The Circles are broken, and the mages have risen up in rebellion. After the events at Kirkwall, Anders seeks to build a safe haven for his people in the last place anyone would have expected: Orzammar, the kingdom of the dwarves.
The gates of Orzammar loomed high overhead, massive and imposing. Anders eyed them with trepidation as they drew ever closer, the two of them just a drop in a steady river of travelers, wagons and caravans winding up the switchback trails to the gates and back down again. From a distance, the gates had looked like just another hole in the mountain, no bigger than the dozens or hundreds of caves it felt like he'd spent his entire life exploring. Up close, though, the gates grew to tower over the puny mortals at their feet, grew until it seemed like they could swallow the sun and the moons and leave all in darkness.

It looked like an eye, he decided. A blank, staring eye that saw and judged all of the puny mortals that came before it. If he could have, he would have shuffled around to hide behind his traveling companion as though that would shield him from its gaze, but that was impossible for two reasons; 1) coming out of hiding at last, being seen by the world, was the entire reason he was here in the first place, and 2) his companion, the Hero of Ferelden, was far too short for him to hide behind.

Though, he supposed, metaphorically her silhouette made quite the impressive shield; her word and her patronage was going to be what got him into Orzammar itself, even into an audience with the King of the Dwarves.

"Are you sure you won't come with me?" Anders said hopefully, not for the first time. Natya Brosca snorted her opinion of the question, then spat over the side of the trail onto the trees below.

"For the last time, Anders," she said tartly. "No. I ain't gonna babysit your pet project; I got business elsewhere. Warden business, the kind you decided wasn't yours anymore, remember?"

Anders winced and looked away. It seemed like he'd spent a lifetime running, a lifetime disappointing the people he cared about and letting them down. Natya wasn't the first, but the memory of his desertion of the Wardens - his desertion of her - still throbbed miserably in his mind. Justice stirred uneasily, caught up as much in the shame and misery of that betrayal as he was; it had, after all, been his desertion too.

"Besides, I wouldn't be much help," Natya continued. "I don't know shit about what you're trying to do here. You've got my name and my word in the ear of the King - that'll do ya better than me hanging around riding your ass while you work."

"I appreciate it, Commander, I really do," Anders said humbly. "You've been so… I mean… I know I don't deserve your support. Your kindness. I really don't understand why you… why you would help me. After all that I've done."

"You still beating yourself up about Kirkwall?" Natya snorted, but she looked down and to the side, dark red hair falling in messy sprays over her face. "If you're looking for someone to kick your ass for you, you're at the wrong store. Last person in Thedas who should be handing down judgment on anyone is me, not after Amaranthine."

*Amaranthine*. The two of them remembered it together, sending a shiver of horror up their spine; flames climbing high against the black columns of smoke rising from what had once been a thriving town. Was it memory that conjured up the faint sounds of agonized screams, floating on the black wind, or just imagination? They couldn't be sure. Anders remembered protesting, arguing
with his Commander for the first time since he'd known her; Justice remembered delivering a furious tirade. But the Commander had been adamant, unmoving - and when she turned her back on the town to return to the Vigil, they had each reluctantly followed.

"You stood by me, salroka," Natya said softly. "And I know just how hard that was for you. For you both. You stood by me, and I'm not gonna let you down now."

"But I deserted you," Anders said unhappily. He was a lot more ashamed of that in retrospect than he had been at the time; Justice believed in oaths and bonds of honor much more fiercely than Anders, who only saw promises as yet more chains he had to slip. "I - we betrayed you. I never expected you to forgive me for that."

For a few minutes Natya was silent, staring out at the icy mountain vista spread out behind them. At last she spoke. "You ever hear 'bout my friend Leske, Anders?" she asked. "Know you never got a chance to meet him. Oghren did, but not the rest of you."

"I don't think so, no," Anders said after stopping to search his memory for the name.

"Leske was a friend of mine from the old days - the old, old bad days, from before the Blight," Natya began. "From Dust Town. We were casteless blighters together - partners - friends. I watched his back a hundred times, he watched mine. Saved my ass more times than I could count. He got caught up in the same mess that got me running to the wardens with my tail on fire… and I left him, not knowing if he was gonna make it or not, not knowing if he was gonna die in the dust without me there to keep watch anymore."

Anders was not quite sure where she was going with this. "But you said Oghren knew him?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah. I came back, after all. Came back with half of Ferelden tailing after me and a Darkspawn horde on our heels, got roped in to try to sort out Orzammar's shit before the Blight took us all. And here he was, that rotten blighter. Alive, well, still haunting our old runs back in Dust Town…" Natya trailed off, staring out over the ice and snow. "Still up to his old tricks."

"That's good?" Anders said hopefully. Although if one of Natya's old war stories had a happy ending, it would be the first Anders had ever heard from her.

Natya shrugged. "Coulda been," she said. "Till he turned around and stabbed me in the back. Sold us out to Jarvia for a copper scraping. All we'd ever been through - gone. That easy."

"Oh." Anders quailed.

"And I still…" Natya sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I'd still have forgiven him. If he'd given me the chance, I'd... For all the times we'd fought together, for all the times he'd saved my life, I woulda forgiven him anything. Let him have the whole blighted Carta, for all I cared. Given him anything I had the power to give. If only he hadn't been blight-rotted determined to be my enemy! If only he hadn't made me kill him."

She glanced up at him, a piercing light in those blue-green eyes, sharp as precious stone. "D'you get why I'm telling you this story?" she asked.

Wordlessly, Anders nodded.

He turned back to look at his new home. It was too soon to be hopeful, too soon to start sketching out imaginary towers and castles in the air. But he thought, despite the barren stone and the harsh wind-whipped crystals of ice, that it had promise.
The path finally leveled out in a wide open basin cupped in stone walls on each side, and the massive gates ahead of them. Natya's stride, normally brisk enough to force Anders to nearly jog to keep up with her, slowed as they approached the massive gates, but they pushed on.

Anders shivered as they passed under the great stone arch into the main hallway; open to the mountainside as it was, the air was no warmer under here, and they'd lost what little warmth the weak spring sun could lend them. Still, he stared up in fascination at the great stone statues that lined the walk; Paragons, he remembered that much, one commemorating each of the great dwarven heroes and the grand Houses that had been founded in their name. There was even one for the Commander, and he found himself drawn by his curiosity to the base of the newest statue, the edges still fresh and sharp and not yet worn by time.

He knew enough of the dwarven runes to read the inscription chiseled in the base, PARAGON BROSCA, the date of her birth (and a blank stone panel reserved for her death), then a multitude of smaller text he had trouble making out. It was not a bad likeness, he decided after some study, although the cold medium did not flatter his friend. Her features were rather plain, homely almost, without the force of her personality animating them - and her best feature, her enormous blue-green eyes, were rendered blank and empty. A small part of Anders - the part of him that had once been the mischievous apprentice, the troublemaking student - was already planning a late-night raid down to the hallway with some pots of oil-based pigment.

Behind him, the real Natya expelled a forceful sigh. "Alright," she said, and clapped her hands together. "This is as far as I go. From here on, Anders, yer on your own."

"You sure you won't stay?" Anders said, aware that he was being pathetic, but unable to bear the thought of losing the only friendly face he'd seen since Kirkwall.

"I can't." Natya looked away, her small face clouding over. "I can't. I don't... I don't like who I am when I come back here. Not the Arlessa of Amaranthine, not the Commander of the Grey, not the Hero of Ferelden. Not even really Paragon Brosca. I'm just the casteless Carta thug who broke poor stupid fuckers' legs for a living. I can feel it fucking me up, dragging me down."

"I want to do right for my people. I do. But when I'm back down here, they aren't my people any more. They're just a bunch of stoneless warriors and rock-sucking deshyrs and sniveling, scrounging dusters. I hate them. I hate them and I hate what they make me. Fuck that." She stopped and took a breath, letting it out in a long, shaky exhale. "Just fuck it. I can't stay. I can't stay here and be someone I can stand."

Anders nodded, momentarily without words. He understood. Maker, he understood more than he ever thought he would. As claustrophobic as the stone ceiling overhead was, it was nothing to the thought of setting foot in Kirkwall again - letting that pit of a city drag him down, poison him, strip away everything in life that was worth fighting for. The one bright light in Kirkwall had been Hawke, and Hawke... well.

There was nothing for him in Kirkwall any more. Nothing for him anywhere, really, except this one chance that Natya was giving him.

"I won't let you down," Anders promised. "I mean it."

"Good." Natya rifled around in her pack for a moment. She gave him a brief smile, and tugged his belt meaningfully. "Get down here. Blight! Even for a human, you're too fuckin' tall."

Obediently Anders bent down, and let her settle the amulet around his neck. There was no magic in
it, according to his mage senses; it was just a flat piece of polished stone, with the sigil of House Brosca on one side and the marker of the Hero of Ferelden on the other.

"Hold onto that," Natya said, tapping it hard enough to make the sharp edges dig into his skin. 
"That's your ticket in to Bhelen, and more. The common folk of Orzammar don't respect much, but they'll respect that. Keep it with you, safe, and you'll be alright wherever in Orzammar you go."

Then again, maybe there was more magic in it than any rune or enchantment could imbue. Anders straightened up again, rubbing the flat disk between his thumb and forefinger, feeling how it warmed. He gave his friend a smile. "Thank you."

"Right, enough of this!" Natya said, stepping back and rubbing her hands briskly together. "I got a ship to catch in Gwaren, and you got an audience with the King. And I can tell ya, king-type folk really don't like to be kept waiting."

"But you keep them waiting anyway," Anders said, his smile widening into a cheeky grin.

"Course I do. Don't want them to think I'm going to pander," Natya smirked, and gave him a swat on the ass that stung even through the layers of his robes and cloak. "Come on now. Back to work!"

She began to turn away. Anders felt a sudden stinging in his eyes, and a lump in his throat. 
"Goodbye… Commander," he called out. She looked back, and he caught sight of her glorious eyes one more time.

"Good luck, Anders," she called back, and then her voice dropped to a near whisper. "Take care of him, Justice."

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

A few notes and caveats before we begin.

**First**, this story is going to be long. That tag that says 'slow build,' it's not kidding. I wrote the first 50k for NaNo and I don't think I'm more than a quarter of the way through yet. So if you like fics that go on for miles, this one's for you.

**Second**, although I am making an effort to research things in the DA2 setting, I intend to take artistic license wherever appropriate to make the story go in the direction I want it to go. So, just for example, while though the epilogue slides for DAO describe Bhelen as dissolving the Assembly and ruling alone, I have not had him do so here. Really, given how quick Bioware is to retcon their own canon when it suits them, I don't see why I shouldn't do the same.

**Third**, although this is a story that has love, it is not a story about love, at least not about relationships. I am going to go ahead and tag it with Hawke/Anders anyway because that's what it is -- yes, Anders and Hawke were together in Kirkwall; yes,
Anders still loves Hawke and no one else; yes, Hawke is eventually going to turn up and they'll have a chance to repair their relationship. But that's not what this fic is going to be about. Hawke isn't even going to show up for another 100k words, and even when he does he's not going to become the focus of the story. I don't want any readers to feel like they've been brought in on false pretenses; if you read fics on tenterhooks waiting for the OTP payoff, you will not enjoy this one.

This is primarily a building and creation fic, and the conflicts and challenges that the characters will run into are the type that you come across when striving to make something out of nothing. Which is not to say there will be no fighting or adventures (and mandatory Deep Roads segments) at all -- they do come part and parcel of the setting -- but, like romance, they are not the main focus of the fic.

This fic is my answer to some of the problems DA2 proposes. This fic is my 200k word answer to "What was Anders doing during Inquisition?" This fic is me indulging my dwarf interest that the game doesn't seem to care much about. This fic is my happy ending.
Anders has got a proposal for the Dwarven King.

Anders had never been to Orzammar before, but he had been in and out of the Deep Roads on many occasions, and some of his best friends had been dwarves; he'd seen no lack of dwarven-inspired architecture and aesthetics. The broad, solid architecture, the geometric patterns of runes and sigils decorating every surface - it was practically homey. But standing in the heart of the last bastion of Dwarven culture on Thedas, Anders realized that what he'd seen before had been no more than a pale imitation, or a ghostly remnant of the real thing.

Despite the sheer depth of the vaulted ceilings high overhead, the mountain itself seemed to press down around him, reinforced with thousands of years of stolid and immobile tradition. Nothing could change that moribund mass. Nothing ever would and he, Anders, was going to splat against that stone like a bug in a windstorm.

It was unfair, he decided, how the great vaulting stone ceiling of Orzammar could feel both too small around him and too huge above him at the same time. The weight of stone pressed down on him, making it hard for him to breathe; but at the same time the expanse of flat openness around him made him feel exposed, with nowhere to hide. In just a few minutes, he was going to be unmasked, exposed to the authorities to see. Never mind that his disguise had never been much of a disguise to begin with, or that the Orzammar Assembly was about as far from the rule of the Chantry as one you could get in Thedas without swimming: this was the point of no return. Once he stepped through that door, there was no going back.

For one terribly selfish moment, he considered turning and walking away. He still could - he didn't have to go through with this. He could go back to the life of the wanted criminal, the hunted fugitive, the apostate; it wasn't an easy life, but it was the only one he'd ever known. He could still run, and run, and run...

A glowing warmth lit in his chest, spreading down into his belly and up through his shoulders. He glanced down at his hands, half expecting to see them glowing with an inner light, but there was nothing. Anders heard no voices, but he could feel the tenor of his thoughts changing, taking on a strange, measured clarity. He had spent enough time running. It was time to leave that life behind him, and walk forward - not as a wanted criminal but as a free man and a leader. He could do this. The Commander believed in him, and the mages needed him. Had he not faced down certain death in the past and come out unscathed? He was strong enough for this.

"Thanks, Justice," Anders whispered, rubbing his hands together as though he could clasp hands with the spirit within. He took a deep breath, imagining his lungs filling with healing light, and it helped loosen the iron band around his chest a little; he let it out and took another. "Listen. When we go in there and talk to the king... I need you to back me up on this. I need your strength, I need your confidence, and I need your conviction. But the words have got to be mine. Don't get carried away and put words in my mouth, not here."

A hint of discord - surely if this Bhelen was a just king, he would recognize the rightness of their cause? But the sense of a second presence faded back, leaving only the warmth behind.
He clasped Natya's amulet in his hand, feeling the edges digging into his palm, and remembered what Natya had told him about Bhelen Aeducan. "I put him up on the throne over Harrowmont - not just for Rica, but for all of Orzammar," she'd said. "This place needs to change, and at least he knows it. He needs you, Anders. He needs your crazy scheme, he needs your ideas, and he needs you mages. Remember that, when you go to face him. You ain't arguing over whether he'll say yes or no; you're just haggling over the details of the terms."

"I'm terrible at haggling," Anders had whimpered.

Natya had jabbed an elbow into his hip that nearly knocked him off the narrow path. "Nug shit," she said, laughing. "Listen, I've seen politics. Nine tenths of is just keeping on talking until the other guy gives up. You'll be set!"

The memory of her laughter helped sustain him, and with a deep breath he let go of the amulet and straightened up, pushing back his shoulders. He brought his chin up, gripped his staff in one hand, and marched forward.

It wasn't exactly hard to find his way to the palace; it was the center of everything, the axle around which the rest of the city turned like a great wheel. Getting to it was slightly more difficult, as the only avenue of approach was a long, wide bridge of stone with gruff and suspicious guards posted every few yards along it. Confidence wouldn't get him past these guards - but the sight of Natya's amulet, combined with a few choice words, was enough to cause a buzz of interest. He'd only had time to argue in circles with the bridge guards twice before a messenger appeared out of thin air to beckon him forward, over the bridge and into the grand palace foyer.

His guide led him through a confusing tangle of corridors to fetch up in a round chamber that felt like an office despite its luxurious trappings. Poised by a door on the far end was a desk manned - or perhaps he should say dwarfed - by a large, muscular secretary.

"Vartag Gavorn," the messenger introduced shortly. Anders had no idea if that was a name, or a title in Dwarvish, or what. "Steward to the King. He'll take you from here."

The dwarf looked up from his ledger, a frown on his face. He had dark hair and a dark beard, both trimmed to a neat military length, but he had the paunchy build of a muscular man going to seed. "The King is in audience right now, taking petitioners," he said.

Anders put on a smile, hoping that charm would take him the next step. "Well that's good, because I'm here to give him a petition," he said.

Gavorn's frown deepened. "We weren't expecting any delegations from the surface this week," he said, tapping his fingers on the open ledger. "I'm not a delegate for anybody," Anders said. Well, except maybe Justice. "I'm here for myself. I have this."

He pulled Natya's amulet out from under his collar, and Gavorn's attention sharpened upon it. The amulet seemed to mean much more to Gavorn than it had to Anders; what had Natya been saying about him? "Ah yes, the Grey Warden Anders," Gavorn nodded. "You're expected. Wait here; I'll call for you when it's time."

The steward vanished behind an unobtrusive door behind the desk, leaving Anders alone in the waiting chamber with the two guards. Well, so far so good; the dreaded name Anders had been said, and nobody was yelling, drawing swords or pulling out chains. Unless the steward was just...
trying to keep him docile and quiet while he went to fetch the Templars… no. This was Orzammar; there were no Templars here.

He wasn't sure how long he waited, hands twisting nervously on the shaft of his staff as the moments ticked by. The dwarves had their own system of clock, Anders knew, but he had no idea how to interpret it or match it against the passage of the sun in the sky. Maker, would he ever see the sun again?

Before he could worry himself into a complete state, the heavy door at the end of the room opened and Gavorn stuck his dark head through. "The King will see you now," Gavorn announced, and Anders hastily gathered himself up and followed the dwarf through a short hallway into the chamber beyond.

He'd heard about the Assembly of Orzammar, and had half expected to be brought before them; instead this seemed to be a more private audience chamber, only large enough to fit a hundred or so bodies carefully. On one end was a raised stone dais, sporting one large chair and a handful of benches and tables on either side. The stone tiles in the floor changed their patterns subtly, right angles spiraling in to converge on a point in the center of the room facing the dais. Anders let himself be herded to stand on that point, and tried not to feel like he had a target painted on his back.

He felt horribly out of place here. Everyone else in the room was a dwarf - well, of course they were dwarves; this was their city, wasn't it? The height of the room, of the furniture, all made him feel awkward and oversized, and he couldn't help but notice that even on the raised stone dais, his height put him at a solid eye level with the man seated on the throne.

Anders didn't know what he'd expected to see in Bhelen, but the man himself was definitely a surprise. Compared to some of the other dwarves Anders had known, he was practically babyfaced, his cheeks round and his nose pudgy. His skin was ruddy pink, his hair light blond, and his eyes a pale blue-grey. But if there was any illusion of softness, of weakness in his appearance, it stopped the moment you saw the steel-hard core in those eyes.

"Declare yourself," Gavorn prompted him pointedly, before vanishing back to his post. Hastily Anders cleared his throat, tried to gather his scrambled thoughts, and spoke.

"I am Anders," he said; the name alone felt horribly insufficient, devoid as it was of titles or family affiliations. But that was the naked truth. He felt compelled to add: "Of Calenhad, of Amaranthine, and most lately of Kirkwall."

"Ah yes," Bhelen said, sounding unsurprised. "I've heard of you. One of the new Wardens of Amaranthine, the Darktown Healer, and the man who destroyed the Kirkwall Chantry and incited the mages of southern Thedas into rebellion."

A few of the seated dwarves stirred in surprise; whatever Bhelen had knew, he evidently had not briefed his advisors. Anders decided to brazen it out. "That's me," he agreed.

Bhelen sat back on his throne, lacing the tips of his fingers together as he regarded Anders steadily. "Why are you here?"

"I've got a proposition for you, Your Majesty," Anders began, reaching for all his practiced words and arguments. He touched Justice, briefly, feeling the surge of confidence and conviction and letting it strengthen his words. "You've got a problem: cities and roads overrun with darkspawn that you need to clear out. I've got a problem: a country full of refugee mages with no place to go. I think we should work together to turn our problems into one elegant solution."
"Do tell," Bhelen said, still evincing no surprise. Really, his Wicked Grace face was excellent. "What exactly do you propose?"

"You of all the kingdoms in southern Thedas are free from the control of the Chantry. You owe them, and the kings they puppeteer, no fealty," Anders said. A little flattery never went amiss when talking to those in power. "Give my people a safe harbor, a place in Thedas they can go to be free of persecution and pursuit, a place they can live in safety and freedom. In return, we'll fight for you in the Deep Roads. We'll help you reclaim your rightful kingdom."

The proposition prompted another, louder stir of noise from the gathered notables: surprise, intrigue and outrage. Only Bhelen remained cool and unmoved. " 'Your people,' are they?" Bhelen inquired. "What gives you the authority to treat on behalf of all mages? My understanding is that they are born all over the surfae kingdoms and live in towers scattered all over the continent. Ferelden, Orlesian, Marcher, Nevarran... Shouldn't I be making deals with the kings of those country?"

Anders took a breath. "A mage may come from any kingdoms, but they are of no kingdom," he reasoned. "To be a mage is to be stateless. Mages are stripped of inheritance, title, wealth, property, and legal rights to sue in court -"

He felt a familiar wave of indignation, and fought back down any further rant on the mistreatment of mages. Not the time or place, Justice. The dwarves didn't care about the fraught relationship between mages and the Chantry, and that was exactly why he needed them. "Mages are legal nonpersons in the kingdoms of their birth," he continued, slightly calmer now, though the acrimony still burned bright in his bones. "And so I say those kings have no claim on them. I will speak for them, because I am the only one who speaks for them. When I call, they will answer. What I promise, they will uphold."

At least, he hoped they would. Maker, he prayed they would.

"And why should we extend our protection to you?" Bhelen at Anders, stroking lightly at the braids of his beard. "You're a wanted criminal in the surface lands. You've caused a lot of trouble for very important people."

"Trouble that had been brewing for over a thousand years, Your Majesty," Anders reminded him. "Change had to come sooner or later. I am just its messenger." He did his best to look modest.

"Hmm," Bhelen said noncommittally. "But trouble on the surface is also trouble for Orzammar. The surface world is in chaos thanks to you. Bad for business."

He needs this as much as we do, Anders reminded himself, trying not to panic. If Bhelen didn't want exactly what Anders was offering, he wouldn't be bothering to hear him out in the first place. This was just a pressure move, trying to remind him where the power balance lay, trying to get him to concede rights for the mages due to his own personal wrongdoings.

And that, Anders would never do.

He changed tacks. "All the more reason you should accept my proposal, then," he said smoothly. Bhelen's eyes narrowed. "And how do you figure that?"

"The mages will never submit again, never," Anders said, and his voice rang with unshakeable conviction. "And the Chantry will never stop trying to suppress them. The fighting will continue indefinitely. Opening up a haven for the free mages here will present an alternative endgame, a
potential end to the conflict.

"Once sheltered by Orzammar, the Chantry will have to back down, as the surface kingdoms can't afford war with the dwarves. Free mages will have a place to flee, instead of being forced to fight to the death, and the violence will die down."

"I can't afford war with the surface kingdoms either," Bhelen protested.

Anders laughed. "They won't dare," he asserted. "They need you more than you need them. They suffer your alliance to the Imperium, do they not? This is not so different."

Bhelen shifted back in his chair, his fingers drumming on the arm of his throne. "You're asking much from Orzammar."

"And I am offering much in return," Anders argued. "My people have great power that we can bring to bear for you. If we are to be weapons, then let us be weapons fighting for a worthy cause - against the Darkspawn. One mage can amplify your combat capability as much as a dozen additional warriors. We can also bring healing beyond the powers of ordinary men. We have so much to offer. Harbor us, Your Majesty. It'll be worth your while."

There was a long, breathless pause; the assembled advisors and scribes stirred restlessly, but didn't dare to interrupt their king's silence. "And how would this promised service be rendered?" Bhelen asked at last.

Anders breathed a sigh of relief at that, knowing the worst was over with. "For every mage that you harbor, one year of service in the Deep Roads," he bargained. "Transferrable, of course."

"Transferrable?" Bhelen blinked.

Anders shrugged wryly. "Not all mages are born equal warriors. I'm sure you would much rather have multiple terms of service from a seasoned veteran than a parade of half-trained apprentices who can barely manage a fireball, wouldn't you?"

Bhelen allowed this with a judicious nod. "Transferrable, yes." Then his eyes narrowed and he leaned forward. "But I want five years, not one."

"You get one," Anders said, his voice suddenly soft. He was willing to let the mages work for their freedom and safety, but he would not allow them to be exploited. "Don't push me on this, Your Majesty. One year, perhaps more later - if the mage chooses to volunteer. We'll have other services to offer you in the meantime, if they are welcomed."

Another long silence hovered, and then Bhelen sighed, sounding deeply put-upon. "I will consider your proposal, Grey Warden Anders," he said, and Anders' heart thumped a bit at the unexpected addition of his Warden title. "In the meantime, let us see if there's anything more to your words than empty air. Prove that your power is as great as you claim. Prove that your offering is worthy."

~tbc...
Proving I

Chapter Summary

Anders is called on to prove himself.

Despite that nerve-wracking announcement, they did not march Anders off to the Proving Grounds immediately, or even that day. The preparations took several days - which at least was some kind of reassurance that Bhelen hadn't had this all planned out and waiting for him to step into his throne room to trigger it.

According to Gavorn, this was a tremendous hurry for a Proving - there was barely enough time to make and deliver invitations to all the noble houses to come witness, let alone select suitable candidates for the Proving. (And, if Anders knew anything about dwarves from the years spent with Varric, time for the bookies to generate odds and take bets.) As a result, this match would be unusual in a number of respects; rather than a series of matches going on all day, there would be only one main event, Anders himself facing off against a board of opponents. The short notice also meant that not all the noble guests would be able to attend, meaning that the stands would be open to anyone of the lower castes who had the time and the interest to come watch.

Somehow, he got the feeling Bhelen had planned it that way. Or at least wouldn't mind too much.

"So what exactly are the rules here?" Anders asked of Gavorn, jittering nervously as he sat on the too-low bench in the vestibule of the Proving Grounds. "I mean, what should I expect out there? Are these fights to the death, first blood, or what?"

"Technically they are to the defeat, not to the death," Gavorn answered. "Although death does happen - warriors are expected to fight with all their strength - but it is not the goal. In your case, I might suggest avoiding killing too many people if you can help it - it would not look politic."

"So, they'll all be trying to kill me, but I shouldn't kill them?" Anders said.

Gavorn considered it for a moment, then nodded judiciously. Anders groaned, and slumped down further on the bench. Great. Just great. His magic, backed by Justice, was formidable; he would back his odds against any given enemy, but fireballs and lightning bolts and crushing prisons were not exactly conducive to non-lethal solutions.

"The Master of the Provings was able to pull together a list of six opponents for you," Gavorn went on. "A respectable number."

"Six?" Anders yelped. "All at once?"

"No, no, one at a time," Gavorn reassured him. "But since the event list is so short, the Master didn't feel the need for any intermission - so they'll all be back to back. You may want to pace yourself."

Anders stifled a moan, and buried his head in his hands.

Inside his chest, he felt a slight tugging sensation, as though someone were poking him in the ribcage. It was ridiculous of him to be so nervous. They had faced far worse opponents, and far
worse odds, than this. Their combined strength would be more than equal to the task.

Yes, but never before when half of a kingdom's notables were going to turn up to watch me flail around with my trousers down, Anders moaned to himself. No, that had always been Hawke's job.

There was a rumbling burr in his throat like he needed to clear it, and the second presence withdrew. Anders suspected that Justice had never quite forgiven Hawke for his choice that night in Kirkwall, no matter how many times Anders told him that Hawke had done the right thing. Maker, it would have been the right thing even if Hawke had chosen to drive the knife home. He had always been able to rely on Hawke to know what was right…

But now was not the right time to be thinking about Hawke. Now, he needed to be in the moment, focused and ready for anything.

The noise from the arena beyond the door rose to a dull roaring, and Anders stood up, guessing he was about to be called out. He stood facing the door, clutching his staff, trying surreptitiously to rub his palms dry on his robe so that they would not slip on the wooden shaft of the weapon.

What was Bhelen up to? What was he hoping to do by accomplishing this? He'd wondered that off and on for the last three days, and had come no closer to the answer. From all his readings about the subject, Provings were meant as a combination of entertainment and judicial law. An accused criminal could fight in a Proving to refute his crime or even, having admitted his guilt, reclaim his honor; or else an individual dwarf could challenge another to a Proving, either to avenge an insult or to settle a feud between whole Houses.

Anders would not even try to deny that he fit into at least one of those categories: he was an accused and admitted criminal, sure, but he hadn't committed any crimes (or insults) against anyone here. Not one mention had been made of guilt, or judgment, or redemption for his crimes. And from the way Gavorn had talked about collecting opponents for him, it didn't sound like any of them had been particularly spoiling for a fight against him personally. So why?

In her reminiscence about Orzammar, though, Natya had unwittingly offered insight into another layer of her come society; the Provings served more purposes than the stated ones. Every proving came with a huge shadowy underlayer of bets, and debts, and backhanded political machinations. Champions in the Provings were also the front-men for deshyrs in the Assembly clashing with each other, where appearances were just as important as the actual outcome of events.

It was just like the Great Game of Orlais, only shorter, and darker, with less silk and lace and more hard stone and flickering torches but, in the end, about the same amount of blood.

Anders resolved to himself that today, it wouldn't be his blood. He rather liked his blood, and preferred to keep it in his body.

When the door finally opened, the noise of the crowd flooded in with a roar. Anders rocked back on his heels, then centered himself again as an older dwarf with grey hair and white beards poked his head in, beckoning Anders to come out.

He went through a short stone passage - very short; unlike most of the main hallways in Orzammar, this one was so low that he had to keep his head bent to stop from banging it against the stone ceiling. It was a relief to get to the end of the hallway and step out into the open once more, blinking against the dozens of torches that ringed the circular stone arena.

Anders had read descriptions of the coliseums of Orzammar (and Tevinter,) so he wasn't completely unprepared for the layout that now met his eyes. The floor was paved with flat, smooth
flagstones, stained darker towards the center with a silent legacy of thousands of years of Provings before him. The wall around the arena was actually fairly short - only coming up to Anders' chin - and then above it rose ranks and ranks of seats and benches. Despite Gavorn's comments about not being able to secure the invitations of many of the nobles, the risers were packed to the brim with dwarves, all staring down at him.

The arena wasn't quite a perfect circle, more of a slight oval shape. Gates like the one he'd come through were set in intervals around the arena; his was set directly at the near end of the arena, and above it rose a flight of shallow steps topped with an ornate set of thrones.

