat snow? Isn't it already cold if it's snowing?" Keili concentrated on the space between her hands, trying for a smaller bit of ice.

"It's not about cold, it's about tasty," Cormac argued. "Besides, you're in the Anderfels, now, and snow at all would be refreshing."

Nervously, Keili nodded and let the spell flow through her. This time, though, it arced out of her hands and the ice raced across to the wall. "It's too dangerous! I told you!"

"Bullshit." Cormac smiled and draped an arm across Keili's shoulders. "You're just out of practice. You're afraid of it, and the fear's making it bigger. You're trying to defend yourself against the magic with the magic. And it's not something you're doing on purpose, but it's something that happens. Trust me, I'm not the only mage in my family. All you have to do is calm down, which is easier said than done."
"Right," Keili said on a nervous laugh that said she agreed with that last part, at least. How could she stop doing something that she wasn't doing on purpose? "Just... maybe step back a bit, both of you? I don't want to hurt you or accidentally turn you into an ice cube."

"Let me stand out in the sun a bit, and I might want you to turn me into an ice cube," Anders replied, though Keili didn't seem to find that as amusing as he did. "Fine, fine."

Anders stepped back, but to Keili he still seemed too close. She reminded herself that Anders had a weird relationship with fire and hoped that would counter anything that went too far out of her control.

Another calming breath, another pause where she tried not to think about the knot of panic sitting in her stomach, and she cast. An ice cube, she'd decided. Something small, in her hand. Instead, the ice crept outward around her hand and down her wrist, forming an icy glove.

"Dammit."

Anders grabbed her hands and melted the ice. "It's fine. Just a little cold. No harm done." A wave of healing followed, just in case. "Still, that was good. It wasn't what you meant, but it was a lot smaller."

Cormac nodded, watching a few of the sand cats rub against the ice pillar. "Smaller is usually the first step. I mean, except when the first step is aiming. Especially when it's something that comes naturally like that. I mean, my sister gave us all nightmares for years, before she got that under control. Seven of us in that family. It was horrible, especially for my little brother. But, she got it down to only giving nightmares to the people she meant to, instead of the entire house, and then we were really in for it." He laughed.

"How?" Keili finally asked, looking at her hands and then up at Anders. "How did you do it?"

Anders looked uncomfortably at his hands and hers for a long time. "Wynne," he said, finally. And then, "I'm going to get you a pair of enchanted gloves. They'll make fire easier for you."

"What? What has fire got to do with anything?"

"You'll need it. If you have fire, you have nothing to fear from the ice. You can stop the ice; you can melt the ice. You're not going to seriously hurt anyone if you can counteract your own spells, in case you screw up." Anders paused. "Wynne gave me ice gloves. Didn't stop me lighting the library on fire, but that was different. You're not freezing things because you're angry. You're avoiding your magic, because you're afraid."

"And, you know, if you practise with us, you definitely don't have to worry about hurting anybody. That's the healer and the pyromagical master of all things flaming, standing next to you. And I survived my younger siblings." Cormac laughed and then took a closer look at one of the cats. "Oh, shit. Jan, can you help this dumb cat?"

Anders opened and closed his mouth, twisting to peer at the cat closest to the ice pillar. Not just closest but touching the ice pillar, he realised, and... stuck. Its tongue was stuck. The cat let out a long whine, tail flicking and claws scrabbling, but complaining at the ice didn't seem to help.

Anders didn't quite bite back a bark of laughter, and he let go of Keili to crouch next to the poor afflicted fur demon. "Oh dear. What did we do? I know it's tempting, but this is why we don't lick the ice." The cat let out another whine, this one sounding closer to a growl, and Anders pet its back, gently smoothing back its puffed-up fur. "Hey, don't yell at me! I'm trying to help you!"
There was another whine, which Anders ignored as he set to heating up the area around the pillar, just enough to melt the ice around the poor creature's tongue until it was able to pull free. The cat showed its gratitude by smacking its jaw and letting out a hiss before scampering off.

Keili looked horrified, as she watched the cat flee. "See? It's not safe!"

"Hey, you didn't make him lick it." Cormac shrugged. "And that's a perfect point about the fire gloves. With fire gloves, he's right, you'll be able to free stupid cats without help!"

"That poor creature!" Keili still looked quite distressed, her hands clenched close to her chest.

"That poor creature is now healthier than it's been in quite some time," Anders confessed, wiggling his fingers. "So, you can do pillars, right? Let's just work with that." Anders dragged his foot in the dirt, tracing out a square large enough to fit all of them. "Do the corners. Pretend you're making a sunshade, and you need something to put the cloth on."

"Just the corners?" Keili asked, eyeing the square. A litany of reasons why it wouldn't work popped into her mind, but she clamped down on them. "I can... try."

Anders beamed, but again Keili waited until he and Cormac were far enough away to begin casting. Pillars. She could do pillars. She hadn't tried making so many so carefully spaced before, but. Pillars.

Keili barely realised that she was casting before the first pillar rose up, shakily, from the ground. No one was harmed in the process, human or feline, and Keili moved on to the next corner.
Val's problem is not the one he wants it to be, and Isabela walks right into it.

"Doesn't it bother you having Archon Hessarian looking down on your bed like that?" Isabela asked, running her hand over a low bookcase as she studied the stained glass window.

"I had the choice of any of the Disciples I wanted, and I thought Hessarian would bother me the least. At least he was a mage." The bottle of wine, now empty, still hung from Val's fingers, and he set it aside on the desk as he pulled the door closed. "It's a very nice room, as far as rooms go. Thick walls, warm floors. No more draughty towers for me. The bed I could take or leave -- I'll buy a new one, once I can be sure they're not going to sell me something with half the supports sawed through, because I'm Orlesian -- but you're welcome to try it and give me your opinion." He looked longingly at the empty bottle, for a moment, hoping it would be enough for him not to make a fool of himself.

"I should try your bed, hmm?" Isabela smiled slyly. "I think you should try it with me. We've got to give it the full range of tests and make sure it will stand up to proper use! Or... improper use." She stepped closer, running a hand across the loose robes over Val's narrow chest. "And I think the colour there would look much better draped over your sleek and scholarly figure."

Val wasn't sure 'scholarly' was a compliment where figures were concerned, but he rather liked 'sleek'. He certainly liked the way her eyes roved over him as she backed him into the bed.

"Not as good as it would look draped over yours," Val replied, running the back of his fingers up one of her toned arms, testing the heat of her skin against his. "But, then we could both lie on the bed and compare."

The back of Val's knees hit the edge of the bed, and Isabela grinned, her fingers ruching the fabric of his robes as she reached lower. If his stomach twisted, he blamed it on the wine, on the change of elevation as he let himself fall into a sit at the edge of the bed. Reaching for her was simple -- should have been simple -- but it took more effort than it should have.

"Are you afraid of the big, bad pirate queen?" Isabela teased, tugging at one of Val's curls, while her other hand dug into the pouch at her hip. "Well, I hope you're not too scared. I've heard you're the kind of mage with fancy electricity tricks, and I know just how much fun that can be." She offered a potion. "But, maybe this will take the edge off that nervousness. Anders used to call it 'liquid warden', because it'll make you fuck like one, and I thought maybe we could keep ourselves busy until breakfast."

Val swallowed hard, eyes suddenly sharp, as he took the vial and studied it. "Anders. Anders made this?"

"Of course. Cormac wouldn't be able to keep up with him if they didn't keep it in the house. I just borrowed a bottle, because I know they always have it." Isabela smiled wolfishly. "And if I'm lucky, one of these days, I'll get to experience that Warden stamina, myself..."

Anders made it, which meant Val could trust it, provided the woman was right about what it was for.
"What does it do, exactly. This isn't just a stamina potion -- not in that colour."

"It'll make your knob stand up and salute, but for hours. And I'm told it can give you the strength to keep going, right along with that. At least, that's what Cormac says." Isabela ran a finger over Val's lower lip, teasing the corner of his mouth with one short nail. "Of course, if you want to give me a try, before you commit..."

Val threw the cork across the room and emptied the potion down his throat. Anders had been holding the answer to his problem, this whole time. Anders had been sitting in a room with him, probably right next to this potion, and hadn't even mentioned it. It seemed the healer had a cruel streak, after all, Val thought. "I like to take full advantages of the opportunities that present themselves to me."

Isabela had her eyebrows raised, but she looked delighted. "Dedication. Now that's what I like to see in a man." She sank her hands into his curls, fingernails teasing his scalp in a way that sent tiny shivers down his spine. When she swung a leg over his lap, straddling his thighs, Val wasn't sure if the rush of heat was from the press of her body or from the potion. Maybe both.

"Happy to please." Val's hands gripped the sheets too tightly, and he willed his hands to move, to grip Isabela's hips too tightly instead and to surge up into a teeth-clacking kiss. Past the heat and the scrape of her fingernails, that knot stayed in his stomach, twisting, snarling, but if he held her close enough, tight enough, maybe it would go away.

The kiss wasn't very good, and Isabela remembered Anders's description of Kinloch Hold with a certain confusion. If everyone was kissing everyone, and Anders was so very good at it... Maybe it was just a lack of recent practice, not that she'd ever thought of kissing as something that required practice. It was like rowing a boat. It would come right back to you in a minute or two.

She dug her hand into his curls and dragged his head back, burying her face in that long, creamy neck, instead. "Is that Fleur de Ghislain?" she asked, after a moment of nipping and nuzzling his too-soft skin.

"You know it?" Val panted, struggling to make words against the angle of his neck. "Local interpretation."

"Know it? I smuggle it. It's unbelievably popular in the Marches."

And then her teeth were on him, again, and he could lose himself in the warmth of that desire. He'd forgotten what it was like to be wanted, and he'd never been wanted quite like this -- usually it was wide-eyed fresh transfers from other towers, who were absolutely interested in what he was offering, but he'd had a reputation to protect and nearly no one approached him, themselves. Was this what he'd been missing? Maybe this would be enough to drive it all out of his head.

The potion, at least, was working, and there was a dizzying sort of relief at that. Or maybe just dizziness in general at the change in blood flow.

With a shift of her hips, Isabela felt him under her and purred against his throat. "Well, well. Is that the liquid warden, or do you have a staff in your robes?" She pulled back enough to grin in his face, squirmed enough to hike the robes up his thighs, making way for her fingers, callused skin against a smooth thigh. All the while, she waited for him to touch her in some way productive, but his hands were still there at her waist, clutching bruisingly tight. With the hand not tracing his thigh, she took one of his hands off her hip and slid it down to her much more squeezable ass. Much better.

Val's breath was jagged in her ear, more jagged than it should be just yet, but Isabela was content to
blame that on her charms being too effective. She didn't expect it when she touched the join of his thigh, fingers brushing his knob, and he shoved her off his lap.

Stuttered images flashed across Val's vision -- Leofric begging for more, the demon's hands on him, a hundred nightmare scenes where he almost said yes. The room swam in and out of focus, until finally he latched onto something the woman -- real woman, not a demon, at least if he believed Anders -- was saying to him.

"A little too quick for you, handsome?" Isabela hadn't landed too badly, all things considered. It was a long time since the last time she'd been pushed out of someone's lap, but she could still make it graceful.

"Oh, was that too hard?" Val panted, dizzily, the look on his face more nauseated than interested, even as he tried to pull himself together. "I was just looking at your lips and thinking how much better they'd look wrapped around that staff I keep in my robes." He forced himself to stand, tucking the robes into his belt, to hold them up. This was something he had years of practise doing. This wouldn't be anything unexpected.

"Maybe a little pushy, but I know you'll be good for more than one, so let's do this your way, first, and then we'll do things my way. I think you'll like my way just as much." Isabela leaned forward and wrapped her lips around Val's knob, just teasing the tip, first. As he wobbled and kept a confused eye on her, she grabbed his hips, both to keep him from thrusting and to keep him from falling down. She relaxed a bit as his fingers finally tangled in her hair.

At first it was good. This was something he knew. He closed his eyes and thought of Anders, and that sensation came rushing back to him. This would be safe. He could enjoy this. The hands on his hips kept him from slamming in deep, from fitting all of himself into that warm mouth all at once, but he canted his hips to suggest it, opening his eyes as she slid her lips down his shaft. He watched the spit-shine spread, the gleam on her lips -- and suddenly it was Leofric, red-eyed, drooling and desperate.

"No!" Val leapt back from the vision, tripping over the bed and falling against the wall beside the window. "Get off me! Stay back!" His breathing stuttered along with his heart, and it seemed only one worked at a time -- on again, off again, on again -- and he thought he might vomit. It wasn't Leofric, he kept telling himself. It wasn't even a demon. It was just a woman who wanted to have sex with him, and he needed to stop behaving like a fool and make that happen, because if word of this got out, it might be the last chance he got. He wanted to want her. He did want her. But, nothing was working the way it was supposed to. He should've gotten much more drunk, he decided.
Val is quite far from all right, but he's never admitted it before, and he's sure he won't, now. Isabela has other ideas and some stories to tell.

Below the window with the picture of Hessarian, Keili was still practising, having managed the four pillars of a square, and moving on to an eight-pillared circle. With each pillar, the ice grew more even, smoother. She smiled shyly at Anders and opened her mouth to say something, only to be interrupted by a shout from inside.

"No!" The word rang out through the glass, and Anders looked up, immediately, in time to see a hand strike the window, and a loud thump followed.

"That sounded like it hurt. I should check on them," Anders sighed, rubbing his face.

"...It's Izzy," Cormac pointed out, his eyes widening. "The Stallion?"

Anders's eyes rounded comically. "The Stallion."

After a moment of open-mouthed staring, both men ran for the door of the abbey -- Anders to provide any necessary healing and Cormac to distract Isabela. Keili stared after them among melting pillars of ice, wondering what horses had to do with anything.

Anders tore open Val's door to find Val more or less as expected, curled up in a defensive ball on the bed, cheeks flushed and eyes wild, while Isabela stood over him. They both looked rumpled.

"Everything all right in here?" Anders asked.

"It's fine," Val snapped, uncurling stiffly and not making eye-contact.

Anders hummed, unconvinced. "Izzy, are you traumatizing more mages with The Stallion?"

"The... Stallion?" Val echoed.

Isabela's look was pensive behind the slow smile. "Oh, you know me, Anders. I like to share my toys." She smoothed her tunic with one hand and batted her eyelashes at Val. "Now, Val, I thought we went over this. The proper term isn't 'no', it's 'neigh'."

"Izzy, you can't keep doing that to people." Cormac shook his head and sighed. "That thing's inhuman. It's bigger than my forearm! How did you even bring it with you without me noticing?" He glanced around the room, noticing no sign of Isabela's favourite hatrack.

Val tried to pull himself together, but why would a horse be relevant, he wondered as he pulled his robes back down so his ankles weren't the only thing covering his ass. "I appreciate your concern, Anders, but everything is fine. Merely a minor disagreement about the placement of certain body parts. If you must ease your conscience, leave a healing potion on the desk. I'm certain my back will be thankful -- I do need a different bed."
Something wasn't right, and Anders knew it. Still, Val had never been one to admit to having problems, especially not with witnesses. "Well, if you need anything, just scream bloody murder. Mack and I will be right outside with Keili."

Cormac was much more blunt. "Look, if there's a definition of 'too much' it's Izzy. Do you want me to carry her out of here?" He put a hand on Isabela's waist and winked at her.

"No." Val was so tempted to just give up, to send the woman away and drink until that stupid dead cat came back to chew on his hair. At least the nightmares were getting less frequent, finally. But, if he surrendered, and so publicly, he'd never hear the end of it. His reputation had already become fragile, away from the tower, and this it might never recover from.

Isabela shooed them away. "I promise to return him in one piece," she said. "Or at least two very carefully glued together pieces. Expect the good kind of screaming." She closed the door quick enough to hit Anders's heels on his way out.

Val wanted nothing more than to curl back into a ball, but he still had a show to give Isabela. At least his knob was still ready to go, even after all of that, and Val had to wonder what was in that potion. "So," he said, trying to lay on the charm again, hoping that Isabela would let that moment pass without comment, "where were we?"

Isabela hummed, sitting at the corner of the bed. "We were a few different places," she said. "But, right now, you are sitting over there, and I am sitting over here." The seductive purr had left her voice, and Val wondered if he had missed his opportunity.

"I could sit a lot closer," Val offered, smiling slyly and letting a golden curl drop into his face. "Who did this to you, Orlais?" Isabela asked, eyes bright and one hand on her dagger. "There was a man, once, who did some things to me... you wouldn't have recognised me, then. But, I waited, and then I killed him and stole his ship. I know the kinds of things that went on in that tower. You haven't got to be ashamed. The next time I'm near Ferelden, I'll just... arrange for an accident or twelve. No one has to know it had anything to do with you."

"You--?" Val shook his head and laughed nervously. "What, do you think I'm Anders? He brought it on himself." So did you, his mind reminded him. "No, no Templars for me. No one wanted to start an international incident, that soon after the war."

Isabela blinked, once, to show her surprise, but that was all. "So being Orlesian saved your hide?" she asked, side-stepping the comment on what Anders did or did not deserve. The man was rattled, and she would excuse him that.

"Being the son of the Marquise saved my hide," he said, chin lifting but his eyes on the sheets beneath his fingers.

"So not Templars," Isabela went on, moving to lounge across the foot of the bed like a cat. Like that foul-smelling cat that liked to sit there and paw at his feet through the sheets. "What was it, then? I know it was something, or someone." She squinted at him, tapping her lip, and Val wasn't sure he liked the scrutiny.

"Demons," Val said, finally, still examining the sheets. He really needed to buy a finer weave. These were like sleeping on burlap.

"Ooh, demons. Right. I've met those." Isabela nodded and patted her hip thoughtfully. "You know, I met a demon once. Offered me my heart's desire, and all I had to give was a moment of my time.
Freaky looking thing, looking back, but very, very sexy." She paused and glanced up at the window. "Cormac and Anders had to get me out of that mess. I couldn't imagine a reason not to do it. It seemed like such a great deal. A new ship, a full crew, and I just had to listen to a sales pitch for possession? Obviously I wasn't going to get possessed. I'm not a mage. ... The things they don't tell you..."

Val snorted. "You didn't. Did you? You said yes to a demon?"

Isabela shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time! I've always been a little impulsive."

"And you're still alive?"

"Either that, or I make a very lovely animated corpse." Val's face pinched as though he were going to be ill, and Izzy brought the subject back around. "Anyway... yes. I'm still alive. When I woke up, my first thought was 'wow, that was stupid'. And then my second thought was 'oh good, Cormac's squishy spells didn't carry over'. I died in the Fade. Not something I recommend."

Val gestured vaguely. "And Anders's... passenger? He didn't care that you'd said yes to a demon?"

"Oh, I'm sure he cared, but there was no real glowy retribution, I don't think. Too bad. I do so love some glowy retribution."

"Ew. I'm certain there are laws against using spirits in that fashion, even in Nevarra." Val knew it was a hypocritical response. If he achieved what he intended and redeemed the Shame of Serault, he'd be in the same position as Anders and his spirit, and he wasn't sure he'd be comfortable giving up sex. On the other hand, giving it up involved successfully having some, first.

And then the rest of the story sunk in.

"I'm sorry, did you say 'died in the Fade'?" And that was the part Val couldn't get to make sense. There were no Dreamers left, as far as anyone knew. They'd all been killed in Hessarian's uprising. If any still remained at all, they'd be in Tevinter. And what a Dreamer would be doing in this pirate captain's dreams...? Surely there was no other way to translate a non-mage into the Fade than by sleep. They simply didn't have the tolerances to undertake the Harrowing or whatever experiments Irving had been working on, just before the Blight.

"It was kind of intense. One minute, I was trying to stab two very handsome mages, not at all in the way I usually want to stab them, and then I was waking up in that poor elf's house. Definitely the Fade, though. There was a whole fancy ritual and everything. I didn't understand a word of it besides 'here, drink this potion and then stick your hand in this'."

"I have no idea how you're not dead." Val blinked a few times, shifting position and becoming intensely aware of how well the potion she'd given him worked. Even the complete change of subject seemed to have no effect on his knob, which was now tangled in his robe in some complicated fashion, and starting to ache. Pushing that thought aside, he realised she was describing something superficially quite similar to a Harrowing -- demon and all.

"I get that a lot." Isabela grinned proudly. "But, demons... Demons are difficult, when they're not just trying to kill you. When they are, they're ... I was going to say 'meat like anything else,' but they don't really leave any behind."

"Yes, that's the problem," Val said with a stiff smile. "Much as some of them like killing things, demons tend to be much more interested in coming over here first. They don't mind killing you later rather than sooner, if it gets them what they want."
Isabela blew out a sigh. "It's so much more convenient when they go straight to murder."

Val tried to adjust his robes, but the shift of fabric over sensitive skin only made him wince. "Now... what was this ritual? Why the Blight were you even in the Fade?"

"Oh, psh, that." Isabela shrugged one shoulder, as though she entered the Fade every day before tea. "Some magic elf boy got stuck, so we went in after him. Didn't really know much about the boy, but Cormac's brother has always been friendly with the elves. Didn't work out too well for us non-mages in the rescue party, though."

"I thought he said they'd never been in the Circle." Val's face seemed to be stuck in the vicinity of bemusement, one eye squinted and his lip hiked up a bit.

"What's the Circle got to do with anything?" Isabela asked, quite sensibly. "It was a bunch of elves."

A suspicion crept up the back of Val's neck and it was one he wasn't sure he would ever be comfortable with. "Dalish elves?"

"Sort of. I don't really understand elf politics, but the kid was only elfblooded, not a real elf. Poor little shit was never going to be good enough for anyone, I guess, so they kicked him and his mum out of the clan, like a bunch of assholes. Kicked my friend out, too, because they didn't like her magic. She was supposed to be their leader, but she knew too much about demons for anyone to be comfortable with it." Isabela sighed again, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Why's that make a difference?"

"The Dalish, then, have magic we were taught only existed in the Circle. That it was only used in the Circle. It was some bastardised Tevinter thing that I'm not actually allowed to talk about. But, what I don't understand is why the Dalish would want to practise it -- unless 'magic elf boys' have a habit of getting stuck in the Fade...?" Val was sure this was important, somehow -- that there was something, here, that he could use. This was something he'd never even conceived of -- the Dalish could perform Harrowings, and they could send in non-magical participants to assist. Of course, he'd never actually known any Dalish, so he had no idea how they trained their mages.

Isabela shrugged again, one hand toying with the sheets. "Can't say I know too much about what the Dalish get up to in their spare time. I did get the impression that this wasn't something they did on a regular basis."

Maybe Anders would know more about it. Val shifted again, but he couldn't quite get comfortable and Isabela's eyes tracked the movement with a knowing smile.

"You don't look too comfortable over there," she said, smiling growing by inches, but she didn't move closer, didn't do anything but tease. Val wondered if his chances were gone, but... she was still here, wasn't she?

"Maybe. Back's a bit stiff." His back wasn't really what was stiff, and they both knew it. Still, he could blame the squirming on that, could blame the pinched look on his face.

"Getting too old for all this sitting in one place stuff?" Isabela teased, knowing he was probably pretty close to her age, if he knew Anders as well as the two of them seemed to imply. "Maybe I can fix that for you. I learned some very interesting things from the sexiest of all Antivan Crows."

"Considering you're still alive and talking about it, I'm going to assume those things didn't include murder." Val's lips tightened as he struggled to suppress the instant terror that ensued in all good Thedosians at the mention of the Crows.
"Oh, they did, but that's not what I'm going to use to fix your problem. You wouldn't be any fun at all, if you were dead." Isabela rose up from her sprawl, now perched contemplatively on the edge of the bed. "Stretch out before you get your shoulders permanently stuck in your ears."

"I didn't think I was all that much fun today, anyway," Val admitted, untangling himself from the twist his robes had been in since he fell and stretching out along the bed.

"Well, you've certainly been an adventure. And I like to consider myself an adventurous sort."

Isabela grinned and ran a finger down the side of Val's foot.

Val's toes curled in reaction before smoothing out. Her next touch, up the back of his calves, was more deliberate. Just a light pressure, a press of fingers, to get him used to her touch. Every inch of him was tense and wound tight.

"It's not my ankles that are sore," Val huffed, trying to pretend that he didn't understand what she was doing. A part of him was grateful while another part of him hated that she was being cautious.

"Impatient," Isabela chided, tugging on one of his toes. She crawled up onto the bed over him, knees to either side of his thighs. Then her hands were at the small of his back, and, okay, maybe there was a knot or three just there. "Is this better?" Again, she started soft, slowly increasing the pressure as she ran her fingers up and down his back, pausing to dig into a knot when she found one.

"Maker..." Val breathed, face half turned to the side, still mostly buried in the rumpled sheets. "You learnt that from a Crow?"

"Just one of very many very delicious things I learnt from a Crow." Isabela's hands spread, tugging at the skin, squeezing and kneading along the sides of Val's spine. "And then Anders helped me perfect it."

"Anders can do this?" Val had never much considered the thought that Anders might've had talents he hadn't been exploiting. That there might be more to Anders than just a few healing spells and never having to apologise.

"Anders cheats," Isabela declared, digging her fingers into the tense, lean flesh at the top of Val's ass. "He's got spells to make it easier. But, he's still good. I still wouldn't be any competition without Zevran, though. Do you know the Crows teach where every nerve in the body is?" Her hands slid over his back again, before her thumbs settled between two ribs, near the spine. As she pressed, gently, she could watch the strain melt from Val's face.

"I doubt this is what they use it for, though," Val said, words coming out a bit slurred. This wasn't quite the kind of physical activity he had hoped they would be getting to, but he could not complain about a beautiful woman sitting on his thighs and giving him the most glorious massage.

"You'd be surprised," Isabela said with a chuckle, her thumbs tracing down either side of his spine. "Seduction is a weapon, too, and the Crows are the best."

Considering how pliant and vulnerable he felt under her hands, at her mercy, Val could see that.

"Should I be worried?"

"Not about that, no. I prefer my partners to survive our encounters. How else are they going to tell everyone how great I am?"

Val tried to get a hand on Isabela, but the angle was terrible, and he only managed to rub his fingertips against her knee. "Come a little closer, so I can reach you."
"Can't just lie back and relax, can you? Mages, always so impatient!" Isabela laughed and moved forward to perch on Val's ass, her thighs bracketing his sides.

"Relax? After that potion?" Val laughed derisively into the sheets. "No, all of this is definitely giving me intentions, and I can't say 'relax' has made the list."

"Well, make sure you've got intentions that aren't going to end up in throwing me on the floor again," Isabela teased, kneading the back of his arm, as he slid a hand along her thigh. "And here I thought the point of the massage was to help you relax. Maybe I need to try again from a different angle."

Val rolled onto his back after a couple aborted attempts, robes twisting where they caught under Isabela's knee. "Sure. There's some stiffness on this side you could help me work out." He ran a sparking hand up her thigh.
Isabela is mildly annoyed with Anders, about some things he didn't mention. A conversation on love and sexy siblings ensues.

Isabela walked into a room of carefully controlled chaos, and there was a joke in here somewhere about a cat, a bear, a goat, and a camel that she was sure Fenris would find amusing.

"Harellan! No!" The camel's head poked through the window, neck twisting as it tried to get its teeth around the leaves of Anders's herbs. "Shoo! Go bother Purrssino!" Anders waving his arms failed to deter the camel, so Anders put a hand on Harellan's snout and gently pushed it back out the window. Harellan's ears twitched in agitation, and Isabela suspected he was only temporarily thwarted.

Cormac wasn't having any better luck on the other side of the room, trying to get a cat off the bookcase, and Isabela leaned her hip against the doorframe and watched them with a smile.

"Meowedith, I realise you're named after one of the biggest pains in my ass ever to come out of Kirkwall, but you can't be up there, while Jan's brewing." Cormac prodded at the cat, yet again, but this time it coiled and sprung, arcing over Cormac's outstretched arm and fluffy hair, and landing firmly on Isabela's head, before leaping off again, as if she'd just paused for breath.

"Ow! Cat! What the blight!?" Isabela waved an arm, trying to fend off a cat that had already come and gone, skittering off into the main room, as if pursued by demons.

"Izzy! You're looking good!" Cormac tried and failed to unhook his sleeve from the decorative ironwork on the doors of the bookcase. "Have a good time last night? How many healing potions is he going to need?"

"There are more things wrong with that man than a healing potion will ever fix." Isabela pointed an accusing finger at Anders. "You knew, didn't you. That's what got you in there so fast."

Anders bent over his brew as though it needed his full concentration, which they all knew it didn't. He ground up some elfroot with a mortar and pestle while Izzy stared him down. "Val has issues," he said. "I mean, everyone in the tower had issues. But as to why we got in there so fast, it was because he was screaming and we were right outside the window. It wasn't like there was far to run."

Cormac shrugged as best he could, while still attached to the bookcase. "To be fair, I thought you showed him the Stallion. I think I screamed, when you pulled that thing out, too, and not in the way you like."

Anders pointed at Cormac and nodded in agreement. Before he could say any more, Harellan poked his head through the window again, and Anders scowled, shoving his nose back out. "Don't give me that," he said as Harellan huffed. "And don't you dare spit on me either. Don't forget who feeds you!"

"You could have at least warned me!" Isabela pressed on, taking a step out of the camel's spitting
"Warned you about what?" Anders asked, shrugging. "The last time I checked the only thing I could have warned you about is that he's a terrible lay. And I get the impression that's not what you're talking about. Keep in mind, he spent almost ten more years in that tower, after I left, so I have no idea what you're talking about." Actually, Anders did have an idea, but just the one, and he was relatively sure that wasn't what Izzy meant, either, given what he could see of Val from the doorway.

"Demons?" Isabela looked exasperated.

"... Killed his best friend? I know that. He mentioned that. I still don't see where Frick's coming up in the kind of conversation the two of you were having." Anders remained devotedly obtuse. That and he really wasn't sure what problems Val hadn't mentioned, because no one else at the abbey seemed willing to get close enough to find out.

"Wait, demons, wasn't that during the Blight? Right after you left? I mean, Cullen talked a bit about it, sometimes." Cormac finally got his sleeve free of the ironwork.

Anders nodded. "Something else your cousin helped out with. From what Solona told me, I'm glad I managed to escape when I did." Which was mostly true, even if a part of him felt guilty, considering how many others had been less lucky. "You remember the Fade." Anders pinned Isabela with a look. "You know what it's like to have a demon in your head. So does everyone in this 'abbey'. If that has affected Val differently than, say, Kinnon or Candles, how would I know?"

Lips pursed, Isabela eyed him like she wasn't sure she believed him. "Right. Well, I can tell you from experience, that it has affected him differently. The man needs help even I can't give."

"Because you're usually such a giving person," Anders drawled.

"I am!" Isabela protested, pointing at Cormac. "He'll tell you!"

"I don't think that's the kind of giving he meant," Cormac decided, after a moment's contemplation, "but you are very giving. You give so much, so hard, it's a good thing we know a healer."

Anders looked fondly exasperated, and Isabela stared, suddenly calculating.

"What's that look?" she asked, creeping closer to Anders and stealing a leaf off one of the elfroot bundles hung to dry.

"He's trying to decide how hard to pinch me." Cormac laughed and edged out of the way.

"No, I got that part. There's something different." Isabela tapped her lip and chewed the leaf. "He's in love with you, isn't he?"

Cormac shrugged innocently and Anders turned back to his work, a faint flush creeping up the back of his neck.

"He is! And you? What's this I see? Two mages in love?" Isabela brought her hands together, stars in her eyes. "Illegal romance is my favourite kind!"

Cormac shifted uncomfortably. "I love him, Izzy. I'm not in love with him. Love you too, you know. You guys are my family."

"You're so sappy, I could patch a ship with your tongue." Isabela pinched Cormac's cheek. "And what about you, tall, pale, and hung? Am I right? I'm right, aren't I?"
Anders scratched behind his ear as though it could banish the blush that had taken root. "As I assured Fen'Din, any goats passed between us have been strictly platonic."

And there was that look again, the look that said Izzy was seeing through him. He hated that look. "So what?" she asked, setting an elbow on the counter in front of him in an exaggerated lean. "All that means is that there are no new Hawke weddings to prepare for. Too bad, really. You know how much I love a good Hawke wedding."

"You love a good Hawke anything," Anders sighed.

"I do," Isabela agreed, beaming. She prodded his chest with one finger. "And you are avoiding the question."

"You're right," Anders admitted. "I am. And I will continue to. Shall we go back to discussing your bawdy Orlesian adventures?"

"My bawdy Orlesian adventures weren't nearly bawdy enough, but Candles and that pretty healer were more than happy to make up the difference." Isabela grinned all too widely, bits of elfroot stuck in her teeth.

"Petra!?" Anders blinked, trying to make that make sense in his head.

"No, the other one. Blonde. Is she local?" Isabela perched on the edge of a table that didn't seem to contain any fire.

"There's like three of them, and none of them are local." Anders shrugged. "Petra's apprentices, I guess, now that they're not with Wynne. And the more I think on that, the more I think they're all supposed to be my apprentices, and Wynne is never going to going to let me live down stealing her apprentices. But, as far as I know, I'm the only spirit healer up here..." He looked at Cormac and whined pathetically.

"You still have to finish teaching them how to farm, first, then we can worry about healing and explaining Justice." Cormac offered a lopsided grin that slid right off when Isabela changed the subject again.

"So, you love me, huh?"

"You're like a sister to me, except sexier. A lot sexier. If I had a sexy sister--"

"You do," Anders and Isabela said, at the same time.

"Okay, changing the subject, because stop talking about Bethany like that, where I have to hear it." Cormac covered his ears. "Lalala. Not hearing this."

Isabela held up her hands in defeat, even if there was still mischief in her eyes. "So, you love me like a sexy sister but not like your sexy sister. Let me guess: you love him like a sexy brother?" Kicking her feet, she pointed at Anders with the toe of her boot. "But not like any of your sexy brothers, of which you have three?"

Anders reached over and pulled Cormac's hand away from one ear. "She asked if you love me like a sexy brother."

Cormac nodded. "I tell him all the time, he's like Anton to me, but if I wanted to do Anton. Which I don't. Ever."
"I'm sure he and Cullen are grateful," Anders said, not quite able to keep a straight face.

"Ooh, but the Gazette should run a piece on that!" Isabela purred. "I would read it."

"You would write it," Anders muttered, turning back to flit around his ingredients, even though he knew he needed to let the potion sit for a while.

"I would," Isabela agreed shamelessly. "Mm, though nothing was as steamy as that Page Six with Cormac and Artie, speaking of sexy brothers." Her grin had far too many teeth.

"There is not a secret Hawke-on-Hawke romance going on." Cormac covered his face with both hands and tipped his head back to rest on the doors of the bookcase.

"So, he's not the sexy brother? I think he's the sexy brother." Isabela nodded. "And there's always been something weird about you two. You're always so far in his business people think you're his husband, not Fenris."

"Which, of course, isn't because you've been assisting them in that direction," Cormac drawled, voice muffled by his hands.

"For once, it's not me." Isabela held up her hands.

"Look, it's... a long story." Cormac attempted to slide down the front of the bookcase to sit on the floor, but the ironwork curls on the bookcase door were quick to put a stop to that, tugging at his robes. "He was my nameday present. My very first one. And Dad said I had to take care of him and make sure he grew up to be strong like me. And, looking back, I know he was just trying to give me something to do, so I wouldn't feel left out, with the baby in the house, but... I do things because it's my purpose in life to keep him safe, to keep him out of trouble, to make him happy. You've met my brother; you know how hard it is to get him to stop worrying about everything all the time. I do what he tells me to do, because it'll probably make him smile. I've devoted my entire life to him. If you're Sebastian, you've got Andraste. Me, I've got Artemis."

Isabela's expression softened at the edges, but she kept looking at Cormac like he was a puzzle to sort out.

"In short," Anders cut in, "he loves me like a brother and loves his brother like a god."

"I suppose he would make a sexy god," Isabela decided. She hummed, a smile forming on a glazed-over look.

"Do I want to know what you're picturing?" Anders sighed.

"You? Maybe. Him? Probably not." Isabela pushed herself off the table and approached Cormac with an exaggerated sway of her hips, unhooking the bit of Cormac's robes still stuck on the metalwork. "All of you mages are crazy, you know. It's half of what makes you so much fun." She tugged Cormac's robes toward her, indicating with a look what else made them 'fun'.

"Hey, Jannik? I think we're going to go get Harellan out of your face." Cormac chuckled and draped an arm around Isabela's waist. "As long as someone who thinks mages are fun stops talking about my brother."

"I think the mages in this room are plenty of fun. More could be better, but do we really need more? Probably not." Isabela's grin widened as she settled a hand on Cormac's ass. "But, what's this got to do with the camel?"
"If we're by the window, he won't be."

"Not under the window." Anders didn't look up from his potion, but pointed out the window. "The wall."

"So you can watch? Kinky. Tell Justice he's welcome to join us any time he gets that stick out of his ass. And that means you, too." Isabela squeezed Anders's hip, before Cormac pulled her away.
Hints and Accusations

Chapter Summary

Val's a lousy liar, when it comes to some things, and Kinnon is grating on his last nerve.

Val wasn't openly complaining, but Kinnon could hear his displeasure in the weight of each sigh. Best to ignore it, he'd decided as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Even with magic, weeding was tedious work, especially when sullen-faced Orlesians made it a point to 'accidentally' zap his toes instead of the roots every now and then.

"So, you and the pirate," Kinnon said, just to fill the air with more than Val's sighs. "Heard you, uh, spent some time with her. She's quite a woman isn't she?" He gave Val a conspiratorial grin, one that Val only met belatedly with a stiff quirk of his lips.