The dais, too, was packed with dwarves, many of whom Anders recognized as advisors from his meeting with the king the other day. But despite the crowd, he had no trouble whatsoever picking out Bhelen - his light coloring and stone-hard eyes gazed down at Anders from the highest point in the arena.

It was intimidating, to say the least; the combined focus and attention of all these dwarves was almost crushing. But Anders was no stranger to attention, even hostile attention - there had been many times in his youth that he'd flagrantly sought it out. He swallowed, reached back in his head for the brash and brazen young man he'd once been, and managed to summon up enough of that attitude to raise his chin and step out over the flagstones.

The grey-haired dwarf who had beckoned him out took up a stance on the wall immediately above Anders' gate, one hand on a ceremonial-looking axe whose butt he clanged loudly against the stone. "Notables of Orzammar, deshyrs, warriors, and craftsmen. All rise," he said in a booming, carrying voice. "Announcing our first contestant, and today's defender, late of Kirkwall, Joined at Vigil's Keep, Harrowed at Calenhad Circle, sponsored of House Brosca, endorsed by House Aeducan, Warden Enchanter Anders."

The crowd buzzed and rumbled, and Anders cocked his head to the side, listening. He couldn't make out individual words, but he could pick up some body language and tone, and mostly what he was hearing from the crowd was indecision: a mix of confusion and intrigue. The crowd knew he didn't belong here, and was wondering what Bhelen was up to; but they were also in the mood for a good show, and ready to wait and see how things played out. If the derisive and smug undertone of the mutterings was any indication, those who had bet against him - overtall and underfed, clutching a hunk of wood with only a small blade at the end - were already counting their winnings.

Now that he was finally there, out on display in front of the collective gazes of half the powers in Orzammar, Anders began to get a glimmer of understanding. The dwarves in the stands had no idea what to expect. They had no idea what they were about to see. Most of them would have only seen humans a few handfuls of times in their lives, at a distance when the trade delegations came through; almost none of them had ever seen a mage, let alone a fully trained combat mage in action.

That was what Bhelen had meant, when he told Anders to prove himself. The people of Orzammar needed to see what their king was buying in this allegiance with the mages. They needed to see that Anders - and through him, by proxy, all the mages of Thedas - could really deliver on what they promised. They needed proof that this concept would work.

His mind was still spinning, churning with the implications, as the Master of Provings urged him out to the center of the arena. Another gate at the other far end of the arena slid back, and a short bulky figure trundled out. He was tall - for a dwarf, probably coming up to Anders' mid-chest - and powerfully built, in heavy plate armor jingling with chain around the joints. He carried a short
sword and a large kite shield, which shielded him from shoulder to knee.


The dwarven warrior clapped his helm down over his eyes, dropped into a low stance, and charged forward. Anders waited until the dwarf was fully committed to his charge, then jumped back and started casting, drawing on the full force of magic that Justice provided him -

…a Grease spell, aimed at the smooth flagstones underfoot.

Endrinak had too much momentum to check his charge; when his foot first landed on the slick flagstones, he slipped a bit and staggered to regain his footing. But the stagger put him even more off-balance, and every desperate correction he tried to make just aggravated the effect, until he was flailing ungracefully through the air with every greasy, sliding step.

If he'd had his hands free, he might have recovered - but he was too well-trained a warrior to drop his weapon, and so the heavy kite-shield on his arm tipped him off to the side. His charge finally turned into a tumble, shouting with frustrated rage as he fell to the floor. His momentum carried him even then, gliding across the slippery flagstones until he bumped to a stop at Anders' feet. Anders planted his foot on the man's plated chest, and carefully set the tip of his staff's blade to the gap between his helm and his breastplate.

"I win," he said.

The crowd went wild, surging to their feet with cheers and roars of outrage, but Anders kept his focus carefully on his opponent; he was pretty sure that the warrior was scowling, under his helm, and didn't really want to chance that he wouldn't seize a chance to attack if Anders turned his back. Not until he heard the Master of Provings call the end of the match did Anders step back, letting his staff fall back to his side and standing to attention once more.

Endrinak of House Bera staggered back out of the arena, and Anders waited while the hubbub of the crowd continued. Several burly dwarves had jumped to their feet to argue furiously with the Master of Provings; it was in Dwarvish, so Anders had no idea what they were saying, but he thought he could guess the gist of it from the scowls and head-shakings.

A glance up at King Bhelen, however, reassured him; Bhelen was the one whose approval really mattered, and the King seemed calm and unbothered - aside perhaps from a small twitch of a smile in his cheek.

At length, the angry dwarves slunk back to their seats, and the Master of Provings beckoned Anders forward. His face was set in a lemon-sucking expression that reminded Anders of Seneschal Bran, although it was hard to tell whether or not it was directed at Anders himself. "The first victory is yours, Warden Enchanter," he said. "However, you must now remove the grease from the floor before the next challenger emerges."

"No problem," Anders said with a grin.

"And don't do that again," the Master of Provings said severely. Anders turned away, struggling to control his smirk. That was all right; he was willing to bet that he had more tricks up his sleeve than they had rules for. And it seemed that the majority of the audience - the part that seemed pleased by his victory, that was - had laid bets that he would get past at least the first match. The further the matches went on, however, the more likely they would turn against him.

Anders stood at the edge of his grease slick and conjured fire, with a flourish for the benefit of the
audience. The tiny fireball caught in the oily substance and went up in a coil of smoke. The watching dwarves buzzed and murmured with suspicion and excitement, and settled back into their seats to watch.

"The second challenger," the Master of Provings called out "Tovaris 'the Unclean,' of House Saelac."

Well, that was a promising title. Anders looked over as the arena gate cranked up once again and a second figure stumped out. This warrior was considerably shorter than the first, but even broader; he wore only a breastplate, with mail covering the rest of his limbs, and wiry brown hair bristling through the chain. His chain helm was open in the front, revealing a bulbous and scarred face that grinned horribly at Anders as he hefted his weapon.

Maker, what even was that thing? Was that an axe or a sword? It was covered in too many jagged hooks and cruel curved spines for him to be sure. Tovaris raised his weapon up to lick the tip of it, then chuckled. "Come over here, weedy boy," he taunted. "I'm gonna cut off yer giblets and stuff ya full of em!"

Anders took about half a second to consider the prospect of that hideous sword getting anywhere near his giblets, and cast a Sleep spell with the full force of Justice's power behind it.

It was hard getting it to take hold; the spell was really meant more for putting a patient to sleep before an operation, and dwarves were more resistant to magic in the first place. But Anders was determined: Tovaris took one step, weapon sagging in his hand as his arm wavered, then tumbled on his face on the scorched arena stones. After a moment, he began to snore.

As the crowd erupted into cheers and furious argument, Anders looked up at the Master of Provings with a bright smile. The Master glared at him.

It took three ushers to drag Tovaris away, by which time the crowd had settled back down again. Anders heard a few cheers this time; the words were unclear, but he definitely caught his own name voiced in a familiar guttural accent. It made him feel homesick for Vigil's Keep.

"Third challenger," the Master of Provings called out, sounding grumpy. "Henda and Hirkel Kondrat."

The surname startled Anders with its familiarity, but not so much as the number of names. "What?" he squawked. "Two on one? How is this fair?"

The Master of Provings ignored him; Anders supposed it was a lost cause. He turned towards the arena, gripping his staff tightly, as the gate ground open once more to admit two more dwarves.

They were dressed in chain and leather, without plate to be found, and emerged into the arena bareheaded; Anders could see a definite family resemblance to Oghren in the features of the male dwarf (and, unfortunately for her, also his sister.) The man carried two daggers; the woman, a dagger and sword. The blades were suspiciously dull in the firelight, and Anders was willing to bet they'd been poisoned.

He also caught a change in the demeanor of the crowd as the two rogues walked forward; they became more hushed, more approving. The Kondrat siblings held a certain amount of respect in Orzammar, it appeared, and that meant that Anders was going to have to play fairly, or else risk losing their respect himself.

"Begin!" the Master called, and the two siblings sprang apart.
Anders could see the trust and training that went into the two rogues' coordination, the way worked and moved in harmony. They were fast, too; there was no time for him to waste in thinking of clever plans and worrying about spectator reactions. He had to move constantly, letting his reflexes do the thinking for him - nearly ten years now of getting swung at by swords, spears, axes, daggers, shot at by bows and crossbows and fireballs and every possible thing under the sun. And when Hendra came at him with her sword aimed at his gut and her dagger at his groin, he called on the first element that leapt instantly to his mind: fire.

Fire sprayed from his hands in long gouts, as instinctive (he imagined) as the breath of a dragon. He used it to keep the rogues at bay, blasting flames at their faces every time they came within arm's range. They circled, trying to get into his blind spot, one trying to keep him occupied while the other got a dagger in his back, and he turned with them.

His thoughts came in disjointed fragments between each leap or clash. A mage had the advantage at range, but was almost helpless in close quarters; his opponents knew that and sought to close the distance as quickly as possible in order to plant a knife in his kidneys. He had to keep them at arm's length, or they'd gut him. But their knives, while they would certainly make mincemeat of flesh and blood, couldn't chop through his staff like a larger sword or an axe could, and their light leather jerkins gave them hardly more armoring than his robes.

He used his staff to block and parry, used the blade at the end to drive them back whenever they tried to get close. And he kept up the fire, burning it hotter and stronger the closer they came in.

Stubbornly, Hendra tried to press on through the gout of flame; the surface of her leather armor blackened and crisped with the heat of it, but she was determined. She thrust her sword at his throat, and there was no time to move his staff to block; he grabbed the blade with his bare hand, feeling the sharp edges and something more bite into his hand.

He poured fire into his hand, through his blood, until the blade began to glow a dull cherry red. His opponent had to back off, then, retreating back out of range of the fire before the tang of the sword buried in the hilt became too hot for her hand. She circled again, Hirkel on his other side; his left dagger too was dripping with Anders' blood, although Anders hadn't noticed the hit and couldn't feel the injury.

But he could feel something else - the sluggish burn of poison in his blood, starting at his hand and creeping up his wrist and arm to his heart, and again somewhere in the vicinity of his left thigh. He could heal it, he was fairly certain, but not in the middle of combat, which meant that this match needed to end - now.

Anders brought his hands out on either side of him, letting the fire roar from his fingertips to a new height. Then, just as the siblings started to move once more, all at once he changed the spell to the fiercest Winter's Grasp he could manage.

Ice shot out from his hands; it hit Hirkel solidly in the chest, splashing over his leather jerkin and flowing rapidly down over his torso and legs to the ground. Within seconds he was encased in a cocoon of ice, sticking him to the floor and locking his limbs in place. He cursed and struggled, but was unable to free himself from the still-creeping block of ice.

Hendra had managed slightly better - she dodged the initial blast, but her training kicked in, and she automatically raised her sword and dagger to block the incoming attack. But there was one disadvantage to coating your blade with poison repeatedly, Anders had often heard Isabela complain: the acid worked its way into the steel over time, rendering it weak and brittle.

The sudden switch from red-hot to white-cold was too much for the steel blades, and they shattered
in her hands.

Anders released the spell, staggering slightly as he came back upright. Hirkel was down for the count; Anders kept one hand pointed his way, ready to fire again, as he swung around his staff to point the bladed tip squarely at the now-defenseless Hendra. "I win," he declared.

This time, the cheering in the audience definitely outweighed the angry grumbling. Anders took a moment to recover as the ushers led the downcast Hendra away and worked busily to chip Hirkel out of the ice. The poison in the cuts was creeping faster now, aided by his racing heartbeat; a moment later warmth lit up in his chest as Justice rose closer to the surface. Spirit fire licked through his bloodstream, purging the toxins from his blood and leaving him steady and clear-headed, and Anders sent a mental apology to his spirit for all the times he'd complained over the years about Justice not allowing alcohol to affect them.

Still, the battle and the effort of healing had tired him, and they were only halfway through the match. Anders took deep breaths, oxygenating his blood for the next fight, and reached down for the legendary endurance of the Grey Wardens. Sticking power, he suspected with a glance at Bhelen, was as much in demand here as flashy fire spells. He gritted his teeth, and forced himself straight with his staff at his side, waiting for the next person to try to kill him.

~tbc...
Just as he was starting to get his second wind, the Master of Provings took up his post again below the royal box. "Announcing the next challenger," he boomed out, capturing the attention of the chattering crowd. "Pyrag… of house Haver."

Anders had no idea what the significance was of the pause between his name and his house, but the reaction of the crowd was unmistakable; it pitched to a low growl, rumbling with anger and outrage. When the arena gate cranked upwards, and a stocky blond dwarf with hair that stuck up in a stiff crest swaggered through, an entire section of the crowd actually hissed.

Somehow, Anders got the idea that the other dwarves weren't too fond of this guy.

That gave him an idea. With the House Kondrat fighters, he'd felt the need to fight honorably in order not to offend the crowd. But whatever this Pyrag Haver had done, the audience was rooting for his defeat. Why not make it a spectacular one?

Pyrag strode forward, hefting a pair of medium axes - not the largest battle axes Anders had ever seen a dwarf handle, but more than capable of divesting him of his limbs if he made the mistake of putting them in their path. Judging from the dwarf’s wicked grin, Pyrag was thinking the exact same thing.

"Well, well," the dwarf said, looking him up and down with a sneer. "They really will let anyone into the Provings these days."

"Well, sure," Anders said with a shrug. "I mean, look at you."

Pyrag's bushy bearded face slid into a black scowl, and he almost seemed to bristle. "Look at you," he spat in return, voice thick with loathing. "Got no armor, no muscles, no beard - your Templar babysitters let you out of the nursery too early, boyo. You're just a toddler playing grown-up games, and I'm going to enjoy making you bleed."

That his opponent found joy in making children bleed was almost disturbing enough to overcome the thick bile that rose in Anders' throat at the mention of the Templars. Before he could find his voice to return some snappy insult, Pyrag voiced a blood-curdling battle-cry and began to charge. Anders cast Fist of the Maker, and held it.

An invisible force grabbed Pyrag like a hand from the Fade, stopping him mid-charge. His battle cry cut off with a wheeze, and then turned into a high-pitched yelp as the same invisible force yanked him off the ground by his feet. The dwarf hung in the air, kicking and swearing ineffectually as the blood rushing to his head turned his face steadily redder and redder. His chainmail shirt had fallen upwards down his chest, revealing the underpadding he'd worn beneath,
stained with rust and soiled with bodily fluids unmentionable.

The audience went wild.

Anders held the spell, channeled, as Pyrag writhed and swore and the crowd cheered and laughed. Still channeling, he turned to face one bank of risers, then the other, and waved cheerily; several dwarves in the lower risers hooted and waved back. Anders paced around the inner wall of the arena, blowing kisses towards the part of the stands that had hissed and hamming it up for the audience, while Pyrag screamed increasingly bloody death threats from his upside-down prison. The audience called down suggestions for what Anders should do with him, which Anders dramatically pretended to consider, playing out a few suggestions in mime.

When he thought he'd wrung the most drama out of the moment, but before the watchers could grow bored and restless, he turned back to the center of the room. Holding up one hand dramatically - the hand gesture wasn't strictly necessary, but it felt appropriate - he finished the spell.

The invisible fist smashed Pyrag headfirst against the floor; once, twice, and then a third time, before the spell dissipated back into the Fade. Pyrag twitched once or twice, before lying still in a heap.

Anders hoped he hadn't killed him. Not many humans could walk away from that kind of blunt force trauma to the head and neck, but dwarves were tough. Especially in the skull area.

The ushers that dragged Pyrag out of the ring gave Anders increasingly impressed looks, this time. Anders was more worried about finishing out the bout than strutting, at this point; he grounded the butt of his staff on the patch of his own blood on the flagstones, and waited.

"The fifth challenger," the Master of Ceremonies announced, his tone much more conciliatory now. "Jaria Astyth of the Silent Sisters."

If not for the name and description, Anders would have had no idea that the figure that stepped out of the opened gate was a woman; she was in full plate, again, with a helm that covered her face. She was carrying a strange weapon Anders had not seen before; a double-bladed axe the size of a hand-axe on a long chain, with a heavy weight at the end which she carried in the other hand. Without a word (well, he supposed that was where the silent part came in,) she bowed and dropped into a fighting stance.

"Begin!" the Master called, and with no more warning than that the heavy weight was whistling towards him. Anders barely managed to get out of the way in time, and the way the air parted around the weight as it buzzed by him warned him that one hit from that thing would likely break whatever bone it landed on.

Anders quickly realized that this fight was going to be trouble. All of the previous fighters had been close-melee fighters; they had relied on fancy footwork to bring them into close range where they could use their weapons. The chain weapon that Jaria used, however, had a much longer range. Anders fired off a few Winter's Grasps, trying to pin her in place, but it was not a terribly precise spell, and Jaria was too fast for it.

The two circled each other, trying to get a feel for the other's range. Anders dodged a slash from the axe part of the weapon, then blocked with his staff as the weighted chain whistled down at his head. He realized a moment later that he'd miscalculated; the chain snagged on the shaft of his weapon and wrapped tightly around it. A moment later, a powerful yank nearly dragged the weapon out of his hands.
For a moment, the contest degraded into a tug-of-war; Anders had to call on Justice's strength to keep hold of his weapon. Maker's breath, but dwarves were strong! Not just strong relative to their size, but strong for any size!

Even a dwarven warrior, however, could not match the strength that the Fade lent to him; blue fire flared up his arms and hands, and Anders wrapped his hand around the length of chain (so as not to splinter his staff,) and gave a powerful pull in return.

Not having expected such a tactic, Jaria stumbled forward - right into the stone-wrapped fist that Anders leveled at her head. Anders heard bone crunch, and flinched back as the metal of the helm itself dented and crumbled under the force of the blow. That had been the dwarf's jaw, if Anders guessed right; it was probably just as well she wouldn't want to be talking any time soon. Chips of stone littered the floor as the stonefist spell dissolved, and Jaria collapsed on top of them.

Anders kind of would have liked to check in on her and offer healing if necessary, but the arena attendants were already sweeping her away before he could recover his breath afterwards. Not that he really should be sparing his mana to heal his opponents, anyway; he wasn't dry yet, but he could feel a dangerous shallowness in his connection to the Fade, and he knew he wasn't done yet.

"Announcing our sixth and final challenger," the Master of Ceremonies said, his voice taking on a solemn and almost hushed air. "Sir Osric the Undefeated, Champion of House Saelac."

Saelac? Anders wondered; hadn't he already fought a Saelac once in this match already? He supposed they weren't limited to only one entrant per house, after all.

But while Tovaris "the unclean," had been a bit of a joke, he could tell as soon as Osric stepped through the gateway that he was another prospect. He had the bearing of a seasoned warrior, moving lightly on his feet despite the heavy armor and large two-handed greatsword he carried; there was a grace to his movement that reminded Anders somehow of Fenris.

The effect on the audience was immediate and profound; the background chatter dropped away, and the mood of the crowd shifted to an almost awed respect. Anders twisted his hands nervously on his staff; this was not good news for him. This Osric was likely to be a serious challenger, and even if he wasn't, the audience definitely wouldn't cheer for his humiliating defeat the way they had for Pyrag.

"You fought well today, Warden Enchanter," Osric called out, his voice calm and measured. "Your other opponents underestimated you - to their detriment." He raised his greatsword in a respectful salute. "I will not make that mistake."

He felt a familiar staticky tingle rising in his chest, spreading out to his fingertips; without conscious intent he felt his grip on the weapon shift, from a mere handhold while he used the staff as a channel for his magic, to something more martial. This Osric was a renowned warrior, in a society of warriors. To truly earn the respect of the martial caste, he must be defeated as a warrior.

You want to handle this one? He questioned to the spirit inside. It seems more like your line…

There was a warmth that was definitely assent, and Anders took a step back, dissociating slightly from his - from their shared body. Not without misgivings, but he had faith in Justice for this.

"You honor me with your efforts, Osric Saelac," said Anders' mouth, though it wasn't Anders speaking. "Let us meet in just and honorable battle, on these proving grounds, and our victory will prove the rightness of our cause."

Justice ignored him. The two opponents rushed each other with matching battle roars, and the duel was joined.

It was strange and unreal, this half-present existence - Anders could feel every swing of his arms, every blow of sword on staff, every step that his legs took to press the attack or fall back, but they were not his doing. It was like fighting entirely on reflex, on skills learned but then forgotten, only to be remembered by the muscles and bones long after they had vanished from the mind. He had to fight hard to keep himself detached, not to instinctively reassert dominance over their body - if Justice let him take it, he would likely fall directly in the path of Osric's sword. And if Justice fought him for control... well, they had already had far too much of that conflict in Kirkwall.

"Never again," Justice growled out loud, and Anders silently agreed.

It was a hard fight. Osric was skilled and strong, his equipment kept in perfect order; he knew what he was doing and he was no soft touch. Anders' body, in comparison, was not truly built for this style of fighting, and he was already tired from the five consecutive bouts before this. But Justice had been a spirit of war, conceived in a dream of martial victory; he had all the strength of the Fade and a thousand years of the memories of great warriors to draw on.

In the end, it wasn't even close.

Justice saw the opening and moved to take it before Anders even truly had the chance to register the sight with his eyes, let alone process it with his brain. They caught Osric's swing and forced it wide, the momentum of his weapon carrying his arm in an outside arm that left his torso wide open. Justice spun the staff up and over for momentum, and at the end of the arc he brought the edge of the blade down on the join of Osric's shoulder.

Steel flashed, blood spattered in a wide arc, and Osric screamed in pain; he slumped to his knees, left hand clutching at the stump of his right arm - the arm that clattered to the stone floor several meters away, the sword landing about a foot away from the sundered hand.

The crowd gasped in collective shock and dismay - but not, Anders noted thankfully, anger. Justice took a step back, and swept his staff up to attention position beside them. "Victory is mine," he announced to the stunned room.

As the Master of Provings stammered out confirmation of the victory, Anders pushed for control. For a moment, Justice resisted. "It was an honorable loss in honorable battle. You would cheapen it," he protested.

Nevertheless, Anders thought, as he pushed forward into full control of their body and staggered a bit from the martial pose. "I have to do it, if I can."

He walked - limped, really - over to where the severed arm lay leaking blood on the floor, and picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy - he supposed the armor didn't help with that. Carrying the arm, he returned to where Osric was rocking on the ground, gritting his teeth manfully against tears of shock and pain as he clutched at the injury. The ushers were trying to help Osric to his feet, likely to carry him off to medical treatment backstage; Anders waved them away, and uneasily they gave ground before him.

It actually wasn't bleeding as much as it might have, Anders observed as he knelt beside Osric; likely the shock of the dismemberment had caused the muscles to contract forcefully against the
bone, constricting the blood vessels. Well, that would make his job easier, and all for the better; he didn't have much mana left. The dwarf looked up at him, eyes dark with battle-fury and pain.

"This is my victory," he reminded Osric. "Don't fight me on this."

Taking a grip on Osric's blood-soaked shoulder, he set the two broken pieces against each other, ignoring his patient's pained little grunts as he sent out careful questing magic to sense when the alignment was correct.

Once it was, the space between them lit up in a vivid green glow as he poured healing magic into the injury.

The arena around them had gone dead silent, except for the dripping of blood and whistling of Osric's breathing. Anders blocked out everything except the work before him; it had been a while since he had healed an injury this severe, but the know-how was still there. The dwarven resistance to magic was, blast it all, still a problem - but since this was his last match of the day, he knew he could spend all that remained of his magic on it.

This was important. He'd shown them - the king, the warriors, the nobles - how destructive mages could be. Now he had a chance to show them that mages could heal as well as destroy, that they could build as much as they could break.

Plus, not leaving a good man crippled for life was probably a better way to start off his residence in the city.

His magic sought out the splintered edges of bones and drew them together, fusing the sheared-off bone matrix to itself and encouraging the marrow to start producing more blood cells. He coaxed the muscle fibers to relax from their panicked seizing and extend back into their normal position, weaving the fibers of muscle and tendon together. He spliced the cut ends of the major blood vessels back together, and set blood surging through the distressed limb, bringing oxygen back to the dying cells. A surge of creation magic washed through the limb, encouraging the cells to come out of their shock and function normally again; and then another through the rest of the dwarf's body, leveling out the shock symptoms and boosting blood production. He was still dangerously close to hypovolemic, and large bruises spread through his tissue where the blood had collected under the skin, but -

Osric looked at him in astonishment. "Warden Enchanter, you…" He trailed off, staring down at his hand, and his brow drew down in a pained grimace; the fingers twitched, spastically, then curled into a fist.

He raised the injured arm - now whole again - in a salute, and the arena exploded into cheers.
For the first time all night, the entire stadium was united in its approval; even those who had reason to dislike Anders (or had laid money on his seemingly inevitable defeat) seemed swept up in the excitement. Anders staggered back to his feet, feeling splashes of dwarven blood cooling on his skin and soaking through his clothes, and leaned on his staff in exhaustion. Despite the fatigue aching through his body and the dangerously empty feeling of his mana, he felt a warm glow of pride for today's work.

The ushers finally got to come forward and help Osric limp off towards the gate - hopefully to a medical station with a warm place to lie down and plenty of fluids, Anders thought with a healer's habit. Honestly, those things sounded pretty good to him too right now. But the Master of Provings was gesturing for him to stay where he was, and King Bhelen was rising from his chair with the air of a man preparing for a speech, so Anders waited.

"Ladies and gentlemen, warriors and craftsmen, you honor us with your presence and attention today," Bhelen said cheerfully. "I hope you have enjoyed yourself as much as I have."

The crowd chuckled, and Bhelen beamed, a jolly-looking smile that seemed right at home on his pudgy face. "Thanks to our distinguished guest, today's was an exceptionally unusual Proving; not since the Proving of Paragon Brosca herself during the reign of my father have we seen such an astonishing upset to our expectations. All honor to Warden Enchanter Anders, who favored us with his prowess on this day." He paused, looking down at Anders expectantly.
Anders had no idea how in the flames to respond to that, so he tried an awkward little bow towards the throne. It seemed to be the right thing to do, as Bhelen continued on.

"In fact, his prowess appears to be so mighty, that not even the finest of Orzammar's champions could give him a run for his money!" Bhelen said, his voice full of innocent malice. "Perhaps, as good hosts, we owe it to our contestant to provide him with at least a little bit of a challenge?"

Anders blinked. "...What?" he asked, baffled.

Without another word Bhelen turned and signaled to one of his lieutenants; a pre-arranged signal, apparently, as the man immediately turned and began cranking a gear. Somewhere further back in the stone maze that made up the arena, there was a hollow thump, followed by a chorus of high-pitched squealing.

"What?!" Anders said, panicked. He clutched his staff close, staring wildly around - for the enemy, or for an escape route, he didn't even know.

The two gates closest to Bhelen's throne, flanking the door Anders had come through, began to grind open. A cacophony of squeaking sounds - as though a pack of mabaris had all gotten their hands on rubber toys simultaneously - echoed out the stone tunnels towards him. And as soon as the gate had cleared enough room from the ground, a mass of dark shapes flooded from the tunnels and streamed towards him.

"Bhelen, you son of a bitch!" Anders screamed, his voice lost in the cacophony as a horde of deepstalkers flooded towards him. There had to be at least twenty, possibly more - it was hard to count the things when they were constantly moving, shoving and slipping under each other, their mottled skins blending against the stone behind them. Half a dozen of the cold, scaly bodies slammed into him, and he almost went down under them. Long jaws of serrated teeth snapped at him, filthy talons clawed at his robes and scratched open the skin beneath - for a moment he was back in the Deep Roads with the others, ambushed, overwhelmed -

In the sheer panic of the moment, time seemed to slow down. Justice came back to high alert, offering burning spirit power for him to draw on in lieu of mana. He cast three spells in precise, careful succession: first, a Mind Blast with all his panic behind it. That stunned the deepstalkers surrounding him, driving them back a precious few feet for him to work.

Second, he slapped a Barrier on himself, a shroud of arcane magic that would blunt the impact of physical blows and bleed energy attacks away into the Fade. The second part of the spell was especially important, considering what he was about to do next.

Third, he reached for the Fade through Justice and channeled a massive firestorm, centered on himself, raining burning rock and molten across the breadth of the arena. Without the barrier, this would have been suicide; as it was, the raging flames sucked all the air out from around him, leaving him dizzy and breathless.

The deepstalkers squealed and gibbered, panicking as the fire pummeled down on them from above. Some of them broke off the attack to flee in a panic, only to hit the edges of the stone walls and turn back; some of them turned on each other in savage fury as the pain maddened them; some of them turned their fury on him, instead, slashing at him with burning claws that scraped through his barrier even as the flames consumed them.

It was, Anders was sure, a hell of a show.

He kept the firestorm channeled until the entire horde of deepstalkers was dead, the smell of
cooked meat and charred bone filling the arena. Only then did Anders manage to climb stiffly back to his feet, hanging on to his staff for dear life, and glare deadly holes into King Bhelen's royal doublet.

The audience sat stunned, so hushed that the cracking and hissing of the superheated stones was even louder than their collective breathing. Anders couldn't blame them, as much as he hated it. Everything that had gone before it in the Provings, no matter how unorthodox, was just another form of single combat - but the firestorm was something else. It was destruction on a scale that they likely had never seen before outside of a siege engine, a weapon of mass warfare. And now, just like everyone else on Thedas, that would be all they saw when they looked at him.

Bhelen gazed around the arena smiling benevolently. "Nobles and warriors, deshyrs and craftsmen," he said into the quiet. "I give you Warden Enchanter Anders."

The arena erupted into cheers as Bhelen, apparently quite satisfied with his last word, turned on his heel and walked off the stage. He vanished through the king's private door, and his departure seemed to be a general signal that the event was at its end; people began shifting and milling about, getting up out of their seats and even jumping up and down as they whooped and hollered.

Anders supposed that was his cue to leave, too. The gated entrances to the arena floor looked much further away than they had when he had come in. He began making his way across the scorched flagstones, stumbling once or twice when his boot caught on some shrouded obstacle. If he'd been in better shape he'd have played it up a bit, maybe collapsed dramatically to one knee before getting heroically back up and staggering onwards - but if he went down on one knee now he didn't think he was getting back up after.

Once out of the Proving grounds, he found himself surrounded by a gaggle of admirers, officials, and excited bystanders. "Warden-Enchanter Anders! You were fantastic!" one dwarven girl gushed in his direction, her eyes shining.

"Yes, well, I really need to get some rest," Anders said, giving her a pained smile as he tried to maneuver around her. He had pushed far past the normal limits of his mana in the last fight against the deepstalkers; while he'd endured worse in the past, he definitely was not up for graceful socializing. "If I could just get back to the guest quarters…"

"That was a steaming pile of bronto shit, that's what that was!" a male voice was screaming from the back of the crowd. "Just took our culture's most sacred tradition and took a huge wet dump on it!"

"Warren-Enchanner, could you sign me tasset?" A grey-fringed older dwarf pushed through the crowd towards him, smiling a gap-toothed grin. He held up a shapeless piece of armor that Anders did not really want to examine too close.

Anders leaned carefully away from his new admirer, looking around helplessly for the familiar livery of the palace guards to save him. "Or a nearby inn, really… I'm not picky. I'm dead on my feet."

"Well, it was highly irregular, but it's not like there were any rules..." a bespectacled silvery dwarf was arguing with the gentleman in the back.

"Please… listen… I'm really…" Anders tried to say. The walls were beginning to swim alarming in his vision, and only a firm jolt from Justice kept him steady on his feet.

"Warden-Enchanter, I am a guildmaster of great standing in this city," a large-paunched man
interrupted him, squeezing his bulk into Anders' path and planting himself there. "It would be my honor to invite you to perform at my manor…"

"Look, if one of you doesn't point me in the direction of the nearest soft and horizontal surface," Anders said, projecting his voice loudly enough to startle the crowd. "I am going to sit right down here on the floor and start to cry. Right now."

That cleared the way, at least.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Chapter art is by Kirkwallgirl.
Party I

Chapter Summary

A feast takes place, and after-dinner speeches do not quite turn into an all out brawl.

The Proving had gone from morning till midday, and the feast was scheduled for late evening. There was time for Anders to strip off his clothes -- stained with blood, both his own and Osric's, and smears of scorched deepstalker -- and sink into a bath. The bathtub was maybe smaller than he would have liked, but at least there was nothing to complain about in the availability of hot water. Dwarven plumbing, indeed.

After the bath he'd stumbled over to the nearest vaguely soft surface and collapsed.

He managed a few hours of sleep before a servant woke him, insisting that he get up and get ready to go to the feast. Maker, Anders felt bloody awful; he felt more exhausted than he had before he'd closed his eyes. It would fade, he knew, as his body woke up from its unplanned sleep; he wished he could chase the dragging fatigue away with a Rejuvenate spell, but unfortunately Rejuvenate was a spell that was only as effective as the mage casting it. In other words: not at all, at the moment.

Maybe soon he'd have some more mages around to cast Rejuvenate for him. The thought woke him up a little bit, at least enough to go search for something to wear.

While he'd slept the servants had made off with his clothes (for cleaning and then return afterwards, he dearly hoped) and left another set in its place. Somewhat to his surprise it was a Warden uniform, and one that fit him unexpectedly well; the tunic and trousers were a little loose, the boots a little tight, but still a much closer fit than he'd expected from a city full of people half his height.

So it appeared he would be attending this feast as a Warden. Was that supposed to be some subtle political message on Bhelen's part, a reminder of Anders' connection to the other Wardens? Or was it just that the Wardens were the only human group they had regular enough contact with to have a set of clothes lying around in Anders' size?

Was he wearing the uniform of a dead man?

Honestly, the thought would have bothered him more if he hadn't spent the last ten years regularly looting every dead body they came across -- including most of the ones they'd created themselves.

Anders sighed and left off tugging the sleeves, trying to get them to cover the last bony inch of his wrist. The dwarves probably wouldn't even notice, and, well. This was what they'd given him.

He poked his head out of the guest suite door and saw another servant waiting in the hallway with the ever-present guards. She gave him a quick curtsey, and said "I'm to escort you to the main hall. When you're ready, Warden-Enchanter."

In many ways, entering the hall full of dwarves was even more nerve-wracking than entering the arena had been; at least then he'd had a good idea of what to expect, and he wouldn't have to talk to
anyone.

He needn't have worried; for the time being, at least, it seemed like no speechifying went on before food. Anders was ushered into the hall -- a wide, cavernous room lit with, of course, more torches. There was something slightly off about the lighting, which Anders eventually pinned down to the fact that all the torches were placed considerably lower on the walls than they would be in a human building. It changed the angle of the shadows, making Anders feel weirdly off balance.

It seemed as though the meal was already going on, although nobody seemed to mind his late entrance. King Bhelen was holding court at the head table, surrounded by the now-familiar advisers and less-familiar petitioners. The rest of the guests seemed to be sorted by table; Anders had no idea how to interpret most of the crests and runes decorating clothes and equipments, but some things were pretty obvious.

The long table nearest to the king's, attended by a dozen dwarves in ludicrously rich clothing and practically dripping with jewelry, was probably the Noble Bigwig table. Another table further down the room, bristling with more weapons than the old armory at Vigil's Keep, had to be the Warrior Guy Table. Not that Anders had any problem with warriors -- some of his best friends were warriors -- but at dinner, really?

Anders was led to a seat near the end of the high table, too far away from Bhelen to be expected to hold a conversation, which was a relief. Instead he found himself paired off with Vartag Gavorn; after all the nerves he'd spilled out on the steward leading up to the Provings, he felt like he almost knew the man.

"Warden Enchanter," Gavorn nodded a cordial greeting at him. "Glad to see you on your feet again. Well fought today."

"Thank you," Anders said, taking a cautious seat on the (for him) low bench at the table. He stared at the spread before them in some surprise. Given some of Natya's stories he'd half expected to see dishes full of roast deepstalker or stewed mushroom, but the food appeared to be not too dissimilar from what everyone else on Thedas ate. There was bread, steamed rice with sauce, wheels of cheese, sliced rashers of bacon, and even a bowl piled prettily with fruit.

"Where does Orzammar get all this?" he asked. Belatedly, it occurred to him that being able to afford an entire table full of what must be imported food was a flagrant display of wealth on Bhelen's part. To the rest of the room, this might be the highest of delicacies; too bad that to Anders, it was pretty standard tavern fare.

Gavorn gave a generalized gesture in the air that Anders couldn't even begin to decipher. "Trade with the surface occurs," he said vaguely, and Anders gave him a mystified look.

"Well, I'd assume so," he said. "But I just wonder how you get the surface kingdoms to agree to ohhhhh," he said as the copper dropped. 'Trade' with the surface, indeed. For all that Anders fought hard against falling into the stereotype of assuming that every surface dwarf was a Carta smuggler, the fact remained that there were a lot of them. He supposed it made sense that with all that lyrium they smuggled out, something got smuggled back. "Yes, I think I encountered quite a few of your 'traders' during my time in Kirkwall."

"Likely," Gavorn said with a sigh, and handed over a flagon of ale for Anders to fill his mug.

"Say, what was that whole business with Whatsisname Haver?" Anders asked as he piled his plate high with food. "I mean, I don't consider myself an expert at Provings, but it seemed to me that the rest of the crowd really didn't like that guy."
"Pyrag Haver?" Gavorn scowled as he said the name, then shrugged. "I suppose you would have no reason to know our local gossip. I'll explain as best I can, though it may not make sense to an outsider.

"House Haver has been in dire need of new champions for years now, ever since Gorimal the Stone-Handed went to the Deep Roads. It's unacceptable for a warrior House to be so short on capable melee fighters, so like any idiots with more money than sense, they had put out a contract asking for any skilled blade who would stand as their Champion in return for House status. As their bad luck would have it, the one who bid on the contract was Pyrag Paedus from the Smith caste."

"I wouldn't have thought a professional blacksmith could cut it as an arena champion," Anders said cautiously, as Gavorn stopped to refresh himself with a gulp of ale. Gavorn chuckled darkly.

"Nor could he. But he didn't have to actually be any good; he just had to get to a certain rating in the Provings in order to qualify. Well, Pyrag was about as short on scruples as he was on cash -- or on skill -- so he picked the cheapest way he could to advance in the ratings. He issued a challenge to old Gideon Turin."

Gavorn paused dramatically, and Anders had to say "Sorry, who's that?"

His narrator looked surprised, then shook his head. "You really aren't from around here. Gideon Turin was one of the most beloved warriors in Orzammar -- he had a long and honorable career, from Champion to Captain of the Guard to weapons tutor. Half the young blighters in the Guard today owed something to that old man. He was getting close to the Stone; he was mostly blind, and after a brainstorm last year he could barely lift his shield arm.

"But since he still held the honorary rank of Champion, that meant he was eligible for anyone in the Provings to issue a challenge to him. And because the rank he retired at was so high, defeating him would propel any challenger far enough in the ratings to instantly qualify for House sponsorship."

"Oh, no," Anders said. "He didn't…"

"He did," Gavorn said grimly. "It was all within the rules, for anyone low enough to reach for it. Gideon had no choice but to suit up in his old armor and take to the field, not if he wanted to keep his honor.

"Stone-father knows that would have been cowardly enough, but Pyrag could have just knocked the old man over and called in his points. But no. He cut Gideon down on the flagstones, and boom, Pyrag's in the ratings. And House Haver had no choice but to follow through on their sponsorship contract."

"Wow," Anders said, as stunned by the senseless cruelty as he was impressed by the gall. He suddenly felt a lot less bad for having bounced the dwarf on his head a few times. "What a bastard."

"You're telling me," Gavorn agreed heartily. "You made a lot of friends among the Turins today, let me tell you that. Shame they're only a warrior House, and don't have a seat in the Assembly instead of that bottom-feeder Vollney."

"Vollney?" Anders asked. He was beginning to think he'd need a pocket planner to keep all these names straight.
"House Vollney," Gavorn corrected him scrupulously. "They made a great deal of coin betting on Pyrag when no one else would. There were darker rumors, but nothing was ever confirmed. Either way, they're unlikely to look kindly upon this."

"Great," Anders said with a sigh. "So what you're saying is that the warrior class likes me now, but they don't have any actual votes, and the nobles, who actually control the government, have me on their shit list?"

"Not a bad sum up," Gavorn admitted.

Great.

The feast continued, and Anders indulged himself; as long as the food was here, flagrant display of consumption aside, he might as well make use of it. He still had a Warden's appetite, no matter how many years in Kirkwall he'd spent trying to starve it, and the amount of magic he'd burned through at today's tournament had left him deeply depleted. His arm shook every time he reached for more food, a tremble that Gavorn eyed with a certain misgiving, but didn't comment on.

Anders had demolished everything within easy reach on their table, and was eyeing a stand full of cheesecake a few yards down the table with a wistful longing, when a change in atmosphere swept over the room. At the high table Bhelen got to his feet, and the attention of the entire room focused on him. Apparently, the dwarves preferred to give their speeches after meals, rather than before them.

Bhelen cleared his throat, taking a swig from a tankard before he set it back on the table before him. "I commend this feast in honor of Warden Enchanter Anders," Bhelen announced, indicating in Anders' direction, which caused a bevy of bearded faces to swing in his direction. "His performance on the Proving grounds today left no doubt as to his prowess, his power, his skill, inventiveness and tenacity. And I am pleased to announce that his victory is a victory for all Orzammar, as the Warden has pledged his power to fight for our cause. He will be accompanying our finest warriors into the Deep Roads, there to show the Spawn the full limits of his combat skills."

Pleased murmurs ran around the room, and the Warrior Guy table didn't stop there; there was a deafening rattle of metal as half a score of them banged the hilts of their swords or the butt of their axes against the table or floor. That, Anders supposed, was warrior-guy code for "we approve."

"With such firepower on our side, shielding and healing our brave legionnaires, I have no doubt that our soldiers will be able to press further into the Deep Roads than our forces have for centuries, even to reclaim the gates of mighty Bownammar itself!" Bhelen continued, waxing passionate. Another murmur of approval. "But we will not stop there. We will not just reach Bownammar; we will purge it of the Spawn, reclaim it for the dwarven empire and fortify it against all comers. The passage from Orzammar to Bownammar will soon become as safe to travel as the walk between this dining hall and your front doorstep. And that is only the beginning!"

A dwarf Anders didn't recognize got to his feet, signaling for the attention of the room. "Your majesty, don't you think that's a little ambitious?" he asked. "However great his claims, he is still only one human."

"He is, yes," Bhelen said, nodding in acceptance of the objection. "But he will not be the only man who will pledge his power to support our cause. As of today, Orzammar has forged an alliance with the free mages of all Thedas. Under the Warden Enchanter's guidance, they will found an outpost upon our slopes that will support a very battalion of combat-ready mages. They will join us
in reclaiming our legacy!"

The dining hall exploded in uproar.

Half the room was on their feet, arguing or shouting; Anders caught some cheers of approval, especially from the Warrior Guy table, but they were outnumbered by the chorus of objections. Bhelen waited them out, letting them yell over each other, until one particularly outspoken dwarf dressed in the rich opulence of the nobility managed to win out over the others. "Are you joking?" the dark-skinned, red-headed dwarf nearly screamed. "You want to bring a hundred of those walking time-bombs into our city?"

"Actually, I had planned for them to have their own settlement, on the slopes above Orzammar," Bhelen replied calmly. "The land is still ours, but we have no need for it; we might as well make use of it. But yes, they would be welcome to walk in our city, fight beside our warriors, and of course, spend their coin at our merchants."

"My ancestor, Paragon Ivo, risked his life to defend Orzammar from the ravages of just such a magic-crazed beast!" the dwarf -- apparently Lord Ivo -- said furiously. "The ancients in their wisdom exalted him to Paragon status for his bravery. You would defile all that he stood for!"

Anders grimaced, and rubbed surreptitiously at his forehead. There it was again, the mad mage of legend. Was there any fairy tale on Thedas that didn't have a 'mad mage' as its villain somewhere? There was no way of knowing, all these ages later, whether the story as House Ivo told it was true - whether they had indeed bravely fought off an insane enchanter bent on ravaging the city, or whether there had been some more mundane spat between a lyrium merchant and a traveling mage, or whether the mage had even ever existed at all. Given Anders' wide experience with mage-mundane relationships, it could easily be any of the three.

A second nobly-dressed dwarf, silver hair bound in a multitude of tiny, intricate braids, cleared his throat as he stood up beside his fellow. "Your Majesty, surely this is not wise. Bad enough to harbor this apostate, a wanted criminal in the surface lands. But to harbor a hundred of his fellow fugitives as well? Such a thing would provoke the outrage of the Chantry."

"So it may," Bhelen replied. "But the Chantry does not rule Orzammar. Does it rule you, Anwer Dace?"

"No!" Dace denied quickly. "...No, but we cannot ignore the community of nations of which we are a part. Surely we must strive to be good neighbors to the Andrastean kingdoms?"

"By which he means, his family's fortune is tied up in trade interests in Orlais, and he doesn't want to risk any of 'em," Gavorn muttered by Anders' side, loud enough for only him to hear. Anders sighed.

Bhelen looked around the dining hall, his usually kind and open face going stern. "It happens every time, my friends," he says. "Every time there's a Blight, every time the darkspawn rise to the surface, the human kingdoms beg Orzammar for help. They make promises of alliances, partnerships and aid.

"And every time the Blight recedes, they forget their promises. The surface kingdoms swore they would send men and supplies to aid us in the Deep Roads ten years past. They have broken their promises and forswn their debts. We are owed repayment -- warriors, manpower, firepower. I think it is time we dwarves stopped waiting on the grace of the surface kingdoms, and take
reinforcements wherever they are offered, whether it pleases the humans or not!"

Another grumble of agreement rolled around the room; whatever they thought of mages, it was clear Bhelen's words resonated deeply with the other dwarves. Lord Dace clearly knew when to fold them; he sat carefully back down again, reaching up to tug surreptitiously at Ivo's elbow.

The flame-haired dwarf refused to budge. "No!" he exclaimed, shaking off Dace's restraining hand. "I will not allow this... this madman to bring his infection into our city! This outrage must be stopped!"

"I'm afraid, Frandol Ivo, that you don't really have a say in the matter," Bhelen returned sternly. "I say it, and it is I who wear the Paragon's crown."

"Have a care, Bhelen!" Ivo threatened him. "King you may be, but it is the Assembly that makes a king, and a king cannot rule long if he goes against the true will of Orzammar."

"And who interprets the true will of Orzammar? You?" Bhelen laughed derisively. "Grasping stone hands of dead dwarves past? I think you'll find that the world has moved on, and Orzammar, like it or not, is not exempt from the world. We move on. Move with us, or be left in the dust. I don't care which."

Two more of the nobles had joined in Anwer Dace's attempts to yank Ivo down from the table, and he finally relented and allowed himself to be dragged back into his seat. If his brick-red expression and murderous glare in Anders' direction was any indication, the quarrel was not forgotten.

Anders did not consider himself an expert in politics. He'd never been interested in the jockeying of the Fraternities back in the Circle, and had only started paying attention to the politics of the Chantry and the secular government in the Free Marches because he'd had no choice. He certainly knew little to nothing about the maneuverings of the dwarven government behind closed, stone doors, but even to his untrained surfer perception, one thing was perfectly clear.

Somehow he'd blundered into a power struggle of historical proportions between royal faction and noble, and by accepting Bhelen's offer, had made himself a pawn in the dwarven king's great game.

Well, there was nothing for it now; he was committed. Glumly, Anders pulled over the cheesecake stand and started in.

~tbc...
Chapter Summary

The party continues.

Chapter Notes

Note to readers: After this, I am going to be switching to a once-weekly posting schedule, most likely on Fridays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As he chewed, his eyes wandered over to the king again; he was engaged in serious conversation with his advisors. On the other side from Bhelen, Anders caught a glimpse of a beautiful woman, calmly eating her own meal without showing any reaction to the conversation going on around her. "Is that woman the Queen?" Anders nodded towards her, stabbing another piece of cheesecake. She didn't look much like Natya, her features fine and elegant; well, if she was expected to catch a noble with her looks, it made sense that she would be the beauty of the family. "Do you think I could meet her? I promised Natya I'd send updates about her sister and nephew."

Gavorn hesitated. "Well… that is the Queen, yes," he said. "But she's not Paragon Brosca's sister."

"She's not?" Anders blinked in bewilderment.

"Rica Brosca is His Majesty's concubine, not his wife," Gavorn explained.

"I thought she and her family were living in the palace?" Anders' confusion was growing.

"They are. Little Endrin is Bhelen's heir, and his mother and his mother's family have a place in Bhelen's household because of that. But a noble hunter cannot be given the rank of wife. It's just not done. Bhelen's marriage was arranged for him by his father, the old King, before he died -- chosen for her noble connections and her qualifications to be queen. That," and Gavorn nodded at the bejeweled woman, "is Moira Aeducan, formerly of House Meino, Queen of Orzammar."

"Oh." Anders sat back a bit, watching the Queen with wide-eyes. "And she's living in the same household with her husband's… concubine, and their child? Maker, family dinners must be awkward."

"Why would they be?" It was Gavorn's turn to sound puzzled. "There's nothing unusual about it. Many of the noble households have similar arrangements. The wives are accustomed to the arrangement."

Privately, Anders thought there was quite a world of difference between being accustomed to something, and being okay with it, but he supposed Bhelen's private domestic arrangements were not his business.
Well… except that Natya was his friend, and Rica was her sister, so to that extent their happiness was his business…

No. Definitely not his business. Anders stole one more look at Queen Moira, her face a cool mask of disinterest as her husband conducted business over dinner, and scraped his plate for the last fragments of cheesecake frosting.

"When you are ready to retire, a messenger will take you through the streets to the manor," Gavorn said.

"Wait, what?" Anders asked. "What manor? I've been staying in the guest quarters at the palace."

"A guest stays in the guest quarters," Gavorn said with a shrug. "Now that your residency in Orzammar has been confirmed, you also need a residence. You, and any other mages you collect, will be staying at the Brosca manor until other arrangements can be made."

"Brosca manor?" Anders boggled. "I didn't know Natya had a manor. She never mentioned it."

"I doubt she's ever seen it," Gavorn replied. "She has not returned to Orzammar once since its construction was completed. It's completely empty -- Paragon Brosca absents herself from the city, and of course Rica Brosca and her mother share quarters with the king. But tradition demands that every Paragon must have their own House, so it's been standing empty ever since she was canonized. It will be nice to finally get some use out of the place."

"I think I'm done here," Anders said, looking out over the sea of faces in the dining hall; even the ones that weren't sporting death glares in his direction were craning their necks to gawk at him like an exotic animal on display. "That is, if you don't think I'm needed for anything else."

"No, the show's pretty much over for the night," Gavorn said, and leaned back to gesture for the attention of one of the servants. "The King will send for you when he has time, to further discuss the details of your new alliance."

New alliance. The words bolstered him, gave him the strength and the nerve to get up and walk out of the hall without letting his knees knock together in full view of everyone. They were getting somewhere. Whatever else happened, they were getting somewhere.

The dwarven guide had led Anders out of the palace, through the wide and glittering streets of the Diamond Quarter and past the curious stares of dozens of well-dressed dwarves. They passed by one huge house after another -- not mansions in the way Anders was used to seeing them, identified by wrought iron gates and large well-kept lawns, but rather by the looming grandeur of their facades and the detail and craftsmanship of the carvings in the stone. They blended one into another, blurring in his memory until they finally reached the end of a long row, where the avenue petered out and the residential quarter dead-ended into raw stone.

There was one last grand house at the end of the row, the cuttings in the stone still sharp and raw as the statue at the gates of the city. No lights flickered in the narrow windows cut into the stone, no voices echoed out through the front vestibule. The servant unlocked the grand front doors, presented him with the key, then made his excuses and vanished. That left Anders to wander the
rooms and hallways of the huge, empty house alone.

It hadn't been so bad in the palace's guest suite. It was a guest room, like any other guest room. Low ceilings and stone furniture aside, it wasn't much different from the dozens of inns that Anders had stayed in over the years: impersonal, pre-finished, with at least some attempt made to provide a standard of comfort to the guests. Interchangeable.

But this place was just... empty. A very strange kind of emptiness that came not just from being empty of people for years, but of never having people there at all. The walls were all finished, carved and polished and decorated with the increasingly familiar right-angled knotwork decorations so popular in Orzammar. But aside from a few hasty chairs and beds and tables that had been thrown in one corner of the mansion -- for his use, he presumed, and the use of any other mage 'guests' that made it this far -- there was no other sign of habitation.

Anders walked from room to room, trying to overcome the creeping sense of discomfiture. There was certainly plenty of space, and rooms suited for all sorts of uses -- if he'd had his old comrades from the Vigil here, he could have really turned it into a party town. If he'd had his friends from Kirkwall here...

He stopped in the doorway of one long room, and something about the shape and the angles suddenly threw him back in time to Varric's suite in the Hanged Man. He'd had the same kind of abstract decorations on the walls, the same shape of flagstones on the floor, even the fireplace had been in the same position. Anders could almost see the room filled by a broad stone table, surrounded by low stone chairs, filled by the laughing and arguing voices of the people he once knew in Kirkwall.

But as hard as he tried to remember his friends when they were happy, he couldn't see anything else except that one last terrible day in Kirkwall. The way their faces had looked, bathed in the crimson glow of fire under the burning sky.

Varric, his best friend in Kirkwall aside from Hawke, who had always laughed with him and joked with him and tried to cheer him up -- Varric had looked at him with such hatred, such fury, reflected on every face. Aveline had looked at him with contempt -- but then again, she always had. Sebastian had been ready to kill him on the spot, if anyone had given him an opening. Fenris hadn't even had the kindness to look surprised at all, only a bitter, savage sort of satisfaction. A face that shouted without need for words: "See? What did I tell you? I was right, all along, I was right."

Merrill, sweet bloodied Merrill, had been utterly horrified by what he'd done. Isabela, of all people, looked at him with an awful pity in her eyes. Isabela, who always believed in freedom at any cost. Of all of them, only she might have spoken in his defense -- but she deferred, as they all did, to Hawke.

And Hawke...

Oh, Maker, Hawke...

His legs wouldn't hold him up. Anders dropped to the pretty, tiled floor of the suite, wrapping his arms around himself and digging his fingers through the layers of cloth into muscle and bone. He'd waited, he'd waited for Hawke to pass judgment -- waited, honestly, for Hawke to kill him. But he hadn't.
"Get up," Hawke had said. Calloused hands gripped Anders' shoulders, dragging him to his feet. "I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to make a fucking martyr out of you."

Anders had made the mistake of raising his gaze to look Hawke in the eyes, and all the love, all the softness that had been there was on fire, it was burned out by such rage and fury that Anders felt an echo of true kinship in his soul. Hawke had shoved him back, sending him staggering, adrift without the point of contact between them. "Now run."

And Anders had.

He sobbed once, clutching harder at his ribs as though he could hold his cracking heart together. Hawke had filled him up so much, with love and warmth and laughter and happiness... all gone now, all wasted and ruined and broken. It felt like it was pouring out of him, gushing endlessly out of the cracks in his ribs, and no matter how cold and desolate and empty it left him the bleeding never stopped.

He'd known it might happen. That it was likely to happen, that he was betraying Hawke's trust in the most hideous of ways, that there could be no loving or forgiving the monster he would willingly make of himself. He'd prepared, steeled his nerves and girded his heart and had been ready to let go. Ready to forgive Hawke anything, accept anything, even a blade of steel between his ribs.

He'd been ready for death, but not for living. Not for living like this.

If he'd died, he wouldn't have to see Hawke's face burning behind his eyelids every time he closed his eyes. He would have to walk around with his chest gutted and hollowed out like a revenant, dragging phantom weights and endless chains that dragged all the way back to Kirkwall, all the way back to the Circle, that would never, ever let him go. He wouldn't have to remember the blast of heat on his face as the sky burned, hear the whispers of the innocents he'd killed haunting his dreams.

Maker, maybe it would have been better...

No. It would not have been better. His death would avail nothing, would not return the victims to life. Only by living could he redeem their sacrifice, could he begin to rebuild order out of the chaos that they had wrought. He must live, for only by living could he make the world right. There was no justice in this world save for what men made.

Anders sobbed again, quieter this time, letting grief and pain run out of him and leave him empty, exhausted and wrung-out. He lay there for a long moment, forehead pressed against the engraved stone tiles, just living. Just breathing.

At last he stirred, and with great effort brought his hands down from their tight clasp on his own ribs and pushed himself up off the floor. His whole body ached except for his chest, which still felt empty and frozen and numb. But he'd bear it. He'd borne it for this long, and somehow walked and talked and cast magic as though he were not dead.

This wasn't about his happiness, he reminded himself. If he'd wanted to make himself happy he should have chosen otherwise, long time ago. He'd done it for the mages, and his own feelings didn't matter so long as he was fighting for them. Not so long as he could make things even a little better for them.

"Thanks for the reminder, Justice," Anders muttered, and felt a moment of guilt at the hurt that glowed in response.
He shook his head and got to his feet. He was tired, and mana-burnt, and his head ached. It was time to find the nearest soft surface and fall face-down on it; everything else could wait until the morning.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Moira Aeducan is not a canon character, but I assumed that she -- or someone in her role -- was, so I built a whole subplot around the Queen of Orzammar before I actually thought to check the wiki for her name... only to discover she didn't exist.

I had been led to believe that Rica Brosca, although the mother of the crown prince, could not be married and could not hold the role of Queen due to her caste, and in this I was correct -- she is only ever referred to as 'concubine.' But there's no other mention of a wife for Bhelen. So I had to invent one.

Here she is, beautiful Moira Aeducan! Only been in the fic one scene and she is already so, so done with all of this.
All illustrations for this fic are commissions by Lissy Raine.
Anders has an argument, and a meeting with the king: the first of many, on both counts.

Anders rarely slept well, and now was not one of the precious exceptions. His sleep was fitful, intermittently disturbed by dreams of darkspawn -- worsened now that he was underground, even the civilized dwarven city -- and nightmares of Kirkwall. He woke several times, seeing the same stone walls and dim lamps every time, and went back to sleep again.

He woke up for good at last the next... well, Anders had no idea whether it was morning or not. No natural light came anywhere near this chamber, and there were none of the strange dwarven clocks about -- not that Anders could have read them even if there were.

Most timepieces Anders had seen in the world were based on the movement of the sun across the sky, or the stars in the night, and divided the day into bells according to the arc of that heavenly body. Dwarves, notably, had little access to and less interest in the motion of heavenly bodies; instead, they build strange devices of hairtriggers and springs and gears that ran -- according to one enthusiastic lecture by Bodahn that Anders only followed a quarter of -- according to "the tick of the stone," small pulses emitted by certain types of crystals. He'd assured Anders that the stones in question had no magical properties whatsoever; how they could then know anything at all, let alone what time it was, Anders had no notion, but he supposed he'd heard of stranger things in the world.

Either way, they didn't divide the day into bells the way most of the Chantry-dominated countries did, with six bells spacing out midnight to noon and then six more between noon and midnight again; instead they grouped time by stone-ticks, where a hundred stone-ticks made up one unit, and then a hundred of those made up some other unit, and then fifty of those units somehow added up to four days. The dwarven clock revolved around that four-day cycle, and dwarves measured time as much by the position within the cycle as by the tick of the hour.

He would have to get used to it, he supposed, if he was going to live here; but for now, all he knew was that however long he'd slept, it didn't feel like long enough.

"Goooooood morning!" a ridiculously chipper voice piped up from somewhere near the door to his room, and Anders muffled a groan face down in the pillow.

"Says who?" he mumbled. All right, he supposed he had to accept that it was morning, although he drew the line at good.

Bright laughter rippled from the doorway. "It's me, silly! I'm Dagna. Dagna Janar. I'm going to be the Circle liaison here in Orzammar! Isn't that great?"

Anders lay still for a moment longer, replaying Dagna's words in his head to see if they made sense on further repetition. When they didn't, he made the effort to sit up and squint at the figure in the
doorway of his bedroom. For a startled moment, he thought Sigrun had come to visit him; the perky voice, the hairstyle, and the way the dwarven girl bounced on the balls of her feet all threw him back in time to Vigil's Keep so long ago.

Then he blinked the candlelight into focus, and the image resolved; it was not Sigrun, but another young dwarven woman. Her hair was red, not black, and her face was clear of tattoos. She seemed awfully familiar with him, or at least with his bedroom, but he had absolutely no idea who she was.

"Come again?" he managed.

"Oh, just wake up and get ready to go," apparently-Dagna said, grinning and bouncing some more. "And hurry! You've got an audience with the King today! Oh, I can't believe it's really happening!" She pirouetted in the doorway and vanished, leaving Anders blinking sluggishly at the place she'd occupied.

Still somewhat bewildered from sleep, Anders got himself up and moving again; there wasn't really much he had to do, since the clothes he had slept in were the only ones he owned. A drink of water, a piss, a quick wash of his hands and face and he was as ready to face the world as he ever would be, he supposed.

It was morning. He had no idea what hour, or what day, but it was definitely morning. Morning was for looking forward, starting things, and concentrating on the future. Nighttime was for brooding on things past and gone, wallowing in self-pity and regret. Best not to mix the two.