"She is," Val agreed. He paused to focus his spell, lightning striking the ground from his fingertips. "She, you know, knows her way around a mast."

"And several other things, too! I mean, Candles is a staple, for me, but we couldn't have asked for a better dessert." Kinnon sighed and clapped a hand to his chest, before he went back to shifting and loosening the soil around the lentil plants. "And you... well, I know she was very interested in 'electricity tricks', so I'm sure you two must've had a great time."

"Certainly an experience I would repeat," Val agreed, a stiffness to his tone that suggested he might not want to go into the details.

"You and Candles?" Fen'Din looked up from where a small army of mice was uprooting anything that wasn't a lentil. "Wish you'd told me. I'd have loved to draw that. Three people and all of them happy to be there..."

"You shut up about Leofric!" Val jabbed a finger and a spark intended for the plants at Fen'Din, as Leofric's last, horrifying moments skittered through his head again. "Were you there? Were you watching that, too?"

"If one of the people involved was Anders, then probably," Fen'Din replied, poking at the blister that had appeared on his arm, where the electricity struck him, but Val didn't hear a word of it. "Otherwise, no."

Lightning sparked between Val's fingers as he clenched them into fists. Kinnon tensed, glancing back and forth between the two.

"You're a fucking perv," Val grated out. "It's the closest to getting off you can get, isn't it? You can't get it up, so you watch other people do it?"

"That's rich coming from you!" Kinnon snapped, before closing his mouth with an audible click. Overhead, there were clouds where there had only been blue skies a moment before, clouds that darkened with the look on Val's face.

"Excuse me?" Val growled, cheeks a splotchy red.
"You heard me." Kinnon rallied, straightening his spine. If he died of electrocution, he would trust Fen'Din to do something useful with his corpse. "People talk, but the way you talked about Izzy made it pretty clear! I mean, come on! You looked like you were getting a tooth pulled while you were trying to brag!"

"My experiences in the bedroom -- or yours, for that matter -- are not the subject of polite conversation!" Val protested, cheeks reddening until his scars stood out in sharp relief. "And your absurd ideas about my condition should not spring forth from the fact that I have the good taste my heritage demands of me, unlike you dog-peasants, apparently!"

"I'm not a dog-peasant," Fen'Din retorted, peevishly. "I'm from Halamshiral. Not that I'd mind being a dog-peasant, if you're the mark of a good Orlesian."

Lightning arced down toward the field and Kinnon cut it off with a shield. "For the love of Andraste, get that under control before you starve us all!"

The blood ran out of Val's face, and for the first time, he could see how his great-grandfather had fallen. He could see it all too clearly in the storm that hung overhead -- something he'd known how to control before he was even twelve, and now... something about this place made him forget to keep it in check.

"I hate this Maker-forsaken country," Val hissed, running a hand through his hair and regretting it the next minute when it made his hair stand on end. It only brought home his point. "I hate-- I just hate this."

Val stormed off, literally and figuratively, to get a hold of himself. He almost tripped on the pile of bones that still thought itself a cat.

"What in the ever-loving...?" Val groaned, loud enough to make the not-cat jump. "Not this again. Crazy pants, do something with your pet!" He considered kicking it in Fen'Din's direction, but the damned thing just looked up at him and purred. Muttering, he picked the thing up under where its armpits used to be, but before he could shove it aside, it stretched up to nuzzle under his chin, and the irritation bled slowly out of him. The nightmare creature did seem to be helping with his actual nightmares, if nothing else.

"Aw, who's a good kitty?" Val cooed, straightening up and cradling the thing in his arms. "Probably not you! You don't even have any fur. You're not warm or fluffy. Do you even catch mice? I used to know a cat who caught lots of mice," he rambled on, heading back toward the abbey. "We called him Mister Wiggums."

Kinnon stared owlishly after him, before turning back to Fen'Din. "What the blight was that?"

"Sisterhood. She's been spending a lot of time with Val, lately. Something about his nightmares." Fen'Din shrugged and chittered at the mice, pointing them toward another cluster of weeds. "I'm sure he'll get over himself, eventually. Or maybe he won't. Does it matter, really?"
**Chapter Summary**

Peryn brings Kinnon another gift.

Kinnon and Petra were in the middle of making -- or trying to make -- a rudimentary chess set out of rocks, magic, and a great deal of cursing when Candles stuck her head in with an impish grin.

"Kinnon, your boyfriend's here!" she singsonged.

"What?" Kinnon dropped the piece on its way to becoming a pawn. "I forgot that Peryn was-- I mean, he's not my boyfriend."

"Sure," Petra drawled, her magic delicate around the edges of the queen. "I'll just pretend to believe that."

"Hey!" Kinnon huffed. "He's not!"

"Sure, sure," Candles said between cackles. "Whatever. Either way, your Templar is hoping to see you." She waggled her eyebrows and was gone before Kinnon could protest again.

"He's not *my* Templar! He's *a* Templar. Maybe even *our* Templar," Kinnon complained to Petra, getting up and making his way toward the front door.

Petra shook her head and sighed, picking up a mostly finished archon.

Outside, Peryn stood talking to Val, who sat in one of the sheep-leather lounges, with his robes arranged rather awkwardly.

"It's your eyes, you know," Peryn was saying. "They're very too light. That's why people know you are Orlesian as soon as they are close enough to speak."

"What? That's stupid! All kinds of people have blue eyes! Half of Ferelden has blue eyes!" Val shifted, subtly, pulling at his robes as they started to fall away from where the sides of his summer coat were crumpled in his lap.

"That is maybe true." Peryn nodded, contemplatively. "But, no Anders have blue eyes. Our eyes are brown and amber and gold. Blue eyes are Orlesian, with *your* hair. You are... you are how the Orlesians are painted in pictures."

Val looked entirely too grateful to see Kinnon approaching.

"And no one paints Fereldans like this, but I think they should!" Peryn smiled as Kinnon got into hearing.

"Yeah, well, talk to Crazypants about that. Knowing him, he's probably got naked pictures of your favourite Fereldan," Val grumbled, hands kneading the heap of robe in his lap.

"*Val,*" Kinnon hissed, feeling his ears burn from something other than the sun.
"Did he say... naked pictures?" Peryn asked with that politely confused smile that said he was unsure he had understood correctly. He wore that smile often around the abbey.

Kinnon fidgeted with the sleeve of his robes, shooting a glare at Val past Peryn. "Fen'Din's an artist," he explained. "He learns by drawing people, and he's asked a few of us to be his models on occasion."

Val snorted.

"Shut up, Val."

Peryn's eyebrows crept up as he considered this. "I now wish I could claim being an artist." Now his smile was more devilish than polite, and Kinnon found he liked that look. "But, I think I would be too distracted for drawing."

Val looked like he might comment, but looked down at his lap and bit his tongue, instead. If he could just get the eyes off himself, for a moment...

Kinnon smiled roguishly, smoothing his robes with his palms. "Well, I have been told I have that effect on people. Some of them. Some of the time." He considered stepping closer, putting an arm around Peryn, stealing a completely sober kiss, just to piss off Val. Well, not just. But, his stomach churned at the thought. Peryn was kind, funny, and handsome, but he was still a Templar, and he wasn't sure that would ever stop being frightening, or that it should stop.

"Very definitely this person," Peryn replied, chewing at the edge of his lip as his eyes journeyed down Kinnon's long form, taking in every fold of the robes, every hint of the man beneath.

Val leapt up, still clutching his robes strangely, and made a break for the door, darting behind Peryn. Over Peryn's shoulder, Kinnon could see the cloth fall, finally, as the small, bony head of Val's dead cat friend peeked over the man's shoulder.

"Well, maybe once it gets warmer, you should cover your eyes when you visit," Kinnon teased, still resisting the urge to put his hands on Peryn, to twist his fingers into those Templar robes and pull him in close and tight. But, those were Templar robes. "I wouldn't want you to drop a box on yourself."

"I would not mind the risk of injury." Peryn edged just a bit closer, and Kinnon tensed but didn't step back. He was both relieved and disappointed when Peryn didn't step any closer or tangle his fingers in Kinnon's robes or... any number of things. Instead, Peryn twisted to fish something out of a pouch at his belt. "But, I have brought you something."

"Oh?" Another gift? "Did you bring Figurine Bran a friend?"

Peryn chuckled, fishing out a... pouch from inside his pouch. "Not today, no. But, if he is lonely, I can fix that next time. Today, I have something more Ferelden, for you." He pressed the pouch into Kinnon's hands, his own hands lingering longer than necessary. It was like holding a bag of sand.

"More Ferelden than Figurine Bran? Is that possible?" Kinnon joked as he opened the pouch just enough to look inside. So it wasn't quite sand, but... "You may need to explain this to me."

"The merchant I bought it from said it was a bag of the ashes of Andraste. Of course, if all of the ashes of Andraste being sold are real, she must have been not only a hero but a giant." Peryn chuckled and pushed his hair back. "But, if they are real, then they will bring you health and good fortune. If they are not real, I think they were made in Ferelden, out of good Ferelden things. And they smell nice."
Kinnon laughed, and this time, he couldn't stop himself from putting his arms around Peryn and cackling against the Templar's shoulder. "That is the most ridiculous thing! That's perfect! Fereldan ashes, either way. Where did you even find this?"

Peryn smiled warmly and rubbed Kinnon's back with one hand. "Oh, you know how is Tallo. In the port, there is always someone selling strange things off a boat. I found the seller with the most Fereldan voice and asked what she was selling, because I wanted to get you something really Fereldan, this time, not just fake Fereldan."

"That is... still ridiculous but also incredibly sweet." With Peryn in his arms and a bit of Ferelden in his hand, Kinnon's throat felt suspiciously tight. He pulled back, aware the hug had gone on too long, and retreated back into his own colder, safer space. "You really need to stop getting me gifts," he said in a tone that said he didn't really want Peryn to stop.

"Why? I enjoy them. I enjoy bringing you some of home. You must have given up much to come here."

Kinnon tried not to think of the tower and of what he had actually given up. "Well... thank you. I will treat Maybe-Andraste's ashes with the proper sort-of-reverence."

"Chirp chirp, kiss kiss!" came a voice approaching from the outer gate.

Peryn looked up, first, to spot Anders approaching with a crate of potions on his shoulder. "Jan! It is good to see you!"

"It's not like that!" Kinnon protested, wondering if that was still true, even as he said it.

"So, what are you two lovebirds up to, this fine Ander afternoon?" Anders teased, getting close enough to spot the bag in Kinnon's hand. "Is that Fereldan Brigid, to go with your Fereldan Bran?"

Kinnon breathed a short laugh. "No, but that's what I thought, too. "It's a bit of Andraste's ashes... supposedly. It's probably not, but just in case, they can't hurt to have around."

"Kinnon..." Anders grinned, setting down the box and putting his foot on it. "Did Solona tell you that story the last time you saw her? I... hm, did you see her the last time she was, ah, in town?"

"Yeah, I saw her. She came blowing through like some spirit of vengeance. Stopped to chat a bit, before we went to rescue everyone else, but what are you talking about? What story? I heard she was in Haven and the ashes came from Haven, and there was something about a dragon cult, but that's just bullshit refugee gossip... right?" Kinnon looked more than a little confused, and then concerned.

"Well. She always told it better than I did, but it's quite the story." Anders took a seat on the edge of the box after testing his weight, and made himself comfortable. "The real ashes are supposed to have healing qualities, and someone important was dying, so she went on a quest to get them herself."

"Of course she did," Kinnon muttered. He could picture it, Solona deciding she was going to be the one to find an artefact lost to the ages, all on her way to doing something else.

Peryn made himself comfortable on the lounge Val had vacated.

"She managed to track it down to this obscure village in the mountains," Anders went on, "which, it turned out, was made up of this weird cult that worshipped a dragon they were convinced was Andraste."

"Andraste as a dragon?" Kinnon echoed.
"Not just any dragon, a really pissed off high dragon. Oh, and their Revered Mother? Wasn't. They had a Holy Father or something. I mean, can you imagine?" Anders rubbed his arms and shook his head. "Anyway, I guess they captured Brother Genitivi, if you can imagine that! I always knew that guy was going to get into trouble eventually. You know, worse trouble than that time with the Dalish. So, Solona's just like 'Give me some ashes and the old man, and I'll go away.'"

"Solona, no," Kinnon groaned, the hand not holding the bag covering half his face. He stepped back and sank down onto the lounge, leaning against Peryn's legs.

"Solona, yes." Anders laughed and scratched at the edge of his beard along his cheek. "You know how she is. So, she decided she'd just go up there with her husband -- he wasn't her husband yet -- and this Chantry sister and a qunari, and just... steal the ashes. Well, that turns into a tremendous amount of people getting stabbed and then the dwarf and the golem showed up, and they hadn't even gotten into the temple yet. You've seen her decide she's doing something. She just... keeps going."

"How is she even still alive?" Kinnon asked through the hand still covering his face.

"No idea," Anders replied cheerfully. "But she has a knack for finding people who are just as insane as she is. That golem? Punched the dragon in the face."

Kinnon's hand dropped to his side, and he gave Anders a narrowed look. "Are you sure about this? You sure she didn't just make all of this up to mess with you?"

Anders laughed. "No, she was drunk. You know how painfully honest she gets when she's drunk. That and her husband corroborated her story later on, word for word." Not that he would put it past Zevran to join her in messing with him, but by then he had travelled with them enough to stop being surprised.

"Right. So, did she get the ashes?"

"I'm getting to that," Anders assured him.

"This is the story of the Hero of the Fifth Blight?" Peryn asked, as it slowly sank in that the Warden Commander of Ferelden was also named Solona, and had been credited with finding the ashes. "I thought she was a mage? How do you know her?"

"They grew up together." Anders pointed at Kinnon. "I'm a Warden. Thought I mentioned that. Maybe I didn't."

"You fought in the Blight?" Peryn asked, eyes wide. This would explain so much about Jan, he thought.

"Oh, sure. I was in Ferelden. We all fought," Anders shrugged and gestured at Kinnon. "Him, too. Like he said, Solona came by and they had to rescue the rest of his... village."

Kinnon cleared his throat. "Blood mages, not darkspawn. I don't know how the darkspawn missed us, but I'm grateful they did."

"You weren't on the road to Denerim -- not properly, anyway." Anders shrugged and tugged at his beard.

"I am in the company of heroes!" Peryn gazed up at Kinnon in amazement.

"Solona's the real hero," Kinnon assured him.
"And that asshole dwarf," Anders agreed. "Blight ended, and he came right back to become a real Warden and keep spattering the Deep Roads with darkspawn guts." He shook his head and huffed. "Anyway, I heard he split the Holy Father right in two, when the guy tried to stop them getting to the ashes. Little dwarf. Foul mouth, fouler stench. Big axe."

"Okay, I've met the dwarf. I believe that." Kinnon laughed and leaned back against Peryn's legs.

"So," said Peryn, "after that, Solona found the ashes, yes?"

Anders held up a finger for patience. "Well, after splitting the Holy Father, that was when they had the encounter with dragon-Andraste. Andragonste? Whatever. Dragon was punched and eventually killed, clearing the way to the temple."

"And that was where she found the ashes?" Kinnon asked.

"Yes. Eventually. She was a bit vague about the next part, but from what I understand, there was some sort of test. And then another test. Riddles, and then... something with fire?"

Kinnon bit his tongue, almost too late, against a comment about Anders and fire. "That sounds like her. Focus on the screaming and the stabbing and gloss over the rest."

"Oh! I remember. She had to walk through fire naked."

Kinnon nearly choked on his next breath. "Naked? Through fire?"

"Oh, don't look so scandalised. I've done it, and for much less dramatic, world-saving reasons. Really, you're better off naked if you're going to walk through fire. At least your clothes don't catch." Anders waved a hand, dismissively.


"Which is apparently a thing she gets quite often. Although, also apparently, not with you." Anders smiled saucily. "But, she got the ashes and ran off the cultists, and saved some noble guy. The Arl of... somewhere I don't remember, or something. Maybe a bann. All I know is it wasn't Ferrenly. I'd have remembered that. And definitely not Howe, but that's another story."

"Redcliffe," Peryn said, after a moment's thought. "That's what the merchant said. And Mack said, too. Arl Redcliffe was very sick and the Hero of the Blight couldn't save him with magic, so she brought back the ashes of Andraste from a hidden temple on a mountain."

Kinnon shook his head in amazement. "Anyone other than Solona, and I wouldn't believe it."

Anders stood up from his crate, sweeping into a flourishing bow. "And that, my friends, is the story of the sacred ashes. So you have Solona to thank for those, you know, whether they're real or not."

"Great," Kinnon sighed, staring down at the pouch in his hands. Now there was a good chance he was going to associate naked Solona with these ashes as well as Peryn. Non-naked Peryn, that is. He felt the need to emphasise that to his subconscious.

Anders's grin said he knew where Kinnon's thoughts were, but he bent down to pick up his crate again without a word.

"Your friend," Peryn said to Kinnon as Anders disappeared inside, "she is quite a woman, yes?"

"That's one word for her."
Kinnon shifted like he meant to get up, but his eyes lit on Peryn, so close behind him, smiling up comfortably from where he stretched on the lounge. Non-naked Peryn, his ever-helpful mind pointed out, which just made him think of naked Peryn. And he knew he was staring.

"You are all right?" Peryn asked, a quiet concern in his voice.

"You are... I'm..." Kinnon sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't know. I thought of kissing you, but I didn't know if it was right of me to ask. If it was right of me to want to do."

"Well, I would very much like if you did," Peryn said, voice light. "But, I think this is not the trouble you have."

"The question's the same as always. Who we are, what we are, is it right -- is it even acceptable -- for me to have these sorts of desires for you?" And that was the truth, even if Kinnon couldn't explain the meat of it -- that he wasn't a Chantry brother at all, but a mage.

"It is what we make of it," Peryn replied, patting Kinnon comfortably on the arm. "Whatever you decide you want, it doesn't have to be a decision forever. It can be for right now, and for later, you can choose again."

For a man who occasionally struggled with the language, Peryn had a way with words. Kinnon wanted to hate him for it, wanted to hate him for how easy he made it sound, how easy he made it look, lying there so patiently, but it was difficult to hate anything about the damn man.

"Fine," he said, almost defiantly. "Just for right now, then."

Peryn's smile widened in increments until Kinnon kissed it away. It was an awkward angle, the way Kinnon twisted over him, half-sitting on the lounge, but it did still qualify as a kiss, and some hysterical part of Kinnon just hoped that Val wasn't nearby within frying distance.

Peryn's lips were strangely sweet, Kinnon noticed, and some hint of a warning sparked in the back of his mind, but he couldn't find the rest of it, so he pushed it away. He was kissing a Templar -- that had to be it. He was kissing a Templar and rather enjoying it. Those rough lips against his own, the small sound of pleasure rumbling in Peryn's chest, the way those lips parted as he darted his tongue between them.

And then Kinnon knew what his memory had been desperately trying to point out, as the sour taste of used lyrium flooded across his senses.

He pulled back, suddenly, hand pressed to his mouth, eyes wild, and Peryn blinked at him in surprise.

"Kinnon? You are well?" Peryn didn't look convinced he'd get a positive response.

"Lyrium," Kinnon croaked. "You taste like lyrium."

And then Peryn's eyes widened, the panic setting in. "You know the taste? You will be well? What should I do?"

Kinnon held up a hand. "Wait. Family's sensitive to lyrium. Maybe some mages somewhere. There was a test. I know what it tastes like." Fragments of a story that wouldn't be too dangerous clattered out of Kinnon's mouth, as he tried to pull himself together.

"Ahh, okay, yes." Peryn nodded. "That is just a superstition, you know, but some people still try to keep safe with it. Bad memories?"
Kinnon nodded, eyes drifting shut, again. He couldn’t believe that had worked. Some half-remembered thing about how they’d found out Niall, because his aunt had been a mage. A drop of lyrium potion under the tongue would bring out the waiting magic, they’d said, and it would be safe, because a Templar was already there to stop it. Of course, Niall was Niall, and he’d probably already manifested while nobody was looking.

It took Kinnon embarrassingly long to get his breathing under control, to not think of words like "throw" and "up" and how badly his stomach wanted to do it. "Sorry," he said, managing the word but not a convincing smile. He dropped his hand from his mouth to his throat, until finally he let it fall into his lap.

Peryn shook his head, hesitating before patting Kinnon’s hand. "Do not be sorry. Perhaps next time I chew mint leaves before we kiss, yes? Much mint leaves."

Kinnon huffed a laugh because they both knew that wouldn’t make much of a difference. Peryn twisted to get a better look at his face.

"You... wish to talk to me?” he asked, gently.

"I do. Still." This time Kinnon's laugh almost made a sound. "I must be crazy, because I still want to do a lot more than just talk to you even after that. Just... maybe with less tongue, next time."

Peryn laughed in surprise. "That is good to hear, but not what I meant. I meant this. Do you wish to talk about this -- what just happened?"

Kinnon shook his head. "Less tongue just means more hands, right?” he joked, managing a weak chuckle.

"You are very brave to want to try again, after making that face. You would have made a very good Warden, I think. If you knew the Commander, why didn't you go?” Peryn changed the subject as smoothly as he could.

"I was needed somewhere else," Kinnon said, quietly. "Brave, huh? I just thought I was stupid."

"Brave, stupid, sometimes it just depends on who is telling the story.” Peryn ventured a smile. "When I tell it, you are brave."

"Well, don't go telling too many people that," Kinnon said, easing back into Peryn's space in small, safe increments. "They might develop expectations." He ended the statement on another kiss, also small, safe, a kiss with just lips and warmth, without panic and the taste of lyrium.
Sail Away Again

Chapter Summary

Isabela sets back off to sea, but first she has to get back down the river. Peryn joins her for the trip to Tallo.

"Is it always this hot?" Isabela asked, fanning herself, as she waited for the afternoon ferry down the river and back to Tallo, where she hoped she wouldn't have to bail too many of her crew out of jail... or whatever passed for a penal system, up here.

"You've been here how many weeks?" Anders teased, elbowing her gently.

"Enough that I have seen her twice." Peryn waited for the same ferry. He'd go on to Tallo, stay a few days, and come back through again as he worked his way back down through the river villages.

"It's unspeakable!" Isabela protested, groaning and draping herself on Cormac. "I can't wait to get back to nice, breezy Llomeryn or Antiva City. That's beach weather. This is torment."

"She means it's too hot to fuck," Cormac translated for Kinnon, who choked on a laugh.

"Well, it is," Isabela huffed. "I don't know how you stand it. Or lie down in it. Where's that good Fereldan sensibility?" She rested her chin on Cormac's shoulder and peered up at him.

"We are slowly replacing it with cats and Ander insensibility," Anders replied.

"Well, that won't do." Isabela tsked, wrapping an arm around Cormac's waist. She spotted the ferry making its way slowly up the river, and she tightened her grip. "The option's open, you know, any time to want to reclaim those Fereldan senses. I can swing by again in a few months, kidnap you, and introduce you to the delights of Gwaren. I hear there will be already be another Hawke in town, and that might be delightful enough." She batted her eyelashes.

"Where is this Gwaren?" Peryn asked, tearing his eyes away from Kinnon. "Is it near Haven? I heard to sail to Highever for Haven, but..."

"Haven?" Isabela blinked and considered. "No, never heard of it, but Gwaren's about the opposite end of Ferelden from Highever. You want me to take you to Highever, though, I can do that. Probably. Assuming nobody I need's been arrested or drowned by then."

"She wasn't kidding about the pirate thing," Anders sighed, leaning forward to look down the river.

"If you will have time in winter, I would like to go to Highever, yes. I would like to sail on the ocean and see Ferelden." Peryn smiled like it was the best idea he'd had all week. "You will come with me, back to Ferelden?" he asked Kinnon.

"I, ah, that is... well..." Kinnon sputtered, trying to figure out what to do with the invitation. But, travelling with a templar was probably the safest way to go. No one would suspect him, with Peryn. "As long as I don't have to ride a camel across the desert again. Or a bronto. Or go through the Deep Roads. There's darkspawn down there. Did you know there's darkspawn down there? It's terrible. And orangey-grey."
"As your healer, I recommend against travelling through the Deep Roads whenever possible, for your health," Anders agreed, looking a bit green in the face at his own memories. "As for travelling across the desert, if you manage to find one of the local Dalish and ask nicely, they might lend you use of a dracolisk."

"A...?" Isabela blinked. "So that's the desert equivalent of a halla? Good to know."

"Something like that."

"The ride doesn't make it any less of a desert," Kinnon pointed out. "I'll take the boat, please."

"Boats." Cormac shook his head. "I rode all the way to Starkhaven on a camel, and I'd do it again, if I could just stay off the sea."

"He's fine on rivers," Anders added, laughing. "We took this wonderful holiday on a river barge, one time. I'd do that again, although maybe under less life-threatening circumstances, next time."

"Rivers are great!" Cormac declared, gesturing to the stretch of the Lattenfluss, before them. "You know what rivers don't do? They don't roll."

"Don't you have a potion for that, yet?" Isabela asked Anders. "I'd think after we got to see him repeat everything he ate for a month, you'd have done something about that."

"Yes, but he'd have to be able to keep the potion down in the first place. Besides, what are we even trying to do? It's not like it's food poisoning or some kind of sickness! If I knew how to treat it, I'd be treating it! I'd have been treating it in the first place!" Anders crossed his arms and huffed.

Cormac cleared his throat. "So, I'm thinking I'll take a camel as far as Kirkwall and then catch a boat across to Highever. It's a couple of days at sea, but... days. Not a month. Besides, I know people in Kirkwall, and camels are faster anyway."

Isabela pouted and pulled away from Cormac to place a hand over her chest. "Ditching me for a camel? I have never felt so betrayed!"

"Yes, you have," Anders reminded her.

"Fine, yes, I have. Still!"

Anders gave her shoulder a consoling squeeze. "I think you and your ship would appreciate not being thrown up on. I'm sure you'll find other passengers to amuse you."

"I don't throw up on boats," Kinnon offered, only to pause and consider. "I think. It's been a while. Peryn?"

"We will find out!" He was still beaming, much too cheerful for a discussion on vomit.

"And look at that! I still get two handsome men to keep me company." Isabela stuck her tongue out at Cormac, who replied by licking it.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how that's supposed to work." Kinnon's face squinched in disgust.

"And I'm pretty sure she tastes the same, either way," Cormac shot back.

"This licking. It is a Fereldan thing?" Peryn asked, remembering the face-licking he'd walked in on at the abbey.
"Not really," Peryn replied, at the same time Cormac said, "Kind of."

"I've known more Fereldans who lick people than people from anywhere else," Cormac clarified. "Also, it's a dog thing, therefore it's a Fereldan thing. Just don't, you know, randomly lick people, in Ferelden. You've got to have known them for a while, before you can get away with that. I'd lick my brother; I'd lick Izzy; I would not lick Kinnon -- nothing personal, I just don't know you well enough to be sticking my tongue on your face."

"No offense taken. I would not lick you either. I know where you've been." He gave Peryn an appraising look out of the corner of his eye. "I might consider licking you."

"Well, I don't know what Cormac is talking about," Isabela huffed. "I'd lick everyone here, and I'm not Fereldan."

"You're a special case, Izzy," Anders replied. After a pause, he added, "And please don't lick me."

Isabela turned a mischievous look Anders's way.

"Izzy, no. That was not a challenge." Anders took a step back, only for her to follow, tongue-first. "Izzy!" He grabbed Cormac by the shoulders and used him as a shield.

"Licking me is a fantastic pastime, and one I encourage!" Cormac stumbled as Anders turned to put him in Isabela's way again. "I rather enjoy being licked!"

"And now that you've shaved off that beard, I can lick you in public." Isabela laughed and pressed her tongue to Cormac's cheek, before deciding that cheek could use another lick on the less-public side.

"Me next!" Peryn volunteered, laughing, his face freezing awkwardly, as he looked at Kinnon.

"Him next!" Kinnon pointed at Peryn and picked up the laughter where Peryn had left off. Maybe he could ease Peryn into what sort of man he really was, now that they'd moved past the lyrium. Well, aside from the mage part. That still wasn't safe at all. But, something about his 'sordid past', which he was sure he'd mentioned trying to 'move away from'. No, that was ridiculous. He was not making plans to enter into the kind of relationship with this templar where it would matter. Except, he wondered if he already had, with that look on Peryn's face.

"Don't worry, boys," Isabela purred against Cormac's wet cheek, "there's plenty of licking to go around!" She turned to dazzle them with a grin.

Anders cleared his throat. "The ferry."

"What? I'm not licking the ferry!"

"No, I meant..." Anders sighed, indicating the ferry docking in front of them with a wave of his hand. "The ferry's here. But yes, please do not lick the ferry. They might not mind in Ferelden, but here, I assure you, they do."

"Well, then I'll just have to lick the passengers," Isabela said, wrapping an arm around Peryn's shoulders. "Or at least one of them."

And there was Peryn, giving Kinnon that look again, but Kinnon just smiled his encouragement. "Just don't break him. Or turn him into a pirate."
"Are you sure I shouldn't turn him into a pirate?" Isabela teased, walking toward the ferry with Peryn. "But, then you wouldn't get the thrill of a man in armour, would you?"

As they vanished into the crowd of people trying to catch the day's last ferry, Kinnon sighed, looking at Anders. "I know the answer to that is 'please turn him into a pirate', but that kind of defeats the purpose, if he's not a templar any more."

Anders raised an eyebrow. "There something you want to tell me? It's a long way between 'eww, templar' and you mooning over him when he brings you gifts."

Kinnon pulled down the front of his hood a bit more. "He's not a bad guy, for a templar. And I'm not ... mooning."

"Honest to Andraste, if you were mooning any harder, I'd have to start calling you Satina," Cormac chimed in, with an exaggerated shrug.

Kinnon threw him the finger and looked down. "An-- Jan, you, ah... you said you kissed Cullen, right? How?"

"I think I told you that, too, unless you want the sexy details to keep you company at night."

"No, I mean, how did you not throw up in his mouth?" Kinnon paused. "It's... um... become relevant. I'm still not mooning."
Other Uses for the Healer

Chapter Summary

Kinnon and Anders work on diverting the summer floods. Candles makes an unrelated proposition, and Fen'Din wants to draw the results.

Anders leaned against the arcade around the inner garden, watching the mages bring in baskets of herbs. Outside the walls, more of them worked to harvest the beans, before the next planting cycle started in a few weeks. Everything in its time, and in a place like this, a multitude of different things on varying schedules, all sorted into rounds, all ensuring the abbey would be fed at all times of the year. The summer floods would also start in a few weeks, and as much as he hoped they'd miss the abbey, it wasn't something to count on, and he'd come out, that morning to talk to Kinnon about building a bit further out, setting up something to channel the water around, instead of through, if it came to that.

They'd come up with some ideas, but now it was time to drink beer and let things stew a bit. Fen'Din sat on the edge of stone at Anders's feet, drawing the garden and the people working in it. Kinnon leaned in the shade of the next arch, smoking elfroot in a pipe he'd picked up from somewhere in the dwarven district. Filthy habit, but he said it made him less nervous.

"Can't we store that water?" Kinnon asked, blowing out a stream of smoke.

"No." Anders shook his head. "If you store it, you'll dry up the river."

"Shit." Kinnon sighed and gazed back out over the plants.

"What are you trying to avoid working up a good, honest sweat?" Candles asked, as she came up out of the garden with a basket of vandal aria tucked under one arm, flicking sweat at them with the other hand.

"Of course not," Kinnon said through a grin, "but there are much more fun ways to work up a sweat. Plus you seem to be doing such a good job on your own."

"Oh?" Anders quirked an eye at Kinnon, half his thoughts still on the water problem. "Have you gotten to some sweating with Peryn?" He almost said 'your Templar', but neither of them needed the reminder, even if Peryn was one of the good ones.

"Nervous sweating, maybe," Kinnon said, his cheeky grin turning wry as he shrugged. He braced himself for a round of teasing from Candles, but something in his face must have told her to leave it for now. Either that or her thoughts were already elsewhere.

"Well," she said, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. "I'm thinking I might go in, cool off, grab some water, and then maybe get up to some more sweating." She eyed Anders up and down in a way that made the implication obvious. "Thoughts?"

"Is that you considering getting me sweaty?" Anders raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, tell me you never wanted a piece," Candles scoffed, shooting Kinnon a look.

"I never wanted a piece," Kinnon deadpanned.

"If you do, can I draw it?" Fen'Din asked, looking up from his notebook.

"And that's reason number two," Kinnon added, looking down at himself in dismay.

"There is just no adventure in you, Kinnon," Candles sighed, "but you're so reliable. Like toast and jam for breakfast. Just enough to get a girl going."

"And on that note, if we're doing this, we're doing it at my house," Anders decided, after a moment's contemplation, and a brief argument with Justice. Justice liked Fen'Din, and this could be considered a favour to a friend. "Because I'm sure you'll be a delicious start, but whatever you start, Mack's going to have to finish. I'm a Warden. You'll get tired of me after an hour or two or five."

"Five?" Candles finally looked concerned. "I guess those stories are true, then."

"I can't speak to any individual incidents I wasn't there for, but the theme is pretty accurate." Anders offered a lopsided grin, and then pointed to Fen'Din. "And he's part of the package. Don't worry, you'll hardly notice him until he turns a page."

"This paper's too thin for that noise," Fen'Din complained, holding up his notebook. "Remind me to get the Antivan paper, next time."

"... Five hours, my ass." Kinnon finally said. "That one night, you only had Mack screaming for three." As if three hadn't been just as impressive and more than anyone had wanted to hear.

"That one night, we were--" Anders paused. "That's not my story. Let's just say I'm a lot less careful with Mack than I'd be with anyone else."

"Well, we'll see if you live up to all the propaganda," Candles teased, gesturing toward the door that led back inside. "I'll take my chances."

"And I'm coming with you." Kinnon rocked forward, away from the arch, and stood up straight, pipe still smouldering in one hand. "I'm not sticking around to hear what Val has to say if the two of you wander off by yourselves."

"Chickenshit," Fen'Din accused, as he stood up and brushed the dust off his legs.

Kinnon loitered in the kitchen, splitting his time between trying to coax over the narrow-eyed cat that kept staring at him -- Meowedith, Cormac had called her -- and swiping bites of half-finished guacamole while Cormac was busy chopping peppers. Kinnon licked his lips, chasing the taste of avocado as he kept an ear on the bedroom. So far, Kinnon had heard exactly what he expected: all Candles and no Anders.

"Here, kitty," Kinnon tried again, rubbing the tips of his fingers together. Meowedith flicked her tail at him, and Kinnon came out of the exchange feeling thoroughly judged.

"So, how's things with you and Peryn?" Cormac asked, sweeping peppers straight off the stone countertop into the bowl and picking up a fork, to stir. "Still mooning?"

"I am not mooning!" Kinnon protested, sticking his finger in the leftover smear of pickled pepper juice, on the counter.
Cormac dropped the fork in the bowl and grabbed Kinnon's wrist, before the finger could make it to his mouth. "Yothandi murder peppers. They're fine in the dip, but don't put that straight in your mouth."

Kinnon could feel the faint tingle in his fingertip and cast a small ice spell, shaking it off over the sink basin. "Thanks. And I'm still not mooning."

"Uh-huh." Cormac raised an unconvinced eyebrow and started mixing again. "And that's why you were asking Jan about the correct way to kiss a Templar without barfing."

Kinnon huffed and folded his arms, snatching a sliver of bread from the platter, behind him, after a moment, and twiddling it in his hands, rather than eating it. "He left with your lady-friend. It's nothing serious."

Cormac set aside the bowl and grabbed a fresh tomato, straight from the abbey's gardens. It was possible to grow all sorts of things with a lot of patience and a lot of mages. "You want it to be?"

"No." Kinnon shook his head. He didn't have to think about it. "I have a life. I have a lifestyle to maintain. I'm not going to become some Templar's farmer wife -- you know that's why they don't get married? Peryn says it's because Templars can't be home, and it takes a minimum of two people to produce enough food to live on."

"You're a mage," Cormac reminded him. "You'd be cheating anyway."

"Point is, no. I don't want something serious. I don't need something serious." Kinnon huffed and dipped the mangled bread into the bowl of weird green dip a second before Cormac whisked it away to mix in the minced tomato. "But, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want some other non-serious things. I mean... he's just..." He smiled, despite himself, and then took a bite of bread. "And not a woman, which is really freaky for me. I mean, I'm usually pretty predictable, but..."

"So, what, you need Jan's advice on how to get a naked sausage party going?" Cormac teased, glancing around Kinnon at the bowl of macerated dates that were probably almost ready.

Kinnon made a face, stepping out of Cormac's way as he bustled around the kitchen. "No, I think I understand the basics. I mean, I already have a sausage, and I like to think I'm pretty good at using it. How hard can two be? Metaphorically," he added quickly, realising his choice of words. He grimaced, stuffing more bread into his mouth as an excuse to stop talking, only to keep talking anyway, cheeks bulging with half-chewed food. "But, you know, Templar. You know how it is. Or maybe you don't." He was starting to forget that Cormac hadn't been with them in the tower.

"I kind of know. I grew up running from them, and then my brother married one. You should've seen us, the first time Cullen had a nightmare and dropped a Smite on the entire house." Cormac caught the sudden intensity of Kinnon's gaze. "Yeah, he packs a lot of whomp, especially when he's sleeping. It's terrifying to get caught in that by accident." He set aside one bowl and picked up another, measuring out a powder to mix into the warm liquid. "But, Peryn obviously likes you. I mean, whether or not he wants to do you, he wants to make you happy. He brings you dopey gifts just to watch your face, I swear."

Kinnon thought of Bran, the Fereldan barbarian figurine, and this time he stuffed more food in his face just to hide his own dopey smile. "Those presents are ridiculous," he said, half-chewed bread softening his consonants. This time he took the time to chew and swallow before continuing. "I know he means well, and I might even trust him. It's just taking a while to... unlearn certain reactions."
Kinnon's next bite of bread was more reasonable and came with a bit of guacamole. "Mm, the pepper is a nice touch!"

"Yothandi murder peppers are a great accent, as long as you use them in moderation. Jan and I do not always agree on what qualifies as 'moderation.'" Cormac laughed and dumped the mess of dates into the mixture he held, giving it a final stir before he tucked it into the icebox. "Don't unlearn those reactions too well," he suggested, hefting himself up onto the edge of the counter, across from Kinnon. "He's a nice guy, and he likes you, but he's still a Templar. You know how they tested Cullen, right? J-- Anders told me the story, one night."

"Was that the time Irving made Solona fake a Harrowing?" Kinnon asked, with a lopsided grin -- and then it hit him. "He had a crush on her, didn't he. Not that it was that obvious, but he was a blushing, stumbling disaster every time she talked to him. And he didn't talk to her. ... They wanted to make sure he could kill someone he cared about."

"Ring the bell and get the man a beer." Cormac reached over his shoulder and handed Kinnon a clay mug. "If he ever so much as suspects it, you need to have the same steel he's trained to. Be happy with what you can have of him. Enjoy it. But, you know, don't forget that either you drift apart after a few years -- which is pretty normal -- or one day you're going to kill each other. I mean, I really don't see that as a barrier to having a good time, right now, but I also had a long and thoroughly indelicate relationship with the Queen of the Eastern Seas, who nearly got me killed at least three times a year, until we moved up here. Of course, only twice did I ever think I'd have to kill her, and I only ever had to do it once." He paused. "On the other hand, she's fine, but I couldn't be sure of that, at the time."

Fleeting 'romance' -- if it could even be called that -- was something Kinnon was used to, something Kinnon had expected from the beginning of... whatever this was, between him and Peryn. That did not stop him from feeling the barest twinge of regret that staying together could never be an option. He liked having options.

"You're going to need to tell me the rest of that story some time," Kinnon said, words trailing off as Candles waddled into the room in nothing but a bedsheet.

"I need a sandwich," she said. Kinnon was already working on getting her water.

"Congratulations on surviving so far," he said, handing her a glass.

Candles took the glass and raised it in a sarcastic salute before draining all of it in one go.

"I told you he's a bit much." Cormac laughed, gesturing to the countertop behind Kinnon, where he'd been laying out food. "If you want to sit-- no, you probably don't. Can I get you a potion?"

"You think he didn't take care of that?" Candles shot Cormac a startled look. "I thought you lived here."

Cormac laughed again. "Yes, I did just walk into that. But, I know he's used to me, and he might not be thinking clearly right now."

"Used to you..." Candles shook her head and picked up some bread to make a sandwich. "That's... I've heard rumours. That's not a spell, is it? How -- I know I'm asking a lot, but--"

"Yes, it does fit. I'm not an elf." Cormac slid down from the counter and grabbed some sandwich makings for himself. "And now I should bring him a sandwich, because I know J-- Jan's not going to think of eating. He never does."
"Okay, so, I've actually seen ... 'Jan' with his robes up, not that I meant to, and I have to know. How much bigger can that possibly get? I mean, I always assumed he was one of those who just got stiffer, not bigger." Kinnon stuck a finger in the avocado dip and then in his mouth. "I can't believe I'm asking that. I don't really want to know that, but it's going to bother me, now."

Cormac put his thumb at the side of his wrist and extended his hand down his forearm until his pinky pointed exactly the opposite direction. "Okay, my hand's not big enough." He glanced at Candles and grabbed her wrist, putting the other hand under her elbow. "Roughly. Maybe a little less wide. Not including the hand."

For a moment, Kinnon looked a bit nauseated, and it wasn't because of the dip. He tried opening and closing his mouth a few times before simply settling on, "How?"

"Lots and lots of grease, I imagine," Candles said around her sandwich, her manners worse than Kinnon's. But then, manners were probably pointless, since she was holding up the bedsheets with her elbows tucked against her sides.

Kinnon screwed his eyes closed and shook his head for her to stop. "I really don't need to picture it. I don't know why I asked."

"Well, a picture is worth a thousand words, anyway," Candles said, "and Fen'Din is recording every moment." She pinned Kinnon with a shark-like grin, cackling when he grimaced.

"I don't want to see them, before or after he's done." Kinnon shook his head and covered his eyes.

"Then definitely don't get too close to the bedroom. He's got one of my favourites from last month sketched out on the wall. We're trying to figure out who we can bring in to paint it." Cormac looked more than a little smug as he picked up the two sandwiches and backed toward the door. "And now I'm going to go finish what you started, so we can hopefully have supper together, without him looking grim and squirming. Help yourself to sandwich parts, and there's a pudding in the icebox -- dates and cardamom."

Kinnon gestured at Candles's arm, as Cormac vanished through the doorway. "Seriously?"

"And pretty good at what he does, even without it," Candles said, around a mouthful of sandwich, one edge of the sheet sliding down from under her elbow. "Shit."

Kinnon pulled the sheet back up and tied it over her shoulder, as he gazed thoughtfully at the doorway. "I guess there's a reason everyone wanted some of that, which is not a statement of interest. No. Not doing it. Not crazy. Also, ew."
Justice Bared

Chapter Summary

Cormac does something he probably shouldn't, but Anders and Fen'Din are the only ones in the room... right?

"You're carrying food," Fen'Din noticed, as Cormac appeared in the bedroom doorway. He kept sketching, filling in shadows before he could forget them.

"I'm carrying food for both of you," Cormac confirmed, handing a sandwich to Fen'Din, before he made his way over to the bed and offered the other to Anders. "I figured it was time to make sure neither of you were going to die of concentrating on things that didn't include food."

"Good thinking," Anders said. He half-reclined on the bed, looking sweaty and tousled but nowhere near as worn out as Candles had. He took the sandwich Cormac offered him with a smile. "I'm glad you're here. You too, Cormac," he teased before taking a wolfishly large bite. Candles had whet his appetite in more ways than one.

"So, did she keep you warm for me?" Cormac teased, running a finger along Anders's thigh, before he tucked his hands into the neck of his robe and lifted it off. "Did she get you warm for me?"

Fen'Din held out his notebook, from where he perched on a dresser against the wall. "There's a lot of sweat in these. And I still don't like your beard, Roundear. It's ruining the angles."

Anders took a moment to brush a few crumbs from the offending beard before pulling Cormac down onto the bed with him, letting him feel just how 'warmed-up' he was. "It's good practice for you," Anders told Fen'Din while grinning at Cormac.

"Have I mentioned, recently, how sexy you are?" Cormac purred, kneading Anders's chest with one hand. "All these years, and I still get a thrill every time you let me touch you."

"Good to know I'm not losing my charms." Anders chuckled and spread a hand across Cormac's ass, squeezing appreciatively.

"What if we show him something special, this time?" Cormac let the indigo of the Fade creep up his arm and held up his hand for Anders to see, his chest blocking it from Fen'Din. "I know you like it -- both of you -- but... would you let him draw it?"

The air tingled, and Anders wasn't sure if the shiver down his spine was from him or from Justice. He supposed it didn't matter when it felt good anyway. The hand on Cormac's ass did more than squeeze, pulling them closer together as he considered the elf on his dresser. He bit down on Cormac's shoulder, just hard enough to tease. "Why wouldn't I? It should pose another interesting challenge for him." He didn't care about his audience, so long as he could feel Cormac's skin against his.

"Just checking," Cormac reassured him, moving to straddle Anders. "We get a little extra strange, sometimes, and I'd rather not upset any old friends."

"You would upset me if you hurt him. Little less would matter," Fen'Din offered, voice distant as his
charcoal moved across the page. And then he looked up. "What--? That's not electrical. What is that?"

"Deep Fade." Cormac smiled slyly. "I've been practising for years. This came out of a book from the early days of the Chantry, when they were still teaching mages to fight darkspawn. And Justice likes it very much." He wrapped his glowing hand around Anders's knob and gave it a long, slow stroke.

Glowing blue lines formed on Anders's skin in complement. A shiver ran through his body from his head to his toes, carrying sound with it, a long moan layered with Justice's otherworldly timbre.

Fen'Din looked up from his sketch, again, and just stared. Maybe that was just a one-off? It didn't quite sound like Anders; maybe it was Cormac? His eyes lingered on Anders's face as Cormac's glowing hands traced patterns on Anders's skin, the blue lines following, chasing after that hint of the Fade. Suddenly, he was glad he'd left Moxie outside with the camel.

"Tell me what you want, pretty thing," Cormac purred, dragging his fingertips along the insides of Anders's thighs. "Where do you want me to put this? How do you want me, this time?"

Focused on the tingling trail of those fingertips, the word 'everywhere' came to mind, only for Anders to remind Justice that that was not a thing mortals should do. Justice agreed, albeit reluctantly, and that needing ache was still there, pooling between his hips.

"In me," Anders purred, unsure if he meant Cormac's knob or his glowing fingers but finding that he was more than okay with either. He pulled Cormac down into a biting kiss, his grip just tight enough on Cormac's hair to sting.

The glow crept inward, Cormac's face a mask of concentration as he distractedly returned the kiss. One hand slid down between Anders's thighs, prodding at that already slick hole. "I will never understand how you do that without even blinking," he mumbled against Anders's lips, still balancing the magic's desires against his own, as his body was swallowed into the indigo glow.

His fingers dipped in, gently working Anders open in that way he knew would be a terrible tease after the rounds Anders had already gone with Candles. He knew they had company, still -- Candles was probably in the kitchen gossiping with Kinnon -- but he couldn't resist the thought of Anders and Justice howling for him, and this was the way he was willing to do that in a house full of friends. The other was only for when they were alone. Fen'Din didn't get to draw that, but this might be nice to see from the outside, for once.

It took every bit of common decency the tower had managed to give him for Fen'Din not to get up and walk around the bed, just to get a closer look. He'd get Cormac to do it again, later. Not in bed. This was definitely the sort of thing that was no longer taught, or he'd have seen it, with all of Irving's bizarre experiments.

Around the kiss, Anders sucked in a breath, letting it out in a pleased, if shaky, hum as Justice purred in the back of his mind. The Fade felt a part of him -- of them -- in that moment, and Anders took a moment to bask in its glow, before tilting his hips up in a demand for more, limbs wrapped around Cormac pulling him closer. At the edge of his awareness, Anders heard the scratch of charcoal on paper, background noise now like the sound of the wind.

Cormac had needed to be reassured a preposterous number of times that he wasn't going to corrupt Justice, by doing this, but he was finally starting to believe it, after the number of times they'd done this and then Justice had gone out a few hours later to hunt down wrongdoing, only to return complaining that Anders wouldn't let them stop being Hector. Justice was still Justice, even if he did like lyrium and the Fade pressed against his skin.
Still, Cormac hesitated before pushing into Anders, the indigo glow licking inward from his hips. But, this time would be fine, just like all the ones before. Tight, slick heat, and then the Fade glow caught up, as he tried to pull it in from where he didn't need it. There was no sense in accidentally intersecting Anders's ribs, if he got distracted. Keeping a tight grip usually made that take a little longer -- just long enough for him to stop being in a position where it would matter.

His fingers traced the scar on Anders's chest, so much less frightening than it had been the first time Cormac had seen it. The ridges got a little smaller every month, and he believed that, in time, Anders might actually get rid of it. But, now, it was just another place to put his Fade-glowing fingers. The scars, he'd learnt, watching Fenris, were particularly sensitive to that touch.

Anders arched, first away from that touch and then into it, as though it were too much to take all at once. His world narrowed to the heat of his skin, to the lovely pressure of Cormac's knob, to the lightning-charge of the Fade inside of him, and all it took was just the right touch to that scar -- there -- to knock him over the edge. He would blame Justice for the sound he made, loud enough to echo, more than loud enough to startle the pair in the kitchen eating his food.

Fen'Din dropped his charcoal, which exploded against the hard earth floor. He had never heard a sound like that out of Anders -- not in pleasure or pain. And this... this definitely appeared to be pleasure. He'd seen enough over the years to recognise the looseness around Anders's eyes, that particular twitch of his ears, the way his hands clenched tight as the rest of his body relaxed.

Cormac stole a kiss, hot and wet and desperate, as Candles and Kinnon tripped over each other trying to fit through the doorway. He ignored them, hips still rocking, slower now, a dreadful tease.

"He makes noise?" Candles said, loud enough to break through the pleasant hum that filled Anders's brain. "I didn't know he made noise!"

She looked to Kinnon to confirm. He shrugged and shook his head around another bite of avocado dip, bowl in hand. "I thought he was being stabbed or something. Which, well, I guess he is."

"Hey, Mack," Candles said. "Get him to make that sound again!"

But, Cormac wasn't listening to the patter behind him, he was listening to the sound of Anders breathing, timing his thrusts to compliment that rhythm, and then picking up the pace. But, Anders almost never panted, because that would be a loss of control, that would make noise. It still made less noise than he'd come to expect from anyone else, when he pressed his glowing hand against the pitted scar along the inside of Anders's hip. Less noise than he expected from Anders, if he'd gone for the scar in the centre of Anders's chest, again. Distantly, he wondered if it was really Justice.

It wasn't the howl that had startled Candles earlier, but it was still more noise than she was used to hearing from Anders. She would be taking notes, if she knew how to do that glowy thing, which she was definitely going to ask Cormac about later.

"And now I think I've seen more than I needed to see," Kinnon said as he ducked back out of the room.

"Hey, leave the dip!" Candles hissed, but the avocado dip was already halfway to the kitchen with Kinnon.

Fen'Din perched curiously on the dresser, eyes still following the lines of Cormac's body, Anders's face, as he fished for another charcoal from the box beside him. "Is this what happens, outside? Is this... something else they took away?"
Candles shook her head, still watching. "I don't think they knew this existed. I didn't know this existed. What am I watching?"

Fen'Din opened his mouth and then closed it. "I think that's for Anders to explain," he said, squinting as he shaded the figures on the page. There was no way to explain without explaining Justice.
Candles asks a question she didn't get an answer to, the other night. Val gives her an answer she wasn't expecting. Anders and Val get into a fight about possession -- again.

The sun beat down, unrelenting, even as the rain poured down around them. Monsoon season had begun, and the lakes were rising beyond the hills. Ribbons of water streamed down, breaking against the diversion walls beyond the abbey, before they continued on to the channels along the main road, cutting underneath to reach the river. And in the clear-skied deluge, Anders could finally admit he had a use for Val. Although Cormac could've kept the water off just as well, it would've involved a barrier, trapping them wherever they decided to sit. Like this, the breeze still blew, cooling the mages and their frosty wine, but the rain pattered just outside the circle of chairs.

"Hey, Jan," Candles said, reaching for another fig, "you were going to explain that glowy thing from the other week. I mean, assuming you've remembered how to chew and stand without leaning on things."

Anders shot a mildly distressed look at Cormac, who answered for him.

"Oh, right. So, like I said, but... not to you, I don't think, I picked it up in Kirkwall. The book dates to the Second Blight. Basically, it's an extension of the Arcane school, or that's where I'd put it. It involves shields and the Deep Fade."

Kinnon held up a finger while he washed down a mouthful of cheese with some frosty date wine. "Does it have to be deep? I mean..." His hand flashed and a bubble resolved around himself and Candles. "Spirit's not bad with shields."

Cormac shook his head. "I have no idea. I just worked with what I had. But, instead of directing it out, you kind of direct it in. Basically, you force yourself to exist half in the Fade and half out. Except it's not even half, unless the Veil's fucked up, and I never thought I'd miss that about Kirkwall." He laughed and poured himself a little more wine. "But, it's the kind of thing that takes a long time to get the hang of, to get a grip on. The Veil will fight you, and the Fade... Spirits have opinions. Spirits are part of the Fade. The Fade also has opinions, and they may not be your opinions. It took me years to do what you saw the other night, and it still occasionally scares the shit out of me." The memory of being sandwiched between Anders and Artemis, being a part of his brother's body, was more insistent than he liked. "It's possible and extremely easy to partially pass yourself through things, and if you re-stabilise at all while you're conjoined with something..." Cormac grimaced at the thought.

Kinnon winced, reaching for more cheese. "That sounds like it could be messy." He tried to picture it, pulling the Fade in instead of out but could not quite wrap his head around it. Best not try it, or he'd end up conjoined with the slice of cheese in his hand.

"Very," Anders said with the long-suffering sigh of someone else who remembered that almost
disaster with him, Cormac, and Artemis.

"So that's what was causing the light show?" Kinnon asked.

"You could say that," Anders said, hoping it would be that easy.

But Candles was not so easily convinced, and she watched him over the rim of her glass. "It explains why he was glowing," she said, pointing at Cormac. "But not you. You weren't even glowing the same colour!"

Anders did not react, another lie already on his lips, when Val cut in. "Was that your spirit?" the Orlesian idiot asked, and the words hit Anders like cold water.

"Spirit?" Kinnon asked, eyes narrowing. "I know you're a spirit healer, but aren't those usually... next to you?"

"Shit," Fen'Din sighed, crumbs falling out of his mouth, as he tried to figure out how to talk and swallow at the same time.

"Wait, wait, wait -- you two knew he was an abomination, and you didn't say anything?" Kinnon whipped around to glare at Fen'Din and then Val.

"He's not an abomination!" Val insisted, the objection surprisingly strong.

"Man's right, though I'll rarely give him that." Cormac nodded and shrugged. "Abominations require a demon. We don't have one of those."

"Look, the 'Shame of Serault'? The reason I'm not allowed to study Spirit, Arcane, or Entropy magics? He was an abomination, because he made a mistake somewhere in the process. That is what success looks like." Val snapped, gesturing with his mug and slopping date wine over the side. "He's somehow merged himself with a spirit of Justice and he won't tell me how he did it, for some asshole reason or another."

"I'm pretty sure the asshole here is you, Val," Fen'Din remarked around another cookie.

"No!" Val insisted. "Not this time. This time, he's just... doing the same thing the bloody Enchanters were doing back at the tower! You don't think I can do it!"

"I don't think you should do it, Val," Anders corrected. "And... yeah. I don't think you can. You're right. But, it's not about you. It's about the completely stupid set of circumstances that made it even... possible. I didn't do it on-- No, that's a lie. I guess I did. I still don't remember it. I don't want to remember what happened after."

"If you really think I can't do it, then you should have no problem with telling me how you did it," Val countered, latching onto the words he found important.

Anders blew out a sigh, his whole body moving with the act. "You're still not listening to me."

"I'm sorry," Candles cut in, not sounding sorry at all, "but I'm still stuck on the whole 'Anders has a spirit inside him' thing. I really don't want to wrap my head around Val doing the same thing." She eyed Anders up and down, eye narrowed, as though she expected Anders to change shape any second. "You're not all lumpy like an abomination, but I still don't know what to do with this."

"Most days, neither do I," Anders said with a shrug and a crooked grin. "Justice isn't a demon and doesn't behave like one. We just... coexist, in one space."
"You make him sound like a roommate," Kinnon said. "Most roommates don't glow."

"Most roommates also aren't occupying your body at all times," Cormac added, flicking a chill at Kinnon's drink. "And they do things like eat and sleep." He paused, sipping his own wine. "Justice can be a bit of a horse's ass, sometimes, but he's much better now than he was back in Kirkwall. I mean, a spirit of Justice in the middle of a remarkably corrupt city. He had some... difficulties adjusting."

"I had some difficulties adjusting. Templars are shitty, and I thought I couldn't be surprised any more, and then I went to Kirkwall." Anders groaned, leaning back in his seat. "I don't know what I'd have done without you. I mean that. Died, probably."

"Probably," Cormac agreed, with a shrug. "Eating and sleeping are important, and you're much more enjoyable when you've done both of them in the last day or two. Which is another thing about spirits. Apparently they don't eat and sleep, and they get confused and angry when you try to do either one while they're trying to get something done. I had to sit Justice down and walk him through that one, because it's not like Jan's memories were the best place to figure out what people actually need." He leaned over and pinched Anders's ass under the arm of the chair.

"So..." Kinnon's thumb wiped the condensation off his cup. "There are times when you are not in control? When it -- he -- this Justice takes over?"

Anders glanced at Cormac. That man probably knew better than he did just how much or how often Justice would take over. "Sometimes," he said. "Back in Kirkwall, there were times he'd be up all night writing a manifesto on mage rights. I would wake up at my desk, with ink smudges all over my hand." He chuckled, though Kinnon looked more uneasy than amused. "But mostly it's a give and take. We are one person, each seeing what the other sees."

"Desire," Anders huffed. "I do that well enough without the help, thanks, although Justice has put a bit of a lid on it. He only agreed to the other day as a favour to Elfhole."

"And let me thank all of you again for that. I'll let you see when I finish filling them in." Fen'Din offered an awkward smile, the timing just a little late.

"Okay, am I the only person who's going to point out that Mack's apparently having sex with a spirit? Does that strike anyone else as weird? Maybe something that shouldn't be done?" Kinnon asked, still unconvinced that all was as well as Anders made it out to be.

"Yes, just you," Fen'Din replied. "Why does it matter?"

"Didn't anyone ever read you the poem about the magister's apprentice who fell in love with the..."
spirit?" Val asked, rolling his eyes and adjusting the flow of the rain around them as a few drops splashed on his hair. "It turned into a desire demon and killed him. And that's why you're not supposed to do that, even in Tevinter."

"It's different," Anders insisted, running a hand through his hair. "It's different because Justice has human memories, and most spirits don't. And not just mine -- he was a friend before we ended up like this. We were Wardens, together. And that's why I think you can't repeat it. Add to that the part where you've never been allowed to study any relevant schools of magic, and it's a setup for a disaster -- an actual abomination."

Val's scowl came across as more snooty than intimidating, but Anders suspected he was not yet dissuaded. Anders just hoped that, if he did anything stupid, he would only get himself killed.

"I still don't like it," Candles said softly, and Anders supposed he couldn't blame her. At least she hadn't thrown fire at his face or run off screaming.

Anders shrugged. "It's not like I can undo it, even if I wanted to. He's kind of a permanent 'roommate'. He's no threat to you or to anyone, really. Unless you've been out stealing the neighbour's sheep, in which case he will glow more intensely at you."

Kinnon nudged Candles with his toe. "Hey. If this Justice wanted to harm any of us, something tells me that Val would be his first target, and yet here he is, magically unharmed!"

"Wait, did you say 'glow more intensely'?'" Candles squinted at Anders, as the realisation set in. "Are you Hector?"

"No, he's Anders. Hector was one of the Disciples," Val shot back, without thinking.

"Are you seriously running around pretending to be the ghost of one of Andraste's disciples?" Candles demanded.

"It's not my fault!" Anders held up his hands. "We haven't told anyone who we are, and they just... made assumptions I didn't think it was safe to correct! ... not that Justice is happy with people calling us the wrong name, but at least we're out there doing something useful!"

"Wait, what?" Kinnon blinked at Anders. "The legendary spirit of Hector protecting this village is you? Why?"

Anders shrugged in exasperation. "Because Justice. He -- we don't have the injustices of Kirkwall's Templars here. It's quieter, more peaceful, but there are still injustices, if on a smaller scale. Justice can no more ignore those than he could have ignored Meredith. Usually all we have to do is glow and say a few words, and the problem fixes itself. And it was often satisfying putting the fear of the Maker into these miscreants. "The legend of Hector just... happened."

"What happens if one of them gets too close and figures it out?" Kinnon asked. "What happens if a Templar is around, and you don't know it?" He was determinedly not thinking about Peryn, especially not Peryn drawing his sword on Anders.

Anders laughed, one hand pressed over his eyes. "Actually, your Templar has already seen us. And he was with Sister Ingill, if you can believe it. We were explaining to some kids why defacing the statue of Maferath in the middle of the night was a bad idea, and I guess they were waiting for us. Peryn's pretty convinced he saw the actual spirit of Hector. You should ask him about it sometime."

"I still can't believe you got away with casting sleep on Ingill." Cormac shook his head. "How did he not notice?"
"Spirit. Justice. One tiny spell isn't going to make much of a wave if Justice is already glowing like a lighthouse." Anders shrugged and rubbed his face. "Yet another thing I learnt in Kirkwall. It's like asking someone to hear a pebble hit the ground in the middle of a thunderstorm."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes a certain kind of sense," Cormac agreed, nodding.

"You are insane," Kinnon murmured, shaking his head. He would have to ask Peryn about that, all right. Kinnon would just avoid mentioning that he had seen 'Hector' getting buggered by a mutual friend.

"Of course I am," Anders said, as though that much should be obvious. "But it's working. The people here think they have someone watching over them -- which they technically do -- and anyone thinking about stealing from or harming someone else has second thoughts. I can't say I regret it so far."

"So far," Candles repeated. She threw Anders a wry look, slumping down in her chair so she could better watch the rain overhead.

"You can't really know the future." Cormac shrugged. "It's better to plan ahead, but to be able to say that so far, you're doing well. It's better than so far things are shit, but we're hoping they'll get better."

"You were still in Ferelden for the Blight, weren't you?" Fen'Din asked, bringing up his hand to cover a mouth full of cookies and wine.

"Just the beginning. I wish someone had told me that Warden was my cousin. But, who knew, then? I was still trying to keep my family together, to figure out if we could just stay put, lock the doors and hold them off. The Warden came in one morning, and my brothers came back the next night. A few more days and we were gone, but not as gone as the ones who stayed behind. You can get used to some wild shit, but I don't have to tell you. So, yeah. 'So far'. And maybe one day, we have to move to Rivain. It's not today."

"Wait, wait, he has this enormous power, and you two are just sitting on your asses in some tiny town, waiting for the Templars to develop the ability to see what's in front of them?" Val was outraged, and a few drops of water spattered the ground between them. "Why aren't you in Hossberg? Why didn't you go back to Ferelden?"

Anders could hear what Val meant. 'Why didn't you save us?' "Kirkwall," he replied. "I just needed a holiday after Kirkwall. A couple of years to learn how to live, so I could pass it on to you, I might add. Kirkwall wasn't exactly... living."

"Kirkwall involved a lot of not sleeping, not eating, and still using powerful magic on the fourth day. And that was a relatively normal week. We really just needed to get Justice out of the city until he figured out how to keep that gorgeous body alive without my constant intervention." Cormac offered a lopsided smile. "It's... finally sinking in. Maybe. I might feel comfortable leaving Jan to fend for himself for a few days."

"I did manage to keep myself alive before meeting you, you know," Anders huffed, flicking a piece of cheese at Cormac and scowling at Val when a drop of rain fell on his shoulder. "For certain values of alive, yes, but the important point is that I am not dead."

"Somehow, none of us are dead," Candles said, still squinting into the rain. "And it says a lot that that's worth celebrating. Surviving is usually at the lower end of the achievement threshold."

"Not 'none of us'," Val reminded her, letting the water splash on her face, making her sputter.
Candles scooted her chair towards drier ground. She considered correcting him, that she had meant none of them present, but she kept quiet when she saw the look on his face, the look of someone only half alive and barely trying to hide it.

Anders quietly reached for Fen'Din's hand, and Fen'Din took it, without comment, the other hand still holding the end of a pastry and a mug of wine.

Cormac cleared his throat, trying to turn the subject away from Karl before the group got any more morose. "So, to answer your question, yes. We both glow in the dark, but for different reasons, and I'd count that as part of our limitless sex appeal."

"For the record, I wouldn't do either of you, whether or not you glow in the dark," Kinnon volunteered, pouring himself some more wine. "Ugh. You... I don't know how you do it."

"You don't know how I do a lot of things, Kinnon. Mostly because you faint at the slightest hint of blood." Anders grinned. "Does he still do that? Has anyone seen him do that, lately? Because he used to do that."

"Yes," Candles and Fen'Din answered at the same time, in the same exasperated tone.

Cormac coughed, a smile lingering around the corners of his mouth. "Then it's a good thing you're not interested in me..."

"Oh, that reminds me, I went over the river to get a ring for another hole. The dwarves at the shop seemed rather impressed with it." Fen'Din smiled, absently.

"Another...?" Kinnon tried to stand up, but fell over the arm of the chair, knocking it and himself out of the rain-free circle.

Val huffed. "He moved. He can lay in it."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from this codex, including the text the sonnet of that name, referenced in this chapter.
Jowan & co. reunite with Grace, who leads them to a village of people who might be able to help.

There was something over that hill, and it caught Jowan's eye. A dome -- that was the top of a dome, and that... probably meant demons. He sighed deeply, and for a moment, he nearly missed being tired. The Fade was endless, and it wasn't even particularly linear, and the longer he was in it, the more endless he could feel himself become. There was a time in his life when that would have been something to brag about, but now it just meant everything was exactly the same, with nothing to break it up.

He and Asha usually walked at the front of the group. Asha was a fighter and Jowan had the skills to run away and take everyone else with him, so even in the worst situations, they'd all survived, whatever survival meant here, since leaving Kinloch Hold. Ahead of them, a familiar golden glow shimmered into existence, in the middle of the road.

"Grace!" Asha's face lit up as she ran toward the spirit, arms wide.

Jowan and Niall braced themselves, just in case it wasn't, but the spirit recognised them.

"The Maker has guided you away from the demons," Grace said, with a welcoming smile. "The benedictions of your faith follow you still. I have found you at last, and I will guide you to safety."

"Does that mean you can get us out of here?" Jowan asked, hardly daring to hope.

"Safety takes many forms," she said, turning to lead them on.

Jowan took that as a 'no'.

"Where are you taking us?" Asha asked, trotting to walk next to Grace. Already she felt calmer in the spirit's presence, like all would be well. Even if Grace did not answer, Asha would trust her, wherever she brought them.

Grace's smile was warm in a way that felt like home. "To others like you. Perhaps they will have the answers you seek."

"Like us?" Jowan asked. "What do you mean?"

But all Grace would say was, "You will see."

She was leading them towards that dome thing, and the closer they got, the more sure Jowan was that Grace was leading them into a trap. Mouse had been friendly too, hadn't he? He had made promises of his own, and look where it had gotten them.

But then they walked close enough to see the dome through the greenish mist, and Jowan realised that it wasn't a dome at all, but rather the angled roof of a building. Closer still, and Jowan could make out the outline of a wrought-iron gate and the dim silhouettes of smaller buildings that made
him think of Redcliffe.

"A village," Niall sighed. "Who wants to bet me it's full of demons?"

"These are people like you," Grace reassured him. "More like you than the others, even. They are simple farmers. They are mostly not demons."

"Mostly." Niall's lips tightened.

"Are you a demon?" Grace asked, turning to face him even as she continued on toward the gate.

"I don't know," Niall replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"Neither do they. But, they are here, and they know the Fade. They come from where you do, but they have been here longer."

"Then why haven't they left, if you think they know how to go?" Niall demanded, and Jowan would admit that was a great point.

"Where would they go? Nothing remains. Here, they are home." Grace approached the watchman at the gate, thick stone walls reaching out in either direction. "May your faith give you strength," she greeted the horned-helmed figure.

"Well met, Grace," the figure said, and he certainly sounded human. He looked like he might even be one, under the helmet, but then so did most demons, at first. He eyed the group behind Grace. "More stragglers? Where are the lot of you coming from?"

Jowan wondered if the question was rhetorical. 'Where' wasn't something easily described in a place like this.

"We met in Aeonar," Asha answered for him, and she could see the helmed man thinking it over, trying to place the name.

"Well how did you end up stuck in here?" He looked at all of them as he talked, as though trying to memorise faces.

Asha threw a wry look at Jowan over her shoulder. "This one tried to summon some geese."

Jowan sputtered in wake of the man's odd look. "There's a little more to it than that!"

The watchman blinked at them, almost invisible in the shadow of his helm. "I'm afraid I don't understand past the point where you're some kind of mages. Now, we've had good mages and bad mages, here, but I'm going to trust that if you're with Grace, you're not some kind of evil Tevinters here to conquer our village and steal our children. Of course, the last time that happened, she was Orlesian, not Tevinter. But, if anybody's going to understand what you're talking about, I bet it'd be Jean-Cathaire. He's probably around in six or so places. Usually at least one of him's by the gates of the Baroness's old mansion."

"I'm sorry, one of him?" Brynn cleared his throat and made an apologetic gesture for interrupting.

"Oh, sure. There's a few of Jean-Cathaire. I never bothered to count." The watchman shrugged. "I guess something went wrong when the Baroness sacrificed him for her eternal youth. Must've been a few years, now, but I was so glad when that spirit came and brought that bunch of Grey Wardens to get us out from under her. Maker, that was a bad time in the 'marsh. Say, do you know what year it is out there?"
Niall looked around, hopefully. "Some time after nine thirty."

"I think the rest of us got here in nine thirty-eight?" Jowan shrugged and Asha shook her head. Time was a mystery in Aeonar.

The watchman whistled. "We've been here a while, then. Orlais still in charge out there?"

"Not of Ferelden." Brynn smiled grimly. "Two kings and a queen, since."

"Finally gave those ponces the boot, did we?" the guard asked, as though he had had a part in it. "That's good to hear! Almost sorry I'm missing it, but..." He looked around him at the village that seemed so out of place here, amid the greenish fog, and offered them a shrug. "It is what it is."

Jowan was still trying to figure out what 'it' was as the watchman opened the gate for them and waved them through. It was surreal how normal it almost felt, like they were actually walking on cobbled ground in a small, Ferelden village.

"It's like someone transported a whole town," Brynn murmured, eyeing the townspeople milling about as though afraid one might turn into a demon if he blinked. They returned the stare, but with curiosity and not fear.

"Are there other places like this in the Fade?" Asha asked Grace, again walking beside her as the spirit led them towards the building they had seen from a distance. A mansion, the guard had said.

"More than you know. Few survive," Grace explained, eyeing a man leaning against the gate wall by the mansion. "This baroness was not the first, but the last. But, those other places are further in time and distance."

Lily remained between Brynn and Owain, watching the flow of the village around them, little different to the one she'd grown up in. If there was a problem, the multitude of mages around them would probably solve it, and if not, the Templars at her sides would protect her. She'd come to appreciate them a great deal more, once she was no longer a prisoner.

"What did happen here?" Jowan asked, glancing around, and the man by the gate answered before Grace could.

"Orlais happened," he scoffed, pushing himself off the wall and stepping toward them. "They sent some baroness to rule over a tiny little town in the ass-end of Amaranthine -- if you ask me, more of a punishment than an actual assignment, and she started sacrificing the villagers for her own ends. It's not like they could complain to anyone. First, it was slaying a dragon, then it was keeping her young and pretty." He held out a hand to whoever would take it. "Jean-Cathaire, mayor of Blackmarsh -- by default, anyway."

"Mayor?" Jowan gaped. The guard had given no indication of that.

Asha grabbed the man's hand and shook it firmly. "Pleased to meet you. ... You say 'they', not 'we', and yet here you are. The man at the gate said you were her victim, too."

"I'm from Jainen," Jean-Cathaire said. "She had me removed from the Circle to serve in her estate. I guess they figured with the dragon and all she'd need a mage. Well, she did. Just not in the way I was hoping. Whatever happened in that ritual, she wound up with a dead dragon and at least half a dozen of me. Mind, I couldn't say a word to her about it, until the final sacrifice, when she died and took the town with her. She wasn't terribly pleased to find out I was still around, but even with six of me, she was a lot more than I could handle -- blood magic, you understand. Bad stuff."
Lily shuddered, making a point of not looking at Jowan.

"Is this really Blackmarsh?" Owain asked, eyed round and awed. At Asha's questioning look, he added, "I've heard stories about it since I was a kid. Something about how it was a bustling town one day, and then the next day there was nothing but ruins and charred earth. My friends all had different versions of what happened, and we used to scare each other, telling the stories at night."

Jean-Cathaire chuffed. "I suppose there are worse legacies than becoming a ghost story. I assume there were ghosts in those stories, anyway."

It occurred to Owain that he was actually talking to a ghost, or at least to one-sixth of one. "In the more detailed ones, sure."

Jean-Cathaire grinned. "You will have to tell me a few of them. I'm tired of hearing the same stories and seeing the same faces, my own included. So I take it you're stuck here, too? Should I give you the official welcome speech?"

"Stuck here?" Niall caught it first. "Our friend brought us here because she thought you might be able to help us go back to the real world. Help... them, I guess. I'm probably dead. I don't know if I can go back."

"Oh, no one's gone across in what, ten years? Maybe more, maybe less. It's so hard to keep time here, but no one's gone over since the Baroness left." Jean-Cathaire shook his head, sadly. "We lost a real hero, that day."

"Shit," Jowan huffed. "You don't remember how the last crossing worked, do you?"

"Oh, I wasn't there but another me was." Jean-Cathaire glanced around and spotted another of himself talking with a young woman. "Jean-Cathaire! Have you seen Jean-Cathaire?"

"Jean-Cathaire or Jean-Cathaire?" the second Jean-Cathaire called back.

"Jean-Cathaire," first Jean-Cathaire replied.

"Oh, he's helping Alora with the garden. Do you want me to get him?" Second Jean-Cathaire eyed the crowd of strangers huddled close around his doppelganger. "Who are you talking to?"

"Grace's friends, it seems. They're trying to cross over."

Second Jean-Cathaire made a rude noise. "Because that worked out so well, last time. I'll go get Jean-Cathaire for you. He was there, last time, wasn't he?"

"That's what I thought, too," first Jean-Cathaire agreed, turning back to the group before him. "He'll be a couple of moments. The village isn't that wide."