He found Dagna waiting impatiently in the foyer of the Brosca manner, along with three other dwarves with crates and tablets. The crates were piled in an empty corner, the tablets shoved at him demanding his mark of acknowledgment that the shipment had been delivered.

Somewhat bewildered, Anders signed; though the manifest was too scribbled for him to read it, comments from the delivery dwarves revealed that it was packages of food and bedding for use at the house. Apparently, anything that the house was missing, he could place an order for and have it delivered, which led him for a good long time into contemplation of just how far he could stretch such a warrant. It was like Satinalia had come every day of the year.

But there was no time to open the crates and unpack their contents; as soon as the delivery dwarves had gotten his signature and gone on their way, Dagna grabbed his hands and dragged him out the front door. "C'mon, let's get going!" she chattered excitedly. "The sooner we talk to the King, the sooner construction can start! I'm excited, aren't you?"

"Apparently not as excited as you," Anders commented, retrieving his staff and following in Dagna's wake. "May I ask, what's your involvement in this?"

"I was the one who proposed the building of a Circle at Orzammar even before the Fifth Blight!" Dagna said proudly. "The Circle project has been on hold for years, and now it's finally gonna be built!"

He didn't mind her enthusiasm, but there was one word that stung in his ears and threw all of his hackles up. "It's not going to be a Circle!" he said sharply.

Dagna swung around to walk backwards, facing him with wide eyes. "What do you mean?" she said. "Of course it's gonna be a Circle. What else would it be?"

anything but a Circle."

It didn't matter how well Dagna meant the word; the Circle had stood for too long as a place of imprisonment, oppression and injustice. Anders would never again be able to look at those round stone towers and see anything other than horror and fear. The Circle system must be torn down, and not one part of it could remain; not even the shape. Not even the word. Not even the symbol.

"Hmph." Dagna turned back to face forward again, nose in the air as she walked. "You know, I don't get what your problem is with the Circles. I was there for five years, you know, studying at Calenhad. The Hero of Ferelden arranged a scholarship for me. It was wonderful!" She sighed nostalgically. "Such an incredible wealth of knowledge, and all the time in the world to study it! I don't understand why anyone would ever want to leave."

Anders bristled. "Just because you want to live a certain way, doesn't mean you have the right to force others to live that way as well!" he snapped.

"Oh? Isn't that what you did?" Dagna retorted. "Because you know, I don't think every mage in Thedas woke up one day deciding that they wanted to live like dusters and fugitives on the run. But you forced them into that life anyway."

Anders fell silent, hunching his shoulders as the weight of her words fell on them. It wasn't like he had never thought of it himself, in the dark of the night. Wondering. Doubting. Had he done the right thing, was he doing the right thing still? Would he be able to change the world the way he hoped? Even if he did, would he cause more suffering on the way than he ever could hope to prevent? Did he, of all people, have the right to make this choice? Did anyone?

Those were the fears that haunted him in the night. This was morning, and it was time to put away doubts, and walk forward.

He should shut up, stay quiet, let her have the last word. They had a real chance for the mages here, a real chance to do something right. He shouldn't risk ruining his hosts' good graces with his own agitating, which everyone -- even his friends -- had universally agreed to be obnoxious. And yet... and yet, he couldn't. Justice wouldn't let him let it lie.

"You don't get to speak for the Circle, Dagna," Anders said quietly. "You think because you spent a few years there, you know what they're like? You don't know the half of it. You were a sponsored student, an honored guest, not a permanent resident. You had the freedom to walk out any time you wanted to. The rest of us didn't have that luxury.

"Did you ever visit the basements of Kinloch Hold?" Anders shut his eyes, and he could still see the visions burned behind them. "Did you see the cells, the ceilings too low to stand up straight? Did you see the cages nailed to the walls? The hooks, the chains, the shackles bolted to the floor? That's what Kinloch Hold really is, below all the pretty lies and self-justification. A prison." He opened his eyes again, looking upwards to try to keep the stinging tears from falling. "That's what they all are."

Dagna fell silent, her steps stumbling for a moment before they resumed, slower and more steady, without the skip from before. "... I know that every population has its share of people who think nothing of hurting others," Dagna said, her voice subdued. "Every city has to have some way to contain them, to punish those who commit crimes. Why should a mage city be any different?"

Anders couldn't help himself; he laughed. The sound was harsh and bitter, but it helped burn away the tears. "Those cells weren't for the mages who hurt people," he said. "Mages who hurt people, or other mages, or themselves, didn't get trials and prison sentences. They got the sword. End of
story. The templars figured that a mage that resorted once to violence was too dangerous to try to rehabilitate. The cells were for the mages who didn't obey quick enough, who didn't pray hard enough, who didn't toe the line well enough. A reminder of who they were, where they were, what they were. A reminder that they could never be free."

"But why?" Dagna said, bewildered. "If they didn't commit any crime, then why? That doesn't make any sense."

Anders sighed. "It only doesn't make sense to you because you're a dwarf," he said tiredly. "You didn't grow up in the Chant of Light. The only crime we mages ever needed to commit was breathing."

They walked along in silence for a moment, the rich facades of the Diamond Quarter melting along beside them. "...But we can build something better, right?" Dagna said tentatively. "What we're making now, it's not gonna be like that. It can be the best of both worlds: a place of learning and study and enlightenment, without all that other stuff you talked about."

Anders chewed on his lip. "I hope so," he said at last.

They finished the by-now routine walk to the palace, and the guards gated them through. One of Bhelen's stewards -- not Gavorn today, Anders didn't recognize this one -- directed them to an unfamiliar wing of the palace, where Anders and Dagna walked in on the King enjoying a hearty breakfast.

"Should we come back later?" Anders asked.

Bhelen shrugged, dashing a few crumbs out of his beard as he wrote on a parchment with his right hand. "Not at all," he said. "Too many damn meetings in a day, this is the only time I have free for this. Sit down, help yourselves."

Anders sat, Dagna beside him. Somewhat to his surprise, the table was laden with what Anders would not exactly consider breakfast foods -- druffalo steaks, potatoes and yet more cheese.

"Now that you've had a chance to settle in, let's talk details," Bhelen said, setting the quill in its pot and picking up a handful of sand to scatter over the parchment at his hand. Once it was dry, he picked it up and handed it over to Anders, who took it carefully by the edges.

"By the order of Bhelen Aeducan, King of Orzammar, son of Endrin Aeducan, yadda yadda yadda..." Anders skipped several lines of titles and pontificating. "Do hereby proclaim that all free mages of Orlais, Ferelden, the Free Marches, Nevarra, if they be not maleficarum, may find refuge in the sovereign kingdom of Orzammar, where, in exchange for some small services to the Crown, they may enjoy lives of freedom, safety and peace, unmolested by violence or fear."

"That's to be sent out today," Bhelen said. "Thoughts?"

It all looked good, very official. No loopholes in the wording that Anders could see, not that he knew anything about law or diplomacy... or could do anything about it even if he did. He set the parchment down while he considered for a few moments, then reached for the quill and added one line at the bottom.
The lantern is lit in the dark town of Orzammar. The healer is within.

He handed it back across the table; Bhelen skimmed over the addition, and his pale eyebrows went up. "Now, what's that supposed to mean? Something arcane and mysterious?"

"Arcane, no, mysterious, well sort of," Anders said sheepishly, rubbing the side of his neck and trying not to look over at Dagna. "There was a... bit of an underground back in Kirkwall for helping to get apostate mages to safety. The lit lantern was the symbol for a safe house. I'm hoping that the word will spread... and mages who are on the run, scared and paranoid of everything, will recognize that this isn't a trick or a trap."


Anders frowned thoughtfully at the document in Bhelen's hands. "How exactly do you plan to distribute this?" he asked. "I mean, you can't exactly post it up on the Chanter's Board in every town. The Chantry will blacklist this and do their best to stifle it."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Bhelen said with a chuckle. "We have ways of getting information around. Orzammar has, ah, delegates in every town in Thedas."

Anders renewed his determination to never try to play Wicked Grace with Bhelen. " 'Delegates,' " he quoted sarcastically. "Right. I think I may have bought some lyrium from some of your "delegates" on occasion."

"You may have," Bhelen laughed. "Don't worry so much about the how. If the mages are out there, they'll hear it."

"I hope so," Anders said.

"And when you call, they will answer?" Bhelen said, his pale eyes sharp on Anders' face. Anders swallowed, and tried not to let his expression flicker.

"They will," he said. "They'll answer. Maker willing, they'll come. Please, Maker, let them come."

"Of course they will!" Dagna exclaimed. "It's a great opportunity! Why would anyone turn it down?"

"I'm a little more worried about how they'll get themselves here in the first place," Anders admitted. "Aside from Kinloch Hold, the Circles are scattered all over southern Thedas. They'll have hundreds of leagues of land -- and sometimes water -- to cross, dodging Templars the whole way."

"Well, we'll assist as we can," Bhelen said, stroking his beard as he leaned back in his chair and eyed Anders thoughtfully. "Although of course, any competent mage who can pull his weight in the Deep Roads should certainly be able to handle a simple cross-country trek. Eh?"

"Of course," Anders echoed hollowly.

"Now on to the next item of business," Bhelen said, sliding the parchment across the table to join a stack of others. He helped himself to another bite of steak and mushroom. "Your first Deep Roads mission. We don't have anything going out for a couple of cycles, but there's a reconnaissance mission planned in eight days that I want you to be part of. But before that, you'll need to get inducted into the Legion of the Dead."
Dagna gasped slightly. Anders nodded, ignoring the slight queasy hollow feeling the name gave him. He'd expected this going in, and really, it couldn't possibly be any worse than joining the Wardens. At least he probably wouldn't have to consume any part of a darkspawn in the process, this time.

"Anders, you're really going to do this?" she exclaimed. "Joining the Legion… there's no going back from that. You'll be dead!"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Anders said. "Although -- do I have to get those tattoos like the others have?" He thought of Sigrun, and her pretty eyes, and how pretty the rest of her face would have been without those tattoos. He'd done worse to himself in the name of his cause, in the past, but for the most part he'd managed to spare his face.

Bhelen shrugged. "They're traditional, but not exactly required," he said. "In your case, the induction is mostly ceremonial -- a legal fiction. Though you will, of course, be accompanying them on missions. But given how many other duties you'll be handling at the same time, including whatever else you'll need to do with the mages and other surfacers… it's up to you."

"I'll pass, then," Anders said.

"But how is this possible, Your Majesty?" Dagna asked the King. "Joining the Legion… you forfeit all rights and status. You're legally dead. How is that supposed to work with him running the Tower?"

"If he were a citizen of Orzammar, it wouldn't," Bhelen replied. "Since he's not, there's nothing to really negate -- except for his criminal record. The guest residency is an entirely different branch of law, under Orzammar tradition, and Legionnaire status doesn't touch it. I've gone over all the details with the Shaperate, and it will work out."

Dagna was still frowning stormily. "That isn't right," she said huffily. "I mean, maybe the laws can be bent to fit, but it completely violates the spirit."

"You'd be surprised how much of my job consists of finding ways to bend laws to get things accomplished," Bhelen said, picking up another paper from the stack. "Now, Quartering for the mages. I assume you surfacers would prefer a view of the sky, so let's talk about this tower you want built."

"Oh, yes!" Dagna squealed, then controlled herself with a visible effort. "I mean -- yes, yes, of course, let's talk about it!"

"This is very generous of you, your majesty," Anders said, slightly surprised.

"Well, to be blunt, in the long run it's probably better not to have however many mages running around in Orzammar all the time," Bhelen said, rubbing at the side of his nose and sniffing deeply. "Casting fireballs and turning into demons or whatever else it is that you do --"

"We're not going to --" Anders began indignantly, Justice rearing up in him.

"Save it," Bhelen interrupted him, holding up a hand. "This is not an accusation. I want to be ready for all possible developments. Do it in the Deep Roads, fine. Demons fighting Spawn is no skin off our noses. Do it in your own tower, away from Orzammar, also fine. So you'll have a tower. I have a nice little valley in mind that should work out fine for it, I've sent surveyors up to take measurements and get started on a plan to level the ground and lay the foundations. But it'll take time. Until the first few floors are livable, any mages who show up will be quartered in Brosca
Manor. I'll be relying on you to make sure there are no incidents." He leveled a stern glare at Anders.

Anders bit the inside of his cheek, hard. His hands were firmly planted on his knees, trying very hard not to burn through his trousers. Always, everywhere, it was exactly the same, and he wanted to scream out at the unfairness of it. Even here, where the Chant of Light never reached, mages were still seen as nothing but weapons -- time bombs, primed to go off, with unscrupulous men vying with each other to be the ones aiming them. Even the King, who had promised his aid --

He forced the fury back down, locking it under a tight lid of self-control. Bhelen hadn't promised sympathy and nice thoughts. He'd promised safety, freedom and autonomy, and as long as he delivered on that promise Anders didn't care what he thought of him. Or any of them. It was all about deals, about pragmatism, about them both getting what they wanted -- what they needed. And for that, Anders would smile and play nice. Maker knew, he'd done it before.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Anders managed to say. "Don't worry, I'll make sure none of my people are so overcome with pain or terror or despair that they give up their souls and lives and bodily autonomy out of sheer desperation prematurely."

All right, maybe 'nice' wasn't the right word for it.

"Anders!" Dagna whispered, shocked and appalled. Anders glared back at her, but gritted his teeth and bent his neck in grudging apology.

Bhelen looked unperturbed by his outburst. He looked at Anders calmly, narrowly, until Anders began to squirm from embarrassment at his emotional outburst. "I don't pretend to be doing this out of the goodness of my heart, Anders," the king said at last.

"I'm not naïve," Anders muttered. Of course Bhelen wasn't. He was far too ruthless and cunning a statesman for that.

"Good," Bhelen said. "But believe it or not, I am generous to my friends and allies. Of all the things I find myself lacking, money is not among them. But all the money in the Stone-Father's kingdoms cannot buy victory -- at least, not directly. So long as the Deep Roads await us, the welfare of the mages is in my interest. It's in Orzammar's interest. I want your people healthy, happy, and ready to fight. And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that they are."

Anders kept his eyes low, tracing his fingers over the right-angled knotwork on the table. He couldn't force any words past the heaviness in his throat, and in the momentary silence, Dagna spoke out.

"Your Majesty, you have to know that this is going to cost us more than a bit of coin," he Dagna said tentatively. "The Chantry will be furious. I don't think they'd dare try an Exalted March on Orzammar, but... Ancestors know they'll try everything else. They'll put pressure on the Andrastean countries to put sanctions on trade with Orzammar. Won't that hurt us?"

"In the short run," Bhelen said with a shrug. "Certainly the noble houses whose trade routes will be hurt by it will scream bloody murder. But I take the longer view. Trade will always happen. You can't stop it any more than you can stop a magma flow; even if you build barricades, you can only divert its course. More goods and money will be diverted to the black market and illegal trade networks, at least in the short run, but the overall wealth of the city will remain strong."

"Why?" Anders burst out, finally dragging his gaze up from the table. "Why is this so important to you that you'd be willing to risk so much and give so much? What's there in the Deep Roads that
means this much to you? I don't understand!"

Bhelen gazed at him for a long moment, his thick fingers tapping restlessly on the parchment under his palm. "Perhaps it will help if you do understand," he said at last. "Orzammar is a bleeding city, warden. Did you wonder why we could so easily dig up an empty mansion for you to house in? Too many of our houses are sitting empty, now. Our birth rate is lower than it's ever been, and we're constantly losing manpower and talent to the surface."

"Is that so bad?" Anders asked, thinking of Varric with barely a pang; how naturally he'd fit in Kirkwall, how easily he'd navigated the stone labyrinth, how effortlessly he'd laughed off all mention of Orzammar. "I've met several surface dwarves and they seemed perfectly happy and well adjusted." Well. Setting aside a certain fixation with his crossbow, anyway.

Bhelen grimaced. "Don't mistake me," he said. "I'm not one of those fools in the Assembly who wants to slam the doors closed and shut out the sky. We're too invested in the surface to cut off contact now -- we'd lose too much to even consider it. That's not what I mean to do." He picked up an apple from a platter on the center of the table, holding it up and scrutinizing it as though the entire surface world could be seen in the gleam of light off its skin.

"I have no grudge against the surface world. I have no objections to dwarves who choose to go up and live their life there. But too many of them flee to the surface not because they want to, but because they have no other choice -- either to escape poverty, or stifling social restrictions," he flashed a brief smile at Dagna, who stiffened in her seat. "Or simply because there's no future to be found under the earth. And that is what must change. Our people need to have a future here.

Bhelen stood from his chair and turned to face the wall, hands clasped behind him as he gazed intently on the mural carved into the stone there. "My people are forgetting who we are. We are the children of the Mountain Father, and when we leave his kingdom we also leave behind his gifts. And we will not find our purpose, our future under the earth simply by sitting on a pile of riches and clutching at the dead past with withering hands. We must fight for our future. I want to reclaim the great cities of the dwarves, their resources and their knowledge and their masterpieces. I want to reclaim the atredum na satolva aeduc..."

He broke off from the sudden spate of dwarven, clearing his throat self-consciously. "My apologies. The concept has no real translation in the Trade language. The 'stone spirit,' I suppose you could say. The sacred virtue that is invested in artisanal crafting of stone. All of the years that we poured into the building of those cities -- all that was lost when the Spawn overwhelmed us!

"It's not enough for Orzammar just to survive," Bhelen continued, pacing back and forth with short, energetic strides as his speech gained in eloquence and passion. "We must have our own society, our own culture, and our own future. I refuse to let us lose what makes us truly dwarves and become no more than short humans, catering to human whims. I will not stand by and watch my people be reduced to a parasite criminal or servitor class, with no higher aspirations in the world than facilitating the needs of the surface races --"

Anders couldn't help himself; he snorted a laugh. Bhelen scowled at him, and the expression on his face was so annoyed that Anders burst out into more laughter. "Sorry," he gasped. "This isn't for -- your ideas sound grand, really. I'm all for them. It's just that -- you do realize that this whole 'servitor class, facilitating the needs of another race' thing is exactly what you're wanting for the mages, isn't it?"

He half expected Bhelen to be angry; if not for the interruption, then for the sarcasm that followed. Somewhat to his surprise, the king's face smoothed out, taking on a slightly saddened expression.
"It wasn't exactly my intent to lift up my people by forcing any others into the same position," he said quietly. "I hope it won't come to that."

"It's all right," Anders said, waving it away as his chuckling faded. "We can worry about our own future when the future comes." He could hardly imagine thinking that far into the future, on the scale of an empire or a hundred years of time. He could hardly imagine living to see the new year.

"Right now, we just need to survive, to have a place to live in safety and in peace. Someplace the Templars can't follow us, someplace the angry mobs can't reach us." A surge of longing nearly choked him with its unexpected intensity; longing, and sorrow at the thought that the mages could only ask for so little, and anger at the thought that they still could not be allowed even that. "Refuge."

"Well." Bhelen smiled briefly, reaching out to finger the proclamation with Anders' handwriting still drying on it. "I'll see what I can do."

~tbc...
The next Deep Roads patrol, to which Anders was going to be a party, was due to set off from Orzammar two cycles from now (or, as Anders would have put it, in slightly over a week.) In the meantime Anders explored Orzammar, made increasingly outrageous requests of the deliverymen assigned to equip the Brosca manor, and visited the palace. Rica Brosca had welcomed him warmly, inviting him into the King's private quarters and into her suite, introducing him to her two children.

Endrin Aeducan was nine years old and shy for his age, staring at Anders with large eyes for his entire visit but not volunteering any words apart from the polite and formal introductions that had clearly been drilled into him. He had his father's blond hair and his mother's fair skin, but the color of his eyes reminded Anders strikingly of Natya.

The boy scorned all of Anders' attempts to entice him to play, even when he broke out some harmless and flashy demonstrations of magic. Much less aloof was Triana, Endrin's baby sister, who was eighteen months and just starting to transition from crawling to walking. She had the same bright copper hair as her mother and the same unruly curls as her aunt, sticking up in a frizzy wild thatch, and she shrieked with laughter as she ran on unsteady feet after the illusory crow Anders guided around the edge of the nursery.

"It's so good to meet you in person, Anders," Rica said, beaming as she watched the Warden and her young daughter play. "I've heard of you from Natya, of course -- she spoke so highly of you -- but all the things she writes about in her letters seems strange to me, like something out of a story. It's so different to have one of her friends actually be here, in person. It's like getting to know another part of her."

"I could say the same," Anders agreed, looking around the walls of the nursery while he manipulated the light spell to change to another color. Triana took a step towards it, fell on her face, and started crawling off with great determination. "She talks about Orzammar a lot, you know, but it's not the same as seeing it."

"What has she been doing, the past few years?" Rica asked. "We don't always get letters, and there are a lot of things she can't talk about, being a Warden and all."

Anders shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know much more than you," he said. "I actually hadn't seen Natya for ages before Zevran got in touch with her and she agreed to escort me back here. We were only stationed together for about a year, in Amaranthine."

Rica sighed. "Even so," she said. "I feel like you know her better than I do, even though I'm her sister. She's just grown so far away from me."

"I know what you mean," Anders agreed quietly. "She misses you too, you know. She asked me to write to Weisshaupt with news of you and the children."

"Weisshaupt?" Rica asked. "Is that where she is now? Where is Weisshaupt?"

"In the Anderfels. It's the fortress that headquarters the Warden Order," Anders said. A small
shiver went through him just saying the name. He'd never seen Weisshaupt; he'd never been given orders to go there before he deserted. Maker willing, he never would. "I don't think she's there all the time, exactly; but they keep track of her movements and can forward her mail. At least, they'd have a much better chance of finding her than I would."

Rica sighed, looking downcast. "I suppose if she's on special business for the Wardens…" she trailed off, pouting. "I just feel like I never see her. When is she going to come back to Orzammar for good?"

*I hate them,* Natya's voice whispered in Anders' ear, and he shivered again. *I hate them, and I hate the person they turn me into.* "I don't know," he lied.

Fortunately Triana managed to break the somber atmosphere with an outraged shriek; the illusory crow had stopped moving, and she'd managed to get within grabbing range of it, but her stubby fingers passed right through its insubstantial body. Anders dispelled the illusion, and Triana fell back on her bottom, an expression of flummoxed outrage on her face. "I suppose I should be going," Anders said regretfully. "It's getting late. I think. I still haven't gotten the hang of your clocks."

Rica laughed a little. "Oh, I'm sure you'll adjust soon," she said. She scooped Triana off to the floor, distracting the baby from the epic tantrum she'd been about to throw. "Thank you for coming by, Anders. Please, stop by often, and again once you get back from your trip."

*Your trip.* She said it like Anders was just going overland to Gwaren and back for supplies, not venturing into the Spawn-infested Deep Roads. He picked himself up off the floor with a regretful sigh, and said his farewells to the Crown Prince.

In the two weeks or so since he'd come to Orzammar Anders had at least gotten used to the layout of the palace. He managed to find his own way out of the royal nursery, *without* opening any doors that made the guards jump in to stop him, thank you very much.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he glanced over to see Queen Moira and two of her ladies-in-waiting just coming out of another door in the royal suite. She glanced at him, then looked over through the open door into the nursery, where Endrin and Triana's voices carried clearly. For a moment her cool non-expression changed; whatever it was, it flitted over her face too quickly to interpret and was gone.

"Anything I can help you with, Your Majesty?" Anders hazarded. It was probably terrible manners for him to address the Queen without being addressed first, but that brief expression had disturbed him.

The Queen gave Anders a cold, flat look, and moved off without answering. Anders blew out his breath, and rubbed his palms against his trousers to dry them off. Maker, what a glare; it was like being looked at by Velanna, or Fenris. Come to think of it, why was it always elves?

He sighed, and re-oriented himself back towards the main palace doors. At the very least, he should be able to find his way back to the Brosca Manor without getting lost.
The next day Anders was inducted into the Legion of the Dead. Which induction, it turned out, consisted of Anders signing his name on a sheet of paper (the place for his signature was a blocky square, meant for other kinds of marks, marks by people he suspected had never had the chance to read or write.) Once signed, he took it down to the Orzammar Shaperate, there to be set into stone.

The Shaper Assistants who processed Anders' forms were polite, yet chill. Anders got the feeling that they didn't approve of Bhelen's fast and loose play with the traditional legal immunities of the Legion of the Dead any more than Dagna had. Or maybe they were just prejudiced against humans. Hard to tell. At least, for the first time in his life, he could be fairly sure it wasn't because he was a mage.

And that was it. He found himself out on the doorstep of the Shaperate, empty-handed. He was a member of the Legion now, all his past crimes expunged, legally dead in the eyes of Orzammar.

Sigrun had once told them that when a new member joined the Legion, it was traditional to throw a funeral for them, with all the traditions and trappings of a dwarven funeral (that was to say, *booze*.) All the new Legionnaire's friends and family would attend, and raise toasts to the newly dead, and tell whatever good or funny stories they could dig up for their lives, and weep for their glorious death at the hands of the darkspawn. All of the benefits of a hero's funeral, and you even got to be there for it. Anders had always thought it sounding cripplingly morbid, but then again, they didn't call it the Legion of Jaunty Pub Songs.

It turned out that the only thing more depressing than attending your own funeral was *not* attending your own funeral, because there was no one who cared about you enough to hold one.

It wasn't that Anders didn't have family or friends. Family, back at Vigil's Keep. Friends, in Kirkwall. It was just that all of them were dead now, or wished Anders dead. Hawke might not have been willing to spill Anders' blood himself, but he didn't fool himself into thinking that any of the old misfits from Kirkwall would be anything but glad to see his presence wiped out of the world. At most, Sebastian or Fenris would shed a tear for not being the ones to do it.

Sigrun had chattered happily about her own funeral, and Sigrun was dead now. Nathaniel would never forgive him. Velanna, vanished without a trace. Natya...

His hand crept up to his neck and he pressed his palm against the amulet Natya had left him with. The sharp edges cut into his skin, but the polished stone was smooth and warm against his beating blood. Natya would have cared. Natya would have held a funeral for him; hell, she probably would have turned it into a party. Natya was proof that there was at least one person left in Thedas who would mourn if he died.

But Natya had left him. Again.

Anders let go of the amulet with a sigh, letting it skitter back down under the neck of his tunic. Back to work, Natya had told him, almost her last words to him. Back to work, and for the Commander of the Grey, that always meant killing darkspawn.

One day later, a delivery of supplies arrived that Anders hadn't put in an order for, and he knew it was time: a compact set of deep cave traveling gear, leathers and boots and gloves and belts, with clips and straps to carry everything he would need for a month on his body with the weight evenly
distributed so as not to slow him down. Anders piled it all on slowly, his mind going over everything he might need and everything he had, and deliberately not thinking of where exactly he was going that he would need it.

"Anders?" The breathless voice from the doorway pulled him out of his last minute preparations; Dagna was standing there, hands twisting on each other, an anxious look on her face. "I just heard the news this morning and was coming to tell you; I saw the deliverymen and I followed them in. I guess… I guess you already know then?"

"Well, not explicitly, but the message was pretty clear," Anders said, and he picked up the Warden tabard to wear over all. "It's not like I didn't know this was coming -- I mean, it's the whole point."

"I guess so." Dagna's small shoulders slumped. "There's a Legion patrol bivouacked just outside the main Deep Roads entrance, getting resupplied. Guess you're part of that now."

"I'm one of their supplies?" Anders said with a chuckle. "Well, I've been called worse things in my life."

Dagna gave him a frown, though Anders wasn't sure whether it was for the inappropriate humor or something else. "You be careful out there, okay Anders?" Dagna said. "Don't get eaten by a Hurlock or anything like that. Our Circle still needs you."

He wanted to argue -- again -- that it wasn't going to be a Circle, but now didn’t seem to be the time to re-open their perpetual disagreements on the nature of the Circle of Magi. He let it go. "Hard to kill what's already dead," he joked.

"I'm serious!" Dagna huffed, and she actually stamped her foot a little, which was cute. "Just… just watch yourself."

"I will," Anders promised her, surprised and touched by her concern. Apparently, even if she thought him little more than a vandal who had instigated a bloody insurrection for what she considered no good reason, she did still actually cared if he lived or died.

It was an unexpected piece of warmth and light, to carry with him under his breastbone into the dark.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter this week, but once the Deep Roads get started, they go on forever.
Patrol I

Chapter Summary

Anders ventures into the Deep Roads. Contents include, but are not limited to: 1) dwarves, 2) darkspawn, 3) deepness.

Chapter Notes

There will be about three chapters of this, if anyone is wondering. Some of the violence warnings will come into play here, but nothing we haven't seen in the games.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Deep Roads.

Anders had spent more time in them than he ever cared to, everywhere from Amaranthine, to the Free Marches, and now to the Frostbacks, but there was little point in comparing them: they were the same everywhere. Interchangeable, eternally unchangeable… to step in one part of them was to enter another world, one that ran by its own rules and moved on its own vast, insurmountable epoch of time.

Thoughts of the sky, of a dome of velvet midnight studded with diamond stars, seemed not only distant but an impossible fantasy. There was only the cavernous darkness of the stone, the only light the glow of magma running in trenches along the side and any torches the travelers might carry. The deep roads marched off square and solid into the darkness in every direction, straight and unwavering save for the periodic falls and slides of stone. Time seemed an impossible concept in these depths, and yet the vast ages of neglect and emptiness were still evident in the cracks that went unrepaired, the debris that went uncleared.

Time. Human ideas of time were foreign and unwelcome here, sickening and waning with nothing to nourish them. It was easy enough for Anders to become disoriented as to the day, the moon, the season just while living in Orzammar, but at least there he had known that the surface world was just outside its vast gates. At least he had known that he could go outside, if he really wanted to. At least he had known that the sun was out there, even if he couldn't see it from in here.

Buried beneath the earth, in darkness that had never dreamed of the sun, it was easy to forget that such a thing had ever existed outside of children's stories.

And this, Anders told himself as he shuddered at the heavy weight of darkness pressing down from above, was the easy part of the Roads. The part with open space and clean stone and heat and light. Once they went off the beaten path and delved into the darkspawn tunnels, labyrinthine and blight-coated, it would get even more fun.

A regiment of dwarven soldiers were posted at the gateway between Orzammar and the Deep
Then he was out of Orzammar and walking alone into the darkness.

Up ahead he saw the glimmer of a campfire, and as he got closer it resolved into a neat semicircle of bedrolls and stools that made up a campsite. There were no tents like Anders was used to -- irrelevant underground, he supposed, where it never rained -- but other than that the field kitchen and rows of bedding seemed to have all the comforts of home. Short and squat silhouettes passed back and forth in front of the firelight, and as he got closer he was able to make out about a score of bodies variously lying down, sitting down or walking around the camp.