Asha glanced at Grace, who was still smiling serenely, and then back at Niall, whose bewildered expression was more fitting to the situation. "And there are six of him," she said.

Jean-Cathaire put his hands on his hips. "You know, it's rude to talk about any of me like I'm not here."

Asha couldn't begin to respond to that.

Soon the other Jean-Cathaire returned with a third Jean-Cathaire in tow, though Maker knew which one was which. They were bickering as they approached, wearing matching pinched expressions
and mirroring each other’s gestures, and in a less absurd situation, they might have been twins.

"Jean-Cathaire!" the first Jean-Cathaire called out, waving them over. "Thanks for finding Jean-Cathaire. We have a few visitors who want to know how to leave."

"Have you tried showing them the gate?" another -- likely the third -- Jean-Cathaire drawled.

"Not leave town, you salted hamhock, leave the Fade!" the first Jean-Cathaire corrected. "You were there when the Baroness left. I thought you could tell them what you saw."

"Oh, yes, that'll help! Because we always have disposable chatty darkspawn available for blood sacrifice!" Third Jean-Cathaire huffed and crossed his arms. "That's what she did, you know. He brought them there, and she killed him to make them leave."

The pause in the wake of that assertion dragged on.

"Don't look at me like that!" Jowan stepped behind Asha.

"Who brought who here?" Lily asked, looking at anything that wasn't Jowan.

"The talking darkspawn brought the Grey Wardens. Mage girl, mage guy, the sulk-faced Alamari, and a dwarf," first Jean-Cathaire told them, counting off on his fingers. "That darkspawn busted in here whinging at the top of his lungs about being betrayed, or something, and the Baroness took him in like it'd be a great joke."

"The others showed up later," second Jean-Cathaire added. "They said they'd been up in the hills looking for a way home, but all they'd managed to do was screw up the Veil and kill some demons. There's some weird ruins up in the hills. Statues and altars, mostly, and it's not Tevinter or I'd recognise it. But, she said they'd gone after those because in the real world, you could see the demons showing through, and she was hoping it'd open enough to let them out. No such luck. I sent them to talk to that loud-mouth, Justice."

"Justice was the best thing that ever happened to us," first Jean-Cathaire insisted.

"Doesn't stop him from being a loud-mouth," third Jean-Cathaire said.

"The best thing?" second Jean-Cathaire argued. "If he's the best thing, then where the Blight is he now?"

"I assume you're talking about a spirit," Brynn said.

"Spirit of Justice," first Jean-Cathaire said, nodding. "He was outraged at the indignities the Baroness had inflicted on us and rounded us up to rebel. He's the reason we were able to kick her out!"

"The Warden's the reason, you mean," second Jean-Cathaire replied, shaking his head in exasperation. "Justice was a glowing tin bucket and all talk."

The first Jean-Cathaire pursed his lips, folding his arms across his chest. "I am not going to have this argument with you, Jean-Cathaire."

Jowan cleared his throat, getting the trio of Jean-Cathaire's attention. "You keep mentioning a Warden... Was her name Solona by any chance?" It seemed she was everywhere, after all. It would be his luck.

Third Jean-Cathaire shrugged. "Never heard her name."
"Dark hair, almost as tall as me, looks like she's going to rip your head off and use it for a footrest, most of the time?" Niall prompted, wondering if Jowan was right -- if Solona had beaten them to the exit and closed it behind herself, again.

"That sounds right," second Jean-Cathaire said with a nod, and the other two made sounds of agreement.

"So, what happened?" Asha asked. "Talking darkspawn brings these Wardens in, they fail to get out by themselves, and then... blood magic?"

"Well, Justice decided to go for the full-frontal assault on the Baroness's mansion." Third Jean-Cathaire rolled his eyes. "Kicked open the gates and marched right in with a few villagers, two of me included, and started demanding that she free us. So, she set demons on us, instead, because what exactly was that tin bucket thinking? And that darkspawn went after the Wardens. But, he couldn't get a leg up, and went back to whinging, so the Baroness killed him and then all of them disappeared. Justice, too, which was a bit unexpected."

"You don't know the spell she used, do you?" Jowan asked, hoping it might at least give him a starting point.

"I really have no idea," third Jean-Cathaire admitted. "I never studied much blood magic. You know, with it being illegal, immoral, and dangerous."

Jowan's glare didn't hold much weight. "Great. So there was a way out, but we just have no way of figuring it out." He ran a hand through his hair. He would pluck himself bald if he kept tugging at it like that. "Would any of the other yous know?"

"I can assure you that none of me has studied much blood magic," second Jean-Cathaire said, sounding offended as he folded his arms across his chest. "There are a couple of other mages milling about you could ask, but I forget which ones would have been there. Jean-Cathaire?"

First Jean-Cathaire shook his head. "My memory's as bad as yours."

"You could always try where the Warden failed," second Jean-Cathaire suggested, "and go have a look at those demon contraptions. I mean, you'd have to deal with demons, outside the walls, but you seem to have gotten here all right, so that can't be too much trouble for you. You're not chasing a darkspawn through the untainted Fade, so you probably have more time to really look at them."

"Oh, it is hardly untainted," third Jean-Cathaire scoffed. "What about Hungry Kate?"

"It is not Kathleen's fault she's sometimes a demon," first Jean-Cathaire sighed. "Besides, she's never hurt anyone in town, she just gets a little strange around the anniversary of her grandfather's death. Or... what she thinks is the anniversary, anyway. It's hard to keep time here."

"Sometimes a demon?" Niall perked up. "And she's handling that all right?"

Two and three looked at each other and then back at Niall. "She's a perfectly lovely girl, since she's come back inside. Now that she's not living in the crypt, she's just like anyone else, except she eats for three, sometimes."

"Yet another miracle courtesy of the Warden." Third Jean-Cathaire rolled his eyes.

"Anyway, the point is, she's sometimes a demon, not sometimes a darkspawn, so it's hardly 'tainted' here," first Jean-Cathaire pointed out.
Jowan was starting to forget what it was like to have a normal conversation. "Demon contraptions, you said? What do you mean?"

The three Jean-Cathaires exchanged looks. "We're not quite sure what they do," second Jean-Cathaire said. "Or what they were supposed to do, before the Warden blew past them. What I can tell you is that the Veil had seemed thinner where they were. I never stayed near one long, but I could see glimpses of trees, real trees."

Jowan wasn't sure how he could tell the difference, but that sounded promising. "Sounds like someone else was trying to get out."

"Sounds like something else Solona smashed to bits on her way by," Niall added. "If she was involved, I'm not sure how much left there will be to find."

"Well, it's the best chance we have, since we left Mouse, isn't it?" Asha asked, looking at the assembled travellers. "Unless you want to back to Aeonar and try that in reverse."

"Aeonar!?" the three Jean-Cathaires demanded in unison.

"Where else are you going to find skills like these in this day and age?" Asha drew herself up to her full height, which was still shorter than Jean-Cathaire or Jowan. "And before you start thinking we're actual maleficars or something, just look -- we've got Templars with us, too."

Brynn waved, hand close to his shoulder.

"You know, I rather liked that this was the one place in the world I was guaranteed never to run into another Templar," third Jean-Cathaire complained. "Now I haven't even got that."

"Nothing personal," second Jean-Cathaire said.

"If it helps, it was an accident," Owain offered. "I don't think any of us meant to be here."

"This is not how I expected to leave Aeonar," Jowan agreed, nodding. "On the other hand, I hadn't thought that far ahead, yet. Just far enough to get in."

Lily sighed, dramatically, and Owain awkwardly patted her back.

"You know, if you leave that part out, it sounds a lot more heroic." Niall gave Jowan a gentle shove.

"The point is, it's the best thing we've found," Asha cut in. "We've got to try something, or we'll never get out of here."
A Slow Burn

Chapter Summary

Peryn drops by with another gift, and for a change, Keili invites him in for water. Kinnon gets into more trouble with Val.

Summer, as Kinnon had learnt, was merciless in the Anderfels. They'd arrived the summer before, and if he hadn't already been sweating like a tightly-wrapped roast, the thought of it would've gotten him started. It was time to lay in the next crops, and he should know what those were, but all he could think of was what needed to be done to this field. Someone else would handle the planting, the next day, but right now, he needed to finish ploughing the field.

On the bright side, what should've taken a week and a camel would only take him about a day. Magic made life so much easier, in the world outside the tower, and he couldn't understand why more people didn't embrace it. The last harvest, after they'd finished up with their own lentils, they'd decided to offer their services to the farmers Anders thought would benefit most from the help and ask the fewest questions. Every house they visited had offered them a tithe, but they had no need for more food and the village clearly did. This season, Anders thought they might be in a position to actually donate part of their crop back to the Chantry, which would be redistributed to the village, as needed. Everyone in town whispered about how the abbey was the Maker's blessing come back to Anderfels. First Hector, and now this. Mother Yotte was predicting pilgrimages, if their uncanny fortune kept up, and Kinnon could only hope the fact of their fortune being magical would stay a secret. He was starting to get used to the abbey, and he really didn't want to move again.

The earth churned in the field before him, and Kinnon finally made the decision to strip off his outer robe and tie it around his waist, which he knew he was going to regret in a moment or three. That would leave him in only a summerweight under-skirt meant to keep the coarse fabric off his delicates, but they had potions and salves for his exposed skin. What they didn't have potions for was dying of the heat.

As the sweat dribbled out of his sopping hair, pouring rivulets down his chest and back, he kept working one field after the next. They'd be laying in a lot more food this year, more kinds of food, since everything had worked so well until now. They'd be able to feed themselves and half the village, if nothing went wrong. If something did, they'd still be able to feed themselves.

His thoughts were interrupted by a voice behind him. "Petra says you've got to come in, now. It's getting too hot to be out in it, and your Templar's here."

Kinnon shook his head, sweat droplets flicking off in all directions. "He's not-- okay, maybe he is." He picked up the gourd by his feet and shook it. "Have to come in anyway. I'm out of water again. Let Petra know I'll get the rest of this tonight, when it cools off."

He didn't wait for a response, eager to be back in the shade, and it was a relief when it hit. It was still hot, ungodly hot, but without the sun's stare burning a hole through his skin, the inside of the abbey felt like an icebox in comparison.

He found Peryn loitering in the kitchen, talking to Keili, and Kinnon would never understand how Ander Templars could wear so many layers without melting into the sand. Sweat darkened Peryn's
hair and streaked his face, but his smile was no less beaming than usual when Peryn caught sight of Kinnon.

"You look... toasted," Peryn teased, taking the opportunity to appreciate the bare skin in front of him. "Keili says today you work hard."

"As opposed to most other days?" Kinnon asked, throwing a tired smirk at Keili. "I'm glad you've made it back safely."

Kinnon paused awkwardly in front of Peryn, wondering if he should hug him. If he weren't so sweaty and if Keili weren't there, grinning at his back, he might have.

"You are maybe more toasted than a man should be," Peryn noted, pointing to a bit of peeling skin on Kinnon's shoulder. "This is why we wear long robes. You should not go out without covering."

Kinnon laughed and looked down at his chest, a radiant pink. "I went out with covering! I just got too hot and took it off... which might not have been the best idea." He stepped closer to the sink, to splash water on himself, hoping the burn would abate. "Keili, would you get me one of Jan's salves for this?"

Keili rolled her eyes and smirked at Peryn, before she walked out to get one.

Peryn's eyes lingered on Kinnon's lower back, just above where his robes were tied loosely around his hips.

"You like the view?" Kinnon teased, stretching his back and hissing as the skin on his chest pulled tight.

"That is a very strange writing on your back. I did not know you had one, but I think this is very like you." Peryn's eyes flicked up to meet Kinnon's, and he smiled.

"Wait, what's on my back?" Kinnon tried to look over his shoulder as Keili returned with the salve. "Keili, is there something written on my back?"

Keili sighed and handed the salve to Peryn. "You told him, didn't you. I was wondering how long it would be."

"How long what would be?" Kinnon asked with a bit of a growl. "Keili, what's on my back?" He still kept trying to look over his shoulder, turning in place like a dog chasing its tail.

"Hold still," Keili sighed. "Let me put some salve on that."

Kinnon looked at her distrustfully, eyeing the jar in her hand as though she would somehow use it to put another tattoo on his back. Rolling her eyes, Keili nudged his sunburnt shoulder so she had better access to his back. He hissed at the prodding, but the salve was deliciously cool and Keili was quickly forgiven.

"You were very drunk," Keili informed him, slathering the salve on liberally before handing the jar to Kinnon for him to do the rest, "and lucky that that was the worst you ended up with, considering Val was just as drunk as you were."

"But what is it?" Kinnon pressed, turning so his back and whatever was on it faced the wall.

"A drawing of the Maker's Eye," Keili told him innocently. "Like I said, there are worse things."
Kinnon fixed her with a narrowed look. "He said there was writing." He pointed at Peryn as though in accusation.

"It says 'shake it','" Peryn informed him. "I think maybe it does not mean the eye."

"I have what on my back?" Kinnon paled as best he could under the pink glow of his sunburn.

"I'm going to have to let Petra know her betting pool has come to an end," Keili teased. "You won't get into too much trouble, if I leave you to yourselves, will you?" She gave Kinnon a firm look.

"Not more trouble than I've already gotten into," Kinnon retorted, once again turning around in circles as he tried to twist far enough to see his back.

"It is good work," Peryn assured him, plucking the jar of salve out of Kinnon's hands. "Sit and I will put this on you, if you want. You are very attractive in your underthings, but if you are in them in front of me, it should be because you want, not because you can not put on clothes."

"Oh." Kinnon looked down at his legs, bare below the knee, and the white cloth dripping with the water he'd splashed on his chest. Where it was wet, it had become somewhat translucent. "I'm just..." He pulled the tied arms of his robe together in front. "I was so glad to have an excuse to come in, I didn't think. Sorry."

"You did not wish me to see? I will turn away." Peryn studied the cupboards on one wall.

"No, I just... if you didn't want to see, and here I am standing here in..." Kinnon gestured down.

"If I have given you the thought I do not want to see, then I speak Common very terrible." Peryn laughed, still looking away.

"Did you say you were going to put that on me?" Kinnon asked, gesturing at the salve Peryn held.

"If you allow it."

Kinnon did take a moment to consider that. This would be a Templar, putting hands on his naked skin, but this would be his Templar just putting on salve, something he was about to do himself anyway.

"I think I'll allow it," Kinnon said with the barest, teasing smile, one which Peryn easily returned. Clearing his throat, Kinnon gestured at the jar in Peryn's hand. "Keili already did my back, so..."

"I noticed," Peryn replied as he dipped his fingers into the salve. "But that is only half of you, yes?"

Peryn checked Kinnon's face to make sure this was okay before touching his fingers to Kinnon's shoulder. Even though he was prepared for it, Kinnon's skin still twitched at the contact, at the texture of the salve on his raw skin. It still felt soothingly cool, and Kinnon sighed, leaning into the touch as Peryn worked the salve into his skin.

"You should not go out in so little. There are much better ways to get me to touch you," Peryn teased, working salve down one of Kinnon's arms. The colour had already begun to fade where Keili had applied it, and Kinnon's skin looked like it would return to a more usual colour, soon.

"I suppose it would be easier if I just asked." Kinnon laughed, cheeks darkening under the pink burn. "But, whatever you came for, I'm sure it wasn't this."

"Oh, I brought you something from Tallo. Mother Amira is trying a new design for the Brothers in
the city, and I thought it would look nice on you. Well, once you can wear things." Peryn's slick hand smeared a fistful of salve across Kinnon's chest.

"Another gift?" Kinnon sputtered foolishly. "You don't have to bring me things, Peryn. I'd still see you if you came empty-handed."

"I do it because I like when your face does that." Peryn chuckled and smoothed the salve thickly over Kinnon's skin.

"Does what?" Kinnon asked, just to distract himself from the hand rubbing salve into his chest. He could feel the hardness of calluses in that hand, their roughness smoothed by the ointment.

"That," Peryn teased, his hand pausing in its downward trail to tap a finger to Kinnon's nose, leaving a glob of salve and a cross-eyed look in its wake. He laughed as Kinnon scrunched his face and rubbed it off, smoothing it around the bridge of his nose instead. "It is more than worth it."

That hand returned with more salve, smoothing down Kinnon's stomach, making the muscles underneath twitch. Peryn paused, but Kinnon did not pull away.

"You are a very handsome man, even when you are all pink," Peryn said with faked solemnity, bringing up his hand to smear the salve onto Kinnon's cheek.

Kinnon snickered, tipping his head forward to rest his forehead against Peryn's. After a moment, he made a small, uncomfortable sound. "Ow. My face."

Peryn laughed and leaned back as he swiped salve across Kinnon's forehead. "Better?"

"Much. You're a very good nurse, Ser Peryn." Ser, Kinnon reminded himself, as in Templar. But, a very handsome and reasonable Templar who kept bringing him thoughtful gifts. Gifts aside, he thought that if Peryn weren't a Templar, they might already be half-naked and sweaty. Well, in a good way. In a better way than he was currently half-naked and sweaty.

Peryn's fingers landed on Kinnon's lips, then, gently working the salve into the cracked and tattered skin, and Kinnon tipped his chin up, for a better angle. "May I?" Peryn asked, straightening his back, bringing his lips so close to Kinnon's, but leaving his salved fingers in the way.

Kinnon pursed his lips and kissed those fingertips. "Yes. I mean, don't-- but, yes."

Half a smile crept up one side of Peryn's mouth. "Hold your lips tight, and I will do the same."

With a nervous nod, Kinnon waited as Peryn rubbed the last of the salve into his upper lip, before the fingers were no longer between them.

There was no taste of lyrium this time, no rush of memories or sickness in his stomach, just two lips pressed to his and a gentle hand on his chin. He was able to lose himself in the moment, this moment, instead of in the past.

"Oh come on!"

Startled, Peryn pulled away from Kinnon, who levelled a glare at Val.

"It's bad enough you're doing that in the house," Val spat, cheeks as red with anger as with sunburn, "but do you have to defile the kitchen? We eat in here!"

Kinnon bit down on a comment about what, exactly, Val could go eat, but Peryn looked apologetic.
"If Sister Keili did not bring me in to have water, I would still be outside. We would be outside in the shade of the walls. Please do not think ill of me. I was overcome." Peryn stepped back to arm's length, out of the radiant warmth of Kinnon's slightly less brightly pink skin.

Val cocked his head at Kinnon, as he realised what he was seeing. Kinnon wasn't blushing with embarrassment... "You're an idiot. You know that, right? What, were you standing around outside, naked? Do I have to worry about what you might have gotten on the next harvest?"

"Shove it up your ass, Val. You might get some satisfaction," Kinnon huffed. "The next harvest isn't even planted, yet. I was just trying not to drown in my own sweat, out there."

"So you could... come in here and drown Ser Templar in your sweat, instead?" Val grabbed a cup from beside the sink and filled it, still fuming, his anger contained by the fact that he couldn't say any number of things he wanted to with Peryn standing in the room. "I'm going to go talk to Petra. We're putting a pump outside. This is completely unacceptable, and you know better."
Giving Back

Chapter Summary

Kinnon decides his best option is to get Peryn a gift and wait for him to return. Candles and Cormac come along to give advice, while Anders tries to keep them from getting too weird in public.

The day was hot -- all days were hot. The Anderfels were a death-trap designed by the Blight itself, as far as Kinnon could tell. The summer heat snatched the moisture out of every breath, when it wasn't raining, even by the river, and he'd started carrying a little tin of Anders's healing salve for his lips. Fortunately, they weren't going to be out in it, much longer. The dwarven quarter wasn't that far from the docks, in Kassel.

He'd decided to buy Peryn something nice, and something dwarven seemed like the way to go. Peryn had brought him 'Fereldan' things, but Fereldan things were rare, up here. Getting Peryn Ander things would just be... kind of stupid. Peryn was much better travelled, on a regular basis. But, the dwarves made some of the best and weirdest things, and a lot of it was out of the price range of the average Ander. Kinnon, however, could turn dirt into jewels, and as long as he could find a buyer, he didn't really have an upper limit on spending.

Speaking of buyers, Trovid hadn't needed anything, right then, but he'd pointed Kinnon in the direction of an Orlesian scholar who was trying to set up an observatory in the blighted lands. Of course, Trovid had associated Orlesians with enormous disposable incomes, where Kinnon saw a man who needed precise crystal lenses of the sort that were probably easier to produce with magic. With Cormac's help, he'd produced a couple of samples, that morning, and he'd meet with the Orlesian after he went shopping. He had money to spend; he'd just rather replace it before he needed it for something critical, same as any other resource.

"So, I've been looking at your ass since we left the abbey," Candles said, suddenly, "and I'm absolutely sure I've never seen you wear those robes before. Where did you get those?"

"Peryn brought them. Mother Amira sent them from Tallo, to see if we liked them." Kinnon shrugged and looked down at himself. "They're... Chantry robes. I feel a little weird in them, but they've got a bit more breeze through them than anything else I've got. I should find out what this fabric is."

"I never imagined that Chantry robes would be such a nice fit," Candles said with a suggestive look at Kinnon's ass. "But I'm sure that was the last thing on Ser Peryn's mind when he brought them."

Kinnon met her grin with a roll of his eyes. He turned to Anders for backup, only to find the healer pretending not to be checking out his ass as well.

Then Kinnon felt a breeze, and suddenly that was all he cared about. A breeze, and the shade of dwarf buildings, solid stone instead of mudbrick. Anders pointed out the building where they had gotten their iceboxes, and they walked through the stepped archway into a sprawling room with cavernous ceilings, shelves lined with too much stuff for Kinnon's eye to land.

Kinnon paused just inside the open doorway, looking around at dishware, furniture, jewellery, and
realised that he had no idea what he had come here to get.

Cormac was instantly distracted by a cupboard displaying some traditional sauces from Kal-Sharok. "Oooh, look at this one! It's got four kinds of mushrooms and trace amounts of lyrium! It's supposed to be served with ..." He turned the jar and squinted at the text. "... something. Meat, I think. I don't read enough dwarven."

"And yet, you know it's made of mushrooms and lyrium," Candles teased.

"Of course I do. Those are things I have to read all the time. Like, here, this word is 'sauce' and that's 'Kal-Sharok'. I mean, it's pretty close to Common, most of the time, but not all of the words are the same. A lot of Tevinter words made it into Common, and Ander words, if you're talking about darkspawn." Cormac shrugged and looked at another sauce. "And this one's spicy. I wonder if it would go on eggs..."

Candles almost choked, laughing. "Kinnon, that's it! Get your Templar some sauce for his eggs. Show him you really care!"

"I am certain that neither his eggs nor his sausage are in need of sauce," Kinnon sighed, "but thank you for the suggestion."

Kinnon wandered around while the others poked at things, desperate for inspiration. Candles made it a point to try out each of the chairs on display, including -- or especially -- the chairs made for dwarves.

"Maybe you should get him one of these," Candles suggested from a chair not much higher than the floor, her knees bent at an uncomfortable angle. "Make him feel tall in comparison!"

Maybe Kinnon should have brought Petra or Keili along to 'help' him instead. "Thank you, Candles. You are being very helpful."

"You can't really get him home furnishings, can you?" Anders asked, thoughtfully studying what he was sure were actually metalworking tools, but would handle some thorny herbs very well. "I don't think he's ever in one place long enough to appreciate them."

"And if he was, you'd be living with a Templar," Cormac teased, "because I'm pretty sure that's the only thing that'd keep him in one place."

"Shit!" Kinnon swore loudly, throwing his hands up and turning in a circle, hoping to get an idea from some nearby shelves. He huffed and made a frustrated noise.

"Is there something I can help you find?" The voice came from between a display of camel armour and a shelf of books with a basket of throw pillows on top.

"Brother Kinnon needs to show a Templar he cares." Candles struggled to hold off a laugh.

"Something romantic, then?" The dwarf asked, stepping into view.

"Yes! No! ... Maybe!?!" Kinnon shoved his hood back and roughly pushed his hair off his face in one movement. "More... establishing friendship?"

"You're two dozen pints past 'friendship'," Anders pointed out.

Kinnon scowled at Anders. "He keeps bringing me thoughtful gifts," he told the dwarf. "I want to get him something in return, but I just..." He trailed off, his desperate look and helpless shrug
conveying the rest of that thought well enough.

"I'm sure we can find something for your man," the dwarf assured him cheerfully, oblivious to the uncomfortable way Kinnon shifted at the phrase 'your man'. "I always recommend jewellery, if it's something romantic you're going for, and that could work too, if you're going for something more friendly. What do you think?"

As he spoke, the dwarf led them in the direction of the jewellery display. Most were heavy pieces, intricate designs stamped onto wide cuffs or elaborate necklaces, but their guide pointed him towards the simpler pieces at the end.

"Human, right? I don't know too many dwarves with an interest in your Andraste strong enough to be Templars," the dwarf said easily. "But, if I'm wrong, you'll find something more appropriate back that way."

"What's the difference, size?" Cormac asked, leaning over the display to look at some of the designs. He'd look good in some of the heavier ones, he thought.

"Weight, mostly. A lot of dwarves have a taste for things they can feel, but most humans can't stand the pressure of that much metal on them at once."

Kinnon looked over a few small talismans -- cooling seemed like it might go over well, or maybe this one for health... At least, being a mage, he knew the runes used and could tell what they'd do, no matter what the description cards said. Not that he could read the descriptions.

Cormac tapped Kinnon on the shoulder and put an amulet in his hand. "Barrier," he said, the corner of his mouth tipping up slyly.

Kinnon was struck by how perfect it was, his slow smile matching Cormac's. The design was simple but attractive, and Kinnon could feel the magic tingling against his skin, magic that, when worn by a Templar, would likely mask any smaller bursts of magic. And it would, of course, help keep Peryn safe.

He held it up for the salesdwarf. "This one is nice."

The dwarf beamed. "Ah! An excellent choice, particularly for a Templar or a soldier. Or anyone prone to accidents, I suppose."

As they began to talk price, Candles dangled another amulet in front of Kinnon. "Are you sure you don't want this one?" she said, waggling her eyebrows.

Kinnon leaned back enough to see the rune, only to scowl at her and swat the amulet aside. "I am sure his endurance is fine as it is, thank you."

"And you know this how?" Candles teased. "I thought it 'wasn't like that' and you're just 'establishing the friendship'."

"Pure speculation," Kinnon insisted, "though maybe you want to keep it, if you're going to keep up with Jan."

"Whoa, hey, no!" Anders put up his hands defensively and stepped behind Cormac. "No one should keep up with me. It's not healthy. Besides, I think Mack might object to this becoming a regular thing."

That was a suggestion, and Cormac knew it, so he held up his fingers, the slightest bit apart. "Just a
bit. You know, back in Kirkwall, he almost left me for this sly old lady who came through the clinic all the time. I was struck to the very heart with the injustice of it all."

"Wasn't he also sleeping with your brother?" Kinnon asked, suspiciously. "And his husband?"

"You see why I like being the only one who can keep up with him, now?" Cormac laughed and pinched Anders's hip. None of it was true. He'd be happy to share, but he understood himself to be Justice's stand-in, because they were in public.

Candles shrugged and put the amulet back where she had found it. "I'm not sure I'd survive another round with Jan, even with this. Maker knows how you do it, Mack."

"This is one moment where I do not envy the Maker," Kinnon muttered. He counted out the necessary number of coins and handed them over with a bright smile, not minding the lightness in his purse now that he was armed with a proper gift.
Follow the Demons

Chapter Summary

Solona's journey through the Fade broke the equipment the demons were trying to use to get out into Blackmarsh. Jowan wants to see if he can fix it, to get his people back across.

No matter what he poked, smacked, or kicked, no matter how many curses he muttered, Jowan could not get the damn thing to work. The apparatus was once a sophisticated blend of magic and machinery, but now it was just a mess of pieces that made no sense. Jowan could feel the pressure of what would have been a headache in the physical world, and he gave the apparatus another kick for good measure.

"I don't think that's helping," Asha said, hand out as though to pull him back.

"Well, it's not hurting, either!" Jowan snapped. "Look at it! Solona couldn't have just broken it neatly! No, she had to smash the thing into oblivion!" Jowan paced in small circles and tugged at his hair, breathing as though the air were thin. "We are never going to get out of here."

Asha sighed and darted a look at Niall, who looked less angry and panicked but no less hopeless, and she knew she would get no back up from him. "Jean-Cathaire said there was more than one. Maybe one of the others is in better shape?"

Niall sent her a flat look. "You really don't know Solona."

"If we can find enough parts from all of them, maybe we can fix one," Lily suggested. "Would one be enough, or do you think they all have to be working?"

"One way to find out, right?" Brynn asked, driving his sword through a despair demon, as it came up the path. "Can you possibly find something to be happy about? Anything? This is getting a little out of hand..."

"I'm with him," Owain agreed, scouting for any other incoming demons. "But, at least they're not rage demons."

"They will be in another minute, if Jowan doesn't calm down," Niall pointed out, one hand on his face, to make sure he wasn't slipping again. So far he'd managed to keep it together, in front of Brynn and Owain. No point in upsetting the templars more than necessary. The last thing he needed was to die again.

Asha grabbed Niall by the hair and the hip and tipped him down to her level, following with a very long kiss. A very long, very excellent kiss, to judge by the few small sounds from Niall. When she let go, he straightened up, looking dazed.

"Are you sure now is really the time for that?" Lily asked, with a baffled look at Asha.

"Now is absolutely the time for that. Brynn's looking for something happy." Asha grinned and put an arm around Niall.
"Desire. Demons." Jowan gestured with both hands for each word, as if holding them up.

"Desire demons are looking for things you want and can't have, which means Niall and I are exactly what they're not looking for. You, on the other hand..." Asha tucked her chin and raised an eyebrow disapprovingly.

Jowan made a point of not looking at Lily. He was getting good at that, looking at everything around him except her.

"What I want right now is for us to go home," Jowan said. "I was under the impression that that was a desire we all share."

Niall took another moment to recover before responding. "And if any of us sees a particularly shapely veil tear apparatus, we'll know it's actually a demon playing off that desire, but I don't think that's something we have to worry about. You pitching a fit, on the other hand..."

"I was not pitching a fit! I was... expressing my concerns."

Asha hummed. "Loudly. And with kicking."

Brynn cleared his throat to get the attention of the squabbling mages. "Why don't we find the other two and decide from there how much kicking and cursing we should be doing?"

"They're all supposed to be in the hills around the village, right?" Niall leaned over the edge of the low cliff and looked to the sides.

"I can find them," Lily said, quietly.

"Shit, Lily, if you know what you're doing, take us there." Asha held out her arms, encouragingly. "How are you so sure?"

"I'm not a mage. I had to find something to do in Aeonar, so I just... see everything. And hear it, too." Lily shrugged and nodded to Brynn as she made her way back to the path leading down. "I saw what this one looked like, when we were coming up, and now I know what it means. I saw two others, on the way to town. I know where we're going."

Asha looked at Jowan. "She can do that? Man, you never should have took up blood magic."

Jowan sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, unchanging. He hadn't shaved since before he'd set out for Aeonar, and still only stubble met his palms. "I tell myself that every day. Also that if I didn't take up blood magic, we wouldn't be here, and she wouldn't have been in Aeonar in the first place. Which, I guess, means she can only do that because I took up blood magic, which is a shitty consolation."

A look from Lily said she agreed, and Jowan could feel himself shrivel. He had to get them out of here if he had any hope of making things right with her. This whole mess was supposed to be a heroic rescue!

A flat look from Niall said his desperation was not helping, and Jowan tried to curb his thoughts of Lily.

"Here." Unerring, Lily had led them to the second apparatus, and Jowan approached for a better look while the templars kept an eye out for demons.

This one was less smashed and more shredded, like someone with an axe had needed to work out his
anger. The mages and Lily stood silent around it, as though in mourning. Finally, Jowan wiped his hands over his face and groaned.

"What the *fuck*, Solona?"

"I don't think that was Solona, unless she's got skills I never got to see." Niall walked a slow circle around the wreckage. "A poleaxe, maybe? A really big sword? This thing looks like it's been diced."

"Waraxe," Owain said, after a moment. "I don't think the angle's right for a poleaxe and those gouges are way too wide for a sword." He laid his own sword in one to make the point.

"Merciful Andraste, remind me never to speak ill of the Wardens," Brynn clutched his sword more firmly and took a quick look around for demons. "Okay, it looks quiet. I'm just going to sit a moment, and then we can move on. Do you think you can avoid luring any demons for a bit? My hand's getting stiff."

Asha whispered something to Niall, who looked horrified, but after a few raised eyebrows, he grabbed Jowan's face and kissed him on the cheek.

"There. Don't be sad. Someone will kiss you," Asha teased, as Jowan tried to rub the cold spot off the side of his face.

Niall hadn't changed again, but they all knew it could happen again, and Jowan remembered it suddenly, with that uncanny chill in Niall's fingers and lips.

"That was gross. Don't ever kiss me again. Why would you--?" Jowan protested, but at least he'd stopped thinking of Lily.

Niall rolled his eyes and shrugged as innocently as he could manage, pointing at Asha.

The third apparatus was in no better condition, a melted lump that had fallen prey to some mage’s fire magic, but after the threat of another kiss from Niall, Jowan kept his thoughts to himself.
Chapter Summary

It is far too hot, as summer in the Anderfels tends to be. Kinnon and Peryn decide to spend some time together in a less-warm place, where Kinnon can present his gift.

The Petty Crown was cool, at least, with its thick walls and wet cloth stretched over the open parts of the windows, and it was under one of those windows that Kinnon and Peryn sat, with Kinnon periodically mashing his face into the cloth.

"It's so much less hot in here, and the window is so nice and cool," Kinnon groaned, the dry air sucking the moisture from his face almost as soon as he turned away from the cloth. "So's this robe. Thank you and thank Mother Amira. Petra's interested in getting some for all of us -- we'll pay for them. We should give something back for all Amira's help."

"I have heard you are already giving back to Mother Yotte. To the whole village. Everyone speaks of you." Peryn smiled and poured another glass from the pitcher of last season's beer. "They say Andraste sent you, and you can do the impossible."

"It's hardly impossible," Kinnon scoffed, swigging his beer and looking uncomfortably around the tavern, waiting to be accused as an apostate. "We're just young and healthy, and we'll bring in a harvest for free. The village won't need us after a few more years of Jan and his potions."

"I think you do not look well enough at yourself. If it was so easy as you say, more people would do it."

"More people will do it, once they're as healthy as we are." Kinnon knew it wasn't true, but he hoped he could pass off the magic as just skill and good health. "And I look at me just fine. I'm a healthy, thirty-something Fereldan, who tells terrible jokes and shouldn't be exposed to blood. And I'm pretty good looking, too."

"You are very good looking. Even better in these robes." Peryn tipped his head to the side, following the line of Kinnon's body down past the edge of the table.

What went unsaid was that Peryn now knew how good he looked outside of those clothes, and the thought had Kinnon clearing his dry throat and reaching for that pitcher himself. His gift for Peryn was a weight in his lap as he held it, waiting for the right moment to slide it across the table. He felt foolish now as he clutched its paper wrapping, wondering if it was too much or not enough, if Peryn would read all the wrong things into it. Assuming those things actually were wrong, to begin with.

Kinnon would blame his muddled thinking on the heat.

"Well, since you keep pampering me with these gifts," Kinnon said, deciding it get it over with, "I thought it was my turn. I got something for you."

Kinnon set the wrapped gift on the table and slid it over, answering Peryn's delighted yet surprised look with an awkward shrug.

"That is not a thing you need to do," Peryn said, warmly. "But, knowing you were thinking of me is
a gift itself."

"Isn't that what I usually say to you?" Kinnon asked with a crooked grin. His leg bounced under the table as Peryn tore into the paper.

As the rune came into view, Peryn recognised it immediately. "Barrier?" He turned it over to study the crafting. "This is not from the Circle. Dwarfwork?"

Kinnon nodded. "Yeah, I wanted to get you something you wouldn't find, usually, so I went to the dwarven market over the river. And when I saw that, I just... If we're going to this Conclave, I want to know you're going to be safe. Even here, I want to know you'll be safe. I've lost enough people."

Unclasping the chain, Peryn put the amulet around his neck at once. "I think no one has said that to me before. You are very kind." He took one of Kinnon's hands in both of his. "You are very good."

He paused. "And you are very handsome, too. How did I get so lucky, to meet you?"

"Hector," Kinnon said, before he could realise he sort of meant it. It had been Anders and that spicy shimmy contest. "I blame the spirit of Hector. He's responsible for all the good things around here, right?"

"Is it blame, when you like it? I think it is maybe credit? Thank?" Peryn smiled warmly, his eyes still lingering on Kinnon's hand.

"Thanks to Hector, then," Kinnon amended. Peryn's hands were rough, callused where he was used to holding a sword, and Kinnon remembered how gentle they had felt, softened with salve. "You are very kind too, you know," he said, repeating Peryn's words back to him. "And very good. And very handsome."

Kinnon could grow addicted to making Peryn smile like that, like he had offered him the moon and stars.

"I think," Peryn said softly, "that you are full of gifts, today. All better than the trinkets I give you."

"I don't know. I think Figurine Bran still tops the list."

Peryn laughed. Neither of them had pulled their hands away.

"I want to watch the sun set with you," Peryn decided, after a moment. "You will come with me?"

"Only if we can have supper. If I drink much more beer, you're going to have to carry me home."

"Speaking of home, Petra's not going to let you in. We're not supposed to have guests inside. Just in the courtyard is still fine, same as it always was. I mean, we were never supposed to have anyone inside, but Petra hadn't really been enforcing that... but then, with the other day..."

"I am sorry," Peryn apologised, drawing his hands back, but Kinnon caught him.

There was a long pause, before Kinnon swallowed and said, "I'm not. Er, no, I'm sorry you can't come in. I'm not sorry the other day happened. I might be sorry I have a stupid tattoo, but I'm definitely not sorry I got to... kiss you again."

"I am not sorry I kissed you," Peryn replied, that warm look returning to his eyes. "I think I am sorry that your friend saw."

Kinnon chuffed. "I think he's the sorry one. He just wishes someone would kiss him like that." Not a
templar, certainly, and kissing was not really his problem, but that was more than Peryn -- or anyone -- needed to know.

Peryn poured out the last few sips of beer. "So, we do not go to the abbey. There is room in town, and there will be fewer complaints from others if I kiss you, yes?"

"Not unless we give them something to complain about," Kinnon teased. He asked himself if this was something he really wanted to do, spend the night with a templar. But when he tried to come up with reasons why he shouldn't, he kept coming up empty.

"The inn is tall. We will ask for a window toward the sunset." Peryn smiled giddily at the idea. "And then we will see if there is enough kissing to make people complain."

This was a bad idea, and Kinnon knew it, but he wanted to do it anyway. He was a free man, and if he wanted to spend a night with a templar, he could do it. There would be no price for it, as long as that templar never found out the truth about him. And that, he thought, was something he could handle, for now.

"We can get a curry in the market, and maybe some of that sweet sauce. Supper and a sunset -- would you believe I've never done this before?" Kinnon laughed as Peryn drank the last of the beer.

"It is maybe the time for something new," Peryn said, with a smile, pushing out his chair.
Chapter Summary

Kinnon and Peryn take a room at the inn, in the hopes of having a quiet evening together. One thing leads to another leads to bed.

For once, everything seemed to go according to plan. They had gotten the room with the best view of the sky purpling towards dusk, their supper set out between them, and Kinnon wondered if this was what he had been missing, all those years in the tower.

Then again, Kinnon supposed he could have found both windows and templars in Kinloch Hold, if not the curry. But he was growing fond of this templar, in particular, even without the beer's warmth muddying his senses. This was still a bad idea, but as he watched Peryn lick sauce off his fingers, he couldn't bring himself to regret it just yet.

"I could not think of a better place to be," Peryn said, suddenly, reaching across the little table to take Kinnon's hand. "And I tried, so I could know if this was the best I could show you."

Kinnon scoffed and looked away, trying to figure out how much of the appeal of that statement was directly related to the volume of beer he'd had. "It's... definitely new. I mean, we stayed here one night, when we first got here, but... there were four of us to a room, and we'd been in the desert for weeks. Not the most romantic interlude."

"How did you come from Ferelden? Not on a boat?" Peryn looked confused at the idea. "Ah, you said something about riding on a camel, but I thought up from Tallo."

Lacing his fingers with Peryn's, Kinnon started to tell the story, or some version of it, anyway. "We came from a little place in northwestern Ferelden, not far from the Frostbacks, so we went up into the mountains and got a dwarven trade caravan to take us as guards. Oh, but we had to wait for them in an Avvar hold, where we had to prove we were accepted by the gods. Would you believe Sister Keili climbed up a cliff to win us the right to stay?" He wouldn't mention Fen'Din. He tried not to think too hard about Fen'Din.

"She is stronger than I thought," Peryn admitted, rubbing his thumb across Kinnon's knuckles. "So, you came by the Deep Roads?"

"Yes." Kinnon shuddered to think about it. That had been his least favourite part of their journey. Or second least, after Fen'Din in Hawk Hold. "Kal Sharok was incredible, but the Deep Roads themselves..." He shook his head. "We were reasonably safe, with a caravan that knew the way, but we still came across some darkspawn. I will never understand how the wardens do it, face them regularly and willingly. A particularly nasty one caught Val in the face with a fire spell." Kinnon gestured at the side of his face where Val had been hit.

"Ah, and so the scar." Peryn gestured too, but he did not let go of Kinnon with the other hand. "You were unharmed?"

"I was unharmed," Kinnon assured him with a smile. "Luckily, the dwarves knew what they were doing, and Keili is pretty good with a polearm."
"She is more and more surprising." Peryn smiled warmly. "But, so are you. You are a hero and an adventurer!"

"Oh, you must have some excitement. Mages and all..." Kinnon swallowed, nervously.

"Mages are not so exciting. I see mostly little children who are afraid of themselves, and I tell them I can bring them to a school where they can learn to be Wardens. Every child dreams of growing up to be a Warden. It is good not many of them keep that dream, or there would be no one left to build and grow food." Peryn laughed and picked another sliver of meat out of the curry. "You are afraid of mages?"

Kinnon snorted and waved his free hand. "Mages? No. They're just people, right? If I was going to be afraid of mages, I'd have to be afraid of grenadiers and swordsmen, too. You fear then when they're fighting you, not just because they exist." This would be the telling point, here. Peryn had seemed comfortable with the idea of magic, so far, but his response here would set the tone for the rest of the night, for Kinnon.

"That is it exactly, I think." The fine lines at the corners of Peryn's eyes creased even before the smile touched his lips. "Mages are people. Often, they are pleasant people. Sometimes, they are not. But, that is true of all people."

"Even templars?" Kinnon asked wryly.

"Templars are people, yes? But, I hope I am the pleasant kind."

He was, Kinnon decided. His stomach was a knot of tension that was slowly starting to loosen. He wondered what Kinloch Hold would have been like, if there had been more templars like Peryn. Would he have left?

"I can say you are the most pleasant templar I've ever met." And Kinnon hoped Peryn would never find out just how honestly he meant that, or how many templars he'd known to make that decision. "Definitely the only templar I've ever kissed."

"You are the only Chantry Brother I have ever kissed," Peryn admitted with a small smile. "And even if you are not a Brother, yet, you are still the first man."

"Weren't you telling me stories about running around kissing everyone in the valley?" Surprise flashed across Kinnon's face.

"Many pretty women. I like looking at men, too, but I do not kiss them. Except you." Peryn cleared his throat and put more curry in his mouth, before more words could come out, but that only worked until he realised what he'd said. With a hand over his mouth, he tried to swallow the half-chewed curry and continue. "I do not mean you look like a woman. Maybe it is just I have been waiting for a Fereldan man to kiss."

"Any Fereldan man?" Kinnon teased, grabbing another bite at the same time Peryn reached for the dish.

"A Fereldan man like you," Peryn amended, which was the right answer.

There was something sweet in that, in being an exception, but that also meant there were more unknowns to deal with than Kinnon had anticipated. Kinnon had a little more experience on that end, at least, but he doubted that experience -- mostly teenage foolishness involving orgies and closets -- would help him too much in this situation.
"Well, kissing Fereldans in general is always a good idea," Kinnon said, shifting just a bit closer without realising he was doing so. "I am glad I could open your eyes to that."

Peryn leaned in close enough that the smell of curry on their breaths was the only thing between them. "I should maybe do more of that," he suggested, "this kissing of Fereldans."

Kinnon moved first, one hand coming up to close Peryn's mouth before he pressed his lips to Peryn's. No sense inviting an accident on a night that was going so well. "There are so many other places you could be kissing this Fereldan," he whispered against Peryn's cheek. Lips were usually good, almost anywhere he could get them, and he was fairly sure this would prove no exception.

"Oh, yes. In the road, on a riverboat, on a farm, in the tavern..." Peryn teased, as Kinnon's hand released his chin, and he heard Kinnon choke on a laugh.

"In a bed," Kinnon suggested, drawing back a bit. He wasn't sure how this was supposed to go, but he was sure that if he didn't know, the best thing would be to start it lying down, where there would be less opportunities for tripping on the furniture or knocking over the remains of supper.

"That is a better option, yes," Peryn agreed, his eyes on Kinnon's lips. "And closer. We will kiss on a riverboat another time." Peryn leaned in for another, shorter kiss, cutting off Kinnon's laugh. And that was decidedly pleasant, the simple brush of lips against lips.

Then Peryn rose, gently bringing Kinnon up with him, and they paused to disentangle their legs from their chairs, Kinnon accidentally bumping the table with his hip. They threatened to capsize the curry when Peryn stepped close again, but then Kinnon pulled him away, towards the bed.

Kinnon pulled them down onto the bed at the same time Peryn leaned in for another kiss, and they ended up a tangle of limbs on top of the sheets, Peryn's soft chuckle a puff of air against Kinnon's cheek.

"I should've worn something else," Kinnon sighed as Peryn tried to decide whether he would bother to untangle the mess they'd made of themselves. "This is a really nice robe and I'd hate if anything happened to it."

Peryn paused in his deliberations, studying Kinnon's face for a clue. "You could remove it?"

"I could take it off, but then you'd be wearing too much." Kinnon shifted down toward the foot of the bed, nuzzling under Peryn's chin. Candles had always thought that was cute, when he did it.

"Ah, so if you are without robes, I must be. That is fair." Peryn managed to wedge a knee between Kinnon's thighs, only to have the tangled cloth between them stop him from following with more of his leg. "This is probably a good idea. I do not know how it is between men, but I have not been in a bed with a woman and still with my robes. Not a real bed. Not a bed for doing these things. Bed with robes is for sleeping only, I think."

"That is an excellent policy," Kinnon agreed with a regal nod and a coy smile. He gave Peryn a playful nudge out of the way and, once they had disentangled themselves from each other's robes, rose to his feet again. Peryn was there a moment later, helping him tug his robes over his shoulders, his hands eager to find skin.

"As good as you look in these robes," Peryn said as Kinnon folded his clothing over the back of a chair, "it is sad, I think, that they hide what is under." His gaze was nothing short of adoring as he looked Kinnon over.

With a smirk, Kinnon tugged at the sash around Peryn's waist. "Fair's fair," he reminded Peryn, who
was more than eager to even things out.

Kinnon's first thought was that Peryn looked far too soft to be a templar -- milk-white skin over a solid body of rounded edges, not a coarse line of hard muscle to be seen. His second thought was that he wanted to bury his face in all that softness. Like this, the uneven colour of Peryn's skin was all the more obvious, and in some ways, Kinnon was glad he'd stripped down like a fool, weeks earlier. At least he was the same shade of post-burn gold over most of his body, where Peryn was darkest around the eyes and hands, lighter on the rest of his face and neck, and creamy pale everywhere else.

"You are staring," Peryn pointed out, sounding slightly uncertain.

"Yes," Kinnon agreed, before clearing his throat. "I stare at sunsets, too."

And Peryn did make him think of the sun then, with his golden hair and that warm look in his eyes, and Kinnon did not resist as Peryn slid a hand around his waist and pulled him close.

"Those are good words," Peryn said. "Words I should say to you, not you to me, but I do not complain." He ran his hands up Kinnon's sides, marvelled at the shape of the body pressed to his, at the difference in angles to holding a woman. "I do not complain at all."

"Good." Kinnon nudged him back. "Now you can go back to kissing this Fereldan on a bed." He could not keep his hands off Peryn's skin as he spoke. There was a softness to him, yes, but there was a solidity under that softness that spoke of a physical strength Kinnon could admire.

"It will be my new sport. ... No, the other word, for passing the time with a thing you like to do..." Peryn looked entirely distracted for just as long as it took for Kinnon to trip him over the bed.

"Hobby?" Kinnon suggested, fingers trailing along the side of Peryn's thigh.

"I trust your word," Peryn replied, shrugging. "Your hands... maybe I should not trust, but they feel very good."

"Might as well trust the hands. They're not going anywhere you tell me not to put them." Kinnon's hands spread, fingers stretching across as much of Peryn's skin as they would cover.

"That is good, but I don't know where that is." Peryn laughed and kissed Kinnon's cheek and then his chest. "You are so hard," he observed, after a moment's kisses.

"Not yet, but if you keep doing that, I will be." Kinnon chuckled and eyed Peryn in confusion.

"No, the rest of you. Like you are made of sticks and twine." Peryn looked concerned. "You are well? You eat enough meat and drink enough water?"

"Is that the secret?" Kinnon asked, sinking his fingers into the resilient softness of Peryn's waist. "Maybe I should drink more water. This is very nice."

"It is," Peryn hummed in agreement, though Kinnon did not know if he meant the touch at his waist or the press of his sticks-and-twine body against his. Maybe both, Kinnon decided as his hands continued their exploration, mapping out the planes of Peryn's back, feeling the shift of muscles under his skin.

Peryn's pleased sigh tickled Kinnon's collarbone before Peryn bent to press a kiss against just that spot. There was something decadent in this, in having the time to spend exploring each other's bodies, and Kinnon rather liked the unhurried way Peryn touched him, as though he was taking the
time to memorise each part of him.

Then again, Kinnon also liked the noise Peryn made when his hands found the templar's ass.

"Is that a no?" he asked, just to be on the safe side.

"That is surprise, but a good surprise," Peryn assured him, hands following a similar path. As his hand cupped Kinnon's ass, one long leg slung over Peryn's thigh, nudging him closer.

Kinnon rolled his hips, lazily, revelling in the feel of warm skin pressed against him. Even after a year, it was still a novelty to be naked, to be lying down. He treasured the sensations, so different to rushed trysts over desks and in cramped closets, as his hands absently kneaded Peryn's ass.

"You are good?" Peryn asked, slightly concerned at the distraction on Kinnon's face, as he drew back for a higher kiss.

"I am so good, I lost my mind entirely." Kinnon huffed out a laugh and squeezed his eyes shut. "This is so much better than I'm used to. There's a warm bed, a door that locks, and you're naked. I, ah..." He snorted again. "The joys of communal living."

"This I understand," Peryn agreed, with a low chuckle, kissing his way down Kinnon's neck, to his chest. "It is why I do not mind riding the river. It is all the time I did not have alone, before."

"That. That right there." And Kinnon wasn't sure if he was agreeing with the sentiment or the touch of Peryn's tongue against his nipple.

Peryn repeated that motion anyway, for good measure, closing his lips around Kinnon's nipple and feeling him squirm. Kinnon could feel those lips smile around him, could feel Peryn bring a hand up to the other side of his chest, fumbling a bit as it squeezed. Peryn recovered quickly, giving Kinnon's nipple a pinch, the pleasant twinge making Kinnon's soft laugh stutter.

"I do not have breasts," Kinnon reminded him, prompting an embarrassed chuckle from Peryn.

"So I notice," Peryn said, stretching up to kiss the smirk off Kinnon's lips, careful still to keep his lips closed.

His hands returned to Kinnon's ass instead, as he rocked down into the man below him.

Kinnon began to think he should've taken Anders up on the offer of explaining how this was supposed to work -- not that the two of them wouldn't figure it out soon enough, it couldn't be that different -- but just because he'd expected Peryn would know enough to get them through, and this had already begun to get a bit silly. Not that he minded silly, if he were honest with himself. Better that than any number of things. Better than too serious. But, he still would've felt a bit better with at least one clue between them, other than the knowledge that exactly zero parts of Peryn's body belonged in any of his orifices, which was going to make this interesting.

"We remembered to pick up oil, didn't we?" Kinnon panted, knowing he'd thought of it at some point, but not if they'd actually bought it in the rush to get supper and a room.

Peryn left another kiss in the centre of Kinnon's chest before he leaned over the edge of the bed to dig through his bags, finally handing up a bottle, before he sat up. "You are moving quickly," he observed.

"I'm not," Kinnon corrected, pouring a bit of oil into his hand. He set the bottle aside and rubbed his hands together, before holding them out to Peryn. "Come here. I learnt some things from a very
beautiful woman, and I want to make a fool of myself."

"So far you have done no foolish things," Peryn said, eyeing Kinnon's greased-up hands as he sidled closer. "But, maybe that means it is time."

Kinnon stuck out his tongue at Peryn's teasing and manoeuvred him until Peryn's back was facing him. Kinnon could only remember bits and pieces of the path Isabela's hands had taken, but Peryn's broad shoulders were the obvious starting point. Kinnon dug his thumbs into the meat of the muscle that joined neck to shoulder, his hands and fingers working in slow circles over Peryn's skin.

Peryn hummed in appreciation, arching into the touch. "This is... a good surprise."

Kinnon grinned, working his hands in whatever direction felt right. "It seemed like a good excuse to touch you all over."

Peryn chuckled. "You do not need an excuse."

Thinking it through, Kinnon let his hands wander, listening to the little sounds Peryn made as his fingers pressed into some places. "Well, the door locks, so you're the only one I'd have to excuse myself to. I guess I'll just take your word for it."

"Good. This is not a time for argument." Peryn tipped his head back, resting it on Kinnon's shoulder. "This is the time for me to hope I can make you feel this good."

"I have no doubt you'll think of something." Kinnon's hands slid around from Peryn's back to his chest, still kneading and squeezing.

"I also do not have breasts," Peryn teased, and Kinnon's laugh caught them both by surprise. "You are very loud when I surprise you. I wonder if that is the only time you are loud."

"It... probably is. The joys of communal living, again." Kinnon sighed, pouring a bit more oil into his hands before he ran them down Peryn's thighs, trying to remember that place Isabela had put her thumbs to turn him into a panting mess.
Chapter Summary

A whole lot more time in bed with Kinnon and Peryn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kinnon felt as well as heard the cadence of Peryn's breathing change as his hands just skirted the inside of his thighs. With a smirk, Kinnon ran his thumbs down the muscle there before bringing his hands back to rub Peryn's hips and lower back, teasing the skin just above the curve of his ass.

Peryn arched back into his touch. "Your hands," Peryn sighed, "are evil."

"Evil in a good way?" Kinnon teased, his hands returning to Peryn's front, working the oil into Peryn's stomach, feeling the muscles shiver under his fingers.

"In the most good way," Peryn assured him, leaning back against Kinnon's chest. With his head resting on one bony shoulder, Peryn looked at Kinnon. "I would like to touch you. Maybe have my revenge for your evil hands."

"Oh, goodness. I don't know if I could bear such a thing," Kinnon teased, voice breathy and fluttery with dramatic concern, as he dragged his fingers down Peryn's body and splayed them over his thighs. "Your revenge might be far too much for my delicate constitution to take!"

Peryn twisted around in Kinnon's arms, knocking Kinnon back across the bed, and leaning over him. "I will get cool water and fan you until you wake, if you faint at my touch," he joked, the curve of his lips and crinkle at the corners of his eyes ruining his attempt at sincerity.

"Oh, well, in that case it's all right. I wouldn't want to miss a moment of it." Kinnon's eyebrows lifted and he ran a finger down the middle of Peryn's chest.

Peryn's hand was gentle, as he caressed Kinnon's side, and Kinnon squirmed at the sudden ticklish sensation. As Peryn's eyebrow lifted in mischievous contemplation, Kinnon pointed straight at his nose.

"No."

Peryn laughed and reached for the oil, picking it up from where Kinnon had left it and kissing the tip of Kinnon's nose. "You do not like being made to laugh."

"I laugh at things that are funny. That's not funny." But, Kinnon softened his words with a slick hand against Peryn's lower back.

"Mmm. Now is maybe not the time for funny, anyway. Happy, but not funny." Peryn tipped the bottle, spilling a bit of oil into the middle of Kinnon's chest, watching it pool.

"Indeed. I might be insulted if you find certain parts of this funny," Kinnon said with mock seriousness.
Coating his hands in the oil, Peryn started to massage Kinnon's chest in gentle circles, increasing the pressure with each pass. "Then I will do this with the most..." Peryn paused, hands still moving as he tried to find the word. "What is the word? Solemness?"

"Solemnity," Kinnon corrected automatically, and Peryn could feel Kinnon's chuckle under his hands. "And really, I think I'll take funny over solemn."

"I think that I agree."

Peryn's hands rubbed up Kinnon's shoulders and back down his chest, and Kinnon's breathing deepened as he settled into the sensations. This was familiar, like Peryn rubbing salve into his sunburn, only this time he was horizontal and Peryn's touch held more promise.

"You don't have to stop there," Kinnon offered, after Peryn's fingers traced just above the top of his smalls a few times.

"I do not wish to get oil in the cloth. It is difficult to clean." Peryn grinned sheepishly. "I have done this."

"Let me show you how very little I care about oil on my underthings." Kinnon managed to get one leg around Peryn without kicking him, and then shoved off his smalls with both greasy hands, kicking them off the bed. He paused, in the middle of bringing his leg back across. "Unless you object. I could put those back on..."

"I am relieved to see that Fereldans are made much the same as Anders," Peryn joked, pulling Kinnon's leg back around him. "You are my first. I know not what I would do if you were too different."

"I promise Fereldans aren't secretly part kraken." Kinnon couldn't keep a straight face, and turned his head to bury his laughter in the pillow. "Well, most of them, anyway. I've heard things get a little weird around Gwaren."

Peryn joined in his laughter. "Kraken would not have been my first guess, with Fereldans."

"There's a dog joke in there somewhere, and I thank you for not saying it." Kinnon made a face that only had Peryn grinning more broadly. "Now. Where were we?" A squeeze of Kinnon's leg thrown over Peryn's hip was a good reminder.

"We were getting oil on everything, I think," Peryn said, his voice dropping to a soft rumble.

"Not everything yet," Kinnon said with a suggestive tilt of his eyebrows.

"Ah, that is my fault." Peryn leaned in to kiss Kinnon's throat, one oiled hand finding Kinnon's hip, pausing there before following the crease of his thigh down to his groin.

Had the touch been any lighter, Kinnon would have been laughing and kicking, but as it was, the shiver that ran through him was anything but discomfort, and he tried to pull Peryn down onto him, with his legs. Peryn braced himself against the bed, with one hand, and dragged his slick fingers along the soft skin behind Kinnon's balls. For a moment, they looked at each other in confusion, and then Kinnon burst out laughing.

"No, it's not, but do it again. That still feels good, and if you want to get that potential grease sop out of the way, I'll show you just how good." Kinnon tugged at Peryn's smalls and tipped his hips up, rubbing himself against Peryn's fingers.
Peryn looked at his hands and tried to figure out how to squirm out of his smalls without falling onto Kinnon. After a moment, Kinnon unwrapped one leg from Peryn and tried to use his toes to help.

"This is foolish," Peryn decided, easing himself of the bed, to strip off his smalls, leaving them in a pile with Kinnon's.

As he returned to the bed, Kinnon welcomed him, hands soft from the oil stroking and kneading every part they could reach, and Peryn's breath stuttered as those fingers firmly pressed between his thighs, making tiny circles.

"Oh," Peryn breathed, returning his hand to where it had been on Kinnon's flesh.

"I agree," Kinnon said in kind, arching up into Peryn's hand.

Peryn's touch gained in confidence, still gentle enough to tease but with enough pressure behind it now to prevent Kinnon from breaking into giggles. Kinnon, in turn, basked in the shivers and the small noises he wrung from Peryn, and the two continued their oily exploration, heated breaths meeting heated skin.

Then, in the course of mapping out this new territory, Peryn's fingers dipped a bit too low, and Kinnon went still beneath him, the hand that had been bringing Peryn such pleasure now holding Peryn's wrist.

"That is not... uh..."

Peryn looked up to find Kinnon's face red and his eyes wide, and Peryn moved his hand back to Kinnon's hip.

"I am sorry," Peryn assured him, his thumb rubbing circles on Kinnon's skin. "You are well?"

Kinnon nodded, blinking a few times as he composed himself. "I've had things... in... that's not somewhere things go." Half a laugh startled out of him. "I'm not like the other boys," he said, breathily, fluttering his eyelids dramatically.

Peryn looked confused for a sliver of a moment, and then a smile broke across his face. "I do not know about 'other boys'. Just you."

That gave Kinnon a moment's pause -- he knew it, Peryn had said, earlier -- but after so many years in the tower it still seemed a bit strange, though he suspected the templars got to be pickier, anyway. Either way, this would be an adventure. It already was one. Strange positions, nakedness, no magic at all, and the oddest desire to have this templar, in particular, keep touching him.

He nudged Peryn with his hip, a suggestion to lie beside him instead of over him, which Kinnon thought might ease his own mind a bit. "Come down here so you have both your hands, and I'll show you some things I do like. Tell me you didn't knock the oil all over the bed."

Peryn's lips pressed together to hold in a small sound of amusement, as he picked up the closed bottle and set it on Kinnon's chest, before rolling to the side. "We like the same things, most times."

Kinnon slicked his hand and rolled to face Peryn, tucking the bottle between their chests. "I think you'll like this, too." One of the very small number of good ideas that had come out of that particular closet, Kinnon thought, as he wrapped his long fingers around Peryn's knob and his own, giving both a long, slow stroke.

The sounds Peryn made told Kinnon he was right, a low moan wrung from his throat. Kinnon liked
that sound, liked also the look on Peryn's face, skin flushed and lips parted in pleasure. That look alone made this so much better than the last time he had done this.

"Your hands are still evil," Peryn panted, drawing a breathy laugh from Kinnon. "That is... still not a complaint."

"Good. I'm not sorry."

A twist of his wrist made Kinnon shiver and Peryn mutter something in Ander, and Peryn clutched at Kinnon's hip to steady himself, his eyes intent on Kinnon's face. Kinnon wondered what he looked like then, hoped he looked half as good as Peryn like this.

Wrapping one arm around Kinnon's back, to hold him closer, Peryn worked the arm he was laying on up until he could flick his fingers over Kinnon's nipple, again, this time earning him a gasp and an open-mouthed swallow, obvious on Kinnon's thin neck.

"So quiet," Peryn observed, as Kinnon ducked under his chin to kiss and rub stubble against his neck.

"Mmm," Kinnon agreed, rocking his hips against Peryn, and adding another rhythm to the slick path the two of them made through his fist. But, the pleasure was intense, even in its simplicity, and Kinnon found words in his mouth, where an Orlesian novel might have put moans. "I want to stay here with you, all night. I want to sleep with you here all wrapped around me, and wake up with your smell on my skin. I want to do this again before we even finish waking up. Can we have that? I want it." His breath came quicker. "I want you."

Kinnon thought the pleasure had shorted out his hearing when he heard Peryn rumble something in response but could not make out the words, but between pants and shivers, Kinnon realised that he had spoken in Ander. The adoring tone translated even if the words didn't.

"Yes," Peryn finally managed in Common, as though that one word was the only one he could reach. The look in his eyes and the touch of his hand said the rest: you have me.

It was heady, knowing that his touch had knocked a man back into his native tongue, and watching Peryn unravel was the most arousing thing Kinnon had seen in a long time.

Peryn's arms shook as he clutched at any part of Kinnon he could reach, panting and shuddering as his hips kept their own rhythm, broken pleas in a language Kinnon didn't speak on every stuttering breath. He wrapped a leg around Kinnon's hip, as if he might never let go.

Kinnon bit his own lip not to lean in and lick Peryn's lips, to lick those breaths out of this gorgeous man's mouth, but even like this, he knew. He remembered he was with a templar, and the thought nearly knocked him back from the edge, but the low moan that sounded like it started in Peryn's soul was more than enough to drag him back, if not quite enough to tip him over, as the first warm, wet splash hit his chest.

Just a little more -- that slick hand tightened, wringing every drop out of Peryn who moaned and pleaded, barely above a whisper. A few tiny, desperate sounds finally squeezed out between Kinnon's clenched teeth, as he rutted against Peryn's softening flesh in his fist. Finally, his breath caught, a staggered inhale as every muscle in his body flexed, arcing Kinnon back as he spilled over his trembling hand.

Their heavy breaths filled the silence as they laid there, loose-limbed and spent, covered in sweat and grease and each other. Kinnon allowed himself to float in that haze, but as reality returned to him, so
did the realisation of what he had just done. He had just had sex with a templar. The spunk cooling on his skin belonged to a templar.

But then Kinnon looked at Peryn, at the soft and profoundly happy look on his sweat-streaked face, and he shoved those panicky thoughts back down where they belonged. This wasn't 'a templar'. This was Peryn, and he looked thoroughly used in all the best ways.

"I think we got oil on the sheets," Kinnon murmured, startling a soft chuckle from Peryn.

"There are worse ways to make sheets dirty." Peryn buried his fingers in Kinnon's hair and pulled him in for another close-lipped kiss.

The day was cool, yet, as the sun arced up into the sky, slow and steady, and it was just starting to heat up, when Kinnon got off the ferry. Humming jauntily, he stopped in the market to pick up a few things, getting comments from a few merchants about it being early in the day for a smile like that.

By the time he made it back to the abbey, the sun had begun its ascent into the hours no one wanted to be outside, and mages were moving into the shade in the courtyard or back into the coolness inside the thick mud and stone walls.

Val's voice caught him as he approached the doors. "So, the prodigal halfwit returns."

"Shut the fuck up, Val." Kinnon smiled brightly, reaching for the heavy door handles, a basket hanging from his arm. "I'm not in the mood."

Val kicked away from the wall where he was leaning and stepped closer, the skeletal cat still weaving between his feet. He studied Kinnon's face, as they stood in the open doorway. "You did it, didn't you? You fucked a templar." Astonished disgust flashed across Val's face as his voice grew louder. "What are you taking lessons from Anders? Is that it?"

Gerda and Candles came into the front hall from opposite directions, looking at each other, and then at the men framed in the sunlight from outside.

"Get out of my face, Val," Kinnon said, his good mood evaporating.

Val shook his head in disbelief, neither backing up nor backing down. "You're not even going to try to deny it?" He made a disgusted noise, dogging Kinnon as he pushed past the doorway. "Was he worth it, hm? Tell me he at least bought you something nice before you bent over for him--"

Kinnon turned to punch Val in the nose, only to find Candles's fist there ahead of him. His nose made a sickening crunch, and he staggered back to fall ungracefully on his ass.

Candles swore under her breath shaking out her hand, and Kinnon turned a bright smile her way... only to find her fist flying a second time, this time towards his face. He saw stars, and then his ass was on the ground too.

"A templar, Kinnon?" she shouted as Kinnon touched his bruising cheek. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that he was pretty hot, all things considered, and he's been nothing but kind and decent for more than a year!" Kinnon protested, shoving the basket he was holding into Gerda's hands, so nothing would get broken or bled on. "I was thinking that's a pretty long time for him not to have been pushing for... anything. I was thinking it was time for me to make up my mind, so I did,
and I liked it, and I'm probably going to do it again."

Val opened his mouth, and Kinnon heard him inhale.

"And I didn't do it in the house, so you can fuck right off. If I fuck up, it's just going to be me, do you hear me? You're all just decent, unsuspecting religious folk, and I'm the dangerous apostate. But, it doesn't matter, because I'm not going to fuck up." A wave of dizziness washed over Kinnon, as he stood up, and he put his hand on the wall. "And it's not going to last, anyway. He likes women. I like women. It's just... kind of nice. It's the kind of normal other people have. I just wanted to try it out, and you know, it's pretty good."

Candles's shoulders sagged, and she rubbed her forehead, suddenly looking more weary than angry. "Fuck, Kinnon, you know I get that. We all do. But this could never be that kind of 'normal', not with a templar."

Kinnon held up his hand to keep her from saying more. "I don't need the lecture, Candles. Trust me. Anything you can say, I've already told myself, likely more than once. So unless any of you have something to say that doesn't involve my date night with Peryn, I would like to get to the kitchen, please. Anyone? Candles?" He ignored Val. "Gerda?"

Gerda, still holding his basket, looked as wide-eyed as a startled deer. She shrugged. "I like your new robes?"

Kinnon chuffed. "Thanks, Gerda."

Chapter End Notes

For those who only get their Rhapsody fix, here, the next Fan Chat is this Saturday, 12 Aug 2017 @ 13:00-17:00 EDT. (What time is that?) You're welcome to join the Discord server in advance!
As the summer wore on, in addition to adding a well to the outer courtyard, the mages added shelter to the courtyard, hanging waxed cloth between the gate and the building, to provide more space for their sudden visitors to wait in. The village had discovered that they could petition the abbey for help with things they were unable to deal with, personally, and the Brothers and Sisters, there, would make the time to solve the problem. They had always gone to the Chantry for aid, as was tradition in the Anderfels, but where the village Chantry had only three people, two young enough to offer assistance, the abbey had forty, so there was always help to be had.

Each day, the petitions would be heard by whoever happened to be outside, and Petra would find someone to go -- even if 'go' was down the road to get Anders. But, more often, the problems were farming troubles, from diseased plants to bugs to, on this particular day, a field taken by the rain.

Cormac came in with a woman about his own age, a small child on her hip. Both looked wet and exhausted. "I need Kinnon and Gerda. Maybe Val, if you can spare the asshole," he told Fen'Din, who sat in the shade, sketching the mages hanging the washing.

"We can always spare Val. Are you sure you want him?" Fen'Din asked, eyes subtly curious.

"I'm not sure, but I need Gerda, either way. I need someone who's good with water." Cormac took a breath and the woman cut in.

"The flood came last night. Our crops went nearly to the river." She choked up and tightened her grip on Cormac's arm. "My husband was caught in it and--"

"Jan's got him. He'll be fine. Just needs to dry out a bit," Cormac assured her, turning his attention back to Fen'Din. "But, we've got to get the fields back in before the rain starts again. I can't do it, myself."

Fen'Din nodded and rose, closing his sketchbook. "I'll see if Petra will go with you, too. Jan shouldn't be working alone."

Cormac snorted and rolled his eyes. "You know Jan..."

To Kinnon, it looked more like a swamp than a field, the ground at the edge of the farm squishy and sucking at his boots. Crops floated above the muddy water or clustered where the ground was highest, and Kinnon could picture the trajectory of the flood.

"Well, this is a mess," Gerda sighed. Kinnon hummed in agreement.

"And how, exactly, are we supposed to clean it up?" Val asked. Kinnon fought not to roll his eyes. He had been wondering when Val would start complaining. "Aren't we supposed to..." Val glanced back at the house, where Jan and Petra were seeing to the family. He lowered his voice anyway.
"Aren't we supposed to be hiding the fact that we're mages? How are the three of us supposed to clean all this up without anyone knowing magic is involved?"

"Invoke the Maker's blessing?" Kinnon suggested with a shrug. "We'll just have to move slowly so it doesn't look quite so suspicious."

"Get the water, first," Cormac suggested. "Once you get the water moving you can do just about anything, as long as you're holding a shovel, and nobody's going to ask. Besides, doubly nobody’s going to ask, when you save their life."

"It's just a field. Anders already did all the saving," Val huffed, folding his arms petulantly, as he eyed the swirling water, still trying to drag things down to the river. He kicked Kinnon in the ankle. "We need a pool and then a channel from it. Nothing too straight, if we want control of what's getting past us."

"For once, I agree with Lord Poncy de Orleais," Gerda said, crouching down in water that was already up to her knees. "Mack, go get us something to catch all this with. And some shovels. You're right about the shovels, I think. I'll keep anything else from making it to the river."

The water curved inward, swirling back from the road as if it had hit a rock, and Kinnon's fingers twitched, shaping the ground around it to support the curve Gerda was trying to make. The rise of the land looked like it was just the water parting, and under the surface, the ground moved out of the way about as fast as the water could fill the growing hole. The earth rolled as if the water were moving it, slow and thick, but instead, it moved the water, the ground drawing together more stably as Cormac returned with a bundle of tools slung over his shoulder.

"Two shovels, a hoe, a pike, and a bit of trellis. Best I could get my hands on. All I could find that hadn't already been washed out, really."

Kinnon took a shovel. "I would tell you to give the hoe to Val, but I'm not sure he'd be able to handle it."

Val shot him a black look, taking the pike and holding it in a way that was meant to be menacing. Kinnon met that look, and some of the water-logged earth shifted under Val, making him stumble and nearly fall into the water.

"Boys," Gerda said sharply, glaring at Kinnon. "Can we focus on what we're supposed to be doing, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," Kinnon grumbled, ignoring Val to better focus on the shift of earth and water. They half-assedly pretended to use their tools as they worked. Slowly, the ground started to look more like a field and less like a swamp, even though the crops were scattered everywhere.

"Can you keep this under control?" Gerda asked Val, as she started looking for hints as to where the grain and vegetables had started their journey.

"An apprentice could keep this under control, at this point. I don't think Jowan could fuck it up." Val snorted and nudged the water to keep it moving the way they wanted it to, instead of washing out one of the barriers.

"I'm going to remember you said that, you know," Gerda warned, smiling sharply. "That'll be something to hang on the wall -- Lord Poncy Orlesian outdone by the whiny maleficar who could barely put his smalls on forward."

"Who's a whiny maleficar?" Cormac looked up from the ground he'd turned from swamp to muddy

"Can we not talk about blood magic, thank you?" Kinnon rubbed his face on his sleeve, wiping away the combination of sweat and humidity. "In fact, can we just not talk about blood while we're trying to work? While you're expecting me to do delicate and dangerous things that would not benefit from me drowning?"

"I'm not a blighted maleficar!" Val snapped, barely deflecting a bolt of lightning that arced down from the surprisingly clear sky. "And neither was my great-grandfather!"

"Says you," Kinnon scoffed, turning around to find Gerda behind him, half a dozen long stalks already standing in a row beside her.

"I was referring to Jowan," Gerda cut them off, hoping to calm down Val before they ended up with another storm they did not need. "Jowan was, uh..." She shook her head at Cormac and shrugged. "He was very good at screwing up in new and interesting ways. He's become the standard for competency. Or incompetency."

"Ask your cousin about him some time," Kinnon added, continuing to reform the land so that the river stayed on the correct side. "He almost got her sent to Aeonar, from what I heard. Lucky for her, she got sent to the Wardens instead."

"And now the idiot's probably dead in a ditch somewhere," Val added, lip curled in a sneer. "Templars still hadn't found him last I heard, but he's too good at pissing people off to be alive."

"Your cousin's Solona, right?" Gerda asked, straightening another plant. "I bet she killed him with her bare hands. Everybody's gonna tell you what a hero she is, but she was scary, and that is exactly the kind of thing she'd do. Over lunch."