One stocky figure stood up and walked towards him as he approached, and Anders guessed -- from his bearing, from the way the other dwarves deferred to him, and from the fancy badge on the front of his armor -- that he was the commander. He approached tentatively, and the dwarf came to meet him with a friendly smile. "Warden Enchanter Anders, is it?" the dwarf asked. "I'm patrol-captain Bardien Saelac. Good to meet you."

Somewhat to Anders' surprise, Bardien stuck out his hand to shake, southern Thedas style. He was the first Orzammar dwarf Anders had met who knew (or bothered with) the tradition. Nor was that the only thing about the captain that came as a surprise to Anders; he looked a little like Oghren in the hair and the eyes, but like the Oghren of some bizarre parallel universe seen through the funhouse mirror in Xenon's basement where Oghren was a well-groomed dandy.

His hair was neatly barbered, combed back, and held in place with wax or grease; his beard and mustache, too, were immaculately trimmed and styled. He wore chain mail and boiled leather armor, and it was impossible to make chain mail look neat; but the metal rings were free of rust, the leather all uniformly darkly stained, and the cuffs of his gloves and boots were immaculate. An actual jaunty blue feather was stuck in his helmet, which ought to have clashed horribly with his hard-boiled warrior ensemble but managed to lend just the right note of style to pull it off.

"Honored to meet you too," Anders said, automatically accepting the handshake. "You're a dwarf of the world, I see."

"That I am," Bardien grinned. "I've been to the surface a time or two -- was at Denerim during the Blight, on my honor! Lucky to be part of the battalions sent, luckier still to be the part of the battalions that came back. Then, well, luck eventually runs out, and here we all are. But I've got another ten years in me yet, before I mean to let the darkspawn have their due."

"I believe it," Anders said.

"Well, that's what you're here for," Bardien said, beckoning Anders further into the camp. "King Bhelen picked this patrol as a test case, figured I'd find it easier to work with some fancy magic surfacer than those other rock-brained idiots out there getting their legs chewed on by 'spawn. Me, I'm willing to try anything that will give my boys an edge in battle."

"I'll certainly do my best," Anders replied. But hey, no pressure. "If you don't mind my saying so, you're rather more well-dressed than most dwarves I've met."

A handful of the other Legionnaires broke out in chuckles, and Bardien barked a laugh. "Ha! You're not the first to notice it. It's all about standards, boyo." He sounded almost pleased with
himself. "Too many Legionnaires -- hell, too many rank and file soldiers -- are content to just let things slide, get from one day to the next with the minimum of effort. Not bothering about appearances leads to not bothering about maintenance leads to not bothering about being alive any longer.

"Not in my patrol!" Bardien declared, banging his fist against his chest. "We may be dead, but we're still dwarves, and when we walk the halls of our ancestors we'll make them proud to see us!"

A subdued rumble of approval went up from the Legionnaires, and Anders smiled uncertainly. "Let's get the introductions out of the way," Bardien said briskly. "I doubt any of my boys will have any trouble remembering you, but I'm sure you'll learn the rest as you go."

There followed a dizzying parade of names and faces most of which, Anders had to admit, he immediately forgot. The faces all ran together, the same dark eyes looking out of the same stark tattoo designs, stylized right-angle designs over their brows and cheeks and chins mimicking the hollow lines of a skull. Men and even women in similar dark brown and dark grey armor, clothes and armor taking on the same shadowed patina, similar expressions on every face.

He couldn't fail to notice, however, that most of the names were short -- single names, often abbreviated, with none of the clan attachments of which the dwarves were so proud. Like Sigrun, he recalled. Did the dwarves of the Legion of the Dead forsake all family ties when they 'died,' or did they simply not have any to begin with? Bardien seemed to have retained his affiliation with the warrior House he'd come from, but then again, he was gathering that Bardien Saelac was an unusual dwarf in many ways --

Anders was drawn out of his rumination as the whirlwind of introductions approached the end of the line. " -- Dougal, best man I've got with an axe; Sescha, knows all there is to know about scaling sheer faces; Harold, turns a mean deepstalker roast, and, ah," and it was the break in the patter that seized on Anders' attention. "Killer, of course."

" 'Killer' was a woman -- a girl lurking near the corner of the firelight, small and unobtrusive. Not just in body language, either -- she was literally the smallest person in the camp. Anders had plenty of time to subconsciously gird against the associations of the smaller dwarven bodies with childhood -- it wasn't a useful thought, and the dwarves he had known had objected to it rather violently -- but he had no other way to parse the girl at the end of the line.

She had light brown hair, which might have been dark ashy blond if it were fully clean, and something was... strange about her features. Her face was round and flat, her nose broad and flattened, lips thin and smooth. Her eyes were oddest of all, oddly foreshortened, the eyelids smooth and tilted in a way he'd never seen on a dwarf before. She caught him staring, gave him a flat glare that sent a wave of heat over his face and down his back, and then looked down at the ground.

"Killer?" Anders echoed in disbelief. "Maker, you're only a child!"

"I'm not a child," the girl objected, the scowl on her face redoubling. Her voice was much deeper than her small frame would suggest, and there was an odd burr to it that was apparent even from only a few words.

"But you look like a teenager!" Anders appealed, turning to Bardien. "Captain, there's no way she should be out in the Deep Roads!"

"I'm an adult!" Killer insisted, crossing her arms and planting her legs apart on the stone ground. Her hands, like the rest of her, were short and wide; even allowing for the smaller, thicker build of
the dwarves, her fingers were stubby and swollen.

"Killer's a fully fledged Legionnaire, same as the rest of us," Bardien put in, voice firm. He put a hand on Anders' elbow, herding him gently along. "Now that you've met everyone, let's move along, shall we? Come on, I'll show you the digs, get you debriefed."

With another shocked look back at the dwarf girl, Anders let himself be shepherded away. Just as Bardien said, there would be time enough on this patrol to get to know everyone's secrets.

Anders had been wrong about one thing -- there was one tent, and it belonged to Bardien. The canvas walls blocked sight and muffled sound of the rest of the camp, though it was placed in the middle of the bedrolls, not apart to the side. Inside there was another standard-issue bedroll and camp stool, but also a low rough table and several satchels of documents. An officer's quarters.

Bardien produced another stool for Anders and gestured him to sit at the table, which Anders did gingerly; it was a short tent even by dwarven standards, which meant that Anders' head brushed the canvas even sitting down. Bardien lit a small, battered brass gas-stove and put an equally battered brass kettle on it, and sat across the table from him.

"Now," Bardien said, pulling out a battered, many-times-creased sheet of paper from one of the satchels. "Did you get a rundown of our objectives before you left Orzammar?"

"Not really," Anders said apologetically. "Just that I would be joining you on a long patrol. I wasn't even given the name of the patrol captain I'd be working with."

Bardien nodded acceptance. "Well, you've got the scope of it at least," he said. "We've got short patrols, medium patrols and long patrols, and this is going to be one of the longer ones. Not so much in terms of sheer distance covered -- we're only going to Bownammar and back again, as the bronto tunnels, although there will be a lot more leagues under our boots between now and then. Longer in terms of time spent, and blood shed, more than likely.

"You do know at least that King Bhelen is gearing up to push to retake Bownammar, yes?" Bardien said, cocking an eyebrow at Anders, who nodded. "Well, it'll be some months yet before he can muster the men and supplies and momentum to do that, but there are a lot of things that will have to be done before he can begin. Among other things, he's going to need better maps. Most of the maps of the Deep Roads we have, like this one," Bardien lifted the tattered parchment, "Are either centuries out of date, or only rough and incomplete due to being charted in passing by patrols not specifically sent out to map the area. Our job is to bring back accurate charts of the Deep Roads between here and Bownammar."

Anders frowned. "That doesn't sound all that difficult," he said. "Which means there's got to be more ugly details to it than I'm missing. Yes?"

Bardien grinned wryly. "You're thinking the right way, Warden Enchanter," he said. "Y'see, it's not just the road from Orzammar to Bownammar to consider. That's pretty well known by now. But we also have to map out all of the side roads that cross that road, and figure out where they go, where they've fallen in, where they've broken into natural caves, and where those go. And we've also got to map out the darkspawn tunnels in the area, hopefully with an eye towards coming in and burning out any nests later, and looking for places where they can be blocked or sealed. So we've got to follow every cursed Spawn tunnel down until we either run face-first into a nest, or find a chokepoint we can blow up to bring the tunnel down around us. Messy, dangerous work, and like as not to send a patrol down these tunnels leaves no one to bring back word of the results."

"Now this is starting to sound like the Deep Roads," Anders said with a sigh. Bardien let out a
"It'll be good to have a Warden with us," he said on a more serious note. "Not that I plan to let up on our scouts and sentries, but an alert every time the Spawn start getting close will save a lot of lives. If nothing else, your presence along on this venture will be a great help just for that."

He paused for a moment, expectant, but Anders had nothing to say to that. He stared down at the maps, burning the lines and turns of the mapped Roads into the back of his eyelids. He'd be seeing them in his sleep, no doubt.

"Any questions?" Bardien asked after a moment. Anders hesitated.

"Well… not about the mission exactly, no…" Anders hedged.

"Spit it out," Bardien ordered him. "We're all going to be in a pressure cooker together for the next month anyway."

"That girl," Anders admitted to what was bothering him. "I know you said she's full-grown, but how? She doesn't look like an adult. Is she… different somehow? How did she end up in the Legion?"

Bardien sighed, and sat back on his three-legged campstool with a grate of metal. "Killer's story starts in Dust Town, like so many of the Legion," he said, tapping his blunt fingers on the desk. "Or maybe, in Killer's case, it begins with her mother.

"She was a woman who married a man below her caste, forfeiting all her family ties and inheritances to do so. When her husband died, she lost everything -- money, home, caste, future. She was determined to get it back the only way she could, even if that meant becoming a noble hunter at forty. Got to give her credit, at least… she did manage to draw the eye of a few suitors, and got pregnant more than once. But she kept losing it, and drinking off the loss, and going right back to try again. She wouldn't stop, no matter how many of her friends begged her; wouldn't lay off the sauce even when she was pregnant.

"When at last she had Killer… well, that was the last straw for her," Bardien said, sighing again. "A girl child was of no use to her, and everyone could tell right away that the babe wasn't right. She gave up and drank herself to death, leaving the kid all alone in Dust Town."

Anders vividly remembered Sigrun, the story she had told them about her mother. At least her mother hadn't abandoned her, hadn't been so reckless with her child's health and welfare… but how many more Sigruns, how many more Killers, were there in Orzammar? How many of them, like Sigrun and this girl, were funneled into the Carta and eventually the Legion?

"The kid survived, cos she was a fighter even then, but, well… she was a fighter even then." Bardien shrugged, the same vague sort of gesture he'd made when he had avoided talking about his own circumstances that left him in the Legion. "She grew up wild, always getting into fights. She stole to survive, but wasn't very good at it, so she was always in trouble with the guard. Nor very good at putting her head down when insulted by everyone of a higher caste than her, which was everyone. When she was fourteen she broke the nose of some noble boy who tormented her, and that was it -- the last straw. After that, it was the Legion or the axe. She chose this."

"It's not right," Anders said heatedly, and felt Justice flaring to life within him in agreement. "This is no life for someone like her."

"This is no life for any of us," Bardien retorted. "What better life d'you think she could have back
in Orzammar, Warden? D'you really think she'd be better off as a Dust Town whore, or Carta cannon fodder?"

Anders flinched, and shook his head. Bardien's shoulders slumped in defeated acknowledgement. "Sure, it would be better if she'd been born to some rich family that could spoil her sweet and keep her safe all her life," he said with a sigh. "Then again we'd all be better off if we had one of those, hey? But that's not her life; this is. And this is the best life she could have. We watch her back, she watches ours, we keep her safe." He raised his eyes to meet Anders', iron and defiant. "We're the Legion. And we protect our own."

The Deep Roads marched on, arrow-straight and level beneath the earth. The Legionnaires marched beneath it, the heavy tread of their boots overlapping and resonating with each other, echoing off the stone tunnel walls and coming back to collide and rebound again. Anders walked among them, towards the back but not trailing, feeling a little bit like a ghost with how little sound he made in comparison. His boots were only leather-soled, his gear brigandine cloth and leather, and the soft thud of his wooden staff butt hitting the stone floor did not echo.

They sang as they walked, too, which surprised Anders perhaps more than it should; sometimes the sort of simple, brainless drinking song that was popular in every tavern in Thedas, but more often an unfamiliar singsong chant in old Dwarfish which, as Bardien explained, was a traditional hymn of the Legion of the Dead stretching back centuries. Anders didn't speak enough of the language to know what it was about, though he thought he could probably take a stab in the dark: rock, stone, marching, and killing darkspawn, probably.

He'd been shaken awake this… morning? … by one of the Legionnaires whose name he had failed to catch the -- previous day? -- in order to begin the march. Anders had been the last one awake; the others appeared to have been up for some time, and the camp was already struck and the Legion ready to march.

So far they'd been marching for hours, or perhaps for days. There was no way for Anders to tell; any sense of natural time he might have had was thoroughly lost, and between Justice's strength and his own Warden stamina he could not reliably use his own hunger or fatigue to gauge the passing of time. Anders never thought he'd miss the sensations, the comfortable rhythms of everyday living, but he did now. Everything in the Deep Roads was timeless.

Marching with the Legion was unlike the excursions he'd been on as a Warden with Natya and the others, and very unlike the ill-fated Deep Roads expedition led by… led by Bartrand Tethras. Anders was acutely aware of the fact that the rest of his party were not Wardens; he could not feel any lingering taint within them, could not track them by the faint buzzing sensation other Wardens usually engendered. He could sense the darkspawn all around them -- ahead, behind, below -- as a faint whispering, a tapping or scratching that never quite faded until it burst into horribly proximate presence. For all that he could sense between himself and them, he might as well be walking alone.

At the same time he felt strangely light and unburdened, almost naked. There were no wagons, no mules, no porters, yet Anders didn't even have to carry his own bedroll. A handful of dwarves, walking towards the back with Anders, were laden down with the bulk of their supplies so that the rest of the Legionnaires could range ahead with their weapons unshipped, keen eyes peering ahead into the dark and seeking out the first sign of attack.
The first sign of attack, when it came, was almost anticlimactic: a chorus of meeping from down one of the side tunnels sent chills down Anders’ spine and made him grip his staff tighter. The deepstalkers swarmed out of the shadows, half a dozen of them in a brown- and green-scaled wave, beady eyes flashing in the orange light and teeth and claws bared. Yet the forward line of the Legion barely slowed down, sweeping across the corridor with the blades of their axes and swords flashing. The copper scent of blood filled the corridor; three of the beasts were struck down, and the rest fled screeching into the darkness.

They didn't even halt the march to harvest the bodies.

More Deep Roads passed by in a blur of stone, more tunnels, more caverns; they painstakingly went down each one in order, shining torches along the walls to confirm no further exits as two of the Legionnaires independently marked out their route: chambers and corridors, caves and drops and cardinal directions and distances. At each halt the two of them conferred, compared their maps and made corrections; the final draft went to Bardien, disappearing into his metal-banded satchel.

Another Legionnaire was apparently the designated timekeeper; he carried a peculiar contraption of springs and gears in a carefully shielded box, at the heart of which nestled a tiny chip of crystal. Periodically he called out the hours, according to which they stopped to rest, or gathered themselves to move on again. Anders felt himself being sucked into the rhythm of the Legion, the timeless heartbeat of the stone, the tempo of marching feet, and the endless featureless scroll of stone walls on every side. And beyond it all, somewhere in the honeycombed shafts and burrows that wormed their way through the deep stone, there was the unceasing song of the Spawn.

The endless distant chitter and chatter sharpened all at once to a shriek, and Anders came out of his half-trance with a jump. "Darkspawn!" he called out, and the attention of the rest of the Legion snapped to him.

Bardien was beside him before Anders even saw him move. "Which way?" the dwarf snapped out, and Anders squinted against the pounding headache the proximity of the darkspawn caused to point vaguely off into the darkness to the left. Bardien took off in that direction, barking out orders, and the entire patrol fell into tight formation.

The forward lines of Legionnaires collapsed into a tight phalanx, soldiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder. In the back, the dwarves on baggage duty worked frantically to divest themselves of the gear and stack it into a pile around which they could station themselves with their weapons drawn. The spearhead shape of the formation made a V around them, with Anders standing along with them in the protected center.

By now they could all hear it, the chittering and scrabbling of Darkspawn claws on stone. The phalanx advanced cautiously into the darkness, axes and swords at the ready, and then the first shadowed bodies came charging out of the side tunnels towards them.

On the first night that Anders had joined the patrol, Bardien had asked him how he should adjust the Legion's tactics to accommodate him. Anders, never having seen the Legion in action against the darkspawn, had been leery of making any tactical changes without having seen said tactics first-hand. He was getting to see them now, and he paid almost as much attention to the dwarves of the Legion as he did to the attacking darkspawn -- as a healer, a familiar role to him.

There were not too many of the darkspawn -- a dozen, perhaps fifteen -- but they swarmed the patrol from all directions, dispersing around the cavern to attack from all sides. Nowhere did they really cluster enough for Anders to target more than one or two at a time, so he limited himself to simpler, more elemental spells such as bolts of spirit energy and Winter's Grasp. He kept most of his focus on the Legionnaires, ready to throw out a barrier or a rush of regenerative energy.
wherever it was most needed.

Though he tried to keep tabs on the entire patrol, Anders found his attention returning again and again to the smallest figure at the end of the left arm of the V. To his dismay, the girl Killer had not been among those protected by the phalanx formation; she was out on the front lines with all her fellows, and he kept her in his sights, ready to supply shields or healing at the first sign of blood.

He needn't have worried. Despite her small size, Killer lived up to her name; she had a pair of hand-axes connected together by a chain, and the axe-blades were no more of a weapon to her than the chain itself, or even her own arms and legs. She fought with a single-minded, unrelenting fury, a brutally efficient whirlwind of sharp edge and blunt force. As Anders watched, the incantation for a protective ward hovering on the tip of his tongue, Killer buried her left axe in a hurlock's chest, then hauled on the chain, dragging the taller creature in and down to her arm's reach.

The darkspawn hissed and gurgled on its own blood, dark-stained claws reaching for her face; she ripped the left axe free and planted one foot in its stomach as the right one came around to chop the reaching hand off. In the blink of an eye, she had the chain of her weapons wrapped around the hurlock's withered neck; with a powerful kick of the planted leg and a savage twist of the chain, she ripped its head clean off.

A shout of pain grabbed Anders' attention away from the spectacle, and he quickly sought out the Legionnaire who had been injured; a genlock had gotten in on his shield side and raked filthy claws up the Legionnaire's leg, flaying it open to the knee. Shining white bone and yellow tendon peeked through for a moment, before red flooded the wound; the Legionnaire shouted hoarsely and swayed in place, barely staying upright as blood gushed down his leg. His brothers on either side reacted instantly, one barging forward to cover the injured man with his shield while the other swept his curved sword around and down, beheading the Hurlock who'd gotten under his guard.

"Jeb! Harold! Get him back!" Bardien bellowed out, from his place at the point of the phalanx. "Form a perimeter, defend the field hospital! Protect the surgeon while he works on Doug. Sescha! Cover his position!"

"No need for that," Anders called back, already casting. He snapped an arcane barrier into place first, protecting the man from taking any more hits while he worked. He quickly wove the spell together and called on Justice, channeling power into it for several heartbeats before he released the spell, aimed at the injured man and specifically channeled towards the wound on his leg.

The healing magic took hold and worked quickly, thanks to the potency of the spell. Blood gushed once more, cleaning the wound of any poisons, then subsided as the muscle knitted back together, skin and fat and tendon regrowing over the gashes. Within a handful of breaths, the wound had reduced to a shiny patch of new skin on the warrior's shin, and he stepped down on the newly healed leg with an expression of astonishment.

"He's fine! Just stay in position! Go, go!" Anders yelled, flapping his hands at the confused Legionnaires. With a deeply doubtful glance exchanged between them, and an even more dubious look at the now-whole leg of their comrade, they hesitantly turned back to face outwards and raise their weapons once more, just in time to catch another Hurlock throwing itself towards the momentary confusion in the formation.

It was the last push; the determined resistance of the Legionnaires was enough to break the mindless malice of the darkspawn charge. At least ten corrupted bodies lay butchered on the stone floors, and the remainder began hesitating and backing off as one or two turned to flee. Bardien barked out another command, and the patrol shifted formations again -- instead of a tight phalanx, they fell into a pattern like a serrated sawblade, two lines of warriors with gaps between each body,
"Are there any more of the vermin lying in wait up ahead, Warden Enchanter?" Bardien asked him.

Anders concentrated for a moment, then shrugged. "Aside from the ones who got away, maybe a few more," he said. "No more than five or six in that tunnel, all in all."

Bardien nodded. "All right. Legion, sweep the hallway!" he bellowed. "If you're injured, stay back. You too, Dougal!" he added as the man with the injured leg started to step into the line.

"But me leg's all healed!" the dwarf protested, balancing on one foot and waving the other around as he displayed the unbroken skin of his shin. "It's magic, is what it is!"

"Well, he's not wrong," Anders commented, amused. "But I want to check it, all the same. If there's any insult in the wound, it could still get infected."

"Besides which, your greave's all hacked open," one of the other Legionnaires told him rudely. "Fat lot of good you'd do on a sweep, with your pants slashed open and your boot flapping all over."

Dougal subsided, grumbling, and stepped cautiously back over to the warriors who still stood on guard around the hastily dropped luggage. The few other Legionnaires who had sustained injuries - - though none as severe as the sliced leg -- went with him. At a crisp order from Bardien, the rest of the Legion swept forward in pursuit of the stragglers. Killer went with them; Anders kept throwing worried glances after the girl until she vanished from sight.

"She'll be fine," Dougal spoke up, apparently following Anders' line of sight. "Killer's a tough one, she is. She could probably clean up the rest of the darkspawn all by her lonesome."

"Captain'd never allow it," one of the other Legionnaires scoffed.

"No, but she could do it," Dougal grinned. "And if she does take a hit, Ancestors know you can just waggle your fingers and magic her back together, eh? That's a damn handy skill to have! How come we haven't had one of you lot of mages down here with us in the Deeps years ago, eh?"

"Well, you'd have to ask the Chantry about that," Anders said absently, as he crouched down in front of the injured man's leg to examine the wound. A combat healing spell could save a fighter's life in the heat of battle, but it was no substitute for a proper diagnostic and treatment.

"But you're here now," the other dwarf said, and there was a speculative look in his eyes that went beyond the immediate rush of combat and thrill of victory. "And there are lots more where you came from, eh? Others like you who'll be coming after you?"

"Er..." Anders floundered, unsure whether he should qualify that there were no other mages quite like him, or hedge that he didn't know yet how many -- if any -- mages would actually answer his call. "Yes, should be."

The Legionnaires looked at each other for a long moment, then broke out in wide, filthy grins. Two of them reached over Anders' heads to crash their fists together. "By the stones of my ancestors, maybe we can actually do this," he chortled. "Dust to dunkels, we'll be in Bownammar by the end of the year!"
Another OC in this chapter, Patrol-Captain Bardien Saelac. Named after a friend of mine's Warden Brosca, though of course here he's neither a Warden nor a Brosca.

All illustrations for this fic are commissions by Lissy Raine.
The sweep returned, more splashed with blood and gore than they'd left, before Anders had completely finished checking over the wounded for infection and healing the last of the injuries. Bardien accompanied them, and after some consultation with their newly-drafted maps, he had them retreat along their path about half a mile until they reached a defensible cave. They set up camp for the evening there, and spirits were high despite the lack of any more official celebration.

A camp kitchen was set up, and hot soup started to accompany the trail rations each Legion carried with them. Much to Anders' interest, two large basins were dug out of the portable luggage and filled with water, then passed around the camp before any soup was distributed. Each of the dwarves in turn washed their face and their hands in the first basin, then rinsed them in the second before passing the basins along.

Anders was included in the circuit, and he took the time to quickly heat the water with a tiny tongue of flame before he dipped his hands into it to wash. It was no substitute for a real bath, by any means, but still much more in the way of hygiene than Anders had grown to expect in any field camp -- let alone one in the Deep Roads.

More of Bardien's 'standards,' Anders suspected; after he finished his own ablutions, the dwarf captain dug a small polished metal plate out of his gear and set it up at the mouth of his tent in order to carefully trim and comb his beard. Anders ran his fingers through his own scraggly beard, and ruefully reflected that he'd only been on this patrol for less than a week and still managed to look like more of a disaster than the captain had after being out here for years.

Bardien looked up and saw Anders watching; a crook of his eyebrow and jerk of his head invited the mage to come over, and Anders sighed slightly as he dragged to his feet. The low canvas cover was claustrophobic, even if it did block out the sight of the stone overhead.

"So," Bardien said, cocking a neatly-trimmed eyebrow up towards Anders. "Now that you've had a chance to see how the Legion fights, how do you want to shake it all up?"

Anders frowned, going over the memory of the day's battle in his head. He still wasn't really a strategist himself; his Circle training had focused on being part of an entire rank of fellow mages on an open battlefield, and his personal experience was covering no more than a handful of other warriors. The Legion already knew how to fight as a unit; he was reluctant to mess with the tactics they had literally drilled in for years. Still... "It might be easier to draw it out than say," he said. "Do you have paper I can use?"

"Paper's hard to come by in the Deeps," Bardien commented, and Anders kicked himself for not thinking of that. He had grown up surrounded by paper in the Tower, and all the years spent on the run in Kirkwall had not broken him of the assumption that it would always be there for the asking. Bardien rifled around for a moment, and came up with a slate and chalk. "Will this do?"
"You'll spoil me," Anders joked, then turned the slate towards the firelight. "Anyway, I noticed that the problem with the spear formation is that it lets the darkspawn surround you on every side," he said, scrawling quick lines to try to illustrate, with O's for dwarves and little skull and crossbones to symbolize the darkspawn. "But with the saw-tooth formation, you cover much more ground -- in a hallway or a narrow room, you could stretch from wall to wall and leave no room for the enemy to flank you. And it seems to be very efficient at cutting down the darkspawn."

Bardien frowned at his crude scribbles. "Cutting down individual darkspawn, certainly," he said. "But the double-line formation isn't strong. It's fine for sweeps, but a determined knot of hurlocks who charges the line will break through, and then be behind the ranks with the wounded and baggage."

Anders smiled. "That's where having a mage along works in your favor," he told him. "We can keep the darkspawn from grouping up enough to launch a coordinated attack like that -- more than two of them in one place at a time, and they're perfect targets for a fireball or two. That will keep them destabilized, and your Legionnaires can sweep forward and cut them down in ones or twos at a time."

The patrol captain's eyebrows went up. "You're sure about that?" he said.

"Positive," Anders replied. "The biggest challenge is finding a big enough group of Darkspawn in one place to cast at. All your warriors need to do is hold the line, to make sure they can't charge at the mage and interrupt them. Because believe me, once I start throwing fireballs around, I'll be the biggest, juiciest target on the battlefield. You'll have to make it a priority not to let any darkspawn through."

"I've no doubt you can handle yourself if any vermin slip past," Bardien said confidently. "Word is you beat Osric in a duel one on one, after all."

Anders winced guiltily; it had been more like one on two, in reality. "Well, yes," he said. "But not every mage is as skilled in hand-to-hand combat as that. And most mages aren't Wardens, and they won't have an immunity to the Blight. A mage can be a great asset to you in a fight, I promise you - but they have to be protected."

Bardien eyed the slate scribbles consideringly for a moment, then looked up at Anders. "Thinking big, are you?" he said shrewdly.

"It's why I'm here," Anders replied. "Not just for you and your patrol, but for all the mages who may go on these patrols in the future. For all the mages and dwarves who will work together in days to come. For all the Legion."

For a moment he wondered if he'd said too much, and his face went hot; but Bardien only nodded. "As you say, Warden Enchanter," he said.

Anders couldn't help the wince. "Please, you know, you can just call me Anders," he said hastily. "I have no idea where Bhelen and the rest of them came up with this 'Warden Enchanter' business. It's not even a real title. It's one thing to make one up for formal situations, but outside of that, I'm nothing, really." He ignored the twinge in his chest when he said that line, like a poke to the inside of his ribs.

Bardien looked surprised. "But you are a Warden, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," Anders said. "But... I left."
Left in a nightmare whirl of fire and blood; even now, after all this time, he couldn't clearly remember that night. The memories were Justice's, and no matter how close they otherwise grew, Justice seemed determined to hold them apart. Whatever oaths he'd taken, were broken now; whatever protection he'd once had from them, was long gone.

" Didn't think anyone could ever leave the Wardens," Bardien observed mildly. "You're a Warden from your Joining to your Calling. It's in the blood."

Anders opened his mouth, then closed it again, staring at Bardien in disbelief. He had to try several more times before he was able to clear his throat and speak. "Not that I'm complaining, but that is supposed to be a secret," he choked out.

Bardien shrugged. "We see a lot of Wardens pass through here on their way to their Callings," he said. "They say things they wouldn't say to anyone else. After all -- who are the dead going to tell?"

"...I see." Anders had never considered that; all the legends of Wardens simply stopped when they went to their Callings, the dark of the Deep Roads swallowing them up with a black finality. He'd never stopped to consider the world on the other side of that cave entrance, the world where darkspawn and deep roads and the Calling all met. Of course that was where the Legion lived. Of course, that was where Anders had ended up. Where he would be fated to spend the rest of his life.

"And I've read about your Circles!" Bardien said, interrupting his dark-wandering thoughts. He pointed a cheerful finger in Anders' face. "You mages go through some sort of coming-of-age trial, don't you? The Harrowing?"

Anders gritted his teeth. Bardien didn't want to hear his rant on the truly horrifying nature of the Harrowing. No one ever had, after all. "That's not how I'd describe it, but yes. I've been Harrowed."

What a bitter pill it had been, in the end, to find out that it had all been for nothing -- that the protection the Harrowing was supposed to afford had all been a lie. Harrowed mages could still be possessed, by spirit or by demon. Harrowed mages could still be made Tranquil, at the cruel whim of the Chantry. It was no honor, no accomplishment, just a cruel and arbitrary farce that the Chantry forced mages into, for no better reason than providing an excuse to make more Tranquil or to strike mages down on the spot. All the years of fear, of whispered rumors, of apprentices disappearing in the night -- all the sweat, the stress, the pain of the Harrowing itself. All for nothing in the end.

"Then an Enchanter is what you are," Bardien said simply. "That's just how it is. They can take away the accolades, but they can't take away the accomplishment."

"It doesn't mean anything," Anders muttered.