"Yeah..." Kinnon sighed, with a wistful smile. "She was something else."

"You just have a death wish, don't you?" Val swept a broken stalk of grain out of the water and tossed it to Gerda. "That's your problem."

"It is not a death wish," Kinnon groaned, rolling more of the ground back up the slope to where it belonged. "I just like a little backbone. A bit of excitement."


"Candles is only a death wish if you give her a reason to set your genitals on fire," Kinnon argued, "which is something that you do on a daily basis, not me. And Solona was just the one time. Or..." Kinnon squinted, tilting his head as he tried to remember. "No, I don't think that other time was her. One time. At most, one time and a half."

"I don't want to know what the 'half' means," Gerda sighed, keeping her focus on the crops as much as possible. Slowly, the scattered leavings were returning to neat rows.

"And the templar?" Val pressed Kinnon. "What's your excuse there?"

Kinnon gave a tight shrug. "I already gave you my excuse, Val. He's hot."

"Candles is much hotter," Gerda argued, snapping her fingers at Cormac and pointing to a spot the ground was still too soft to hold the stalks upright.
"In the most literal sense," Kinnon agreed, nudging the stone a little higher on the edge of a channel.

"Once you go Anders, you never go back." Cormac chuckled and spread his hands on the ground, chasing the water toward the drainage channels.

"Less specific," Kinnon decided after a moment. "Once you go Ander, it'll take a lot to drag you back."

"Better 'back' than 'to Hossberg','" Val sniped, swatting the rain aside, as it started to come down again. It would look like the wind. Technically, it even was the wind. "If you've got that much of an ache to see the city, you could just go back there, and maybe not get completely wasted, this time."

"Oh, says the guy who got just as wasted and woke up under two old ladies and a goat?" Kinnon scoffed, slingling an actual shovel-full of mud in approximately Val's direction, not close enough to hit, but more than close enough to splash.

Val hopped back a step, cursing under his breath. "At least the stink of old lady and goat came off, unlike that tattoo." He stopped diverting the rain just above Kinnon. In fact, he funnelled much of the other rain so that it hit Kinnon only.

Kinnon scowled and sputtered at the sudden amount of water falling in his face. "Dammit, did everyone know about that before me?" He brushed back rain-drenched hair and readied another shovelful of mud in threat.

"Pretty much, yeah," Gerda said. She kicked aside Kinnon's shovel and shot a glare at Val. "Maybe we should have brought Candles to punch some more sense back into you two."

"She would have to punch him black and blue for him to gain any sense," Kinnon grumbled. "For the Maker's sake, Val, turn off the water! We're supposed to be making the field less drenched!"

"And we're not supposed to be mages," Cormac pointed out, mildly, "so knock that off before we all get dragged to Hossberg and Kinnon has to suffer the single most embarrassing breakup possible."

"That would almost be worth it," Val hissed, but turned his attention back to directing the water away from them.

"You have no chill, Val." Gerda shook her head and sighed. "Zero. When the Maker was handing out the ability to calm the fuck down, he clearly skipped you."

"And yet, you keep talking." Val shot a disgruntled look over his shoulder.

Another hour in, and the woman who'd shown up at the abbey appeared in the field, carrying a basket that she held out to Cormac. "Jannik says you should have this," she told him, looking over the half-restored field, jaw trembling as relief flooded her features. "How have you done this? It's almost half our crops!"

"Sorry," Gerda apologised, leaning around Cormac to pull a potion she recognised out of the basket. "Some of it really did end up in the river. But, we'll get everything else back in. Did I guess about where it was supposed to go?"

"Sorry?" The woman looked completely confused. "You've saved half our crops. It's more than anyone could expect after ... that. And it's early, yet. It's not even a day! Whatever sacrifices you made, the Maker has blessed you, and us through you. Thank you."

"And thank you!" Cormac said, around a mouthful of sandwich. "And Jan. I was getting hungry, but
I didn't want to impose."

Kinnon's stomach made its intentions known, loudly.

"It's *your* food," the woman told him. "A runner came from over the river."

"Fen'Din," Kinnon realised. "We left without taking anything, and he'd have noticed."

"Food and death," Val muttered, reaching for a potion. "All he ever thinks about."

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Sister Ingill insisted Brother Derek go over the numbers again.

"This is way too much," she insisted, squinting down at his ledger and trying to find the math error she knew had to be there. "This is no way we've brought in all this this month alone! That's more than twice what our stores had at this time last year!"

"I assure you it is no error," Derek said with the patience of someone used to Ingill's cynicism. "But you are welcome to tally the stores yourself." He pointed at the over-stuffed cupboard and the bags of barley perched precariously atop it.

Ingill hesitated. "Then how do you account for this?"

"The Maker's blessing, of course," Derek said pleasantly, earning an unimpressed look from Ingill. "No? He has blessed us with a new abbey full of charitable souls. Clearly they have done well by the townspeople."

"This is outrageous, Derek, and you know it," Ingill insisted, pulling down a similar ledger, with a small green stripe on the binding -- ledgers from the best and worst years were marked for quick comparisons. She opened to the summer and laid it on the table beside the book Derek was working with. "This is eighteen Blessed, the best year we have records for, and what you've got is even more than that. This isn't possible."

"Obviously it's possible. It's happening." Derek finally rolled his eyes. "Maybe it's the aftermath of the Blight, in the south. Something's finally given the land some time to recover."

"It's magic. There are mages in this town -- *apostates*! That is the only way this could be happening."

"Or, we're just having a good summer, with all the extra farm help." Derek looked entirely unimpressed.

"Venatori luring our farmers into complicity with the next invasion," Ingill countered. "You know they're out there, that they've been here. You remember what happened in the market."

"And you know that our people would not be having that, no matter how many crops they helped bring in!"

Mother Yotte poked her head into the doorway. "What is all this fuss about?" she asked, eyeing the pair of ledgers Ingill had open on the desk.

"Sister Ingill was just questioning my math," Derek answered.

"As you would question mine, if I came to you with this!" Ingill stabbed at the newer ledger with a finger. "The numbers are high, suspiciously so. If Brother Derek is certain of these numbers, then we are left with the problem of 'how'."
Yotte shook her head in amazement, stepping fully into the room to look at the ledgers over Ingill's shoulder. "First Hector's spirit, now this. The Maker showers us with blessings this year!"

Ingill closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. Was she the only one with any sense? "Or the inhabitants of our new abbey have some questionable talents."

"Oh, I don't think that's a bad thing! They're certainly talented people. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was their devotion to the Maker that let them work so hard." Yotte smiled warmly at Ingill and Derek.

"But, you do know better?" Ingill accused. "And what do you know, that we don't?"

"Why, just that it's their devotion to doing the Maker's work -- that is their talents come from hard work, not just prayer and offerings. I'd hope that after all these years in the Maker's service you've learnt that!"

Derek choked on a laugh, trying to pass it off as a sneeze. "Dusty in here."

"They're Tevinter infiltrators!" Ingill groaned, looking like she'd be crushed by the weight of having to say it again. "It is magic. There's no Spirit of Hector, either. It's a mage. We are beset with apostates!"

"Ingill, dear, if this is what being beset with apostates looks like, I'm not sure I have any complaints. There are less children and livestock missing this year than in most of the last ten years, so I can be fairly sure that even if they were, they're not malefics." Yotte's lips twitched in a suggestion of a smile. "Besides, isn't Ser Peryn having an affair with that nice ginger Initiate? He'll never make full Brother, if he keeps that up, but I'm sure Ser Peryn would've noticed being surrounded by mages, on every visit. If he wasn't skilled at his job, he wouldn't be riding this route."

"I suspect Ser Peryn would be a bit too distracted to notice either way," Ingill said through her teeth. "And he is just one man, against all of them. That 'ginger Initiate' might have bewitched him, somehow!"

"Now, do not be uncharitable, sister," Yotte gently admonished, laying a hand on Ingill's shoulder. "These are some serious accusations you are pulling out of a few numbers. Could you not accept the possibility, for a moment, that these fine men and women are exactly who they say they are?"

"Only if you accept the possibility that I am right."

"Of course." Yotte smiled, not at all deterred. "Anything is possible through the Maker's will."

Ingill sighed, all the weight of her frustration in that sound. It was like talking to a wall.
A Plan of Escape

Chapter Summary

Jowan and his unfortunate companions come up with a plan to tour places the Veil has been known to be thin, in Ferelden, in the hopes that somewhere, it's torn enough to break through.

The sunless sky stretched out for an eternity, like it had every day since they'd gotten into the Fade. But, this time, they had some direction, at least. Lily had started keeping a list of places the Veil might be thin enough to tear -- not that she knew any, besides Kinloch Hold and Aeonar, but the rest of the party had been quick to offer what legends they knew, after Blackmarsh. Still, after Blackmarsh, they were a smaller group, with a number of the mages rescued from Aeonar choosing to stay behind in the village. It was, they said, the closest thing to a normal life they'd ever been offered, and they'd be fools not to take it. Besides, if the village could handle Jean-Cathaire, it could handle them. In the end, even Captain Brynn couldn't argue with that logic.

In theory, now they were headed to a place called Drake's Fall, an ancient dragon graveyard that Tevinter had, of course, done a great deal of building and experimenting on. Assuming they didn't get lost or eaten by demons, on the way, both of which were a lot more likely, in the Fade, but as Niall had taken to saying, it was demons here or bereskarn, out there.

"It just seems weird to me," Owain said, shuffling through the collected stories about Drake's Fall and the Dragonbone Wastes. "Dragons die there. Why would they keep going to a place they're going to die?"

"Other way around." Asha laughed. "You don't go to a funeral and die from it. You die and then someone builds you a pyre. They went there because they were dying."

"That or we've got it the wrong way around, and it was a massive Tevinter sacrifice," Niall speculated, leaning into Asha as she wrapped an arm around his waist. "I wouldn't put it past them. If they could sacrifice a third of the slaves in the Imperium, who says they couldn't kill a thousand dragons for some freaky magic."

"That sounds like a lot of work for a questionable result," Asha said. "But, this is Tevinter we're talking about. I wouldn't put it past them either."

"Either way," Lily said, pausing to chew her lip, reviewing her memory of the crude map they had drawn up earlier, "does this mean we are going to run into some dragon spirits? Fade dragons? Do those exist?" She wished there was some place closer they could test first, but the other possibilities were a little further out.

"I don't think those..." Niall started to say. Then he looked over at Jowan, who was only half-listening to their conversation. "What am I saying. We're with Jowan. They probably not only exist but are having some sort of dead dragon convention right where we're headed."

"What would that have anything to do with me? I'm not one of those Nevarran dragon hunters! Maybe I don't think things all the way through, sometimes, but I have never been attacked by a dragon. They've got better things to do." Jowan huffed and stumbled over a rock that hadn't existed a
moment before.

"Pretty sure that's not the first time you've been attacked by the ground," Lily joked, making no move to help. She sorted through the papers she held. "You know, if we're smart, we can just take a tour of the coast of Ferelden. If Drake's Fall doesn't work, there's all those weird stories about spirits in the Brecilian Forest -- everyone grew up on those, even in the Chantry."

"Did you ever hear the one about the woodcutter?" Owain asked, with a theatrical shudder. "They say he was never warm again, for the rest of his life."

"Sounds more like demons, if you ask me." Niall muttered, keeping an eye out for the same.

"And ... Ostagar, maybe, next. Between Tevinter and the Blight, there's got to be something, right? And there's probably things we don't know about between the woods and Ostagar. We'll probably hear things, as we get closer. And then there's the stories about the Avvar gods, up in the Frostbacks. They say the Lady of the Skies and Korth Mountain-Father are still around and answering prayers, so maybe ... something is getting through the Veil, there. I mean... I don't know anything, really, about the Avvar, but anyone with gods that talk back..." Lily shot a look at Jowan. "That's thin Veil, right?"

"You'd think," Jowan said. "I mean, we had Eleni Zinovia in the cellar, so..."


Jowan nodded. "I guess she was cursed into being a statue and somehow ended up in our basement. Lovely lady. Solona and I had a nice chat with her."

Brynn threw up his hands in defeat. "You know, that makes about as much sense as anything."

"But." Jowan cleared his throat. "Back to Lily's point, we might as well check out these phenomena. They could be completely unrelated weirdness, or we might find something that could take us home."

"All those years in the tower," Niall muttered, "and I never knew there was a talking statue in the basement. I almost feel cheated."

"A prophetic talking statue," Jowan added.

"Dammit."

"You know, they say one of the Archons built Ostagar," Owain offered, considering the list. "It seems like a stupid place to put a settlement, but they ran the road right down there and stuck a fort on the end. I always wondered why there, of all places. Why not further down or somewhere sane, like the bannorn? It's all swamp until it gives way to mountains."

"It's not like Aeonar's in a reasonable place, either. I mean, that's part of the appeal of the place, for us. You don't have a port right near it and the only thing there is the Highway, which suddenly goes south. It's the North Road that goes on to Denerim, but the Highway wraps down around the lake to Ostagar -- and it's the dumb side of the lake, too; up around the mountains, where the Avvar have got to. Who builds a road the long way around, through hostile territory? Tevinter, obviously." Brynn shook his head. "I'm never going to understand Tevinter thinking. It's just not a reasonable way to get things done."

"Well, the Chasind are in the south, the Avvar are in the mountains and across part of the north, you've got the Alamarri still calling themselves that down in the bannorn, and the Clayne are ..."
somewhere." Owain stopped walking for a moment to think on it.

"Up by the top of the lake," Niall told him. "We had a guy who wouldn't shut up about the Clayne. Blighted 'horse lords' and on and on. Gherlen's Pass to somewhere around River Dane."

"Kinnon you mean?" Jowan asked, knowing it had to have been. "I didn't really know him too well, but that horse lords thing..."

"Horse lords?" Asha asked, arching an eyebrow. "I thought all you Fereldans were dog lords."

"Well, clearly some of us like to branch out into other lordly talents," Niall drawled, his arm squeezing her waist. "But, yeah, Kinnon. That was his name! He was very proud of his Clayne ancestry."

"At least he wasn't Orlesian," Jowan noted with a pointed look at Niall.

Niall groaned. "Now, why did you have to bring him up? I was actually in a good mood until just now."

"It could be worse," Jowan reminded him. "Val could be stuck with us too."

"I would rather have the convention of Fade dragons, thanks."
Chapter Summary

Petra's concerned about Kinnon's relationship with Peryn. Anders gives her some hard advice.

Anders was tending the kitchen garden when he heard the knock at the front door and the scuffling of someone trying to displace the cats in the way. He grabbed a rag to wipe his hands and made his way through the house, a faint stun spell clinging to his fingertips until he got the door open and recognised Petra.

"Why do I think this isn't a social visit?" he asked, taking a good look at her face, as he stepped back and pulled open the door to let her in. "You want tea? We've got a mint thing going in the icebox."

"Please," Petra replied, using the edge of her hood to wipe her face, before she pushed it back. "And it's... No, you're right, it's not a social visit, and I feel terrible that I never come by after everything you've done for us, but I don't know who else to ask. I don't know who else would understand."

"Fell in love with Gerda, didn't you," Anders teased, taking down a pair of mugs and filling them from a jug in the icebox.

"I... no. That actually might have been less complicated."

One of Anders's eyebrows twitched up, and he nodded for her to take a seat. "Don't tell me it's Val, then. I may be a healer, but I can't fix insanity." He set the mugs down on the table, sliding hers over as he took a seat across from her.

Petra made a sound that was almost too horrified to be a laugh. "Definitely no. And for once Val isn't the problem here." She curled her fingers around the mug but didn't take a drink, not yet. "You know Kinnon..."

"I am acquainted with him, yes." Anders interjected while Petra paused to find the right words.

Petra rolled her eyes but still smiled. "As you are acquainted with his templar. And it has... come to my attention that Kinnon and said templar have become better acquainted themselves." She gave Anders a meaningful look across the table.

Anders took a sip from his mug, the mint pleasantly cool on his tongue. He remembered Kinnon coming to him, expressing his own concerns about this relationship, and Anders had to wonder why people kept coming to him for advice.

"And you want me to do what?" he asked, watching Petra over the table. "You know he's not going to stop, because we tell him he should. Well, maybe you don't know, but I do. That never worked on me."

"Then what do I do, as a responsible leader? How do I keep him from hurting us? You know he wouldn't do it on purpose, and so do I, but... this isn't reasonable! It isn't safe!" Petra ducked her head into her hands, fingers spreading through her hair, before she looked up again. "We've isolated the inside of the compound. You know that. You helped us. I've told Peryn it's to protect the Initiates"
from temptation, which isn't unreasonable. They're out in town all the time, but no one who isn't one of us comes further than the outer courtyard, now. And it's working, because it shields us, but... for how long? How long until Kinnon forgets? Until he has an accident with the magic, where Peryn can see? Until he uses magic on Peryn?"

Anders looked down at his cup, a terrible understanding forming in his mind. "You cut him loose," he said, studying the way the tea moved as he turned the cup in his hands. "You give Peryn the performance of a lifetime. Horrified. Betrayed. You beg him to take Kinnon away. That is what you do if it comes to that."

He closed his eyes against the blue glow he could feel rising in them, pressing his palms close against the cup. "And then you leave them to me. I like Peryn quite a bit, but Kinnon's not going back, even if it is his own damnable fault."

Petra sat back, absorbing those words. Cutting Kinnon loose hadn't even occurred to her as an option, not after all they had been through, and even with Anders's assurances, none of it sat right in her gut. But then nothing about this whole situation did and, as Anders had so eloquently put it, it was Kinnon's own damnable fault. "And what would you do, exactly?"

"That depends on Peryn," Anders said, eyes still clamped shut. "But whatever is necessary."

Petra fiddled with her cup but still couldn't bring herself to drink. "I hate to say it, but that might work." The first half of the plan would, at least, protect the abbey, regardless of how Anders fared. It was the better of an array of bad options.

"That's why I suggested it," Anders said, eyes opening back to their usual amber. "It's an idea. With luck, it will stay an idea."

Petra hummed, chewing the inside of her lip. "I'm not so sure about that. We take what precautions we can, but. If not Kinnon now, someone eventually will slip."

"If you're very lucky, which we've been, the village will love you far more than they hate mages, before that happens. Remember, you're the ones they come to for help. Does it matter if it's magic, when you've saved so many lives and livelihoods of normal people, while asking nothing in return?" Anders shook his head and sipped his tea. "I don't know if it'll save you. I'm pretty sure it wouldn't save me, but... I have other options. I mean -- no. Forget it. I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't even offer."

"Offer what?" Petra asked, cautiously.

"If you were Wardens, they really couldn't say shit," Anders clarified, shaking his head again. "But, I'm not doing that to you. The survival rate is abysmal. Chalk that revelation up to another secret I decline to keep. I'm terrible with secrets, you know."

"Anders, nobody ever knew what you were thinking. If that's 'terrible with secrets', then maybe Kinnon and I need to get worse at them, if we're going to be safe." Petra snorted, trying not to think of what it meant that Anders had so deliberately risked his life to make his escape permanent. Not just a fight, but apparently some ritual designed to weed out the weak. A second Harrowing, if she thought of it like that.

"Anyway, no. You can't become Wardens. Not enough of you would survive, and I can't tell which of you would make it. No one can tell, until you try it, and then it's too late. So, that's out." Anders set his cup down with a tap of finality.
"Guess we'll just have to rely on the Maker's mercy, then," Petra replied, words heavy with irony. "We are supposed to be an abbey, after all."

"I don't know about the Maker, but I'm sure Hector will give you a hand." Anders smiled around his mug, and Petra finally lifted hers. "I'm not sure how much that will help, though. Mostly I just glow and scare chicken thieves."

"That's more than I see any other Anointed doing around here." The mint was refreshing, now that she was calm enough to drink it.
Drake's Fall (1/2)

Chapter Summary

Jowan and his unfortunate compatriots decide to investigate Drake's Fall as a possible escape from the Fade. But, the place has a memory stretching back thousands of years.

Jowan's methods of travel had cut down the time needed to get between one place and another -- or at least, they cut down the amount of conversation between places. Time and place were tricky, in the Fade, and there was no real way to determine how much had gone by in the world while they sought a way out. But, some places reached through, like beacons, and Jowan was slowly learning to aim for those, when he tore holes in the fabric of the Fade. Still, he wasn't always right. Demon kingdoms still unfurled in the spaces between things, and those also glowed importantly.

Despite that, the journey to the Dragonbone Wastes involved far fewer demons than many of their trips, and Asha assured Jowan that meant he was learning to tell the difference. Niall looked like he might say something about that, but rolled his eyes at Lily and kept his mouth shut, instead. However stable Jowan's talents were, at any time, they'd all seen what happened when he got upset, when he began to doubt himself. Then the demons he found were his own, and they were intensely difficult to stab enough times to kill. Demons that fed on the summoner, however accidental, always were, according to Brynn.

But, they arrived in the Wastes, all the same -- or near the Wastes, as they still couldn't cross, even as the ruins were reflected through to them, in all the original glory. There were no ruins, in the Fade, except the ones where people still lived. And this place just kept playing out the stories of its heyday.

"Wow," Lily murmured, looking up at the towering structure closest to them. The stone was pristine though the edges were a smoky blur the farther away they looked. Memory was like that, she supposed, and a memory was what this place was.

She nearly jumped when she spotted movement in that tower, the ghostly shape of what could have once been a person. Brynn steadied her with a hand on her arm.

"Spirit?" he asked, squinting up at the window where they had seen movement.

"I think so. I hope so."

"Bound to be a few," Niall muttered. "Bound to be more than a few at a place like this. Just hopefully not too many of the demon variety. How do we get around this thing?"

"We could try the road," Asha suggested, indicating the tall roadway above them, supported by a line of arches.

"How do we even get up there?" Niall asked, trying to get his bearings in this new piece of the Fade. "Do you see a road to the road anywhere?"

"You're standing in it," Jowan pointed out, after a moment, pointing to the side of where they stood, the path making its way to the gate of the fortress.

"I don't want to go through it!" Niall protested. "I want to go around it!"
"I'm not sure there is an 'around','" Jowan pointed out, taking a few test jumps. "This place is real enough that I can feel it in my legs. I'd rather not break them in a fall, seeing how we haven't got a healer."

"Shit!" Niall's face wavered, but settled back into itself. "The last thing I want is to walk into a nest of demons."

"Or undead dragons," Lily added, eyeing the fortress warily. "You remember what they said in Blackmarsh..."

"The man's got a point, though," Owain said, reluctantly. "It's called Drake's Fall. It's got a great cliff and what, and not being a drake, I'd rather not do any falling. That road up there is coming from somewhere inside. Look at it; it has to be."

"Why is nothing ever easy?" Niall asked Asha.

"You ask, as we follow Jowan on an adventure into the unknown." Lily gave him a pointed look.

Niall grimaced but had to concede the point. "Right. Into the tower. Jowan first."

Jowan threw him an offended look over his shoulder, but no one argued in his defence and Niall merely shrugged. Sighing, Jowan stepped around craggy stone in search of an entrance, wondering how long they would continue to punish him for bringing them here. Probably until he brought them back out.

The door felt as solid as the stone at his feet, and Jowan almost missed that, being able to feel his own weight, as he shouldered it open. Brynn was close at his heels, a hand on his sword, but no demons jumped out to greet them. At least not yet. The door opened into a circular chamber at the base of a curving set of stairs, the walls lined with sculptures. At another time, Jowan might have found the restoration fascinating, but right now he was more concerned with the wisps of spirits he could see floating along the stairwell.

"They're farther out than we are. No, closer in. They're in the way we're trying to go," Asha explained, as two women with elaborate headdresses walked almost through them, with only the slightest glance at Niall, who nodded, both at them and at what Asha had said.

"I don't know if they're the spirits of people who died here or if it's just a show put on by whoever rules this place," he said, watching the two women disappear on the stairs. "We all know it could go either way, but I'm not sure it matters, because I don't think they can reach us."

"That's weird," Jowan insisted, starting up the stairs and reflexively turning to the side to let a man with a Tevinter face pass him. "It has to be because of the Veil, here. Everything's closer together."

"Tevinter, though," Brynn said, glancing after the man who disappeared after passing him. "If this place is Tevinter, which it seems to be, to judge by the locals, then it's ... Well, I'd say it's certainly more likely they left a hole in something. That's what they were trying to do, wasn't it? And it all ended when they broke into the Golden City and ruined it for all of us. So, maybe they were trying, here, and they missed. They could miss. You miss."

"Yes, but they'd miss because they're aiming blind, from the other side of the Veil," Niall drawled, and Jowan turned on him.

"Can you do it?" he asked, jabbing a finger into Niall's chest. "Really, Niall, can you? Because if you can, now would be a great time for it."
Niall looked away, holding up his hands. "You're the one Mouse taught."

"Then maybe you can do me a favour and shut the fuck up about it." Jowan looked surprised at himself, and then a bit smug, when Niall didn't throw him down the stairs. After a moment, he headed up to the top.

"Don't piss him off too much," Asha said in an aside to Niall. "You don't know what we'll end up with." Privately, she applauded him. That show of backbone meant he wasn't wallowing in despair, which only spelled good things for her attractive spirit friend.

Spirits passed by and through them, and Owain shivered when one glided right through his chest. He had stared into her eyes as she neared, but she had not seemed to notice him. He shuddered, rubbing his breastplate where a chill seemed to settle. "This is just creepy."

Silently, Brynn agreed, walking still by Jowan's shoulder, one hand on his sword. Just because a spirit seemed harmless did not mean it would stay that way.

Jowan paused at the landing, where a group of the spirits stood in a circle, chanting as though in prayer or in ritual. Past them was another doorway, this one leading, he assumed, back out onto the road.

"Does anyone speak Tevene?" Lily asked, looking around at the group.

"Enough to know that's not it," Niall replied and Asha nodded in agreement.

"I'm not sure what that is," she said, closing her eyes to better listen to it. "That's not something people speak, any more. The sounds of the words are all wrong. Whatever it is, it's probably something Tevinter wiped out. They were good at that."

"Well, that's definitely a little dragon in the middle," Jowan pointed out. "So, whatever they're doing, it's probably something to do with the dragon."

"Drake," Owain corrected. "I'm pretty sure that's a full-grown male."

"How would you know?" Brynn asked, looking a bit surprised.

"Captain, before I wanted to be a templar, I wanted to be a dragon hunter. It's just not the sort of career the Chantry will let a man pursue." Owain chuckled quietly to himself.

"That's great and all, but how are we getting past them?" Niall asked, eyeing the group between them and the road. "It seems like tempting fate to just go barging through the middle. It's a ritual. It's a place we think people were trying to tear the Veil. I'd really rather not walk into the wrong kind of tear -- something that puts us on the same level with them. I don't think they'd appreciate the company."

Lily backed up against the wall, inching along it. "I think we can get past them. As long as none of them walk into us, I don't think we'll end up in what they're doing. Probably. The wall's about as far as we are anyway, and I think they're right in the middle -- or the dragon is. Drake. Let me prove we can do it, before you follow me."

"No, let Jowan prove we can do it," Niall argued. "We've sent him through every other door first."

"No," Lily replied, eyes focused on the spirits' feet. "It's my idea, and I'll risk it."

"Lily--" Jowan started to argue, only to swallow his words. He was the last person she would listen
to, even if this was one risk he was willing to take, for her sake.

Lily's face was a mask of calm as she moved along the wall. There was a close moment where one of the spirits in the ritual took a step back, shifting his weight. But Lily held very still, barely daring to breathe, until the spirit stepped forward again, out of her space. She continued her sideways crawl, until finally she was free to the other side. In the doorway, she grinned with relief and motioned them over.

"I'll go next," Asha volunteered, scrabbling along the walls with even more ease than Lily.

One by one, mages followed suit, while the templars directed them. Owain and Brynn both knew it would be harder to avoid the ritual space in their plate armour, but they decided to save that problem for last.

With Brynn's direction, Owain made it safely to the door, to join the mages, leaving Brynn, himself, to attempt it last. Lily pushed to the front of the group to try to guide him from what she'd learnt watching all the others.

"Stop!" Lily barked, and Brynn froze, just as one of the ritual participants stepped back into the space he'd have been in, one step later.

As the spirit stepped forward again, Brynn tried to move past, but the figure suddenly turned, unexpectedly, elbowing him in the chest. It didn't feel like anything, but the spirit was staring him straight in the face. He stopped breathing, hoping if he stayed still enough, it would look away.

"Spirits!" the spirit crowed, suddenly. "We've done it! We're almost there! I see spirits!" He tried to grab Brynn, to pull him into the circle, but his hands kept sweeping through the templar's arms.
"Come! Join us! Tell us your story!"

Brynn stared blankly, still hoping this was some deranged hallucination, and off in the background, somewhere, he could hear Asha trying not to laugh.

"I... er..." Brynn still stood frozen, as the rest of the spirits looked up and gasped, seeing him and pointing.

"What manner of spirit are you?" the first spirit asked. He looked Brynn up and down, noting his armour. "A spirit of courage, perhaps? Valor? Strength?"

"The sword on his armour must mean something," another spirit whispered to a third.

Wryly, Brynn wished more people would think of those virtues when they spotted the templar armour. "Er... I am a spirit who is late for a... spirity meeting. Goodbye."

The spirits protested and reached for him, shouting for him to stay, but Brynn bulled through them, wraithlike, as his way to the door. All the while, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

The group at the door parted as he approached, turning to spill out onto the road, again, with him in the centre. Asha, by now cackling with amusement, turned back to watch the spirits fade as they ran out of the tower, still calling after Brynn.

"No one is ever going to believe this, if they weren't here," Niall choked out, balanced somewhere between horror and glee. "If we ever get out of here, that's going to be a tale for the singer in the first tavern we find."

"When we get out of here," Jowan muttered, as they came upon the third tower, this one glowing
strangely, distantly, as they approached.

"This what you locked on?" Owain asked, squinting into the doorway around Jowan.

"No, and that's a little concerning." Jowan crossed the threshold and paused to look at the beams of light -- of raw magic, if he wasn't mistaken -- that joined between his head and the ceiling, in the gap from the stairs. As he looked up, he spotted some sort of contraption of metal and crystal that seemed to direct the beam down into the depths of the actual Fall.

Lily followed the beam, walking just to the side of it so as not to touch it. "What is that, do you think?"

"Something powerful, whatever it is," Asha murmured. Perhaps something powerful enough to help them, but at this point, she wasn't getting her hopes up.

Lily stood on her tiptoes to look out the window, following the trajectory of that beam, her face paling as she saw where it landed among the wastes. Blue light illuminated a set of bleached-white ribs taller than any human. Not far away was a skull to match, with a long jaw full of sharp teeth.

Next to her, Asha clicked her tongue. "They don't call it the Dragonbone Wastes for nothing." She patted Lily on the shoulder.

"Yes, but why the beam? Why is it aimed at...?" Lily jumped, spotting movement. But when she looked again, the skeleton was still. Probably a trick of the light.

Niall looked up at where the beam passed over them. "It's definitely coming from in here, and not from out there, and that doesn't look like Entropy. What's that colour?" He squinted at the dust in the beam, realising just how powerful this memory was, that it still had dust after this long. And then he remembered the last time -- or at least the most memorable time -- that sort of magic had touched him. "Healing. It's healing magic."

"And those are bones." Brynn looked confused. "Why would you be healing something dead?"

"Tevinter," Asha said, eyes suddenly intensely focused. "They're not trying to heal it. They're trying to raise it. To give it the illusion of life and bring the dead dragon back to its body."

"Wouldn't that be better served with necromancy?" Jowan asked, thinking of Crazypants and his infinite rats.

"Not if they expect it to heal itself when it returns to the bones. It knows what it is, but it would need some external power in order to rebuild." Asha shook her head. "It's insane, of course. That would never work, or we'd see more of it. Someone would be selling a way to bring back grandma, if this was at all viable."

"Grandma's not a dragon," Owain noted, gazing out the window in awe. "Dragons aren't just beasts, they're magic, too. The old stories say they used to talk to people, back before the Pentaghasts killed them all. But, these new dragons don't talk, and I have to wonder if they're not just mad about the Pentaghasts."

"And yet, you were going to hunt them," Jowan pointed out.

"Well, of course! Have you seen what an upset dragon can do to a farming village?" Owain shook his head. "They call this the Dragon Age for a reason, and it's not just because they're showing up in isolated places in the mountains. Some of them are a real danger."
"But this one isn't," Lily said, darting a glance out the window. "right?"

"Not with this magic," Asha said with a confidence that soothed Lily.

"Now if they sought to raise a zombie dragon, that would be a very different problem," Niall added.

Lily stared at him. "Different how? The way I see it, it's the same problem: something with huge pointy teeth trying to eat us."

"Fair point."

There were more skeletons down there, Jowan saw when he peeked over. Many more, and it gave Jowan a chill to think about it, all those dragons marching here to their death, lying down atop the bones of their kin. "We're going to need to go down there."

The others all turned to look at him, some incredulous but none surprised.

"Right," Niall muttered. "Frolicking with dead dragons. That's one Fade experience I can check off my list."

"Not much for the possibility of bone-dragons and freshly-resurrected bone?" Owain teased. "Perhaps we shouldn't have come to the Dragonboner Wastes, if you weren't looking for a frolic."

"That was terrible," Asha mumbled, snorting and giggling against her hand.

"Was that necessary?" Brynn asked, looking pained, as the clank of Lily smacking her head on his pauldrons echoed through the chamber.

"No," Jowan decided, ducking under the beam and heading for the stairs. "No, that was not necessary. But, this is. Whatever we're looking for, it's out there, past the dragon. I can almost see it. It goes somewhere."

"It goes somewhere?" Niall ignored the entire suggestion that he might have been interested in dancing the pantsless tango with a dead dragon. "Jowan, everything goes somewhere. We're on stairs. They go somewhere, too."

"It'd be like stairs if you could take them to the Abyss or to the Golden City. I don't know where that leads, but I can tell it goes somewhere. We have to get closer, so I can figure out what it is and what it's doing. Then we get to figure out how to use it. I bet Asha would know."

"You put a lot of faith in me, and I haven't seen even as much as you have." Asha laughed and patted Jowan's back, awkwardly. "Let's go see your magic stairs, and then we'll see if I know what to do with them."
Drake's Fall (2/2)

Chapter Summary

There's a path here, but whether the mages can figure out how to get on it remains to be seen.

This time, they descended the tower steps. They passed by and through more spirits on the way, but none stopped to ask Brynn his life story, to his great relief.

If Lily thought the dragon skeletons looked big from the window, she had no words for their size up close. She tried to picture them, covered in layers of muscle and skin, alive and angry, breathing fire. With a shudder, she decided she much preferred the bones.

"This way," Jowan said, leading them towards the blue healing beam and the skeleton in its sights. The light deepened the shadows around the skull, making the teeth seem longer, sharper. Lily and Niall kept the templars between them and that particular skeleton, but the bones minded their own business when the group passed.

It was only past the beam that Lily saw what Jowan meant, something else letting off its own ghostly light in the distance.

Asha squinted at the object. "Is that... a mirror?"

Jowan nodded. "I think maybe it's reflecting the beam, but... there's something else going on. I don't know what... That's what I followed to get us here. It's like a giant landmark in the Fade, if you can look at it like I do. Which you probably could, honestly. I mean... I can do it, right?"

"You'd have to teach me," Asha said, after a moment. "I know a lot about spirits, but this is my first real trip to the Fade."

"Didn't you used to wander around in the Fade all the time?" Owain asked. "I thought that was something Seers did!"

"Of course I did, but not like this. And of all of us, Mouse only taught him. So, if any of us are going to do it, he has to teach us." Asha shrugged, and turned her gaze back on the mirror. "But, if you want my advice about those spirits who want to add a fine piece of templar to their collection, I've got plenty of that."

"If you can give it without using the word 'dragonboner', I might be interested. Provided you two don't actually get us out of here. If you do, I never want to think about this place again." Brynn shook his head and held up his hands.

Asha pursed her lips, clearly considering saying 'dragonboner' just to spite Brynn. But she supposed the man had been through enough insanity for one day, however one measured days in the Fade.

The mirror was tall, as tall as one of the dragon ribs they had just passed, with a pair of statues flanking it, robed figures crafted in the Tevinter style. Jowan walked up the set of steps that led to the mirror, expecting to be met with his reflection, wondering if he looked as tired as he felt. But it didn't reflect him at all, and to his eyes, it looked more like a window than a mirror.
"What is it?" Brynn asked, noting Jowan's surprise.

"There's a pathway," Jowan said, reaching out, only for his fingers to touch smooth glass. The touch became an open-palm slap as Jowan tried to push through. "There must be a way through."

"Well, clearly not by hitting it," Asha said, walking around behind the strange not-mirror and examining it from the back. She found nothing remarkable from this angle.

Niall cocked his head at it, studying the statues and the curve of the frame. "You know, I think I read about these once. There was a book about ancient Tevinter artefacts or something, and it talked about these mirrors that could be used to talk from one place to another. Like, massive distances, too. Even if we can't go through it, maybe we can call for help."

"Would anyone hear us? I mean, I've never heard of such a thing," Brynn said, gazing at the mirror with some new respect.

"It's Tevinter. I bet you they still have them up there. If we showed ourselves to someone in the magic capital of Thedas, maybe they'd be able to help us," Jowan reasoned. "I still think it's for going, not showing, though."

"Could we test it with a spirit, do you think? Would one of them come use it?" Lily asked, looking first to Asha and then Brynn. "Do you think we could get them to show us how it's done?"

"Please don't make me talk to spirits again." Brynn held up his hands. "I like Grace well enough, but..."

Niall huffed and shoved his shoulder. "I'm standing right here, you know."