"It means what you make it mean," Bardien countered sharply. "Be serious for a moment, Anders. Do you really think that the Legion is a place of pride? This is where Orzammar sends the people it wants to forget, the people it wants to make us disappear. Oh, sure, we're cleared of all crimes and dishonor -- but we can never go back home. We'll be here, in the Deep Roads, until we die, one way or another."

That struck a chord with Anders, one that reverberated painfully through his bones. He knew what it was to be disappeared.

"Most of them want to die," Bardien went on. "Get told often enough that you should be dead, and it gets in here -- " He thumped his chest, setting chain rings jangling. "They go out in the Deeps,
find some darkspawn to charge at, and they they die, sooner rather than later, because what the bronto-licking fuck is there to live for down here?"

Anders stared, shocked by the passion and anger that drove Bardien's voice. The dwarf leapt to his feet and paced in tight, nearly clipping Anders in the shoulders with his gestures. "Not in my patrol! Not here! Not me. That's not how it's going to be! They could put me in the Legion, they could strip me of my house, they can call me dead, but they can't make me die. I'm still alive, we're still alive, and we're going to stay alive, and if the Deep Roads are our home now, then by the names of the Ancestors we are going to fight for them!"

"The Deep Roads aren't really much of a home, are they?" Anders could help but ask.

"And why not?" Barden asked softly. "These are the halls where our forefathers walked, where they carved and shaped the stone, where their voices rose in song. We walk in their footsteps, we listen to our echoes, and we are home. We have what we can hold, my boy, no more and no less."

The patrol pushed on. The Deep Roads slipped by beneath them, overhead, on every side, changing from the neatly-cut dwarven stone of the dwarven passages to the tainted slime coating the walls of the darkspawn passages to the rugged pristine rock walls of natural caverns. They passed through one cave whose walls glittered with crystals, growing in strangely neat and straight-edged cubical and diamondine formations despite their wildness. There was beauty to be found in the earth, despite everything, and Anders thought he might understand where the dwarves got their passion for right-angled geometry.

He fell into the rhythm of the Legion's movements, trying hard to resist the fugue that had gripped him during the first part of their march. He still didn't understand how their clocks worked, but he adjusted to them all the same, sleeping when the other dwarves slept and marching along with them, keeping pace with their heavy stamp of boots. The Legionnaires still sang their strange old marching songs, and after enough repetitions Anders began to learn the sounds if not the meanings. Before long he was able to join in on the louder chorus, and hum under his breath for the long and incomprehensible verses.

After a long march in the dark they arrived at Bownammar. Anders didn't need to be introduced. The stone face of the city reared high above the cavern it opened into, separated from them by a vast gulf of darkness lit from below by magma. It was spanned by a trio of stone bridges, one broken off, the other two piled with heavy stone blocks to impede passage.

Anders stared across the moat, trying to guess the size of the city beyond it, and felt the hair on his neck and arms begin to rise with horror. He could feel the darkspawn within, so many and so thick that he couldn't make out individuals, just a teeming mass of darkness.

This was no job for a mere patrol, even one as capable and well-equipped as theirs. This would take an army -- at the very least. An army with magical support would be even better, but even then -- Anders wasn't sure he could guarantee their success. For the first time since coming to Orzammar, Anders began to wonder if he had done the right thing, consigning his fellow mages to fight in Bhelen's lunatic war.

He felt a pulse of heat from beneath his breastbone, which he acknowledged with a hard exhale of his breath. They had to try. He knew that. If this was the only way the mages could purchase the
right to live, freely and legitimately, then it was a price worth paying. And wiping out the
darkspawn, eliminating them before they could make their way to the surface and prey on innocent
people, was the right thing to do. The just thing to do.

But not today. Anders put his back to Bownammar -- reluctantly, with the skin of his back and
scalp itching -- and began the long return.

They met more darkspawn, though not in great numbers -- small clusters of three and four at once,
never enough to trigger a pitched battle. They were attacked by deepstalkers several times, the
reason for which became clear as they stumbled into a narrow cavern that held the deepstalker's
clutch of eggs. Bardien ordered a cautious retreat without burning the cavern clear, and once they
got far enough from the clutch, the deepstalkers broke off pursuit, lining up behind some invisible
boundary line to shriek scornful victory over the fleeing marauders.

A few more of the unwelcome denizens of the Deep Roads made appearances, as well -- they ran
across a vein of exposed lyrium surrounded by sickly-glowing, gelatinous slimes, which responded
only sluggishly to their presence. Anders offered to set them on fire from a distance, which
Bardien, considering the proximity to the main Orzammar-Bownammar road, accepted. The slimes
went up in sizzling flames, which the Legionnaires hooted and applauded by banging their
weapons on their shields until the noise attracted an irate bronto.

Anders had three broken arms, one gashed-up ribcage, and roasted bronto meat to attend to around
the fire that night.

It couldn’t be easy forever. On the way to Bownammar they'd started by mapping all the tunnels
and crevices on the right side; on the way back, they covered all the territory they'd missed the first
time. Many of the passageways were twisted, lengthy, and deep; despite all their caution and the
stone-sense of the dwarves, they almost got lost in one particularly convoluted labyrinth of
volcanic rock. It was in one of these branching, extensive side-passages, with foul air gusting in
from the darkness ahead, that Anders called them to a halt.

"Darkspawn?" Bardien inquired as he slid up behind him, eyes searching the darkness ahead. "This
smells like their place."

"Darkspawn," Anders agreed with a grim nod. "Lots of them. Many more than we've been
encountering so far. I think this might be one of their nests."

"Oh, sod. Well, let's blow off the dust to find the vein of silver underneath," Bardien sighed. "This
is what we were looking for, more or less, and if we kill them now, the road to Bownammar will
be much safer."

He turned to the rest of the Legion, already on edge from the stink ahead. "Alright, my blighters!"
he bellowed. "There's darkspawn ahead, so let's get to work cleaning out this pus pocket!
Remember, this is what we're here for -- killing darkspawn scum and looking good doing it!"

There were no cheers -- the Legion didn't cheer -- but a deep hum began to rumble from a dozen
throats, of savage satisfaction and grim anticipation. It filled the air and grew until it seemed to
rattle the stones around them. With a crash of metal on stone, the Legion began to advance in step.

They didn't even get into the chamber beyond before the darkspawn were on them, manifesting out
of the darkness surrounding them like shades being called from the Fade. It wasn't true, Anders
knew; the Darkspawn were very horribly a part of this world, as profane as spirits were sacred.
The Legion's advance ground to a halt less than a dozen yards from the mouth of the tunnel, before the chamber even widened out to its full length; Bardien barked the command for them to fall into their double-line formation, but there wasn't room enough for them to all fall into place. Anders found himself standing directly behind Killer, both weapons out and raised in ready defiance, strangely incongruous with her small form. The remainder of the company spread themselves out behind their fellows, ready to jump in and take their place should one fall; Anders resolved to himself that not one of them would.

Darkspawn crashed against the wall of dwarves like a dark tide, swirling and flurrying in a howling, gnawing, drooling, clawing storm of teeth and taint. The Legion's line dug in and held, leather creaking and steel grating as weapons hacked and slashed into the glistening mass.

Anders conjured light, a bright pulsing ball of illumination to hang at the apex of the room. Dwarves could fight in the darkness, but darkspawn could fight better; more importantly dwarves could also fight in the light, which darkspawn were weak against. More to the point, Anders needed to be able to see what he was doing.

He started by casting a generalized barrier over the line of warriors ahead of him, summoning auras and channeling aptitude to strengthen them. A determined knot of darkspawn formed up to one side of the cavern and began pressing against the line, forcing it back; Anders sent out two healing spells and another barrier to the dwarves in the line before he switched from defense to offense, raising his hands together and channeling fire.

Fire roared down from above and up from below, a tempest of scorching heat and cleansing flame. Anders caught it and contained it, channeling it against itself, and it spun in a tight, furious circle that devoured all caught in its radius. The heat washed over him even from where he stood, and he caught the sound of rough, muffled swearing from the dwarves in the line ahead of him, but it sounded more impressed than pained, so he ignored it.

It took a lot of concentration to maintain the spell. It wasn't that it was difficult, exactly -- if anything, it was the opposite. Anders had spent all of his adult life as a mage practicing the fine, tight precision demanded of a spirit healer, and he'd spent his adolescent years in the tower learning restraint. Control had been the watchword of all his training, and it was hard to go against that, to let the tempest rage as it would without instinctively quashing it back down and bottling it back up inside him.

This kind of magic -- wild, destructive, unrestrained -- came easily to him. To all mages. Too easily; it was what made young mages so dangerous, to themselves as well as to others. There was hardly a single school of affinity that didn't have at least some kind of wide-ranging, indiscriminate form of destruction. It took discipline and practice to turn the unfettered torrent of power into something more refined, more useful. At least, Anders thought, he could be pretty confident that any mage who followed his footsteps into the Deep Roads would be able to cast at least some kind of spell to fill this role.

Focus! A sharp tug in his chest yanked his wandering thoughts back to the present moment; he couldn't afford to get lost in casting fugue or bad memories. There were so many things that he had to watch out for, had to pay attention to, and they all needed to be done now; casting a barrier over as wide a set of the warriors before him as he could manage, rejuvenation for the ones who were flagging, healing where he saw blood flow. He had never tried to heal and support this many people before; with the Commander, and even with Hawke he rarely had to keep track of more than four or five other people at a time. There were so many of them, and they were all counting on
him, and they were all…

Despite his best efforts the battle was bad, he knew it was bad; he saw one warrior fall back from the line with a hoarse cry, then another. Others stepped up behind them, closing the gaps in the line before the eager darkspawn could force their way through. Anders started forward automatically, his healer's instinct drawing him forward to help, running his eyes over the two injured and instinctively beginning to triage them by severity. A lifeward under the first one, to keep her stable, reaching out with his magic for the second…

A deafening scream lanced through the room, the sound of a thousand glass windows shattering and scraping against each other -- and a moment later the world shook around him, knocking Anders off his feet. He managed to catch himself on his hands, face inches away from the slimy stone floor as a dragon's blast of heat and noise washed over his back and shoulders. He could feel it, he could see the lurid red light outlining his shadow on the stone, but he couldn't hear a damn thing.

Shriek, his Warden training caught up with him a moment later, but where did the fire come from? For a panicked, awful moment he thought it had been him -- that he'd lost control of the spell when the shriek sounded, unleashing the firestorm upon his own friends and allies. But then he felt it -- a tingling, squirming sensation accompanied by a dissonant, off-key note of song. Magic, that wasn't his own. Magic, that was foul and tainted and corrupted and sang so sweetly --

He was back on his feet and a barrier half-cast when the second fireball arrived -- late to shield the Legionnaires from its detonation. It burst on the dwarven shield, unleashing its stored energy in a concussive blast that could break a hole in rock. The Legion's front line buckled, but held. Thank the Maker for dwarves' inherent hardiness against magic; thank the Maker for their courage and fortitude.

Anders finished the barrier -- for all the good it did them now, too late -- as his eyes searched frantically for his opponent. It wasn't too hard to find, once he knew what to look for -- the dark, spindly figure dancing and waving its arms as it gabbled in the chittering, muttering darkspawn tongue. Fire built about its hands, dripping from the end of its talons, as Anders gasped out a desperate counterspell.

The third fireball died on its caster's lips, flames flaring in its hands and sputtering out. The darkspawn emissary looked for a moment astonished, then outraged; it pointed a long talon towards Anders, and shrieked its hatred.

A piece of darkness and smoke detached itself from the melee and made a beeline for him. Anders threw off a hasty blast of fire -- it wouldn't be enough to take the shriek down, but so long as it was burning, it couldn't hide in the shadows -- and was just in time to quash the next fireball with another dispel. The emissary howled, jiggling around in incensed rage, before it focused on him and threw out a nasty jet of greenish balefire. Anders blocked it with a tight shield, and reflected that if he had been hoping to turn the darkspawn's focus away from the dwarves and onto him, he'd certainly succeeded.

The next few minutes boiled down to a furious exchange of spell and counterspell between the two casters, Anders alternating between interrupting every spell he could manage and blocking or absorbing the rest. In between shots, around the edges of his shield he fired off quick spells whenever he could, chipping away at the other caster's defenses and slowly roasting it inside its own shields. The emissary shrieked and gibbered at him, and although it spoke no words of sense, Anders could almost hear words in its song, words of hate and fury and betrayal.

At last his final shot got through -- a bolt of furious spirit energy that struck the emissary down
mid-cast, the final word of the incantation still on its rotting lips. Anders breathed again for the first time since the duel had began, and almost toppled over as freshly oxygenated blood rushed to his head with the release of tension and stress.

Steady. A pulse of energy and heat from his chest grounded him, and Anders came back to himself with a jolt. Not over yet. He looked around, trying to reorient himself to the battlefield, cursing himself for letting himself fall prey to such tunnel-vision.

But it seemed that the battle was almost over. Darkspawn bodies carpeted the cavern floor in uneven heaps, some two or three or even more deep. A ring of charred corpses marked where his firestorm had passed over, but most of the rest of them bore the marks of sword and axe, deep rents in their unnatural flesh pumping black blood over the ground.

No matter how many darkspawn they killed, there were still more; Anders could feel them skittering and chattering around the edge of his senses, noise and scraping that made his head swim. They were retreating deeper into the cavern, further down the tunnels, and Bardien was moving around his patrol, barking orders that had those still on their feet form up and move forward in tight formation.

Anders moved to get to his feet, to join them, but a gauntleted hand on his arm stopped him. "Not that way," a thickly accented voice said. "Captain says they'll be fine without you; need you to see to the wounded."

"Right… right, of course." Anders shook his head, trying to clear it, and glanced around. There, sprawled out on the floor next to the wall -- a pair of bodies that were too bright, too colorful, too stocky to be one of the Darkspawn, the blood leaking out from under them more red than black.

Automatically he started to move towards the fallen dwarves, mind already working, assessing -- but the hand on his arm tugged again, recapturing his attention. "It's too late for them, lad," his guide said, shaking his head. "We've moved the next worst wounded together. Anything you need from stores, just say the word, we'll be your hands…"

Anders stared in shock at the two bodies, fallen and unmoving, as he let himself be steered away. Then he wrenched his attention back to the still-living; they needed him more now.

~tbc...
There were three of them, laid out on darkly stained mats. One of them was the one Anders had cast a lifeward under earlier, the green light dimming and pulsing as the spell ticked its way towards dissipation. "We didn't think we ought to move her," Anders' helper said in explanation. "You can heal them, right? Like you did for me?"

"I'll do everything I can," Anders answered distractedly, as he dropped to his knees at the intersection of three points. There were two women and one man among the wounded; the woman with the lifeward was actually the best off among them, having lost a hand at the wrist. The man had a gruesome wound to his chest, with a blade -- Anders guessed an axe-blade -- split down through the muscle and bone to cleave his collarbone nearly in half. The other woman lay on her mat, breath whimpering and whistling through her teeth, with both legs hewed off above the knee.

He took a precious moment to examine them all, then cast a lifeward under the second woman; the muscles in her legs had seized and spasmed from the injury, clamping the blood vessels shut. That would slow the bleeding, and the lifeward should sustain her through it. The man with the chest injury was the most critical by far, his breathing choked and strangled in his chest with every wet gasp. "Get bandages, get a tourniquet on that one," he said absently, indicating the woman with the lost hand. "Get something for the pain, for both of them -- something to bite down on… and see if you can find her legs…"

Then he had to turn all his attention to the horrific chest wound, losing himself to everything else except the injury and the need to heal it. He dropped down into a healing semi-trance -- locking out most of his offensive spells but letting him constantly channel a healing aura that would nourish and support everyone in the vicinity -- and began casting. Justice knew the routine well; the spirit surged within him, leaping up to hover just under his skin, wordlessly offering up his power to join with Anders'.

He positioned himself carefully where his shadow would not fall over the patient and reached down to grip the blood-soaked skin, peeling back ripped cloth and leather to expose the wound to air and light. Crimson splashed over his hands as the man shifted and moaned, but Anders barely heard it, sending healing magic questing down into the bloody gash.
It was worse inside than it looked outside. The darkspawn's blade had slashed downward from the point of the collarbone on a diagonal across the ribcage, tapering off near the breastbone. The collarbone itself was cleaved in half, several ribs shattered, shreds of skin and fat and ripped cloth forced deep into the wound. The man was lucky; the broken end of a bone had shifted to press against the severed end of an artery, pinching it shut and preventing him from bleeding out within heartbeats, but spilled blood still flooded the area, leaking under muscle and skin and swelling the tissues like a sponge.

Anders sent a pulse of spirit magic down along the walls of the cut, numbing the flesh and bone as best as he could in such a short time. His fingers followed it, reaching to grip the slippery ends of the artery and shift the broken pieces of bone carefully back into place as he summoned water to flush the insulting matter out of the wound. Once the immediate danger of exsanguination was passed, he turned his attention to the gaping chest wound.

The ominous sucking noise he'd heard was confirmed by what his magic found: the wall of muscle surrounding the lungs had been breached, exposing the delicate organs to the outside and compromising the all-important pressure seal needed to draw breath. The right lung had been flooded with blood and with air, swelling it up like a balloon until the weight of it was crushing the man's life from his chest.

He spared a fleeting moment to wish, with a certain bitter frustration, that Merrill was here. There was no healing magic that could physically act on blood to pull it out of the wound, but blood magic could. He and Merrill had worked in tandem, for the first and only time, to save Hawke's life after the battle with the Arishok, when the brutal qunari sword had punctured the man's chest from front to back. Merrill had pulled the froth of blood and air clear of the lungs, and Anders had healed it -- but here, he was alone.

But he hadn't spent fifteen years as a healer without learning to improvise. "Brace yourself," he advised his patient as he reached for the long, slender dagger he kept at his waist, used primarily for preparing herbs but also for surgery. A quick jerk and thrust punctured the deadly bubble, and his fingers slipped into the wound, channeling a spell he never thought he would use in healing work -- a very weak, modified Crushing Prison, centered on his patient's lungs, compressing the tissue like a sponge.

It was crude, and ugly, but it worked; a bloody froth gushed out of the side of the wound and Anders followed it up with the most intense healing he could muster, knitting the chest wall back together to seal the breach. Justice was there, channeling spirit energy into the wound to bind and reshape the tissues back into place; still it was delicate, slippery work. Sweat broke out over Anders' forehead and neck, but he couldn't spare a hand to wipe off his face.

At last the deadly wound was healed, and Anders began to back out again, mending muscle and lymph and bone as he went. He didn't want to spare the time or the mana to heal the wound to completion -- leaving not so much as a scar as evidence that it had ever happened -- but he poured creation energies into the tissues to encourage them to mend themselves, galvanizing the bones and tissues to regenerate and produce more blood to replenish what the man had lost. "You're going to be okay," Anders said hoarsely, back at the level of consciousness to use his voice again after what felt like an eternity without. "You're going to be fine."

Astonished mutters and admiring curses filled the air around him, mixing with the look of gaping astonishment on the man's face, but Anders shut them all out. There was no time to stop and marvel in his victory; he had two more patients to see to. Anders forced himself to his feet, staggered a step, and fell to his knees again beside the second-worst patient, the woman with the truncated legs.
Only to find the lifeward he'd set around her had run completely dry, the last green threads of it curling up like smoke from a suffocated fire. The woman's skin was ghastly grey under her black tattoos, her face looking ever more like a skull as she shook in a few last quivering, gasping breaths. Shock and horror overtook Anders as his knees splashed in a puddle of blood beneath her that was much, much deeper and wider than it should have been. "Blight!" Anders screamed, and dived forward with healing magic.

It was too late. The bleeding from her amputated limbs had gotten worse, much worse while he had been preoccupied with the other patient; the muscles clamping the blood vessels shut had relaxed as the woman went into shock, and the magic of the lifeward had used itself up in double, even triple time as it poured energy in a futile attempt to keep her body going. Even as he flooded her body with a blast of spirit energy, trying to shock her system back into action, he knew there was no recovery for a body that had met this level of failure.

Anders' feet made horrible sucking sounds as they moved through the spreading puddle of blood, leaning almost double over the stricken woman. He spread his hands out on her chest, pouring heat and power and rejuvenating energies into her, trying one last time to call her back from the brink. It was useless; the mana spun out of him as though pouring it down a well, disappearing into a silence that gave no return.

He would have kept trying -- he wanted to keep trying -- but all his healer's skill knew he must not. He still had other patients to see to -- others who could still be saved -- and he had no right to ignore them while he tried futilely to pump life into the dead. Healer training took over and he found himself moving calmly, smoothly from the second patient over to the third, the woman whose hand had been severed early in the fight.

"How'd this happen?" he asked her as he knelt before her, loosening the tourniquet with practiced fingers. She whimpered, tears springing from her eyes at the sudden return of life and pain to the injured limb, and he tried not to see Sigrun in her face. Tried not to see Sigrun in the face of the dead woman, ghastly grey and disfigured in death. "Any chance of getting the hand back again?"

"Fraid not," the woman said, gulping back sobs. "Went down a hurlock's gullet. Killer got him a moment later, but the hand's long gone. Took my best dagger, too -- took…"

Anders sighed. "Can't be helped," he said, turning the stump of the wrist into the light to peer at the shattered ends of bone, trying to judge how clean the break had been. Not very, if it had come at a darkspawn's teeth; he'd have to smooth down the edges of the bone before he could seal the wound shut. "Are you left-handed?"

"I can be," she said bravely, only the tiny quiver of her voice betraying her. "Guess I'd better learn."

He finished tending to the stump in the same kind of numb detachment, then left the two worst-injured to rest in place while he moved back towards the baggage train and called the less-critically injured to come to him. Broken bones, cuts, dislocations… nothing immediately fatal, but things that could cripple or fester if left untended.

Killer was among them, her dark blond hair stained with blood from a nasty scalp cut that thankfully responded well to the touch of Anders' magic. You never quite knew, with head injuries; but she stared at him with her strange foreshortened eyes throughout the whole healing procedure, and thanked him with guileless simplicity when he was done.

The dead woman's body -- Maker, he didn't even know her name -- had joined the other two piled up against the far wall, covered by a canvas cloth. Anders tried not to look at them as he healed his way through the rest of his mana, tried not to look at them as he meticulously sloshed water over
his blood-soaked hands afterwards, tried not to look at them as the rest of the patrol returned with jubilant news of the darkspawn routed, hunted down and exterminated.

Anders could not begrudge them their triumph, however little a part of it he felt he deserved; the patrol, at least, had done exceptionally this day. Despite having to work with an unfamiliar battle plan, with an unfamiliar ally… the Legionnaires had done everything that had been asked of them. They had been battered by darkspawn, by shrieks and by magic, and they had held the line. They had protected him as faithfully as anyone could ask, and he -- he had let them down.

He reached for the spirit inside of him, but there was no comfort to be found there; in this matter, he and Justice were very much of one mind. Their mingled guilt and regret pulsed inside them like a second heartbeat; if only they had been faster, if only they had been stronger, if only they had done more…

They ended up setting up camp in the same series of caverns, just one cave up from the one where the pitched battle had taken place. Bardien strode in and out on captainy errands, stopping only when his men had gathered around him to deliver a stirring victory speech. "We are alive one more night, my brothers and sisters!" he called out in a ringing voice. "One more night to deliver vengeance on the spawn that stole our lands! One more night to pave the road back into our past! One more step closer to reclaiming our legacy from the charred corpses of these monsters! With your strong bodies and your sharp blades, with old honor and new allies, with steel and with fire, we will make this happen!"

They didn't cheer. The legion didn't cheer. But they growled their approval, and the room shook with the banging of their weapon hilts on the stone.

Not too long after that Bardien came over to him, squatting down on the stone next to Anders' pile of mats and letting out a weary breath. "Thought I'd better check in on the hero of the hour," he said with a friendly chuckle, despite his obvious tiredness. Anders flinched subtly from the accolade. "How are you doing? Not injured? Not… stones, I don't know how mages work. Not run all out of magic juice?"

"I'm fine," Anders said automatically, but his eyes flicked over towards the corner of the room where the bodies still lay out. "None of the darkspawn got through your men. Not a single one."

"Well, of course not!" Bardien feigned comic outrage at the suggestion. "The Legion isn't the most feared military force in Orzammar for nothing, y'know. They knew their job, and they stuck to it."

Anders nodded, saying nothing, looking down at the stone floor.

Bardien cocked his head curiously, studying Anders, then followed his earlier glance to the shrouded bodies by the walls. "We'll give them a funeral before we move on from here," he said in a gentler tone. "A second funeral, that is. There's no sarcophagi here for them, but they'll be laid to rest in the Stone, sure as sure."

"Good," Anders whispered. "I'm glad."

Bardien nodded, then shifted around and planted his mail-clad end on a crate with a grunt. He went back to staring at Anders. "Your first combat?" he suggested after a few moments. "The first is always hard."
"What? No!" Anders jerked his head up, startled. Now he wasn't sure whether to be amused or offended. "I was fighting darkspawn beside the Hero… beside Paragon Brosca after the last Blight ended. And every manner of beast -- human and animal -- since then, from here to the Free Marches and back again. I'm no stranger to the darkspawn -- or to the Deep Roads, believe me."

"Hmm." Bardien rubbed at his chin, running his blunt fingers over his carefully-groomed beard. "What is this that's getting you down, then? You'd think you'd never seen a good man die before."

"I have!" Anders buried his head in his hands, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes until colors flashed behind them. "Maker knows, too many. I've lost patients before -- as early as the Tower, as late as Kirkwall. It's something a healer just has to learn to live with, but I…"

He dropped his hands to his lap, lacing the fingers together and staring at them. "It's never been my fault, before," he admitted painfully.

"How do you figure that?" Bardien sounded bewildered. "Now I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure it was the Spawn that tore my men apart. Not you."

"Yes, but they were following my stupid battle orders!" Anders exhaled. "It was my idea to come along in the first place, to change around the formations they knew how to fight with… to waste their time looking out for me instead of defending themselves."

He sighed. "I've never had patients die because of a decision I made. It's strange, isn't it? I've seen my patients die, and I've seen men die because of things I did… but never at the same time. Never when it was my… my responsibility."

"Ahh," Bardien let out an enlightened noise, nodding knowingly in a way that made Anders want to bury himself in his hands again. "So you're used to battle, but not to being in charge."

"No, I'm not!" Anders shook his head vehemently. "When would I have been? Why would I have been? I'm not… I'm not a leader. Not like Paragon Brosca, not like… the Champion." Just thinking about Hawke hurt, the way he'd blazed his way through Kirkwall, the way Anders had trailed after in his wake. Always following two steps behind, until that last day. "They're special, they have something… that I don't. I never wanted to lead anyone!"

"Then why did you?" Bardien asked reasonably. "You came to Orzammar, you pitched your scheme to the King. Now you think it's not a good idea?"

"No, I…" Anders frowned. "I still believe in it. I do. I just don't think I'm the right man for it. I only did it because… somebody had to. And no one else was stepping up." He dropped forward again, hanging his head. "Stupid! Why did anyone ever think it would be a good idea to listen to me? I haven't got what it takes. I fucked up, and good people died because of it."

The captain let out a sigh, and reached out to grip Anders' knee. The gauntlet creaked and jingled with the movement, and the leather palm was a heavy, rough weight against his leg. "Listen, lad," he said. "I'm not going to tell you that the grief you're feeling now is wrong. You care, and that's a good quality to have. But you can't let it eat you up with guilt and recriminations and self-doubt. You've got to keep going forward, whatever you do -- learn from your past mistakes and move on, instead of sitting in one place and being consumed by them."

"There's no special trick to being a leader, no magical glowing light or writ handed down from the Ancestors. All there is to it is seeing a job that needs to be done, and doing it. All that separates a leader from an ordinary man is making the hard decisions, and being willing to live with the consequences."
Anders squeezed his eyes shut, trying to fight back the stinging. He nodded, once more left without words.

Bardien released his knee with a pat that would probably leave a bruise. "We'll be setting the fallen to rest within the hour," he said gently. "I've got my lads out collecting stones for the cairns. You'll help lay them on." It wasn't a request; Anders nodded again in acceptance of the order. The captain stood up, and turned to go.

"Oh. Warden Enchanter?" Bardien turned back to look at him, and Anders looked up to meet his keen gaze with some difficulty. "Not that you probably need me to tell you this -- what with you being a Grey Warden and such a veteran of the Deep Roads and all. But under normal circumstances, on a fight like this one, on a mission like this one -- I could easily expect to lose half my patrol before the end. If we made it out at all."

Anders choked. "That many?!" The words were like a cold shock to his chest, him and Justice both recoiling from the image. They were used to going out in much smaller groups with the Commander, with Hawke -- and coming back with the same number they'd gone out with. All those years, and he'd never lost anyone he'd been entrusted with. He couldn't imagine going out with four people, and coming back with two.

"Yep. Just keep that in mind when you're beating yourself up about the ones you couldn't save," Bardien told him. With one last nod of respect, he moved back off among his duties.

True to his word, they held the ceremony for the fallen shortly after. The three dead Legionnaires were laid out on the stone floor, in one of the natural caverns above the darkspawn tunnels. They were left in their battle gear, stained with blood and darkspawn ichor, and ruined weapons had been laid at their hands.

Bardien stood above them and said a short piece for each. "Rest well, Sescha. For four hundred and seventy nights of the Deeps you lasted. Now it is time for you to return to the Stone, to rest for ever in the sight of the First Paragon. Atrast tunsha. Totarnia amgetol tavash aeduc."

He moved to the head of the other two in turn, repeating the words with their names and the lengths of their services. Sescha -- the woman Anders had lost -- had been the senior among them; the other woman had been with the Legion for less than a year, and the dead man (dead boy, Anders couldn't help but think) had joined the patrol not very long before Anders himself.

He hadn't thought, Anders reflected, just how short the life expectancies would be for members of the Legion -- far worse even than the workers in Darktown had ever been. Bardien's words kept running through his head -- that on a long patrol like this one, he might lose half his men or more -- and he found himself studying the Legionnaires in a new light, his eyes going from face to face as they stood in solemn ranks, at the funeral of their friends. The second funeral, because they'd already had their first. Because they were dead men walking.

A few dwarves Anders hadn't even seen split off from the main company returned bearing loads of dark, glassy stone, the type Anders usually saw around the lava vents. At some unspoken signal the rest of the patrol fell into a practiced pattern, taking the stones from the pile and building them up in an interlocking structure that arced over the bodies to make a solid cairn. More loads of stone followed the first, and Bardien nudged him towards the pile; he picked up a heavy block and followed the lead of the others, setting it into place with a grinding thud.
Dwarven construction, Anders reflected; even this work -- hasty, informal, without mortar or chisel to guide it -- would probably last for years. Most likely, the cairns would still be standing even when every man and woman who had helped build it had fallen.