"As entertaining as that was," Asha said to Brynn, "I think Niall might have an easier time of talking to any spirits. Any other spirits."

Niall's face soured at that suggestion, but Asha put her hands on her hips, her look daring him to argue. "I don't exactly know what you want me to say," he conceded. "And I don't see many of them milling about in this part of the wastes."

There had certainly been more spirits in the towers and along the highway. The spirits that drifted about down here were thin, wispy creatures, only recognisable up close, and they flitted about without paying any mind to the group.

"Just try to see if you can get their attention," Asha said. "We'll worry about the rest once we know we can talk to them. Plan B, Brynn goes back to get his friends from the tower."

Niall sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes, before he turned to the next faint figure to walk through them. "Hello? Can you--?"

It didn't even register that he was there, just walking on toward some distant destination that was not through the mirror.

"Excuse--"

The next spirit pushed right through him, and Niall rippled faintly and shook himself off.

"This isn't working," he huffed, stalking back toward the tower, where they'd seen spirits in Tevinter clothes aiming the beam.
Jowan eyed Brynn thoughtfully.

"Would it even work?" Lily asked, following Jowan's gaze. "They faded into nothing, as they chased him. They didn't actually stop following, they just weren't there any more. I don't know if they can follow him all the way here, and more, if he could send them here, I don't know if we'd still see them."

"She may have a point," Asha admitted, watching Niall stomp back toward them with no spirits in tow. "But, it can't hurt to try."

"Okay, if spirits don't work, how do we figure out how to use it?" Owain asked, looking back and forth between the dragon bones and the mirror. "Do you think the dragon has anything to do with it?"

Asha shook her head with a helpless shrug, as much at a loss as he.

"We're not going to go ask dragon spirits, are we?" Brynn drawled. He ascended the steps to stand properly before the mirror, squinting through its foggy sheen to another world beyond.

"I doubt they would be too helpful even if we could find them," Niall replied. "And no, I am not going out to find them." As he spoke, Niall walked up to Jowan, pausing next to him and looking him up and down. "Before Mouse went all demony and crazy, he showed you a few tricks. Any chance that might help us here?"

Off to the side, Lily slumped to a sit. She knew it was dangerous to slip into despair, but just once, she hoped that the solution would be obvious and simple. She wondered how long they would be stuck in this half life, only to cut off that train of thought as quickly as she could. The last thing they needed was for Niall to tap into that hopelessness too.

"I don't know," Jowan admitted, staring at the mirror. "I can try, but you might not want to be standing too close."

"Oh, please, like I'm going to let you get sucked through without me? No, I've been here long enough." Niall laughed in amazement.

"Yes, except I don't know where this is going to go," Jowan pointed out. "Or if it's going to warp the fabric of the Fade and kill us all."

"I'm dead, Jowan. Really, truly dead. It's what I'm doing here," Niall retorted, nodding slowly as he spoke, eyes on Jowan.

"Do you really think spirits can't die?" Jowan asked, shooting Niall a sharp look. "You heard Mouse."

"I also heard Mouse lie, constantly. I don't know if half of what he said was true, except that he taught you to control this place." Niall crossed his arms and took a deep breath.

"Destroy. He taught me to destroy this place. There's a difference." And that was it, Jowan realised. That was his purpose -- he destroyed things. And maybe that didn't have to be a bad thing. Maybe there was a way to help with that -- like he'd done during the Blight. "Fine. Just don't lean on my shoulder while I'm trying to do this, or I can't promise anything."

Niall took two steps back and waited, rippling and shivering, to see what would be on the other side of the next rent. He and Asha would fight it, if they had to, until Jowan could get the hole to close. They'd done this before, and he was calmed by Asha stepping up on Jowan's other side, just a bit
behind him.

Jowan looked around to make sure everyone was far enough behind him and squared off against the mirror. The spell was familiar, one he had cast many times now, and he fought off the uncertainty he still felt about wielding this kind of power without Mouse. As he cast, the magic gathered in green sparks around his fingertips, and the spell latched onto the surface of the mirror. He could feel its weight as he tried to pry it open.

"Come on," Jowan muttered through grit teeth. He screwed his eyes shut and put all of his weight behind the spell, certain he would be sweating if he were outside of the Fade. It was like pounding on a locked door. No, it was like pounding on a wall. He knew there was something behind it, but it just would not give.

Finally, Jowan stopped, staggering a step and leaning forward with his hands on his knees. He caught his breath, throwing an apologetic look over his shoulder. "That is a very stubborn mirror."

"Was it doing anything?" Asha asked, still gripping her staff as though ready for battle. "Can you try again?"

But Jowan shook his head, looking at the mirror with a new respect. "It was like trying to assault a fortress with nothing but a pebble."

"What if we help you?" Asha asked, gesturing back to the few straggling mages still with them. "There is a way we may be able to lend you our power, and you direct it."

"That's a thing we can do?" Jowan blinked and glanced at Niall.

"Which you don't know, because you're still an apprentice." Niall raised his eyebrows.

"Go fuck a bereskarn," Jowan snapped. "I've fought demons! You've watched me! You've helped me!"

"Yes, but the trick is you have to fight a demon, and then get out of the Fade," Niall drawled, wondering if Asha's plan would work. "Do you think we could do it?" he asked her, turning away from Jowan.

"I think you do need to stand back for this one, but yes." Asha nodded and took Jowan's hand, waving the other mages forward. "You need to stay out of the way, Niall, or you're going to become what we open this gate with."

"Oh." Niall stumbled back, tripping on a dragon bone and staggering into Owain, who helped him up. "I'll just stay back here with the Chantry folk then, shall I?"

Asha gave instructions and Brynn and Owain watched, uncomfortably, as the maleficars they used to guard pooled their power.

"This isn't right," Owain said, quietly. "However long we've been here..."

"It's not blood magic," Brynn decided, "and it's not aimed at us. Let them do it. They've saved us before."

Jowan began to cast again, the magic clearly visible as it spun out from his fingers like ribbons of light, seizing not the mirror, but the path that passed through it. He strained with the effort of trying to split it apart, but the path only grew stronger and brighter, as if it were feeding off the power.
As Lily opened her mouth to say something to Owain, everything turned white with the sound of a thunderbolt, and as shape and colour returned to the world, Jowan could be seen sailing overhead, through the beam from the tower, to collide with the skull of the dragon. He slid down its bony snout and lay very still.

Asha was the first to move while the others were too busy frozen in shock, darting for Jowan's prone form, still clutching her staff. Behind her, a greenish smoke billowed around the mirror, which otherwise looked unchanged.

Jowan was already moving by the time Asha got to him, pathetically rolling on the ground as he tried to sit up. Asha took his arm and helped him figure out which way was up, and he sat back against the skull, dazed. In the Fade or not, Jowan's skull felt as rattled as the one he was leaning on, and he wondered, at first, if he was imagining the blue light pooling around him.

"Well, it didn't kill you," Asha said. "Are you well?"

Jowan had to blink a few times to come to a decision. "The mirror was much closer the last time I looked."

Asha smiled and patted his shoulder. "It's a very stubborn mirror."

"I don't think it's going to work," Jowan sighed, patting himself down to check for damage. He seemed to be all right, aside from being a bit breathless and having the wits knocked out of him. "But, I do think I'm going to need to rest, before we try to leave." He opened and closed his aching hands a few times, as the aftermath of what he'd just done caught up with him. "I don't think I'm casting anything else for a few hours."

"Well, it doesn't seem like this place is dangerous. Whatever's in charge, here, doesn't seem interested in us, except maybe Brynn." Asha chuckled wryly and Brynn groaned loudly.

"Is he all right?" Lily called out, from where she hung back with Niall, who also wasn't looking too good.

"I've had worse!" Jowan replied, considering whether he could stand. "You've watched me wind up with much worse!"

"I've watched him stab himself in the hand and then run off into the night," Lily muttered, under her breath.

"Do you ever regret not going with him?" Niall asked, and instantly wished he could take it back, as his hands started to grey.

"He made his decision. I had to make mine," Lily said, firmly.

"That's not an answer." Niall honestly wished he had a spell to shut himself up.

"Yes, it is."
The Festival of Hector's Return

Chapter Summary

Mother Yotte has decided the village needs a festival to celebrate the best harvest in a century, and the Maker-sent spirit blessing their village with abundance.

To say it was a festival celebrating the rebirth of Hector was not quite accurate -- Hector, after all, had not been 'reborn', but had returned as a spirit, to aid the people of Kassel and the surrounding river villages, with a particular focus on the one around The Petty Crown, where the festival was being held. People danced in the market square, buying cheap arrows to break, and praising Andraste for sending one of her beloved disciples back to aid them.

Mother Yotte sat in front of the Chantry, shaded by a thick tent embroidered with the Maker's eye, talking to Peryn, Ingill, and Derek about how much better everyone looked, this year. The harvests had become more and more abundant, illnesses were fewer and less severe, and everyone seemed thicker and more solid -- certainly more happy.

"There are mages here," Ingill insisted. "This is a Tevinter plot to win us over, so we will support their next invasion."

"Tevinter is way too arrogant to pull that off," Derek sighed, sipping at a tall cup of water with a shot of anijswater in it. "You know they'd make much more of a show of it, if they were responsible. Staves and robes and great shows of magic to impress the peasants -- that's just how they are."

"Even if there are mages, they are following the word of the Chant, if not the Chantry," Yotte pointed out. "'Magic exists to serve man, not to rule over him,' Transfigurations book one, verse two. If this is not serving man, I ask you to find me something that better does. But, that is irrelevant, because this is the Maker's own blessing, brought to us because we have struggled alone too long."

"Why would there be mages here?" Peryn asked, giving Ingill an odd look. "Besides children, of course. That is why I am here -- for the children. But, you are talking about mages who must be adults, to do this kind of work. Why would mages come to this place? I think I would have noticed them. I am paid to notice them."

Not even the cheery atmosphere of the festival could lighten Ingill's scowl. "Exactly because of that reaction," she said, pointing a finger in Peryn's face. "It's the middle of nowhere, for mages in their towers, and the middle of nowhere is exactly where you go when you don't want to be found. No one would suspect it." Ingill turned her stare on Yotte, who looked more amused than concerned. "Do you really not find it suspicious, all this 'good fortune' coming to us on the heels of these Fereldans? More good fortune than the extra hands can explain."

"And do you really find it so hard to believe in the Maker's blessing?" Yotte countered. "Dear Sister. You should not worry yourself so. Relax. It's a festival! We have much to be grateful for!"

Peryn and Derek echoed that sentiment, but Ingill just shook her head at the lot of them. "You should keep an eye on them," she told Peryn, tipping her chin in the direction of a few familiar faces in the crowd. Familiar Fereldan faces.
Spotting Kinnon among the group, Peryn grinned broadly and stood. "I would be happy to, Sister."

Kinnon held out an arm, as he saw Peryn approaching. Some of the village suspected what went on behind closed doors, he had no doubt, but a friendly half-hug wouldn't raise enough eyebrows to be worth comment. After all, he was supposed to be an Initiate, which left little room for his more exciting choices.

Peryn tucked his shoulder under that arm and wrapped his own around Kinnon's waist, falling into step beside him, as they walked through the crowd of smiling faces, with Keili and Gerda. "It is good to see so many people happy, all at once. It is good that you have helped them."

"It is our duty to Andraste, the Maker, and the people of this village, to see that their needs are met as best we are able. Is that not what the Chant teaches? That we must aid and uplift those in need?" A faint smile crossed Keili's face. "Besides, who wants to see unhappy people every day? It's unnecessary."

Gerda leaned back and raised her eyebrows at Kinnon, cocking a thumb at Keili. "What's that you say, Sister Keili?" Kinnon teased. "Did I just hear you say something more than 'life is suffering'?"

"It must be the desert air getting to her," Gerda joked, laying an affectionate hand on Keili's back. "Or maybe it's all the anijswater going around."

"Oh, enough! Both of you are terrible!" Keili turned a brilliant red under the shade of her hood. "The most faithful nation in Thedas has worked its charm on you," Peryn suggested, with a smile at Keili. "It is good. You are happy, too. And speaking of charms, do you believe Sister Ingill thinks you are all Tevinter mages come to steal our hearts and ready us for a new invasion?"

Horror flashed across Kinnon's face before he started laughing so hard he had to stop walking. "She thinks we're Vints?"

"I don't think I've ever seen anything look less Tevinter than Kinnon," Gerda drawled, the confusion clear on her face. "Why would Tevinter want to charm some little village in the middle of nowhere?"

"That is what I asked her!" Peryn shook his head and chuckled. "This place has not charmed her. She would be more at home in a bigger city. Maybe even in the South."

"I suppose we should be a little bit flattered," Kinnon said to Keili and Gerda. "Our work has been so exemplary that Sister Ingill can only explain it with magic! That's certainly something to strive for."

Peryn chuckled, his body a warm and pleasant weight against him. "But, you should not strive for her scowls. They are potent."

"They're also always there," Gerda drawled. "No striving needed. But, if Sister Ingill thinks that we should slow down our efforts..."

"Of course not," Peryn replied cheerfully. "She is happy too, I think, under the scowl. In her way."

Kinnon smiled, relieved that Peryn had dismissed the notion so easily, but he still looked past the templar to the Chantry stairs, seeking out Ingill's famous scowl. His smile stilled when he found her staring at them. Even if the others had dismissed the idea, she had planted it in their heads, and he and his friends would have to be more careful.
"So, a drink?" Peryn suggested. "For Hector."

"Hector is a good reason to drink," Keili said archly, sharing a knowing look with Gerda, who bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Hector was, as Anders had long known, an excellent reason not to drink, and it was an argument he was having right then.

"Mostly water, only a little anijswater. Jan's got a headache," Cormac explained to the woman serving water and alcohol from shaded barrels.

"It's so bright, today!" she replied, her smile audible beneath the veil that covered her face, as she ladled out a cup of water with only a splash of anijswater in it. "Take this, Healer. You should know to drink more, when it is so hot!"

Anders took the cup with a weak smile, his other hand pressed over his eyes, beneath his hood. "Thank you. I should, but I forget."

_Hector is their word for justice, now_, Justice observed, hearing the voices calling out to them, praying to them.

_And their word for goodness and compassion_, Anders thought, hearing just as much. _Hector is their name for what we bring them._

_Hector is their word for us_, Justice decided, rifling through Anders's memories at the taste of watered-down anijswater.

"You all right, pretty thing?" Cormac asked, keeping a firm grip on Anders as they walked slowly toward the edge of the market, where there was shade to sit under. He knew it wasn't just the sun or the heat, but very likely an in-depth argument with Justice, probably about the festival in their honour. He knew how Justice felt about being called Hector.

"Just talking to myself," Anders replied. "For certain values of talking that don't involve actually moving my lips." Those lips quirked in a wry smile, his next words hidden behind his cup. "I think the name Hector is growing on Justice."

_I do not mind the association_, Justice corrected, which, to Anders, meant the same thing. _The festival is unnecessary, however. Drinking does not often lead to just actions._

"I keep telling people you're going to wind up named an Anointed, if this keeps up, and may they hear me in Val Royeaux." Cormac laughed, pulling Anders a little closer as they passed a group of young women snapping cheap arrows made of river reeds and throwing the pieces wherever they might land.

"I hope not. I'm already busy as it is. And that would just lead to more people making pilgrimages here, which would lead to tourists taking our usual table at the tavern, and no one wants that." That said, the irony of the Chantry naming him and Justice Anointed would be wonderful. "I just hope that no one's actually expecting Hector to make an appearance today."

Cormac laughed again, leaning his head against Anders's shoulder. "Everyone knows Hector only shows up at night."

They both turned, at the sound of raised voices behind them, to find the women with the arrows laughing at Val, who actually had his hood up, for once.
"We don't consort with Orlesians," one of them scoffed.

Another put a hand on her shoulder. "You have your own country! Go back to it! We fought you once, and we'll do it again."

"Oh, shit," Anders sighed, but Val just shoved his hands into his sleeves and stormed away, the women still laughing and hurling insults at his back.

"Did I just see Val being reasonable?" Cormac blinked in surprise.

"He's always taken 'no' for an answer," Anders said, eyes still following Val's progress across the market. "I was just afraid they were going to kick the shit out of him, and I'd have to do something about it."

"You'd think he'd have gotten the idea not to hit on the locals, by now," Cormac said, shaking his head.

"The locals don't know him, personally. Honestly, he's got a much better chance with them, even if it's going to end like that, most of the time. Exactly no one in the Abbey is going to take advantage of his offers." Anders sipped at his anijswater-flavoured drink and turned back toward the shade. "We'll sit a bit. See who comes over."

For a while, Anders contented himself with watching the revellers, picking out familiar faces in the crowd, watching them grow unsteadier on their feet. While Justice was displeased with the display, he kept that displeasure to a quiet grumble.

Anders was nearly done with his drink when Peryn and Kinnon stumbled over, supporting each other and standing like one four-legged, two-headed creature.

"Jan! Mack!" Peryn crowed, as though it had been ages since he'd last seen them. "You are here! It is good. Why are you sitting?"

"Too much sun," Anders lied, eyeing Peryn's loose smile with amusement. "Try not to overdo it, you two. I don't want to have to scrape you off the ground later."

"Not so sunny, now," Kinnon said, squinting up at the sky. "Looks like there clouds. Or..." Just one cloud, he realised, and he promptly shut himself up.

Cormac blinked and looked up, following the greyish smear of what looked like extremely directed rain down to what had to be Val, sitting on the steps of the Chantry, beside Mother Yotte's shelter.

"Has someone tattooed a water rune on his seat?" Peryn asked, following Cormac's gaze. "It is often raining on him."

"Well, you know what they say about Ander weather!" Anders laughed, hoping the discomfort on his face could be attributed to the headache. "I think he sits in it on purpose, so some pretty girl will feel bad for him."

Peryn choked back a laugh. "I know he is Orlesian, but is he that Orlesian?"

"So much more Orlesian than that," Kinnon sighed, rolling his eyes dramatically. "Throws himself around like a sad nobleman, from one of those novels. 'Oh, the rain is all I have left! Only the storm understands me! It's unbearable."

"If Jan wouldn't have to set the break, I'd have punched him square in the nose, by now," Cormac
admitted. "He really is unbearable, that aside. He's from one of those noble families that gives their unwanted children to the Chantry, and he's never really gotten over the 'noble' part."

"I was raised in the Chantry," Peryn said, after a moment's pause. "But, I was just a baby. No one knows where I came from, I think."

Kinnon fumbled for a response to that. He knew what it was like to be taken away from his family, but to never know that family? "I'm sorry," he said, feeling ham-fisted and foolish for not having better words.

"It is not a thing to be sorry for," Peryn replied with another easy smile and a dismissive gesture with the hand holding his anijswater. "My life was good. Is good. There is no cloud over my head."

Kinnon would blame the drink on how forced his laughter sounded, darting a look back at Val, then further back on the Chantry steps, where he knew Ingill was watching them. He couldn't see the look on her face, but he could see her lean in to say something to Mother Yotte, pointing up at the sky.

"Perhaps, we should cheer up your Orlesian friend," Peryn suggested, following Kinnon's gaze as far as Val. "Though I have no pretty girls for him."

"I don't think the two of us would cheer him up," Kinnon was quick to remind Peryn, "after the last time he yelled at us."

"I bet I could cheer him up," Anders muttered, staring into his drink.

"Is that Gerda?" Cormac asked, pointing to one of the two figures stumbling drunkenly over to Val, with a fistful of arrows. "I hope she doesn't stab him, that's going to be a mess to clean up after."

"You sound like Artie," Anders teased, looking up to see the cloud widening and the rain spreading outward. He had to stop this, before something went wrong. Gerda's thought was good, but she was too late for it to work, he thought, hauling himself back to his feet and tossing an arm over Kinnon's on Peryn's shoulders. "Come on and let's see what they're up to, before Ingill decides that rain is a sign on the Maker's wrath."

Kinnon laughed and then caught himself. "She would, too."
The Maker's Wrath

Chapter Summary

... or maybe just Ingill's. Sister Ingill insists the rain is a sign of mages and demands Peryn do something about it.

Cormac got up to go with them, just in time to notice the other figure was Candles, doing a dance she swore she learnt at Hawk Hold. Gerda kept throwing arrows and she'd snatch them out of the air and break them over her head. It was drawing quite a bit of attention, and Cormac wondered if drawing more attention to the soggy Orlesian was really the best decision.

In a similar vein, Kinnon wasn't sure that bringing the templar over was the best decision either, but he supposed it was better to keep an eye on him. As the three of them walked, tangled up in each other, Kinnon made a note to kick Val later. He had just gotten to the point of pleasantly buzzed, but Val just had to go and ruin that.

Val's scowl only seemed to deepen when he noticed the group walking their way, the rain growing heavier. Gerda, on the other hand, looked relieved, and she paused in her arrow juggling to dart to Anders's side.

"I think he's had a bit too much to drink," she said, watching Peryn out of the corner of her eye. "You know how he gets."

"Unfortunately, yes."

He also knew how Sister Ingill was, and he caught her staring intently at Peryn as though waiting for him to do something. They would have to play this carefully.

Peryn shrugged at Ingill, raising the arms of the mages to either side, with his shoulders. "She thinks he is a mage, because he is wet," he scoffed, rolling his eyes at Kinnon. "I will smite him, and she will see it is just the rain."

Anders paled, difficult to see beneath his hood, but he could feel the blood leave his face. "Won't that hurt him? I hope I packed enough potions. I wasn't counting on this! Just drunks!"

"It is a very little hurt," Peryn assured him. "Especially since he is not a mage. Just a quick slap is all."

Kinnon exchanged grim looks with Gerda and Cormac. "Isn't there an easier way? He's going to be pretty pissed about getting smacked."

"Ingill will take the blame. She outranks me." Peryn patted Kinnon's back and freed his hands.

The mages stared, nervously, knowing that this was the point where they needed to be surprised, where they needed to sacrifice Val, for their safety. Surprisingly, none of them were ready to do it, but if it came to a smite, there would be no other way. They swallowed their gasps and clenched their hands as the smite landed, ripping the magic away from everyone in range and turning the heads of other celebrants at the event. No, it wasn't much pain, but it was certainly a surprise.
Anders held his breath... but the rain didn't stop. He looked up to see, if anything, more storm clouds gathering overhead. His relief was so intense that his fingers felt numb.

"What was that?" Val shrieked, nearly tripping over a step as he rose to his feet. His already fair skin was ghostly pale, and Candles steadied him with a hand on his elbow, muttering through her teeth for him to shut up while he was ahead.

"I am sorry, friend Val," Peryn told him, ducking his head. Then he turned to Ingill, throwing his arms out wide as rainwater ran down his face. "You see? He is not a mage!"

Ingill's face still looked pinched, but her brows were knit more in confusion than anger as she squinted up at the rain.

"Thank you for assuaging our concerns, Ser Peryn," Mother Yotte said, gently laying a hand on Ingill's arm.

Val clung to Candles, a situation he never thought he'd find himself in, but the smite had stolen all the noise in his head. The world had gone silent around him, outside the voices and the patter of the rain. Empty and cold -- the things he fought so hard never to have happen to him.

"I'm not feeling well. I think I want to go home," he breathed.

Anders moved forward, then his own magic starting to return to his fingertips, instead of Justice's, as he put an arm around Val, taking him from Candles. "Hold on to me, Valery. I'll get you out of here," he said, turning Val toward the edge of the square. "He's really drunk, and the smite with the drinking..." Anders shot Peryn and Kinnon an apologetic look. "I'll come back, once he's all right. I feel like he's not going to be the only one, today."

Cormac reached out and grabbed Anders's bag, the numbness retreating from his hands. "Give me the potions, and I'll handle whatever's still here. Just take him home before he barfs on someone."

Kinnon's eyes watered as he pressed his face to Peryn's shoulder, smited, horrified, and questioning his life decisions. "Next time, let me get out of the way." His voice was small and ragged. "It's like you've turned off everything that matters."

"You had mages in your family," Peryn recalled, quietly, gently stroking Kinnon's hair. "I forgot. I'm sorry. But, again, we know now you are not one!"

Anders and Val were well on the road when a woman approached them, her hood pulled low over her face against the rain, rain that, it seemed, was slowly easing up.

"Don't ever make me have to do that again," a familiar voice scolded as she pulled even with Val, and he looked up, still in a daze, to find Petra scowling at him. "Storms are really not my thing, and there are so many ways that could have gone wrong."

"So that's what happened," Anders said, followed by a short laugh. Val just met her stare blankly, barely registering what was going on around him. "You threw a storm over his?"

"While out of range of the smite, yes. I could see that disaster unfolding from across town." The glare Petra tossed at Val softened into concern at the edges. "Did it work?"

"No templars pounced," Anders was happy to report.

"What is wrong with you, Val?" Petra demanded. "You didn't do this back in the tower, did you? If
you did, I never heard about it."

"You were a lot younger than us," Anders reminded her, "but, no, he didn't have this problem. What's with you?"

Val shook his head, his straggly, limp curls tossing water. "I don't know. It just keeps getting away from me." His hands clenched into fists. "But, at least I'm not bringing templars round."

"Yeah, except today you did," Anders pointed out. "And you're really lucky -- we're all lucky -- it was just Peryn. Peryn likes us."

"Peryn's going to kill us, one of these days," Val muttered, eyes firmly on the ground in front of him. "Why did I think this was going to be better than the tower? Why did I think freedom was going to matter?"

"Because it does, Val. You're just not used to it, yet. It gets easier." Anders tipped his head back, laughing up into the rain. "Did I ever tell you I spent months living in an actual sewer, until Cormac gave me something better? Worked there the whole time I was in Kirkwall, too. Look, you're not in a city, there's only one templar, and the fields are producing record amounts of food. You're going to be fine, Val, you just have to get this back under control."

"I've been separated from centuries of magical research. There, it was just rooms I couldn't get into and books I wasn't allowed to read. Here? Here, we're hundreds of miles from the nearest archive of magical texts, other than whatever we brought with us, which let me tell you wasn't that! Everything I wanted in my life--! I should have never gone underground. I should have broken off and gone to Cumberland, offered myself as a transfer. No one there would have been told not to let me study my field. I could have sent word to my mother. Everything would have been taken care of." The words spilled out like a wave of venom. "But, instead, I'm in the middle of a blighted desert, surrounded by darkspawn and evil sheep, farming. This is your life, Anders, not mine."

"And yet you chose to come with us," Petra said, not unkindly. "You had a reason for that, and that reason is still there."

Val squeezed his eyes shut, relying on Anders to keep him moving forward. He shut the door on any thoughts of Leofric, trying to fight off the overwhelming pressure in his head and the weight of clouds pressing down on him.

"And you're free now," she added. "You're not in a prison, tied to any one spot. Even here, with the farming, the darkspawn, and the evil sheep. You -- we all -- need to come to terms with our new lives, but after that, if you decide you're still unhappy here, you don't have to stay. That's what freedom is. Choosing the life you want."

Anders wasn't sure telling a drunk and soaking Val that he could leave was the best tactic, but he could appreciate what she was saying.

"Where am I going to go, now? I'm ruined. I can't go back to Cumberland or Dairsmuid, like this, I'll be sent to Aeonar, if I survive at all. You've heard what's happened in the south. We've all heard."

Val raised his hands to his face, for a moment, and then shoved his hair back, wringing it. "Maybe I'll go to Tevinter. I bet I could get up a bit in Qarinus or Carastes."

"Far be it from me to keep you from leaving," Anders replied, wryly, "but you're still Orlesian. And unless you can get this back under control, they're going to look at you like a dog that keeps peeing on the rug. I've got a friend from Tevinter -- he and his sister have had a lot to say about Altus culture -- but if anyone could pull it off, it'd be you. Just, you know, the you I knew when we were twenty-
five. *That* Valery, I have no doubt, would be able to manipulate his way into a research fellowship. But, something about you changed. You're not as sure as you were, then, and it shows. And so does this." He pointed up at the last bit of drizzle.

"So, you don't think I'd make it in Tevinter, because I'm not twenty-five and reckless, any more?" Val laughed bitterly.

"Basically, yeah." Anders nodded. "But, you can get it back. Get your head back on, and you can do it. Just don't go running in there half-cocked, or you'll wind up somebody's slave."

Val turned, suddenly and rammed his fist up under Anders's ribs. "Half-cocked?"

Anders wheezed and slammed his elbow down on the back of Val's neck, driving him to the ground. "Do not. Hit. The healer."

Petra looked on in confused horror, as Anders coughed, spit, and reached down to help Val up. "What the blight was that?"

"We've got some issues. It's a long story." Anders waved off the question.

"And I'm not going to be a slave. I'm a mage." Val grumbled, grabbing Anders's arm and hauling himself up with it. "It's Tevinter, remember? The place where mages are in charge."

"The place where magisters are in charge," Anders corrected. "Mages and their blood are still for sale. They just cost more. So, don't fuck up, all right?"

Val scoffed, though it was unclear whether in disgust at the idea or disgust in himself.

"For now, though," Petra said, giving Val's shoulder a squeeze, "if you can't enjoy the festival, at least enjoy the day off."

"A festival to Hector?" Val spat, but his sour mood rang hollow as the clouds began to lighten up.

"Yes," Anders sighed. "To Hector, who is spending that festival dragging your sorry ass back. You're welcome, by the way."

Val still didn't look particularly grateful, but Anders was just glad to be out of the rain.
The Well of Despair

Chapter Summary

Jowan follows up on the stories of hauntings in the Brecilian Forest, hoping that if spirits and demons can pass the Veil, he and the others can get back, as well.

The next step would take them closer to the Brecilian Forest, where there were stories going back centuries of ghosts and werewolves and talking trees. Actually, if Jowan got it right, the next step would take them right into the heart of the forest, which he insisted was glowing in his vision, like the mirror at Drake’s Fall.

He knelt in the endless nothingness and pulled the world apart, letting the Fade itself spill through him, reaching for the place he could see in his mind, a body of light and green. And then it came to him, open door to open door, and he stepped into the rift to keep it open. "I think this is it!"

The first sound on the other side was lightning, and Asha rolled to the side, pulling Niall with her, as the bolt struck the demon lunging for them. The tattered, grey form still loomed, though distracted by a radiant blue figure with an enormous sword, that seemed to be making excellent progress against it.

"Maker, no," Niall groaned, as the thing’s gaze landed on him again.

"Jowan? Send them back!" Asha called out, trying to pull Niall up, beside her, as she took in the crush of flame and dull ache around them. "We're not getting through, here!"

"What?" Jowan asked, as the last mage passed through, and he let go of the rift, turning around to see what Asha was yelling about. "Oh, shit."

"Dammit, Jowan!" Lily swore, stepping back behind Brynn and Owain and clutching at the Maker’s eye talisman one of the mages had crafted for her.

Jowan’s mumbled, "Sorry," was lost in the clash of battle, as a few demons pulled away from the blue-glowing swordsman to turn their wrath on the new arrivals.

Asha gave up on pulling Niall to his feet in favour of pulling out her staff, the one Valor had given her, and planting herself between the demons and Niall. Hopelessness made her limbs heavy at the sight of them, but Asha had faced enough demons by now to recognise Despair in the tattered robes and the sudden chill. Fire for these demons, Asha had learned early, and that was what she fed them, flame shooting out of her outstretched hand. The Despair demon screeched and reeled back, but that feeling of heaviness remained.

Behind her, Niall clutched his head and sobbed.

Amidst the chaos, Brynn shouted orders, advising the mages so they could herd the demons instead of throwing their spells at random. Fire for Despair and ice for Rage, but the magic that hurt one fed the other.

Lily watched them, the futility of it all lingering in her chest, drawing down any hope she’d had of leaving. She’d trusted Jowan once, and now she’d trusted him again, and this was so much more terrible than Aeonar. But, her eyes caught the growing glow at her side.
"Do not surrender, Sister." Grace smiled serenely, spreading her arms wide. "Give them hope. Bring them the Light within you."

Lily was about to say something angry -- what would Grace know? -- but the spirit had pricked her memory. "Lady of Perpetual Victory, your praises I sing! Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable of your glory! Let me be the vessel which bears the Light of your promise to the world expectant." The Chant poured forth from her, and she raised the talisman she held above her head. Beside her, Grace's glow grew stronger, illuminating the whole of the battlefield and the ancient temple-town around them.

The swords of the templars seemed to strike harder in that light, readily cleaving through the sticky rags of despair, dulling the burn of rage. The light glinted off their armour, like it did in paintings of Calenhad and the heroes of old.

Asha seemed to bend the light, slamming it into her opponents, stunning them and breaking down their powers. Demons stumbled before her, falling into the traps laid by other mages. Rage withered to smoke and despair into ash, while a few demons tore away, shrieking, as they disappeared among the ruins.

When the battle died down, that blue-glowing figure remained, its sword pointing harmlessly towards the ground. The battle had brought Asha close enough to make out the shape within the glow, and she was surprised to see the pointed ears and slender figure of an elf, arrayed in heavy but beautiful armour.

"Well met," she said, hoping the spirit would stay friendly. When it nodded in reply, Asha dared to glance back at Niall, fearing for a moment that she would see the layers of teeth and icy skin of a demon. But Lily and Grace were at his side, and he looked like himself, the colour returning to his cheeks.

"You hold the covenant. I greet you." The spirit flickered in a way Asha could interpret as a greeting.

"Covenant?" Asha looked confused. "Have we met?"

"Your people and mine once joined, here, before the Darkness came. It moved on, but echoes still remain. You return to battle them. I remain to do the same."

"Protection," Grace observed, her voice carrying easily, though she hadn't raised it at all.

"Protection," the spirit repeated, tasting the word, feeling its nuance. "Yes, but no. Dar'Misaan. I am the sword of this place."

"You must have been here a long time," Asha offered, making no move toward the spirit. "As far as time can be said to be long, here."

"The Darkness came, and then the storyteller. It is too long, but how long? I defend against the echoes." The spirit seemed mostly undisturbed by the idea that time had passed around it.

"We are trying to reach the other side of the Veil," Asha explained. "There was an accident. We were trapped here, and we need to return. Can you help us?"

"Return? No one wakes from Uthenera, now. Those who lie down to rest turn to dust and bones. I have seen them." The spirit shimmered as the nearly-forgotten grief passed through it.

"Uthen... what?" Jowan muttered, creeping closer to Asha and the spirit. "But, we're not asleep.
That's the problem. We shouldn't be here."

"There is no waking," the spirit said again. He turned, stared off into the ruins, where the demon stragglers still lurked. In that look, Asha saw their fate clearly, if they did not escape. This place would erode their humanity, and there was a fine line between spirit and demon.

"I can still try to tear our way through," Jowan said, deciding that this ancient elf spirit would not be helpful. "You heard him: this is a place full of magic and history. The Veil is thin, here."

"You thought the same of the Dragonbone Wastes," Asha pointed out, and Jowan winced.

"It's still our best option," he said, and Asha hated that she had no argument for that.

"Even if you do it, here," Brynn pointed out, gesturing to the lurking demons, "all of that is coming with us. We've seen the place. We can come back, if there's nothing better, but I don't want to be responsible for unleashing a demon army on Thedas. I'm the Knight-Captain of Aeonar. Preventing that sort of thing is my entire job description."

"Man's got a point," Owain agreed, nodding. "Demons want to get into the world, more than anything. Even if you can get something to give, here, they're going to follow us out."

"They're going to try," Lily said, grimly. "But, Jowan's strong, and he's fast -- and that's how we ended up here in the first place. And I'm not letting anything follow us out."

"You think you can hold them off?" Asha asked, with a calculating look at the building the demons seemed most drawn to.

Lily paused, but nodded. "Grace helps. I'm no mage, but I've never seen anything like that. I think we can do it again."

"Then we'll bring up the rear, and everyone else goes through first. If you can do it, I can use it." Asha shook out her hands, passing the staff back and forth. "Still, it all depends on him tearing a hole we can get through."

Jowan nodded, gathering strength from Lily and Grace. This was it. He could do this. Just one more spell, and they'd be free again. "Step back," he said, shaking out his hands. There was no mirror this time, but the Fade had, so far, been anything but predictable.

Jowan sucked in a deep breath as he started to cast, pulling light from the air that swirled about his hands. He tried to reach through the Fade, through the fabric keeping it closed off to the real world. He thought of the mirror and the path that ran through it and... pulled.

Lily gasped, clutching at Grace as she saw the sparks, bursts of light peeking through the seams. Jowan strained, the tendons on his neck sticking out, his hands shaking, and Lily hoped, prayed that this would be it, finally, finally.

But Jowan released the spell, gasping and staggering, and Lily felt her heart sink.

"Keep trying," Asha suggested as he paused to catch his breath.

"It's wrong," Jowan said, shaking his head. "This isn't thin. It feels like something happened here to... put it back?" He shrugged and gestured futilely.

"How much do you want to bet me it's Solona again?" Niall covered his face and groaned. "How much do you want to bet me she came in here, kicked something's ass, and did... whatever that is that
she does, and now we've got no holes to get out of?"

"There are no holes," the elven spirit told him. "The Veil is as thick as when Fen'Harel locked away the gods. You cannot return from Uthenera."

"I'm starting to wonder if we shouldn't just go find Solona and make her let us out," Jowan muttered.

"We have a couple more places to look," Lily said, rolling out the list. "But, if we don't get out, maybe she can help us."

"She'd have to be able to hear us," Niall pointed out, "which is half the problem."

"Didn't she used to do creepy Fade shit for the First Enchanter? She'll fucking hear us." Jowan cracked his knuckles and shook out his hands again. "All we have to do is find her."

"Well, she could've gone to Weisshaupt, for all we know," Lily pointed out, "so let's stick to the list, for now."

Jowan glanced at the list. "Is that Redcliffe? Why is Redcliffe on here? I am not going back to Redcliffe."

"So, we'll do something else, first," Asha shrugged, slapping Jowan on the back as she leaned around him to see the list. "Like, what's this thing about Tevinter and the iceless valley of the Frostbacks? That's... not near here, but we pass Ostagar on the way, right? And Ostagar's got to be worth a try. But, J-man, if Lily thinks we should try Redcliffe, maybe we should try Redcliffe."

"Yes, but I know what happened in Redcliffe. It wasn't the Veil. It was just me." Jowan sighed and rubbed his face. "I don't want to go back to Redcliffe. Arl Eamon will have me hanged in the square."

"I could always just take you back to Aeonar," Owain joked, "but, at least we'd be out there to try it."
Anders had to wade through cats to answer the door. They were getting used to visitors -- too used to visitors, judging by the mini, tail-waving swarm -- which he blamed on Candles, who liked to sneak them treats whenever she came by. When Anders opened the door, they sniffed at the visitor, who was not Candles but could still have treats in his pockets for all they knew.

"Hello," Anders said, somewhere between welcoming and guarded. There was something familiar in the man's round face, his skin ruddy from long days spent in the sun, and even though he smiled like an old friend, Anders couldn't place him.

"Oh good. I was beginning to think Isabela gave me the wrong directions."

Isabela. Right. This man had been on her ship on the journey north, though his face had been more waxy than red at the time. One of the mages.

"Ah, right. Good to see you, uh..."

"Gregson," the man supplied, and that seemed right.

"Right. Gregson. Come in for a minute. Mind the cats."

"You've done well for yourselves, up here," Gregson observed, taking in the wrought-iron grates over the books on every wall of the main room. "Captain said as much, but we didn't come up the river, last time. Came down the river this time. Maker, that desert out there! I came in from Afsaana, and it's fine 'til halfway through Tevinter."

"All the way through Tevinter," Anders corrected. "It's fine through Vol Dorma, and then the desert kicks in, because we wouldn't let the magisters back in."

"Who's here?" Cormac asked, coming in through the kitchen with wet washing hung on his arm. He eyed Gregson for a moment. "From the boat, right? Didn't catch your name. Too busy losing my lunch."

"Isabela sent you?" Anders prompted.

"Rialto Bay's got an awful lot of ships flying templar flags. I'm to tell you she's not going to be able to take you to Ferelden, and you should go overland, if you can help it. They're coming for Rivain, she thinks. For the Seers." Gregson shrugged helplessly. "Queen of the Eastern Seas, she says, and
I'd believe it. She dropped me in Afsaana the night she called in the Raiders. I don't know how you can turn a ship in that bay, now, but I don't think she means to lose against a bunch of Orlesian punters." He paused. "Templars, Anders. They've come for us."

Anders rubbed a hand over his eyes to hide the flash of blue. "I can't say we didn't see something like this coming. Dairsmuid is small, and the templars probably see it as an easy fight and a way to send a clear message." It wasn't like the Chantry paid too much attention to them otherwise, and Anders could feel Justice stirring up anger in his gut.

_We have a duty to the mages here_, Anders reminded him. _And we're going to the Conclave. That's the best we can do for them._

Justice was not happy, but then, neither was Anders.

"Regardless," Anders went on, cracking a smile for Gregson, "I have no doubt Isabela will send them off with their tails between their legs. As for us, I think Mack here might be relieved at the lack of boats."

"Kinnon's going to be pissed about the camels," Cormac pointed out, "but I'm not going to be barfing every two minutes! Just... can we get a better saddle, this time? I think my ass still hurts from the trip to Starkhaven."

"That was the softest saddle in the valley, Mack. The one for pregnant women and elderly nobles." Anders looked amused.

"Another few years and I'll _be_ an elderly noble!" Cormac huffed and cast a warming spell on the cloth draped over his arm, the steam wafting up and frizzling his hair. "I can ride horses. Oxen, even. I rode a donkey across the bannorn. Camels are not for sitting on!"

"I'm going to have to agree with him. That thing they sold me in Vol Dorma isn't a fit companion for man or beast. It's like some lumpy blight-beast! And it spits!" Gregson shook his head and glanced toward the door. "I left it in the village. Paid good coin for them to take it off my hands for a couple of days."

"The entire problem is that you're both barbarians," Anders insisted. "Civilised people ride camels in the desert. And we are taking camels down to Kirkwall, so we can catch a boat."

"Remind me to rearrange Anton's bedroom, before we leave town. Do you think we should tell Bodahn we're coming?" Cormac asked, brushing the drops of condensation out of his hair.

"Might as well let him know what he's in for," Anders replied with a slow grin. "But I would leave out the part about rearranging Anton's things. That's the sort of surprise you give in person."
The Storm Comes by Sea

Chapter Summary

Ships flying templar flags are heading toward Rialto Bay, with no merciful mission in mind. Isabela has a fleet, mages, and a plan.

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes after Assing It Up 148 (which hasn't posted yet, as of the post date of this chapter, because what the fuck is linear time).

The sails and flags all bore the Sword of Mercy, a blazing panel of red and gold that stretched across the bay, as the ships closed in on the blockade at the port of Dairsmuid.

"They are the Chantry, and they believe they have the right to take whatever they desire!" Isabela called out to the assortment of raiders and mages aboard her ship. To either side, her men shouted it to each next ship down the line. "But, they're not in it for profit or joy! They're in it for conquest! They're in it to destroy an independent nation and to drag us down too! And we're not going to sit for that!"

A cheer went up from the flagship, spreading a moment later to the next ships and down.

"I want the stormbringers aimed at the masts! Take their sails, and you'll slow them! I have no reason to believe they're equipped to row and fight at the same time! Lend your wind to the sails of the raiders! Give me grease and flames across their decks -- they come with Antivan fire, because they must! To do without would be to come unarmed. Give me stone against their hulls! Hit at the waterline, and they'll go down." Isabela looked out across her crew, the crazed mages who had come with her from Kirkwall, and those they'd picked up along the way, as the rebellion grew and spread. "Do not let them close on us! If they board, they will smite! If they smite, we're fucked! If they surrender, you let the raiders pick them up. You let a ship with no mages take the survivors. Wait for them to strike, so you know they're in range!"

She looked back at the ships closing on them. "Here they come! Show them what they've turned themselves against! We are all people of Thedas!"

Isabela's words rang in the crew's ears as they waited for that first volley. Minna had a spell ready at her fingertips, and it was a growing pressure against her skull the longer she held it, praying, for the first time, that the templars would hurry up and attack. Moments seemed to stretch on forever, until finally, finally there came the first glow of fire along the decks of the templar ships.

Minna finished her spell before the fire hit them, calling down lightning to strike the mast of the ship in front of her, charring the wood and making it split. The mast toppled sideways, the sail falling to cover half the deck.

"I need ice over here!" Isabela called out over the sounds of mages throwing spells, pointing out the
part of the deck the Antivan fire had struck, spreading quickly towards the mast. She couldn't tell
who cast the spell, but suddenly ice was there, freezing the fire in its path. This was why Izzy loved
having competent mages on board.

"Give me grease!" Arielle shouted, gesturing toward another ship angled toward the narrow space
between them and the next ship in the blockade. "Wash their decks with it!"

Two mages turned, one launching the grease and the other chasing it with wind. Arielle lit the grease
while it was still in the air, and the burning gobs spattered the deck of the other ship, clinging to
everything, dripping down under the racks holding the Antivan fire. But, the ship kept coming, a
small group in light armour poised at the rail.

A boulder slammed against the bow, splintering the deck and the rail, and throwing the templars into
the bay, but still the ship continued on, angled, now, to ram the flagship, instead of to scrape the sides
of the ships in the line, forcing them apart.

"Put it under!" Isabela called. "Put it under or shield us!"

The barrier sprung up, barely sufficient to the need, and two fists of stone blew holes in the templar
ship, splinters of wood flying up to meet the barrier, as the water rolled beneath the ships. A gurgling
sound rose, and just above it, the call to abandon the ship, as the water sucked into the hull.

One ship down, but there were others, and they couldn't let the templars get close enough to smite.
At range, they had the advantage, and Isabela planned to keep it that way. Fire rained from another
ship, this time hitting the sails, and they would have hit a few mages if not for their personal shields.
More ice was there the next moment, and Isabela turned her attention back to the incoming ship.

"Minna, take out that mast!" she called, and Minna nodded, her second lightning strike as potent at
the first. Another mast cracked and toppled, falling into the water, and the other mages were quick to
follow with grease and fire. Flames swallowed the templar banner, and more templars jumped to take
their chances with the sea.

Mages cheered as they battered the second templar ship. Victory seemed certain, even simple, and
none of them expected the Smite that slammed into them.

"We're being boarded!" cried a mage, pointing down the side of the ship.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Isabela swore, grabbing an undetonated Antivan fire grenade. She lit it and waited
until the fuse had burned almost into the jar before slamming it down into the face of the climbing
 templar, sending flaming pitch and oil down into his armour. The screams stopped as he struck the
water, but two others appeared in his place.

"Who has fire, still?" Isabela called, holding up her hand to hold the mages in position. "Who's not
afraid to lose it?"

Another smite slammed through that side of the ship, and then the mages came running, pouring
grease and fire down the ship's sides. The templars fell back into the sea, the armour branded into
their skin.

"All right, yes, but now the ship's on fire," Isabela muttered, gazing down the blazing wood and
pitch.

The mage who had been putting out the fires shook his hands out, flexing his fingers. "I can help
with that in a minute, but I'm running out of ice."
Isabela cursed. A minute was a long time in a battle, and Isabela didn't like the way the fire was catching. "Well, hopefully this will be the last time we need it." To the rest of the crew, she shouted, "Don't let them board, at any cost! If any templar gets near, even in the water, take them out! Show no mercy, for the sake of Dairsmuid!"

By the time she had finished speaking, she felt a welcome chill in the air and looked down to see ice curling around the ship like a shimmering layer of paint, swallowing the pitch and the fire. That was one problem solved, at least. "Not too thick," she warned.

"Fuck that, Captain," the mage replied. "Thick as we can keep it. We're not moving, and I don't think they can climb it. 'Sides, when the salt starts to chew it off, we'll start dropping sheets. Ship'll defend itself."

"It's the sheets I'm worried about," Isabela replied, watching the mages hammer at more approaching templar ships. "We're holding a blockade. Nothing near us is moving, either."

"Thick enough to kill a man, thin enough to splinter on impact with the next ship," the mage agreed, after a moment, the ice smoothing until it provided nothing to grip.

Further on, the line bowed as two more templar ships went under, the rush of water into their holds pulling from under the blockade. A touch of Force corrected it as fast as Isabela noticed it happening. Someone on those ships was paying attention.

And then the lighthouse in Salle flashed into life, the light bright enough to be seen in Llomeryn, as the last of the templar ships moved into the bay. The Mistral would be coming soon, and in its wake, the Fereldan raiders off the Storm Coast, who'd hidden their ships along the coast of Antiva, posing as merchants, and Isabela promised herself she'd kiss Lady Cousland, if they made it out of this alive. The templars would be cut off -- unable to escape the bay -- and if the raiders' fortune held, unable to set a ship in any port on it, particularly Dairsmuid, where the tower's mages had mostly barricaded themselves inside, sending out a handful of Senior Enchanters with their own templars, who stood on the shore, cleaving through any of those from the sunken ships who made it that far but refused to surrender.

Through the rain of Antivan fire, Isabela watched another templar mast splinter and fall. A few mages paused in their assault to strengthen their shields, but even only one mage on the offence was a force of nature. Izzy knew that ship was not long for this world.

And so, it seemed, did the rest of the templars. The few ships left started to turn back towards the mouth of the bay, more Antivan fire covering their retreat, and Izzy knew the day was theirs. A cheer went up from the mages at the sight of the templar banner in full retreat.

"Keep firing!" Isabela instructed them. "Take them down while they're in range!"

The sky filled with flashes of light, with fire and lightning, and to Isabela, it was like watching fireworks. But it was only when she spotted more sails on the horizon, sails she knew belonged to the Raiders, that she felt like celebrating.

The Fereldan ships at the mouth of the bay weren't carrying mages, or at least not in the numbers guarding the harbour, but the Mac Eanraig family had been thrashing Orlesians along the coast for centuries, and the youngest generation seemed to be perfectly in tune with that history, as they brought their own perfectly mechanical mayhem to bear on the remaining templar ships. A few pulled off the edges of the fleet, searching for survivors left adrift -- not everyone on those ships was a templar, and most of the sailors were smart enough not to be wearing heavy plate.
On one of the templar ships, a mutiny broke out, suddenly and visibly, with the ship's crew hurling templars into the bay and tearing down the Sword of Mercy flags. They surrendered when the Mistral approached, and were allowed to set course for an Antivan port.

By day's end, all that was left of the templars was washing up on the shores of Rivain -- planks and sailcloth and loose plate, the occasional body that hadn't been swallowed by the sea.

By the time Izzy's boots met sand, there was a gathering of Dairsmuid mages and templars waiting for her. A woman with flowing robes and silver streaks in her hair stood in front, her bearing that of someone who knew how to command attention, her eyes looking through as much as over Isabela.

"I do not know who you are," she said, "or why you have come to our aid, but thank you. We had no reason to expect, let alone prepare for, such a force."

Isabela smiled, resting her hand on one cocked hip. "We passed them a while back, and I thought that that was a few too many templars for a simple friendly 'hello'." She doffed her tall hat and swept it into a bow. "And I am Captain Isabela, at your service."

"First Enchanter Rivella, at yours." She forewent any bowing herself.

Arielle and Minna whispered to each other, both eyeing the same man in the robes of an Enchanter.

"Does Lord Dog have another brother?" Minna finally asked Isabela.

Isabela turned to look where Minna pointed. "Well, hello Enchanter Sexy!" She grinned at Rivella. "You didn't tell me you had a Hawke!"

"A hawk?" Rivella blinked and looked from the raiders to her enchanter. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What's his name?" Arielle asked, trying to pretend to be the sensible one. "He looks so much like Lord Amell..."

Rivella's face cleared in relieved understanding. "Amell? Yes, of course. I'd heard his family was ... Marcher, right? That's Daylen Amell. I don't know anything else from before he arrived, but his name and that he had a big family. He's a master stone-shaper -- simple work, but incredible skill. We're lucky to have him."

"You have no idea," said Izzy, still looking him up and down. The resemblance to the Hawkes, particularly to Anton, was striking, though his skin was the pasty white that spoke of little sun.

Daylen noticed all the attention and shuffled awkwardly, looking back and forth between Minna, Arielle, and Isabela. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Of course not," Isabela said, stepping right in front of Daylen, watching him swallow as he took her in. "I'm a good friend of your family. Your cousins, anyway. A very good friend to a few of them."

"My... cousins?" Daylen blinked, at a loss. "I didn't know I had any. Well. I suppose there was always a high likelihood of having some cousins, but..."

"Does 'five' count as some?" Isabela asked with a cheeky grin.

"Five? You, um... you know Solona's my sister, right? Not my cousin?" Daylen blinked some more, trying to sort through the idea. "There were five of us, too. Me and Kenny, Solona, Maud, and Alice. I don't know where any of them ended up except Solona. Everybody knows where she ended up."
"Married to my favourite Antivan elf is where she ended up. If I could ever catch her in the Keep, any more, I'd take you to see her." Isabela kept on grinning. "But, no, I didn't confuse her for a cousin. You've got five more, starting with the Viscount of Kirkwall. They're all Hawkes, though, not Amells. Well, except something political, so Stabby is Lord Amell, and the Princess of Starkhaven is Lady Amell."

"Nobility?" Daylen looked a little surprised. "I thought... I mean, the books said..."

"Royalty, technically. It's the Marches. And Princess Bethy's got magic. And a great ass, but you don't want to hear about that." Isabela's grin widened further. "I said I knew some of them very well. So, Enchanter Amell... you want to come along for the ride? Go visit as much of your family as I can scare up? I bet your Uncle Gamlen would shit a whole outhouse worth of bricks, if we showed up at his door. What he's still doing living in Lowtown, I'll never understand, but some of my best friends live in Lowtown, so I shouldn't talk."

"I...uh..." Daylen's eyes popped wide at the offer. He darted a look at Rivella, but she was pretending not to hear the conversation. He looked around, at the people he had spent most of his life with, at the tower beyond them that had been his home. "You would let me travel with you? Truly?"

Isabela grinned at the excitement creeping into his voice. "Truly," she replied. "You won't even be the only mage on board." She tipped her head in the direction of her ship.

"Why?"

Isabela shrugged. "Your cousins are worth it. Bethy's not the only one with a fine ass. Now, are you coming, or do I need to throw you over my shoulder?"

Minna snickered. "Is that our booty for this mission?"

Isabela considered making a lewder comment, only to decide that, with those robes, it was difficult to ascertain what other assets Daylen did or did not have in common with his cousins.

"I've never been carried off by a pirate!" Daylen looked a bit excited by the idea.

"I'll be back to talk with you," Isabela assured Rivella. "This shit cannot go on. But, right now, I need to steal your enchanter for a voyage over the sea." She hiked Daylen over her shoulder, with one quick move, and turned back toward the docks.

"My books!" Daylen sputtered, as Isabela bore him off. "Someone get my books!"

"She'll be back," Arielle assured Rivella. "We're still here."

"Someone probably should pack his things, though," Minna said, watching the captain retreat with her prize. "We'll try to bring him back in the same number of pieces we took him, but it'll be a while. Assuming he wants to come back. Times are changing."

"Assuming the Chantry doesn't kill us all." Arielle rolled her eyes. "Apostates, and what. You, too, now, after this."

"They'll have to try much harder to get through us. This is Rivain, not some meek Andrastian nation. I was born to raiders, and I know enough to push back against whatever comes." Rivella cracked a small smile. "But, you! You are raiders. You do us proud."

Somewhere down the docks, there was a loud crack and a surprised squeal.
"Do take care of him. He's really very good at what he does." Rivella sighed, still smiling.
The Korcari Wilds have never been a peaceful place, Ostagar least of all. But, has the wake of the Blight done enough damage to the Veil for Jowan's team to get out?

Lily led them in what she hoped was the right direction. Sometimes the green fog and the pathways beneath their feet shifted in ways that made no sense, and often she doubted, but always Grace was there at her side, reminding her to trust. The landscape shifted once more, and Lily could see the silhouettes of ruined buildings through the fog, could see crumbling arches a giant could walk through.

"Look!" she told the others, while Grace smiled beside her.

"Is this Ostagar?" Asha asked uncertainly. "The fog is thick here."

Lily had never been -- to her knowledge, none of them had been -- but the architectural style seemed about right. "Yes," she said with a conviction she did not feel, as they passed under one of those great, broken arches.

Spires that seemed to be made of broken and reassembled buildings from empires long fallen stretched upward beside the path, as they made their way down toward the smudgy ruins below. The fortress, if that's what it was, sat on an island, the ground beneath caught mid-drip into the unending void below it.

Niall thought first of his Harrowing and then of his death, as he took in the scene and the dull chittering that hung in the air. "What's that noise? Are there rats or something? Why would there be--"

And then he thought of Mouse and turned circles, wildly looking for any demons disguised as small animals.

"Memories of darkspawn," Asha suggested, swinging her staff into her hand as she continued to follow Lily toward the island hanging in the mist.

"Well we'd better find some memories of Wardens, soon," Owain muttered, nervously, one hand resting on his sword.

Lily continued to lead them through the fog, staying close to Grace. The chittering followed them, seeming to surround them, and occasionally they could make out dark shapes in the fog.

"Those aren't darkspawn," Jowan said, squinting at the familiar silhouette walking just to his side.

"No," Brynn agreed, drawing his sword. "They're not."

Lily stopped in her tracks, seeing more of the creatures in front of them, blocking their path. "More demons," she breathed as they finally stepped out of the fog.

"Abominations," Brynn corrected, and Owain nodded.

But Lily shook her head, familiar by now with the heavy cold and the layers of teeth that came with
despair demons.

"What?" Asha threw them all confused looks, her staff held defensively before her. "Those are clearly dragons!"

"No, see, dragons? Dragons would be adorable, at that size," Owain insisted, edging to the side, out of the way of the inevitable first barrage of hexes from the mages. "Those are not adorable. Those are freakish and gross."


"What the fuck are you seeing, Niall? They're abominations!" Jowan danced back and slammed a hex across the first few. "Hold onto him. Something's got in his head."

"Me!?" Niall straightened up, offended. "That is a giant rat, and if I had something to stab it with, I would!"

"Demons," Lily said, again, gesturing for Grace to join her. "You have chosen and spilled the blood of innocence for power. I pity your folly, but still more do I pity those whose lives you have taken in pursuit of selfish goals. No more will you bear the Light. To darkness flee, and be gone from my sight!"

A spear of light seared the creatures in front of her, and whatever they were, dragon, rat, abomination, or demon, they still felt pain. Their agonised shrieks were almost satisfying.

Then everything became a mess of swords and spells, impossible to organise when they couldn't even agree on what they were seeing. Niall stayed close to Jowan, clutching his head and muttering, and Brynn glanced over to make sure he was still more spirit than demon.

"We've fought worse than this," Jowan said, trying to reassure Niall, as well as himself. One abomination had its claws raised for Jowan's face, and he stuffed it full of lightning before it could react.

Brynn wrenched his sword out of whatever it was, before him, arms shaking and tears in his eyes as he took another swing. Beside him, Owain didn't look to be in much better shape.

"Don't pay them any mind!" Asha shouted down the battlefield, which had grown to stretch down the road. "It's all lies! Lily's right, they're demons!"

Lily's recitation rang out even above the sound of swords, even above the sounds of screaming and transformation that rattled in her head, memories of those who'd failed to resist. But, they'd lost their faith. She hadn't. Unshakeable, she glowed with certainty, calm, and the Maker's light, and the demons fell before her, darkness driven back by the Light, as the Maker promised.

Asha's face set in a terrible grimace as she drove the blade of her staff into another demon, and a realisation struck her. These were something new. Demons, certainly, but not the kinds they'd seen before. And whatever they were, they had settled into the memories of this battle quite well. She wondered, in passing, what they'd been before.

As Niall made another terrified sound, Jowan grabbed him with both hands and shoved him toward Lily.

"Stand in the light, Niall!" Jowan wasn't sure it would help, but it couldn't possibly hurt with the amount of damage Lily was doing just... existing, from the look of it.
Niall winced, screwing his eyes shut as though the light hurt them, but he stayed by Grace and Lily, his whimpers tapering off as the demons fell away from them.

"What are these things?" Owain asked, voice ragged and face pale. He continued to cut them down, focusing on Lily's words and the confidence in her voice, letting them block out the horrible images and sensations that assaulted him from every angle.

The battle seemed to go on for an age, Jowan's hands shaking with each spell he cast, and he wondered if this would go on forever, until Lily had finished reciting the whole of the Chant. He didn't notice the number of demons thinning, only noticed when suddenly the spell on his lips had no target.

"Fear," Brynn decided, after a few shaky breaths, his sword still at the ready as he peered into the swirling mists around them. "Ser Hayward wrote a relatively famous paper on the things, but I've never heard of them manifesting like... this! Of course, I've never heard of people just walking around in the Fade, either."

"Of course you have," Jowan pointed out, still holding the spell he'd almost tossed into the ether. "I just doubt these things were waiting for the Seven, or they'd never have made it to the Golden City in the first place."

"Magisters," Owain pointed out, squinting into the mists along the slowly-manifesting road. "Can't really compare yourself to magisters. Besides, we've fought them off, haven't we?"

"For now," Asha agreed, going to check on Niall. "You still with us?"

Niall nodded, his face unusually pale. It took a few more shaky breaths before he was able to speak. "Fear sounds about right," he said in a small voice. He offered Asha a crooked smile. "What does it say about me that you saw Fear as dragons, and I saw Fear as a bunch of rodents?"

Asha wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "It says that one particular rodent named Mouse was shitty to you in ways no dragon has been."

"Not yet, anyway," Jowan mumbled. At Asha's flat look, he threw up his hands. "I'm just saying, who knows what else we'll run into?"

"Hopefully a way out," Lily said, looking back at the island fortress that loomed much closer now. Brynn nodded, firming his grip on his sword. "It's best we find that out before more of those come back."

Jowan huffed and took the lead, before Lily could step forward again. "You're the best we've got against them. We can't put you in the front."

Brynn nodded, again, more emphatically. "Stay between us and Asha. However they come in, we can keep them off you, until you do your thing."

"You are a templar, Ser Brynn," Lily reminded him, her chin angling up slightly, as she followed the mages. "It should not only be my thing. Were you not instructed in the faith? Tested in your certainty and devotion?"

"Sister, you were studying to be a Mother, were you not? You studied the clerical path." Brynn smiled awkwardly. "I'm no Brother. I studied the martial path. Your faith will always be stronger than mine, because all I have is faith. You have certainty."
"If only that were true." Lily chuckled, the sound cut off suddenly, when the mist shifted out of the way of something that looked almost familiar. The golden gleam on Enchanters' robes, all surrounding a misty white fountain. They were still too far to speak to, but she wondered if they were real.

"Those don't look like demons," Asha said hopefully, if quietly, as though not wanting to disturb them.

"The other demons didn't look like demons, either," Jowan grumbled, but he still headed, cautiously, towards that group in glowing gold. It was the closest he had come to seeing the sun in many months. Or at least it felt like months.

The enchanters looked no less ethereal up close, like ghosts robed in light. But ghosts that Jowan recognised, and he sucked in a breath. "Mages," he stammered, pointing. "Our mages!"

Behind him, he heard Lily gasp and knew that he was right. "Can they hear us?"

"I don't think they're alive," Niall said softly.

"Neither are you," Owain pointed out, shrugging.

"No, I mean, they're just echoes. Like those Tevinter researchers," Niall explained, inching closer to the fountain they surrounded. He could feel it -- that had been the separation point, where they'd crossed the Veil. They'd only done it in spirit, but after a battle -- a massacre -- like what happened here, maybe they'd be able to follow it out, if it still glowed like that.

"What is that?" Jowan asked, trying to find a space between two other ghosts, to see the circulating glow.

"It's like a Harrowing, I think. Irving did all these wild experiments with sending people into the Fade to look around -- I didn't get to go. I didn't want to go. So of course, here I am." Niall shook his head and edged into a space between two half-visible mages. "If I'm right, and this does work the same as the Harrowing, that's empowered lyrium out there, and the power was channelled to make a conduit that could be followed in and out. Just, in the Harrowing, someone else makes your conduit and then hides it from you. You rememb--" He stopped suddenly and shot a look at Jowan.

"Actually, I don't, but thanks." Jowan laughed. "Not a Harrowed mage, remember?"

"Well, you are now," Niall muttered, nudging one of the ghosts aside to examine the conduit.

The ghost he nudged turned to look at him. Niall thought she was opening her mouth to say something, only to watch her jaw continue to drop, stretching longer and wider and sprouting another layer of jagged teeth. Her body stretched, skin pressing taut, her fingers long and claw-like, and Niall screamed.

The creature shrieked back at him, its note long and piercing, washing over the others like a bucket of ice. That note carried more than sound; it carried blinding terror, the kind that made Jowan want to scream and run away. He might have, too, if they hadn't only just battled fear.

Owain pulled Niall back, swiping his sword at the demon, keeping it at bay until he had Niall securely behind him.

Asha was the next to strike, a blue flare slashing across the other spirits that had turned after the first. Interestingly, not all of them did, a few still hovering around the fountain, going through ritual motions. They began to look thin and pale, as the others became more sharply defined -- a definition
that wavered as Asha's spell landed.

A golden glow began to spread from behind Asha, where Lily and Grace stood, extending the Maker's Light over everything in range. This time, the demons didn't crumple or burn. They melted back toward the human forms they'd held, before, the faces of the Enchanters becoming clearer, the longer they were in the light.

"Nolan?" Niall asked, stepping closer to one of the spirits, but it just looked blankly at him.

"Even if the light holds them, we need to destroy them. They're demons. They'll change back as soon as we've passed -- or as soon as she stops," Brynn gestured at Lily.

"You don't know that," Niall said sharply, throwing a glare at Brynn.

"I know that we can't take the risk," Brynn replied. "You said it yourself: they're not like you. This is as close to redemption as they are going to get."

Niall pulled his glare away from Brynn to look back at Nolan. His eyes were empty, the way the Tranquils' eyes were empty, and just thinking about that comparison made him wince. Niall stepped back, making room for the templars but not looking at either of them, refusing to watch as Brynn and Owain made quick work of the ghosts. The golden light died with them, fading into the fog.

"Fear is heavy in this place," Asha murmured.

"Then we should get out of it." Jowan pushed forward to get a closer look at the fountain, still burbling despite the loss of the ghosts. "You think we can get out this way, Niall?"

"I think I'm glad I don't have to sleep, with those two around," Niall snapped, shooting a glare at Brynn and Owain. He could feel himself flicker, feel the fear giving way to the same bleak place where he couldn't even be horrified any more. They were templars. What else would they do?

Asha put an arm around him. "Niall, you're still alive. Isn't that what you said? And you stay by me, and you'll stay that way, right?"

Niall sighed and froze, debating shrugging off the arm. In the end, though, he knew she was right. It was his words that had damned those mages. It was his words and his ability not to slide into that easy, dullness that would keep him from their fate, and Asha would help him as long as she could. "Yeah. Yeah, I just... I knew them. They were my teachers."

"There was nothing here to save them, when they could still be saved. What is it your people say? They've gone on to the Maker's side. They aren't trapped here, becoming monsters, any more." Asha took Niall's cold hands. "Come on, let's help Jowan figure this thing out, and then we'll get out of here. Do you miss real food? Eating things that aren't memories? Because I do. And the sooner we get out of here, the sooner we get food that tastes real."

Niall nodded, still holding Asha's hand as he made his way toward the fountain. "I don't know if this is going to work. I know you're supposed to be able to touch it and be returned to your body. But, you know, you're... in your body. And everything out there is dead. I'm not getting too close, because I'm not... I don't want to wind up in someone else's corpse. I don't want to wind up in someone else's living body either, but that's not even going to happen. Not out there."

Still gripping his hand, Asha tried to smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "You don't know what will happen," she insisted. "You need to try."

Owain looked like he might argue that, but one look from Asha, and he pressed his lips together.
Niall shook his head, not wanting to argue, not wanting to let go of her hand, either. "It's best you find out whether it even works for you before you start worrying about me. But if it does work for you, thank you... for making me feel human again, for a little while."

Jowan considered arguing too, but he knew that if Asha couldn't convince him, neither would he. "I'll try first," he said, drawing their attention. "Just in case something else goes wrong."

"I wouldn't mind seeing you get launched into the air one more time," Niall said with a crooked smile.

"Promise me, Niall. If we get out, you've got to follow. Come with us. Even if you get stuck in a corpse, we'll fix it. Might take a bit, but we'll get it. You're... I mean..." Jowan offered a lopsided grin. "Come on, it's your chance to do great things."

"You're such a shit, Jowan." Niall rolled his eyes. "Every time. You just have to make everything harder than it is."

"Easier. Pinky swear." Jowan held up a finger. "Anything's gotta be easier than non-stop demons, right?"

Owain laughed. "He's got a point."

"You're such a shit," Niall said again, hooking a finger around Jowan's. "Now let go of me and see if this works."

Jowan snorted and tugged on Niall's hand, before he let go and stepped toward the fountain. It wasn't so much a real fountain as a dream of clouds that acted like one, and as he closed in on it, he could feel the power thrumming through it. Lyrium, Niall had said, and Jowan could believe it. Nothing else had that gripping thrum to it. Casting one more long look at Lily, he stepped into the glowing mist, feeling it pool around his legs.

Moments passed.

"Hey, Niall? Is there a spell for this or something?" Jowan asked, looking down at the mist swirling around his thighs. "Brynn? You're a Knight-Captain. You know Harrowings, right?"

"Don't look at me." Brynn shrugged. "We don't do Harrowings at Aeonar."

Niall scratched his head, circling the fountain and Jowan. "I'm not sure what to tell you. Usually just walking into it works."

Jowan's whole body sagged. There wasn't even a wall here, like he had felt with that strange mirror. There was just... nothing. "Asha?" he asked desperately, but she just shook her head and shrugged.

For a long moment, they stood there in silence, processing the weight of another disappointment. Jowan considered sitting down just so the mists would swallow him whole.

"We could always try Redcliffe," Lily suggested, shrugging at the incredulous look Jowan gave her.

"We are not trying Redcliffe," Jowan replied, stepping out of the mist, the thrum of lyrium fading and leaving him feeling diminished. "We still have other options."
Follow the Moon

Chapter Summary

The mages set off on their journey to Haven, a trip involving camels, boats, and Peryn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A day out of Hossberg, Kinnon started to look nervous. They weren't travelling with dwarven merchants, this time. There was nothing to stop the sandstorms, this far from the river, with a templar travelling with them. So far, though, the weather had held -- the unceasing pounding of the sun, while they slept, and the chill air while they rode at night. And the camels had been surprisingly stable, now that he wasn't trying to ride atop a massive tower of goods. Still, even with a proper saddle, spending this long in it, at the rate they were travelling, was something he wasn't looking forward to repeating on the way back. Maybe he could convince Peryn to take a boat with him, on the return trip.

He hissed and shifted position, staring out across the seemingly endless red wastes. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"Of course we are." Anders pointed up at the sky. "The moons rise in the direction of Rivain. To the right is toward the Waking Sea. If we keep going half a turn from the moon, we'll wind up in Vol Dorma."

"After that, it's the Imperial Highway right down to the coast," Cormac assured him. "I heard there used to be a bridge, but it fell into the sea."

"I have never seen the Imperial Highway," Peryn admitted, leaning comfortably in the saddle of the camel he'd been working with for years. "I have heard it is grand, but it is also Tevinter... I do not know that it is a kind of grand one should wish to make again."

"Stone and hard work," Fen'Din replied, quietly. "The path is already there. The hard work is done. If we maintain it, what remains will be forever -- or until it is struck down by something we can't overpower."

Peryn gave Fen'Din a curious look. "With hope, that is not a thing that will happen."

"Everything comes to an end, at some point," Anders said with a cheerfulness at odds with his words. "Just some things we hope won't end in our lifetime."

"Not camel rides," Kinnon groused. "That is something I would definitely like to see end in my lifetime." He squirmed in his saddle, trying to ease his tailbone, and glared at Anders and Peryn, who made it look deceptively easy. He squinted into the glare of sand that seemed to stretch on forever and wondered why anyone would choose to do this on a regular basis.

"You do not wish to ride this route on a horse," Peryn informed him, tossing a small jar of candied desert figs into the saddle, beside Kinnon. "A horse needs water -- far more water than a healthy camel. Far more water than you can carry."
Kinnon opened the jar and fished out one of the round, pink sweets. "I don't know how to ride a horse, either."

"Are you serious?" Cormac twisted around in his seat, knowing that Anders was leading the caravan. "You're Ferelden -- you're a Horse Lord, according to yourself, and you can't ride a horse?"

"There weren't a lot of horses, where I was. We weren't nobles or merchants." Kinnon shrugged, shooting Cormac a sharp look.

"Maybe you can take it up, while we're in Ferelden, again," Anders suggested, half a smile lingering under his hood and veil. "I'm sure there'll be a merchant willing to give pony rides."

"I know where you sleep, Jan," Kinnon shot back.

Anders held up his hands in surrender, feigning innocence. "Very well. Perhaps you'll let Peryn choose your rides instead?"

Kinnon glared at Anders as though hoping he would combust, his own face turning red under his hood. It took Peryn a second to make sure he had heard that correctly, before he let out a belly laugh.

"I am sure I can find something more comfortable than a camel, yes?" Peryn teased through Kinnon's scowl.

"I would hope so," he drawled.

"For those of you who haven't travelled with us before, that's going to be me, once we get to the coast." Cormac pointed at Kinnon. "So, enjoy him now, because I promise you won't enjoy me, later."

"It's true." Anders laughed. "He's not just going to be cursing the boat, the sea, and the man who put them together, he's going to be hurling dramatically, for punctuation."

"You know, we could probably just ride down into Orlais, if you don't mind another couple of days," Kinnon pointed out, looking a bit spooked.

"Depending on the route we book, we'll only be on the water overnight." Anders shrugged. "Overnight's not too bad. The month around Rivain to Tallo was bad."

"I have no idea how Fenris didn't kill everyone on the way up or back again." Cormac chuckled and shook his head. "A month at sea and he hates the smell of fish."

"Yeah, but unlike you, he wasn't throwing up, the entire time." Anders snorted.

"Perhaps, if it is only one night, you should not eat, the day we sail," Fen'Din suggested, picking at a dense, honey-soaked cake.

"Perhaps he should have beer," Peryn advised, with a crooked smile. "Or anijswater. If he is very drunk, maybe he will just sleep."

"And then throw up on the other side of the sea," Anders scoffed. "I think I'm with Fen'Din. Better he should throw up in the sea, where I don't have to clean it up."

"Seconded!" Kinnon agreed, instantly.

"Hey, we're stopping in Cumberland, right?" Cormac blinked and glanced at Anders. "There's
mages in Cumberland. I bet there's a Circle shop, too. Not beer. *Sleeping potions.* Wake me up when we get to Ferelden."

"I'd say wake me up when we get to Vol Dorma, but who can sleep like this?" Kinnon grumbled, watching Peryn fluff a pillow and lean back cozily. "Him, apparently." He sighed. This was going to be a long trip.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is: THE END! Stay tuned for the Assquisition, which should follow soon! (Assing It Up is still running, on Monday/Tuesday (depending on where you are) for six more weeks... Hopefully that'll hold you until the next book begins.)

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