*We'll change it,* Anders resolved. *We'll help.* If his presence in the Deep Roads could help the Legionnaires, then that was a blessing unlooked for. He hadn't come down here for them; he'd come for Bhelen, for himself, for the mages. But if he could help them as well, help extend and improve their lives, then he was glad of that.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

If Bardien's speech about leadership sounds familiar, it should. It's the same speech Iron Bull gives the Inquisitor in Haven, more or less; as soon as he said it I immediately thought "Like Anders!" But apparently Bioware doesn't agree.
ACT II

Chapter Summary

Anders returns from the Deep Roads, and finds that things have progressed without him.

Chapter Notes

The song Surana and Jowan sing in this chapter is 'Yankee Bayonet,' by The Decemberists; slightly edited to make it Thedas-appropriate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anders walked the last stretch alone. He could see the campfires of the Deep Roads patrol behind him, and the glow of the entrance to Orzammar ahead glinting off the helmets of the guards stationed there; but for himself, he walked alone in the darkness.

Once joined, the Legionnaires weren't permitted back in the city, apart from the messengers sent to bring reports in and orders out. Induction to the Legion was no joke, effectively exile and a slow death sentence. Not for Anders, of course. Anders got off easy, as always.

The thought weighed heavily on him as he made the trudge from the stone wilds back to civilization. He had helped them this time, but what about next time? What about all the other patrols that didn't have a Bardien Saelac at their head to wheedle special arrangements from the King? It wasn't right, wasn't just; too many of the Legion were like Killer, poor or low-caste youth forced into lives of crime and violence for simple lack of any better opportunity. He had seen enough of that among the Ferelden refugees in Kirkwall.

The more he thought about it, the more intractable the problem seemed. The Legion provided a pressure-valve for the desperate conditions of the poor, offering death with a frosting of honor and social validation on top. But at the same time, Orzammar depended on the Legion to be its shock troops in the endless battle against the Darkspawn. They were invested in it, as much as the Chantry was invested in the subjugation of mages. And the thought of trying to fight against both systems at the same time made Anders despair.

If nothing else, maybe Bhelen's offensive into the Deep Roads would be a help -- maybe it would take some of the pressure off the Legion for a while, slow their relentless need for fresh recruits to fill their ranks. Or would it just push the front further out, an ever-shifting endgame in a game in which the Legionnaires were pawns? What if, instead of helping, he was only making it worse…?

"Anders!" A bright voice broke into his maundering, and Anders looked up, blinking to adjust his eyes to the change in light. He had walked right past the sentries at the entrance without noticing it, and hurrying towards him from the top of the stairwell was Dagna.

He felt a flush of warmth at her presence, at the happiness plain on her face when she saw him. Here was someone who would miss him if he vanished in the Deep Roads, at least.
"You're back!" the young woman squealed. Her pigtails bounced as she nearly danced down the stairs. Maker, she couldn't be more than ten years his junior; how did she consistently make him feel twice as old? "I heard you were coming back today, I've been just dying to tell you the news!"

"What news?" Anders managed to ask.

"We've been chartered!" Dagna cheered. "The King has officially issued a land plot for our Circle Tower! The surveyors have been up there marking it out for the last five days. It's really happening!"

Anders couldn't stop a wince at the word 'Circle,' but managed to recover from it hopefully before Dagna caught it. He supposed it couldn't be helped; while he was off in the Deep Roads, Dagna would have full input into the planning and construction of the tower. And that was only fair, honestly, as she was as much its founder as himself. "That's great, Dagna," he said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

"Oh, you're gonna love it!" Dagna grinned, wrapping her arms around his forearm. "Wait till you see it! Wanna go now? I'll show you!"

The thought of hiking to the top of the Frostback mountains -- either on rugged slopes outside, or endless stairs inside -- did more to stagger him than her tug on his arm. "Not... not now," he choked out. "Give me a few hours."

"A few hours? But it's day now!" Dagna sounded shocked that any human would not want to take advantage of the natural light.

"Is it?" Anders squinted around the stone chamber as though that could contain some hint of the solar cycle outside. Maker, he'd spent so long in the dark, in the deeps, he'd gotten his days completely turned on his head.

"Sure is!" Datna said enthusiastically. "We should go right now, before we lose the light."

Anders sighed. "Dagna..." he started, trying to find some polite way to detach himself without offending her. He was dirty, exhausted, downhearted, sore both inside and out, and just not up to this today.

The dwarf wilted, casting her eyes down to the stone. "...I'm doing it again, aren't I?" she said in a more subdued voice. "I just... I got so excited, and I wanted to share it. I thought -- I thought you'd be happy too."

"I am!" Anders said quickly. "I'm sorry, Dagna. I am happy, really. And I do want to go see the site -- tomorrow. It's just that right now I need rest. It's been a long..." He stopped in place for a moment, gazing blankly into the air as he tried to calculate how long he'd been in the Deep Roads. How many marches, how many camps, how many steps across the stone, how many verses of the song, how many heartbeats pulsing hot blood into cold air...

"Seven cycles," Dagna prompted helpfully.

"...month," Anders said, giving up on being any more precise than that. "It's been a long month."

"I can see that, I guess..." Dagna said, cautious and concerned. "Well -- how about this? I can walk you back to Brosca Manor, and tell you all about it on the way?"

And so they did -- Anders concentrating mainly on putting one foot in front of the other, while Dagna chattered away at his elbow. It was not so much the bodily tiredness that dragged him; between Justice's power and the Warden taint, he was physically capable of even greater feats of stamina than this. But his mind was only a human mind, however else the body had been changed - and a human mind could only process so much before it shut down against all new input.

Still, he tried to concentrate on Dagna's words as they walked (the topic of the Tower being one near and dear to his heart, of course.) But most of the dwarf's words just slid past him, being a very technical and detailed explanation of the plot of land and the surveyor's progress, questions of grade and accretion, chaining and offset, lines of collimation and protraction. In truth, his interest in the details of the building itself was minimal (aside from the sticking point of Circle or not-a-Circle,) when compared to what the contents of the building were. Would be.

"Look for me when the sun-bright swallow sings upon the birch bough high
But you are in the ground where the wolves and the weevils all a-chew on your bones so dry…"

They had made it almost to the front door of the manor before it penetrated the fog of Anders' exhaustion that he was hearing voices. Voices singing, to be more precise, not just the general lingering echoes of dwarven song in the corners of the stone but voices that came through the ventilation slits of the building before them. Voices lacking the burr and rumble that characterized the dwarves of Orzammar, singing in a purest Ferelden accent -- and a familiar tune.

"I know that song," he exclaimed. "That's not a dwarven song -- that's a Ferelden song! What's going on here?"

"Eh?" Dagna stopped next to him, looking between him and the window and back to him. "Oh! That's probably those two mages singing. They do that a lot."

"What?" Anders exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah! Didn't I mention?" Dagna snapped her fingers. "A pair of surfacers arrived a few cycles ago. A human and an elf. Bhelen put them in the Manor to wait for you to get back, since the Tower isn't ready yet."

"No, you didn't mention!" Anders choked out, feeling suddenly like that poor dwarf he'd healed in the Deep Roads, panic and excitement flooding his chest and swelling up his lungs until he couldn't breathe for the pressure. Adrenaline flooded his body, leaving his head suddenly clear again for the first time in a week, and he felt suddenly, dreadfully aware of how filthy and tattered he must look, having just returned from battle with the darkspawn.

"Oh… Well, they're here," Dagna said a little awkwardly.

"But when the sun breaks and no more herald calls battle-cry
Then will you make a grave? For I will be home then
I will be home"

"What are their names? What Circle are they from, did you ask?" Anders said anxiously, even as he his hands fluttered, trying in vain to straighten out his disaster of travel gear. Maker, couldn't they have put the new mages somewhere else? At least long enough for him to get a bath and change of clothes before he had to meet… "Did they have to travel far? Were they injured? Did they seem all right?" His words scraped higher with every question.

"Right," Anders managed to choke out with the very last of his breath, and he tried to force himself to calm, to breathe. In, for four seconds, hold, for ten, out. Again. Flames, he was obsessing over his look and even his clothes like an apprentice in the Tower trying to impress his crush.

What he looked like did not matter. What he could do was what mattered. "Right," Anders muttered, when the world grew a little less gray and fuzzy around the edges. "Right… I'll just go… see them…"

As he entered the manor and climbed the flight of stone steps to the upper floor, he heard the voices again, continuing the familiar song. The man's voice was rough, unrefined -- a reedy baritone that Anders wouldn't have spared a tip for, in the tavern. The woman's voice was higher, smoother, a pure soprano that transformed the old ballad into something new.

"But oh, did you see all the dead of Tarleton, all the bellies and the bones and the bile?" the man sang; and the woman answered, "No, I lingered here with the blankets barren, and my own belly big with child."

It was an old song, like so many Ferelden tunes about the war against Orlais, about the men and women who'd gone off to fight and the families and lovers they never came home to. Anders found himself lingering in the hallway outside the room the voices came from, unwilling or unable to disturb them. In the last verse of the song the two voices left their separate tracks and blended together for a wistful farewell. "But oh, my love, though our bodies may be parted, though our skin may not touch skin -- look for me with the sun-bright sparrow, I will come on the breath of the wind."

The last notes of the lute died away with their voices, and Anders sucked in one more fortifying breath and ducked inside.

The two figures in the room beyond looked up at his entrance from where they had been sitting with their heads bent together. The man stood up quickly while the woman stayed seated, lute in her lap, but their hands remained joined.

It was obvious from their body language -- if it hadn't been obvious from a mile off, with the sound of the lover's duet blending together -- that they were lovers. Which made it all the more surprising to find that the man was a human and the woman an elf. She was petite, delicate and beautiful in the way elves so often were, with pale blond hair that wisped all over the place out of a bun at the back of her head, and icy blue eyes that stopped you in their tracks. No vallaslin, Anders noted -- so either an elf from the city, or taken from the Dalish before she was an adult. She perched on the edge of her seat like a bird poised to take flight, if not for the hand-grip of the man beside her.

In contrast, the man was tall and solid, with dark hair that stuck up in every direction simultaneously, defiant of any attempt to comb it into submission. He was full-grown -- Anders would have guessed past thirty -- but he still had an awkward, gangling look about him, like his hands and feet were still too big for the limbs they were attached to. Something about that hair -- and perhaps the voice -- rang a faint bell of familiarity in Anders. Someone he'd known from the Tower, perhaps? Or was it just the feeling of the magic in their auras, so much like coming home after so long away?

Anders had to blink away a moment of disorientation at being faced with another full-height human. He'd been among the dwarves for long enough to start to accept their height as the default, and sight of his own tall and skinny body was mind-bendingly strange to him. He'd have to get used to it again, somehow.

"Hi," Anders managed to say, after a long and awkward silence where the three of them stood
staring, hovering around the room. "Uh. I mean, hello."

"Hello," the man said, clearing his throat and shifting uncomfortably. "Um. It's good to see you, Anders."

"Right. Anders. That's me," Anders said, and then wanted to kick himself for that little inanity. Maker, why was he so bad at this?

He knew why, on some level. It had been years -- almost a decade -- since he'd spent any time around other mages. Since he'd left the Tower for the last time, the only two he'd been in regular contact with had been Velanna and Merrill -- both Dalish, Keeper-trained, with a vast culture gulf between them that kept them from really connecting, as much as they shared the gift of magic. There were too many things that they would never, could never understand.

Even in the Underground, his contact with other mages had been limited. They'd had to stay apart for safety, for secrecy, communicating only in cryptic coded notes or brief hooded rendezvous. He'd escorted a dozen Circle mages out of the Gallows, out of Kirkwall, but he'd not been in any of their presence for more than a few hours. And at the time, their focus had always been on the goal at hand -- escaping the city, dodging Templars and informants.

"We know," the man said with a brief smile, then cleared his throat again. "That is to say -- I think everyone knows who you are. I'm Jowan, and this is Neria, Neria Surana. My wife," he said, in a tone of voice that dared Anders or anyone else to challenge him on it.

Anders didn't, even though privately he had his doubts. There were few enough in the Chantry who would be willing to bless the union of a human and an elf, but even aside from that, they were both mages. Finding someone willing to officiate for an actual wedding, especially while on the run from a fallen Tower, would have been a nigh-impossible task.

Still, the legalities and the ceremonials weren't always what mattered, in matters of the heart. If they had made promises to each other, exchanged vows and tokens, then what did it matter what the Chantry or anyone else had to say?

"It's good to meet you, Jowan, Neria," he said to them both, and the real pleasure and gladness in his voice went a long way to relieving the tension in his room. "Welcome to Orzammar, I guess."

"Thanks," Jowan said, the two of them breaking out into smiles. "It's been amazing. I never thought that there was a place where we could be -- well, us. Openly."

They sat in the comfortable drawing room, Jowan and Neria side by side and Anders across the low stone table from them. He felt another jolt of pain at the memory of the Hanged Man, but it was easier to push aside when he had something else in front of him. "Which Circle do you hail from?"

"Kinloch Hold," Jowan answered for the both of them, with a shared glance and a smile at his wife. She wasn't much of a talker, Anders surmised; although at least he knew from the song he'd heard before he entered the room that she could talk, and was not somehow mute.

"Really? So was I!" Despite all his hatred for the place, he felt a flush of absurd fondness -- almost nostalgia -- to be meeting someone from the place he had spent so much of his life.

"Yes, we know you from there," Jowan nodded. "Er... knew you from there. You were quite the celebrity; everyone at least knew your name and fame, haha." He let out a nervous little laugh.

"Er... really?" Anders floundered, caught out. "I don't think I remember either of you..." Kinloch
Hold was not the largest of Circles, but it still housed several hundred mages of a wide variety of ages. Living in such closed quarters for years on end, you at least got to know everybody's face, if not their names or their life's stories. Except for the templars, of course, who didn't have faces at all.

"I'm not surprised; you were much older than us," Jowan commented, and glanced at his wife for corroboration. "Eight years ahead?"

"Nine for me," Neria commented quietly. It was the most she'd said since he'd come into the room.

"Something like that," Jowan nodded. "Anyway, you were Harrowed not long after either of us arrived; and then by the time we got old enough that we weren't just apprentices..." He trailed off, fidgeting uncomfortably. "Well, you were gone more often than not."

Gone. Right. A delicate way to paper over the years he'd spent in and out of the Tower, escaping and being reeled back in, the year he'd spent in the dungeon, seeing no one. He swallowed hard, trying to push the memory away, not to let the stone walls around them turn dark, the relative quiet of the room turn to silence. "Right."

"But you might remember Daylen?" Jowan perked up a bit with the blatant change of topic. "Daylen Amell? He was Enchanter Irving's top pupil in our year... and my best friend."

"Oh... yes!" Anders snapped his fingers in sudden recollection. The name conjured up a blurry picture. "Er... vaguely. Chubby kid, messy black hair, nose always buried in a book?"

"That was Daylen all right!" Jowan looked thrilled that he remembered. "He used to trip over the hem of his robes all the time because he wouldn't stop reading while he walked."

"Should I be expecting him to join us, then?" Anders said hopefully. More mages were good; more mages that were the First Enchanter's pet pupil would be even better. But then he saw the way Jowan's face fell, the crumpling of his demeanor, and too many years of tragic endings for mages' stories reared their head. "Or... not?"


"What happened?" Anders asked quietly.

"It's..." Jowan shook his head. "It's not a pleasant story, I'm sorry."

Anders had guessed that by now. "Few from the Circle ever are."

"Daylen was a good student," Jowan began reluctantly. "And I really... wasn't. By the time I was twenty-one, I knew I wasn't ever going to be able to stand for my Harrowing. They were going to make me Tranquil!" He raised his head, wide-eyed and beseeching. "So I... I was desperate to escape."

Anders couldn't see how any mage would be anything less. But he also wasn't sure what this had to do with Daylen. "Well, you know me," he said encouragingly. "I'm all about the escaping."

"I was inspired by you, honestly," Jowan admitted. "We all were. But if I didn't want to keep getting caught again just like... I knew I had to destroy my phylactery. I couldn't have done it alone, and... and Daylen agreed to help. He risked everything to help me... but then it all went wrong."
"We came back through the Victim's Door and Greagoir and his templars were right there!" Jowan shuddered with the memory. "I... I got out, but Daylen didn't. He stayed behind and sacrificed himself to give me time to run."

He didn't elaborate on what that sacrifice had entailed, but he didn't need to. Execution, Aeonar, or Tranquility; it all came to the same thing in the end. "I'm sorry," Anders said quietly.

Jowan practically drooped in his seat. "I wish I could say I redeemed myself," he said quietly. "I wish I could say I made the most of his sacrifice, but..."

"You did everything you could," Neria said in a soft voice, reaching up to brush against his cheek with a gentle touch. "You came back for me, didn't you?"

He turned his head into the touch, and managed a smile for her. "Ria was a year behind me at the Tower," he said, addressing Anders once again. "When things began falling apart in Ferelden -- after Kirkwall -- I was planning to head across the border to Tevinter, to get clear of it. But when I heard that the Calenhad Circle had fallen -- I couldn't leave her in danger. I went back to find her. And then, well." He shrugged helplessly. "Tevinter was out of the question."

Anders nodded; no elf, even a mage, could hope to find safety or freedom in Tevinter. Jowan continued. "We were hiding out in Gwaren, wondering what to do next. And then we read the proclamation."

"Well, I'm glad you came," Anders said. Few stories from the Circle were happy ones, but at least this one had left them both alive and sane, in possession of their minds and their magic. And they had found each other. "Both of you. You, ah... you have had explained to you what the 'services to the crown' entail, right? Fighting with the King's Army to reclaim the Deep Roads?"

Neria nodded. "Yes, we know," Jowan spoke up again. He squeezed his wife's hand fiercely. "I'll be taking over Ria's year, of course."

Anders blinked in surprise. Not that he'd had a chance to see either of them cast yet, but he'd seen nothing to indicate that the elf was any less powerful or skilled than her husband. "Uh, sure, of course," he echoed. "What are your schools? Neria?"

"Summoning primarily... some Spirit," Neria answered with a small, self-deprecating smile. "Enough to get me through the Harrowing."

"And you, Jowan?" Anders directed the question to the man.

Jowan seemed flustered, as though the question had caught him out. "Oh, uh... E-entropy mostly," he sputtered. "I also do a bit of... bit of healing on the side."

"Healing?" Anders' eyebrows rose. Justice was usually quite sensitive to the presence of other spirits, and he had sensed nothing from Jowan; he found it hard to believe that the other man was a spirit healer. "Creationism?"

"No..." Jowan hedged. "I was always kind of crap at creation, honestly..."

"Well, you certainly aren't healing anybody with Entropy," Anders snorted. There were some spells in the school that could be useful to a healer, such as sending a patient to sleep -- there were some spells in almost any school that could be useful to a healer, under the right circumstances -- but Entropy was primarily used to inflict suffering, not to alleviate it.

"No, but you can heal them with bl- with blood magic," Jowan replied. Despite the stutter, the
words fell to the middle of the floor with the impact of a brick.

Anders felt a wave of anger rise up in him, like magma pushed up from the ground below. Only long practice allowed to catch it, and hold, and hold it back, to keep from lashing out in the fury that threatened to consume them. He held it until the first wave had passed, until his mind cleared enough for him to think, until his hands released their death-grip; only then did he move.

He rose to his feet and leveled the staff in his hand (when had he picked up the staff? He couldn't remember) towards the blood mage. "Get out," he said, and his voice reverberated.

"No, listen --" Jowan started to say, but Anders had no ear for his excuses.

"Leave this place!" he snarled, still feeling the rage coursing in his veins. "There is no place for maleficarum in this house!"

"I'm not one of those!" Jowan protested frantically.

"You just admitted to blood magic!" Anders roared. "Now you deny it?"

"No! I mean... yes!" Jowan flailed and backtracked. "I mean, I don't deny using blood magic, but I'm not a maleficar! The verse says 'those who take His gift and turn it against His children,' and I've never done that! I've never used anyone's blood but my own. I've never used it against anyone else except in self-defense. It doesn't have to be bad!"

Red mist rose up in Anders' vision as though it was blood itself, bringing with it fragments of memories; Hawke, pinioned and struggling in the grip of the blood mage in the Rose. Orsino, his skin bubbling as his flesh writhed and transformed into a monstrosity. Leandra, a live soul racked into a dead body, gasping out her last words across lips already crusted with rot --

"You haven't seen the things that I have seen," Anders hissed, his voice so strangled by fury it was almost a whisper. "Witnessed the atrocities I have witnessed. Whatever the intentions, blood magic always leads its practitioners astray. Always! It defiles everything it touches!"

"You sound just like the Templars!" Jowan was starting to sound angry himself, under the layer of frantic conciliation. "You don't understand. It's just a tool, like any other tool. Like a sword... except that a sword was made specifically to hurt people, and it can't be used for anything else. Blood magic can! It can be used for other things -- good things! So it's more like a... a shovel! A shovel of blood."

The retort Anders had been about to make hung on his lips for a moment as he stared at Jowan, trying to work out what in the Void he thought he was going with this metaphor. In the corner of his vision, he just saw Neria shake her head, eyes shut and ears flattened.

"I've been studying it, looking for ways to use it to help people," Jowan forged bravely onwards. "And it's amazing the things it can do! It can cure bone diseases and heart conditions that creation magic can't touch, that even spirit healers can barely affect. I've used it to find children lost in the woods, or reunite estranged children with their parents. I've --"

"I don't care! I won't have it in my house, corrupting the mages under my care," Anders snapped, cutting him off with a slash of his hand. "If you want to stay here, you will forswear it now and forever. If you insist on going down the path to ruin, then you can get out!"

Jowan gaped at him, expression stricken. "But -- " he started to protest.

"Anders," Neria interrupted them, her quiet voice somehow cutting through the atmosphere like
neither of their shouting had managed to do. "Is this really something you can afford to do?"

"What?" Anders turned to her, a frown creasing his face.

Neria looked back at him with a calm, implacable expression. "The very first mages ever to come to you for sanctuary, and you mean to turn them out? Rumors will spread, they always do; and if they hear that the first mages who tried to join you were rejected on trumped-up charges of blood magic, what do you think that's going to do?"

"Trumped up? He admitted it flat out!" Anders exclaimed.

"That is true," Neria acknowledged. "But for too many of us, for too long, accusations of blood magic have just been a cover, an excuse for killings or worse. The mages will view the accusation with as much suspicion as the act itself. Can you afford to lose their trust so early?"

Anders flinched back from the comparison. "I --" He was not like them, like the Templars, they were not --

"We mages have been stagnating in the Circle for too long. We must change if we are to survive outside it. We must be able to shake off the old molds, and forge new paths. And while we would much rather do it with your guidance and aid," Neria stood up, looking him straight in the eye. "We can also do it without you. We could all do it without you."

"Is… that a threat?" Anders sputtered. Was she threatening to turn the other mages away from him? Could she do that? Could he afford schisms, strife among the people he was striving to protect?

He knew he could not. Not if they were to survive.

"It's a truth," Neria said calmly.

She hadn't raised her voice the entire conversation. Anders stared at her, shocked. He hadn't been expecting such ruthlessness, such determination. Not from her. How had she managed to cut the ground out from under his feet in so few words?

Her husband might be the one practicing blood magic, but Anders had the sudden foreboding feeling that she was the truly dangerous one of the pair.

"You will vouch for him?" Anders said aloud, after a long moment had passed in this tense standoff. He jerked his chin towards Jowan. "This blood mage?"

"Yes." Neria raised her chin proudly, stepping to her husband's side. "Not only because I love him, but also because I trust him. He is not what you think, and he will not be what you fear. He is better than that."

Anders gave in. "Very well," he growled, and lowered his staff back to his side. "Just don't make me regret this."

With that he turned and strode out of the room, suddenly feeling too confined, too claustrophobic in the small space. He stopped in the corridor outside the room, struggling to compose himself.

From the room behind him he heard a groan, and a rustling of air and cloth as a body sank abruptly down onto the seat cushions. "Maker, that was close," Jowan moaned, apparently unaware that Anders was still within hearing range. "I thought he was going to kill me!"
"He wouldn't have done that," Neria murmured, just on the edge of Anders' hearing. "You were fine."

"Says you! He looked like he was a heartbeat away from turning me into pot roast!" Jowan protested vehemently. A groan. "I flubbed it, didn't I? I promised you I wouldn't mess up this chance for us, but I just couldn't think, I…"

More murmuring, too soft for him to hear. Anders suddenly became acutely uncomfortable at overhearing a private conversation, and moved away. Hearing the fear in the other mage's voice made him feel like a beast, guilty and wretched. But at the same time, he still didn't think he was wrong.

The conflict between the two feelings was like a storm within him. Anders put his head down and kept going.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Jowan and Neria arrive! A quick note on Surana.

My understanding of the unofficial state-of-canon is that in worldstates where the Warden-potentials were not chosen, they all died; Amell to Aeonar, Cousland killed by Howe, Tabris and Brosca executed, Mahariel lost to the taint, et cetera.

However, since Surana and Amell share the same backstory, it doesn't really make sense for them both to have been involved in Jowan's disastrous plot at the same time. So, in this 'verse, Daylen Amell was sent to Aeonar, but Neria Surana was not involved. She's not a Warden in this worldstate, however -- just another Circle mage.
Disagreement

Chapter Summary

Mage relations continue to be acrimonious, but in the end they reach an accord.

Chapter Notes

Anders is kind of a jackass in this chapter, as in the preceding one. He can be that way towards people he doesn't like, or when he's in a bad mood. Please don't hold it against him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After so long spent underground it was good to see the sky and feel the free air again. Although, all things considered, it would have been nice if the sky was not quite so bright and the air not quite so frigid. It was well into Cloudreach, but you wouldn't know it, Anders thought as he shivered and tried in vain to tuck his hands into the sleeves.

The tunnel they had taken up out of Orzammar opened into a sort of dell in the middle of the mountains, ringed on all sides by impassable ridges of stone. The ridges sloped down to meet in a gentle bowl with a flat center, with a little stream meandering across it; the stream followed the stone down an increasingly steep hill until it plunged into a shadowed, stony gorge that vanished out of sight between the mountains.

The season was evident in the vegetation, at least, if not the temperature; a layer of soft grass and tiny wildflowers softened the harsh lines of the stone. Further up the slope, however, ranks of pine and fir trees climbed the rugged stone ridges until they met the edge of the snow line, a bright white crown to the cold stone peaks that gave the Frostbacks their name. Anders' long-buried farming sense stirred enough to add up the subliminal clues: despite the enticing layer of spring growth, this valley would never support crops. The elevation was too high, the soil too thin, and centuries of accumulation of pine needles would render the ground too acidic to grow much of anything.

That was fine with Anders, though. They hadn't come here to farm -- and if the land was too poor to support farming, then it would be too poor to attract the greed of anyone else.

At the least, the high stone walls around the valley would provide a break from harsh winter winds -- and a serious deterrence to any invading armies. There was enough flat, level ground to build a castle on, and the mountain spring would provide water. Anders took a deep sniff of the cold air, flung his arms wide as if to embrace the valley, and smiled. "I like it," he declared grandly.

His companions' reactions were mixed. Dagna beamed, looking out over the valley as though it were all here personal sandbox to play in. The head surveyor, however, merely grunted in unencouraging acknowledgement as he brushed past them towards the dig site, nose buried in the thick ledger in his hand. He, as well as most of the other dwarves on the project aside from Dagna, wore a large wide-brimmed hat which shadowed their face and blocked out most of the world.
above the horizon. The scholarly dwarf had been on the surface long enough to get used to the open sky, but for most of the dwarves of Orzammar, it was still an unnerving sight they preferred to avoid as much as possible.

Anders' mage companions had no such reservations; they stood craning their necks around in all directions, taking in the rocky ridges and the valley. "It will be nice to live in sight of the trees," Surana murmured, looking at the line of mountain pines with a veiled longing in her eyes. Anders smirked to himself; of course the elf would be enthusiastic about the trees.

Jowan smiled too, and wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders; the sight of it made Anders' smirk curdle and die. He turned away, looking over the mountain view and trying to recapture the expansive feelings of freedom, of happiness. There was no reason why watching the two of them be so close, so trusting, so blasted affectionate with each other should make his stomach hurt so. Wasn't this what he had wanted? Had fought for? For the right of mages to love whom they wished, and be happy together?

Other mages. But never him. Never him again, never...

"Maker, it's good to be outside again," Jowan sighed, breaking into Anders' spiraling thoughts. "It's awful cold up here, though. I think my nose is frozen!"

"It's still early in the season and we're thousands of feet up; I don't know what you expected," Anders said, unable to keep the bite out of his voice.

"Of course, it's very, erm, brisk. Invigorating!" Jowan said hastily. Ever since their near-disastrous confrontation on the first night, Jowan had painstakingly avoided anything that looked like disagreement or argument with Anders. Frankly, Anders found the insincere attempts to ingratiate himself more annoying than any open sniping could be, but his gritted his teeth to put up with it.

"Buck up, Jowan," Dagna said cheerfully. "It's all part of life on the surface. Besides, once the Circle is completed you'll be spending most of your time inside out of the cold, and I guarantee you that dwarven construction can keep out any mountain breeze!"

Anders huffed in exasperation. "For the last time, it's not going to be a Circle!" he snapped. Dagna rolled her eyes expressively.

"Wait, what?" Jowan looked between them, rather doe-eyed and bewildered. "Why not? I thought that was what this was all about?"

"Ugh, he's got this hang-up about the shape of the Tower," Dagna said, annoyance thick in her voice. "He doesn't want it to be a circle."

"I don't understand... why not?" Jowan shook his head, baffled. "What difference does it make what shape it is?"

"Because the circle is the symbol of our oppression, that's why!" Anders exclaimed. Of course Dagna wouldn't understand, but he'd have thought his fellow mages at least would see it. "It's a reminder of a whole lifetime spent in prison, without even the slightest control over our own destinies. We did not tear down the Circle Towers just to recreate that symbol here, in our own place."

"Oh." Jowan fell silent, blinking as he chewed over the concept. Beside him, Surana stirred, humming very softly under her breath.

"That's true... but you also have to consider, a circular tower is what the mages are used to," Surana
said slowly. "They've lived all their lives in such a building, and it would make them feel comfortable and at home. It would make them feel safe. For those who have gone through a violent transition, I think you underestimate the importance of familiarity."

Anders let out a breath of pure annoyance, fueled by a deeper worry. Circle mages had spent all their lives boxed into habits of thought that bound them as neatly as any chains. And yet, at the same time he couldn't fail to feel a thread of doubt weaving its way into his certainty. The last thing he wanted was to encourage the mages to slide back into those same old habits of fear and submission simply because they were familiar. Was this the resistance he was going to face at every turn?

Maker's breath, he'd longed for the presence of other mages, others like him, to support him and help him, and instead all they seemed to care to do was tear him down. Hurt and anger pushed past good sense for long enough for him to snap out, "Are you this much of a contrary bitch with everyone, or am I special?"

"Hey!" In a flash, Jowan had abandoned his conciliatory attitude, crowding up in Anders' personal space. It was a somewhat pathetic effort, since he was half a head shorter than Anders, but he certainly tried, planting a challenging finger in the middle of Anders' chest. "If you have a problem with my wife, you have a problem with me!"

Anders shoved him back, knocking the offending hand aside; he'd put up with a lot, but he was not going to let anyone just lay hands on him whenever they wanted. "I already have a problem with you, blood mage," he growled, his voice momentarily taking on a deeper resonance. "But your wife is more than capable of fighting her own battles. And yours, apparently," he added, somewhat cruelly.

Somehow, Surana was between them -- a touch on Jowan's elbow was enough to still him, and the small elf looked up at Anders with that unnervingly calm, impassive expression.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, Anders," Surana said quietly, reasonably. "But you have to realize that what is being built here isn't just a playground for your high ideals. People are going to have to live here, and they have a right to have a say in how they're going to live. You aren't going to be able to make all the decisions yourself, just to have things as you like them."

Anders stared at her for a long moment, trying and failing to find a counter for that infuriating reasonableness. It made him cringe, hearing the angry retorts that bubbled up in him and how much they sounded like a child's petulant tantrums in comparison.

He realized a long silence had passed while he worked against his spiteful words, past the time he could have reasonably made a counterargument. He swallowed bitter bile, and forced his lips into a grimace of a smile. "...Fine," he choked out, unable to help how sarcastic and insincere it came out. "Then since you seem to have such a handle on everything, I'll just leave you to it."

He stomped off, leaving the mages and the survey team to work behind him.

Anders didn't go straight back to the Manor after leaving the valley; despite the lingering fatigue of the Deep Roads venture that seemed sunk into his bones, he was too restless and the manor seemed too stifling, too confining. Instead he went on a long prowl all around Orzammar, feeling the
whispers and curious stares bounce off the back of his head, trying to calm internal strife with physical exhaustion. It had never worked before, but when had he ever let that stop him?

He ended up in the Hall of Heroes, the gateway between Orzammar proper and the great gates outside. Despite being the only link between Orzammar and the outside world, it was surprisingly deserted; he supposed most dwarves were uneasy to even have a glimpse of the outside world beyond the huge double doors. And here were the Paragons, set in rows lining the great walk, their great stone eyes looking sightlessly down on all that passed.

He found the Commander's statue at the end of the row; unlike all of the others, she was the only one set with her back to the outside world, her upraised weapons facing the city itself. He'd often wondered what that was meant to say. Was it because Natya Brosca alone of the Paragons of Orzammar had left the city and then come back? Was it because she alone did not cast judgmental gaze upon those who chose to depart the city? Was it just an aesthetic choice, or the most efficient usage of space?

For a long time he stared up at the statue of his friend, hand wrapped around the amulet she had given him, and wondered how she'd done it. No one ever second-guessed the Commander; her word had been as a pronouncement from the Maker. Not that no one ever argued or disagreed with her -- they'd been a contentious lot of ragamuffins, especially himself -- but once she'd made a decision, it was always final. It was something Justice especially had always admired about her, that conviction, the weight of command. But outside the Fade, saying something was not enough to make it so.

"How did you do it?" he asked the statue. The stone had no answer for him. The ones who can make the hard decisions, Bardien had said. But how could he make the hard decisions if he couldn't even get people to respect the easy ones?

Then again, the last hard decision he'd made hadn't ended so well, either.

His breath quickened, chest tightening as he clenched his hand around the amulet and dropped his head. This was the pain he'd been trying to outrun, outwork, drive it back with busywork and exhaustion. It had been easy to push it away when they were in the Deep Roads, the business of survival and battle pushing all other considerations aside: but it was never gone, never really gone.

Seeing Jowan and Surana together, so tender and affectionate, just dragged the edges of the half-healed wound apart again, setting the bleeding starting all over again. It wasn't just a generalized longing for that kind of tenderness, because he'd had something like that before, had it and lost it. Had it, and thrown it all away.

Hawke had been more than just his lover; he'd been his partner, his reprieve, his one bright light in the hellhole that had been Kirkwall. They'd shared touches like that, glances like that, soft words like that. They'd stood side by side like that, fought for each other's happiness like that, and for three years of his life Anders had known what it was like to be in love and have that love returned.

His vision blurred, and Anders clenched his teeth until his head throbbed with the effort of holding back the tears. He couldn't keep doing this; he couldn't keep breaking down every time something reminded him of Hawke -- especially not if his mage companions were going to be so sickeningly cute around him, a constant reminder, night and day. He had to push through it, move past it, focus on the work instead of them instead of his own personal shipwreck. There was work to be done. There was always more work to be done.

A sob twisted in his lungs, trying to escape past his throat; he held it down. He looked up at the statue again, the monocolor blurring to indistinguishable greyness in his eyes. Was it like this for
"Anders?" a voice called from behind him, softly. Anders whipped his head around to see Surana standing there, one hand on the carefully chiseled corner, and turned quickly back away.

Footsteps approached him from behind. He tucked the amulet back into his tunic and cleared his throat, several times until he thought he had command of his voice. "Come to criticize me some more?" he said, and if he sounded snappish at least his voice didn't crack.

Surana stopped just at the edge of his peripheral vision, her hands folded together in front of her. "I won't say I've come to apologize, because I don't believe I was wrong," she said without preamble. Anders grimaced; he should have expected that. "But then, I suspect you feel the same way."

"Why did you come, then?" Anders said irritably. His head was throbbing, his legs ached from the extra miles he'd put himself through, and he wasn't in the mood to pick up the argument where they'd left off.

The elf shrugged slightly. "To see if you were all right," she said.

That surprised Anders enough that he turned to face her, if only to give her an incredulous look. "Why do you care?"

Surana sighed, and sat down at the edge of the pedestal, smoothing her robes over her legs. "Listen..." she said. "I know I can sometimes come off as cold and unfeeling. It's hard... for me to show my emotions openly, even now, after so many years in the Tower."

That struck a nerve in Anders, and he began to really pay attention, instead of just trading barbs until she went away. He turned and sat on the plinth next to her, close enough to talk comfortably.

"It was not easy being an elf in the Tower..." Surana began.

Well, that was the understatement of the Age. "It wasn't easy being a mage in the Tower," Anders remarked with feeling.

Surana looked at him sharply. "It wasn't easy being a mage and it was less easy being a mage elf," she said, a crisp edge to her voice. "That made it worse, it didn't cancel out."

Chastened, Anders sat back a little, and made a little go-on wave with his fingers.

Surana continued. "A lot of people, even the enchanters and teachers, looked down on me because of what I was. Every time I laughed, or cried, or got angry, they treated me like some feral beast. I hated it, but the Templars were worse. They would follow me around..." She drew in a shaky breath, and Anders cringed in sympathy. "Waiting for me to show some emotion so they could come down on me for it. Just words, if I was lucky. But it scared me."

On an impulse, Anders reached out to take her hand. She glanced down at his hand, her fingers folded in his, but she didn't object or try to take it back. "Then I started noticing the Tranquil," she said. "The Templars mostly left them alone..."

"They didn't," Anders said, clutching a little tighter. Remembering Alrik, remembering Elsa, remembering the Tranquil who stood in the Gallows courtyard and monotonously announced their abuses to the oblivious passersby.

Surana sighed. "I know that, now. I know now that there is no amount of docile and unthreatening that can get them to leave us alone. But back then, it seemed like the best way to be. Act like a
Tranquil, and they'll treat you like part of the furniture." She shook her head. "I didn't want to be Tranquil, I just wanted to be safe. And once I got into the habit... it's hard to stop."

"I'm sorry," Anders said. Sorry that she felt that she had to be that way to protect herself; sorry that she couldn't break herself of the habits of the Circle, even now. It had taken him years after his last escape, and Surana was much fresher out of the Circle than he. He felt a pang of remorse for holding that against her.

"Thank you. It's in the past now," Surana said sincerely. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... what I'm trying to say is that I really admire what you're trying to do here. I respect and I admire it, and I want -- we want -- to support you in any way that we can."

Anders blinked. "Really?" That had not been what he'd expected to hear.

"Yes, really." Surana caught his eyes, her gaze level and serious. "Perhaps I come off as a little critical sometimes, but it's only because we want this place to be the best home for mages that it can be. And you are our best chance of making that happen. So, please accept our support."

"Well... all right," Anders sat back, a little stunned. "Thank you. Thank you, that is. I'm not sure yet I want any support from your husband," he qualified. "He seems just as likely to blow up anything he puts his hand on."

Surana actually laughed, a soft breathy chuckle that was gone so quickly he thought he'd imagined it. "Oh, he's not so bad," she said. She was still smiling a little, her sharp eyes soft and fond. "He's got hidden depths."

"...Right," Anders said with a sigh.

They sat there in a comfortable silence for a few minutes more, until Anders broke it with a groan. "I suppose we should head back now," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Tired?" Surana cocked her head. "Or do you not want to go back?"

"To the manor? The manor's fine. I'm just a little run down, I guess," Anders said, rubbing at his face with a grimace. He had to cut down on these wild swings of emotions; they drained his energy as fast as a Smite.

"I could..." Surana raised a hand, then hesitated. Green sparks danced around her fingertips. "I could help, if you would let me."

Anders looked at her in surprise. "I didn't think you were a healer!"

Surana shrugged slightly. "I'm not, really," she said. "But... I do whatever I can."

"Well... sure," Anders said, surprised and touched. "Thank you."

With that small, almost imperceptible smile on her face, Surana raised her hands and laid the tips of her fingers against his forehead. Anders sighed and closed his eyes as the creation magic washed over him, easing the throbbing pain of the headache and washing like clear water across the dragging mud of his fatigue.

It was tentative, inexperienced; Surana wasn't wrong about her skills as a healer. But it was still better than anything Anders could have done alone.
Chapter End Notes

Apparently, the statue of Paragon Brosca is *not* in the Hall of Heroes if Bhelen is king, rather it is set outside the palace "in honor of his wife's family". A small detail I have chosen to ignore. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Disembark

Chapter Summary

Mo' mages, mo' problems.

The next few cycles saw the residents of the Brosca manor fall into a routine which, if not exactly comfortable, was at least uneasily peaceful. With little else to do while the Tower was under construction, and between Deep Roads excursions, Anders fell back into his usual pastime of brewing potions. It was a habit whenever he had no other pressing duties: from the Circle to Vigil's Keep to Kirkwall, there had never been a time when healing potions were not needed.

Surana had come and looked over his shoulder as he worked. "Good idea," she'd said approvingly. "I'm sure these will sell well in the market."

Anders had looked at her blankly, momentarily unable to make sense of her words. "Sell?" he'd repeated with a frown. "Sell - what, healing potions?"

One of her eyebrows had lifted slightly, an unusual display of emotion coming from the taciturn elf. "We have to start making something to sell," she'd said. "We can hardly expect to rely on the King's charity forever."

This had set off another heated not-quite argument, this one on the merits of economic production vs. a social responsibility to the well-being of others. As far as Anders was concerned, providing medical services to his subjects was a solid part of what Bhelen was paying them for, so it was hardly charity. Even if it wasn't, the idea of charging money for healing stuck in his craw, and riled Justice. Healthy bodies should not be a luxury afforded only by the wealthy; it should be the right of all people. So long as he had the power to make it so, he would never take money from those who could not spare it.

They finally settled on a compromise: the healing potions would be distributed as needed, but other potions - the ones for stamina or improved physical prowess, for example - could be sold for profit. The only other potions available in Orzammar had to be imported at great expense from the surface; even undercutting those prices left them with a considerable margin. Anders had to admit that Surana had a shrewd business sense; the first batch she took down to the Diamond Bazaar sold out in an astonishingly short time.

"I don't get it," Jowan had complained, bewildered. "What do the dwarves even want all these stamina potions for?"

Anders snorted. "Not all of us can be Grey Wardens, Jowan," he'd said, which made Jowan blush and stammer and Surana actually exhale audibly.

Nor were potions the only good that could be sold; Surana, it turned out, had a skill for runecrafting. She and Anders split one of the manor rooms down the middle to use as a workshop, Anders' stills and alembics taking up one wall and Surana's vice and chisel sets another. They worked in a comfortable near-silence, only occasionally breaking it to ask for a helping hand or swear a vicious blue streak at a batch gone wrong.
Jowan, unlike his wife, had no skill with runecrafting. Nor with herbalism, nor alchemy, nor inscription, nor any of the half-dozen other crafts normally taught by the Circle. Anders had been perfectly willing to write him off as a useless non-contributor, at least until he returned to the Manor after one trip to the valley to find a giggling pair of dwarven ladies just leaving, a matching set of bracelets around their left wrists and fingertips still stained with their own blood.

Grilling the surprised lovers revealed that Jowan had been making - and apparently selling - enchanted lovers' charms to a number of couples in the city, which would change colors according to your partner's mood and grow warm upon your wrist when they placed a hand upon it, no matter how far away. The enchantment that allowed them to do so, of course, relied on the lovers' blood.

That had set off another argument, this one nearly escalating to blows as Anders struggled to keep hold of Justice and Jowan insisted heatedly that the magical spell was 'harmless.' As far as Anders was concerned, there was no such thing as harmless blood magic - even less so for a spell with so much in common to the phylacteries that had been used to keep them all captive. Jowan hadn't even bothered to deny that. Surana had mediated - again - and finally managed to cool Anders' temper by pointing out that the charms were mostly favored among the warrior caste; for soldiers who had been separated by military deployments, it would often be the only way to know that their loved one was still alive.

Dagna, to Anders' deep annoyance, was enthusiastically interested about Jowan's work. She spent hours in deep conversation with him, chattering about theories of connection across time and distance and sympathetic reactions. Lacking the ingrained cultural aversion of the Chant of Light, the dwarven scholar saw no particular difference between blood magic and any other schools. To her, the horrific abuses of blood magic - or any other kind of magic - were merely theoretical.

Since that was a large part of the reason Anders had come to Orzammar to found his mage refuge in the first place, it was deeply exasperating to have it turned against him now.

The budding routine was interrupted two cycles later, when an out-of-breath messenger arrived at the doors of Brosca Manor. "Warden Enchanter," she puffed. "Thought you ought to know - trouble at the gates - Hall of Heroes."

"What sort of trouble?" Anders asked in alarm. Visions of Exalted Marches, coalitions of templars and Chantry sisters, or maybe just angry mobs danced through his head. "Are we under attack?"

The messenger shook her head. "No, nothing like that," she said. "Some more mages arrived today - but they're stuck at the Gates, and can't get in. Thought you'd better come to sort it out."

"Stuck?" Anders repeated, baffled. How could they possibly be stuck? He pulled on his boots quickly and grabbed his staff, stamping his feet down into the boots without tying them. "I'll go have a look."

The way to the Hall of Heroes was familiar by now, and as Anders approached he heard the sound of a commotion - raised voices, some of them with the familiar heavy accents of the Orzammar dwarves, some not. Anders quickened his stride, and with his long legs he soon outdistanced the others. He was first to the city gates, and slowed to a stop as he took in the tableau.

A trio of dwarven warriors in fancy formal armor - Anders did not recognize the crest or colors, except that they were not House Aeducan - were facing off against three human-sized figures just outside the threshold of the city. Two of them were hanging back, keeping a careful distance, while
the third pressed up right against the intangible boundary of the city.

The warriors crowded menacingly close, obviously attempting to loom menacingly over the lone woman, but the effect was somewhat spoiled by the fact that she topped even the tallest of them by eighteen inches. It made her look less like a helpless civilian and more like a schoolmarm attempting to keep order over a group of rowdy children, which gave Anders a rather intense feeling of déjà vu back to his old outings with the Wardens. When the Commander chose to go out with Oghren and Sigrun in tow - dragging him along, of course, since they always needed a healer - he had definitely been the odd human out.

As Anders approached, he took in some more details of the travelers' appearance. There were two women and one man, or perhaps more accurate to say one woman, and a teenage boy and girl. The teenagers were both wearing travel-stained cloaks that barely concealed the Circle symbol beneath; the woman had a set of robes that fell far short of the floor, hanging at about her knees. Underneath she wore a pair of leggings and worn-out, muddy boots, and a cloak over all of it. The hood of the cloak was pushed back, revealing jet black hair that was doing a very poor job of staying in a bun, and a determined scowl.

"Are you deaf, woman?" one of the dwarven warriors said, his raised voice cutting across the distance to reach Anders' ears. "Rules are rules. No outsider sets foot in Orzammar without a passage permit, which you don't have."

What was this about permits? Anders hurried forward, in time to catch the woman's reply: "Who's your patron?" she demanded.

"Frandol Ivo of House Ivo, what's it to you?" the warrior replied with a scowl, and Anders groaned as the copper dropped: Lord Ivo had been at the head of the obnoxious nobles who raised the most fuss about the presence of him specifically and the mages generally.

"Because this passage in this document -" The woman turned a battered sheet of parchment over and jabbed her finger at one paragraph in it. "- declares that all mages 'shall find welcome in Orzammar.' That's a de facto permission of passage under any reasonable reading, and it's signed by the King of Orzammar itself. Are you saying that your Lord Ivo has higher authority than the King?"

Her voice was brusque and hard, with a hint of an Orlesian accent around the edges; just a slight static on the r's. Another one of the warriors snatched for the paper in her hands. "Lemme see that -"

"Oh, no!" The woman reared back, pulling the paper out of reach, which was ludicrously easy given the difference in heights. "I'm not letting this out of my hands!"

"Well, you can find all the welcome you want in the Royal Palace - if you can get there," the third dwarf was saying as Anders approached the group. "But you ain't goin a step further without proper permits, issued with the stamp of the Shaperate!"

The woman let out a frustrated sound. "How can we get passage permits if I can't go to the issuing office?" she exclaimed.

"That's your problem, innit?" the first dwarf said, a smug smirk on his face.

"What's going on here?" Anders said as he reached the group, striding forward to intervene. Every head on the scene turned towards him as his shadow fell across the threshold; the two teenagers outside took several steps backwards, and even the heavily armed guards gave ground.
There was a deal of coughing and shuffling, punctuated with the clank and jingle of heavy armor. "Er, nothing, Warden Enchanter," the senior of the guards said apologetically, much more polite to Anders' face than he had been to the others. "Just a regular... These here mages want to enter the city illegally," he finally said in a rush, waving one hand at the three mages waiting outside the gates.

Anders scowled. "I have sought to make this place one of sanctuary and welcome for all mages," he said, feeling Justice deepen his voice as he did. "Why do you stand in their way?"

"They can't enter without permits," the second guard shrugged, just as Dagna caught up with Anders, just a little out of breath.

"What? They don't need permits!" Dagna exclaimed. "All a surfacer needs is patronage from a noble house or permission from the King!"

"They do now," the senior guard retorted. "A ruling the Assembly passed just last cycle. 'No non-dwarves may be permitted to walk in Orzammar without notarized warrants from the Shaperate of Orzammar.'"

"What?!" Anders demanded, outraged.

"Laws are laws, Warden Enchanter," the senior guard said defensively.

Anders clenched his jaw, trying to throttle back on Justice's rising fury - and his own. Maker damn all of them, this was supposed to be a safe place, a place where the mages could come and live freely, without the judgment and persecution that they would face anywhere in the Andrastean-controlled lands. The last corner of Thedas free of the plague of the Chant of Light - and even here, he found small-minded bigots who went out of their way to harass and intimidate his people.

The anger came with a heavy dose of hurt, of frustrated betrayal. Bhelen had promised them that, a safe refuge that could truly be made home. And yet he knew that Bhelen had made, could make no promises with regards to the tolerance of others. Bhelen had promised them safety and protection, not kindness.

But this was just the first small step in a long road that led to mages being hemmed in with laws and restrictions, ostensibly for the safety of all, but really just designed to keep them subservient. Never again, never again.

He tried to tamp down his emotions. This was just politicking, the petty bickering of one faction against another. It had been that way back in the Circle, it had been that way in Amaranthine - at least to hear Natya bitch about it - it had been that way in Kirkwall and it was the same way here. There would always be those who sought to take advantage of any small change in a situation for gain, who would politicize even the smallest and most innocuous of things, let alone a momentous sea-change like this one. He just had to learn the terrain, play the game.

"And what about me?" Anders said finally. "Do I need one of these... warrants, too? Do I need to prove myself every time I go out of the city and come back in?"

"No, no, of course not," the guard said hastily, shooting Anders a nervous look. "As a Grey Warden, you are of course permitted to pass where you will. But we can't just have feckless surfacers flooding the city willy-nilly, can we?"

"Fine," Anders bit out. "These newcomers are my guests, my responsibility. I will escort them to the Shaperate personally, if that's what it takes. Will that do?"
"Um... I'm afraid that isn't..." This prompted more metallic shuffling, as the senior guard squared his jaw and firmed to his duty. "No. No can do."

Anders took a deep breath, prepared to argue further - or perhaps scream - when a sound of rapid clanking from the far end of the Hall of Heroes caught everyone's attention. Anders looked in that direction, and felt the tension go out of him when he caught sight of a familiar face: Gavorn Vortag, the King's steward, at the head of his own small squad of guardsmen in Aeducan's crest and colors.

There were four of them to the Ivo dwarves' three, and Gavorn stepped forward with a brisk air. "Right, party's over," he announced, looking over the Ivo guards with a disdainful air. "You lot can go about your business now."

But the gate guardsmen weren't prepared to give up without at least some fight. "Not so fast," the senior guard retorted. "These mages aren't going a step further into the city until they have proper papers!"

"They do," Gavorn shrugged, tapping a small stack of thin metal wafers in his palm. "I've got their permits right here. Signed by the King himself."

"The King doesn't have the authority to issue those!" one of the other Ivo guardsmen protested. "Only the Shaperate has that authority!"

"That's never been a restriction before and we're not going to start now," Gavorn shot back. "The Shaperate has better things to do than be dragged into some power play by bickering nobles looking to pump up their manhood."

The senior guardsman shouted over him. "Why not just say what you mean, that the King can't get the Shaperate's approval because everybody knows damn well he's trampling over hundreds of years of tradition!"

"What's that?" Gavorn stepped into the other guardsmen's space, drawing himself up to his full height and bulk in order to glare down his impressive nose at the other dwarf. Behind him, the Aeducan guards' hands crept towards their weapon hilts, watching their opponents intensely. "You don't like the way Orzammar is being run? There's the door, right there!" He jabbed one thick finger towards the outer doors of the Hall of Heroes, the faintest crack of sunlight leaking through.

The debate quickly devolved into shouting, the scraping of metal against metal as the two parties of guards closed ranks with each other. Anders was briefly sparked by a healer's concern, but for all the bawling and shoving, no blood had been drawn yet...

"This looks like it could take a while," Dagna sighed, confirming Anders' fears.

"Thank you for coming to our assistance," an unfamiliar voice said from behind him. Anders jumped slightly, then relaxed when he recognized the dark-haired mage woman who had been arguing with the guards earlier. In the tense argument with Ivo's men, Anders had almost forgotten her presence; now, as he turned to face her, he wondered how he could have.

She stood between the statues of Paragons, still gripping the tattered copy of the proclamation as she looked between Anders and Dagna. Anders realized that what he'd taken for a scowl earlier was not only the result of her frustration with the guards; she had severe, harsh features that leant themselves easily to fierce expressions. Her eyebrows were as black as her hair, thick and bushy. Under them slanted dark, piercing eyes, and she had a long and prominent nose with a high arch and a distinct hook near the end. Something about those features stirred a sense of familiarity in
Anders, though he would have sworn he'd never met this woman before.

Her eyes flicked between Anders and Dagna, before that unsettling gaze landed on Anders. "So you're him," the woman said, the Orlesian accent faint but discernible.

Anders was immediately on guard. "I'm certainly someone," he said warily. "Who were you thinking of?"

"Anders," she said simply. "The Healer of Kirkwall, or the Butcher of Kirkwall, depending on which version of the story you favor."

Anders winced, but it's not as though he could have kept it a secret. "That's me," he said, giving up. At least she wasn't screaming or running away, he figured.

She nodded, as though she had expected nothing different. "I am Mardra Amell," she introduced herself.

As soon as the word 'Amell' escaped her lips, the realization clicked - he knew why she looked so familiar. He knew those eyes, that nose, because he'd woken up to them nearly every day - while strong and handsome on Hawke, they looked a little severe and unfortunate on a woman.

But she wasn't done speaking. "I understand you knew my cousin, Garrett Amell?" she asked, her gaze challenging.

"Amell?" Anders' brows shot up in surprise. "You mean Garrett Hawke, surely."

"Of course. The 'Champion of Kirkwall,' " Mardra said with a shrug. "But he was the son of Leandra Amell, was he not? My mother Revka Amell was her cousin."

"Amell? Daughter of Revka Amell?" Jowan broke in, astonishment in his voice. "You're Daylen's little sister!"

Mardra's attention switched abruptly to Jowan, sharpening with near hunger. "You knew Daylen?!", she demanded.

Jowan wilted under the intensity of her gaze. "Yes, he... he... W-we were at Kinloch Hold together. S-same classes."

"Were you there when he was arrested?" Mardra asked intensely. "Was it true, the charges of blood magic?"

At that, Jowan nearly folded, and Anders could see why; it had not been Daylen Amell who was the maleficar in the Tower, but himself. "Y-yes, I was there," he stammered. "And... no. It wasn't true."

"That's what I thought." Mardra nodded sharply. "Well, that's one injustice that won't be borne much much longer. I'm going to find him, if I have to travel to the ends of Thedas to knock down Aeonar's door."

Jowan stared at her, lips parted slightly in astonishment. "But nobody even knows where Aeonar is!" he exclaimed. "Its location has been a secret for hundreds of years!"

Mardra set her jaw, making a long, lean, bony profile of her face. It made her look hard, stubborn as granite, and Anders suddenly was not sure he'd want to put money against her in a wager. "Times are changing," was all she said.
There was no time for any more discussion of Aeonar or the difficulty thereby; the shouting match between the dwarves seemed to be dying down. Ivo's lieutenant had apparently decided that this was a problem better deferred to someone at a higher pay grade, and he and his men slunk off to the side, like a cat that had been knocked off a bookshelf and was now trying to pretend this had been their plan all along.

"Right, that's settled," Gavorn said briskly, coming over to the mages. "Sorry about that, Warden Enchanter. Won't happen again."

"So they don't need permits to enter Orzammar after all?" Anders asked.

Gavorn hesitated. "We-ell," he said. "Not quite that. Absurd as those Assembly frills are, the bill was legitimate as far as it goes; no surfaces in Orzammar without the permits. But don't you worry - we'll keep a watch posted on the gate to catch any more mages that come in, and get them their permits right away, so they won't be stuck outside or hassled any more by those nug-for-brains. Ey, over here, my lady -"

Gavorn switched his focus to Mardra, beckoning for her hand to place the strange metal disks in. Anders stepped back for a moment, intending to go check on the two mage kids that had accompanied her; as he turned around, however, he nearly tripped over one of the other royal guards.

The dwarf, brown-eyed and with an impressive bristling set of blonde muttonchops, seemed to think that this would be a good opportunity to engage him in a friendly chat. "You know, Warden Enchanter, you did us a big favor," the light-haired dwarf said, sidling up beside Anders.

"I did?" Anders said uncertainly. Not that he minded doing favors, but he couldn't remember ever seeing this guy before.

"Yep!" the dwarf said proudly. "Dorlon Haver of House Haver. You helped us give a boot to that hanger-on, Pyrag!"

"Oh," Anders said, then a moment later the name connected. The dual-axe wielding warrior from the Provings, the one the crowd had booed. The one who, Gavorn had later explained, had scammed and murdered his way into Orzammar's most cherished pastime of hitting each other with sharp things. "Oh! Him. You aren't, uh, upset?" he asked, with a nervous glance aside.

"Not in the slightest. He was a straight-up shit person, to be honest," Dorlon said cheerfully. "Tarnished the name of our House. Should never have gone with the lowest bidder."

"Why didn't you give him the boot before, then?" Anders asked curiously.

"Couldn't break our contract," Dorlon shook his head decisively. "That'd hurt our credit more than anything Pyrag could do. But after you took him to school in the last Proving - hoo! That opened up an opportunity. Y' see, there's a rule in the Proving code of conduct that says gladiators have to make at least one attempted strike on their opponents every five hundred seconds. Meant to keep the matches moving, and to stop the fighters from throwing the matches at least too obvious. There's exceptions in the rule for being pinned under rocks and such - but nothing covers magic."

Anders could follow that logic, almost. "So... because I had him incapacitated by magic..."

"Technically, he forfeited by going too long between attacks. Technically, he was guilty of throwing the match!" Dorlon let out a hearty guffaw. "And that was the technicality the up-top guys needed to give him the shift. Thanks for that!"
"Uh... well..." Anders floundered. "You're welcome?"

Gavorn seemed to have finished his briefing, because he stepped back from Mardra and raised his hand to signal his guards. Dorlon gave him a cheery wave, and turned back to follow his commander. Anders was finally free to walk over to the two young mages, as Mardra rejoined them.

On closer look, the difference between their ages was more obvious. The human boy had brown skin, large dark eyes, and dark brown hair that hung in exhausted strings around his face. He looked like he was probably in his mid-to-late teens; he had his adult height, although he had yet to grow into it, all awkward gangly limbs and bony joints. The elven girl, pale and with mousy brown hair in two braids, was much younger - short, skinny, Anders wasn't even sure she had crossed into puberty yet, although he had a harder time telling with elves. Both of them huddled together, obviously weary from the trip and intimidated by all the new faces and places.

"Welcome to Orzammar," Anders addressed them, turning his head to include Mardra in the greeting. "Even with the less-than-stellar start - sorry about that - you're welcome here, and I hope you'll be comfortable."

"We appreciate the hospitality," Mardra said briskly. "This is Anla, who came with me from the Perendale Circle." She put a hand on the girl's shoulder, and smiled at her encouragingly.

"Pleasure to meet you," the elven girl mumbled, the Orlesian accent in her voice more pronounced than Mardra's.

"I'm Hamil," the boy announced, defying Mardra to introduce him.

"He joined us along the road," Mardra explained. "We pulled him out of a scrape with some templars near Gwaren."

"You did not rescue me, I had them!" the boy insisted heatedly. Mardra turned her head, but not quite so far that Anders couldn't see her eyes turn up to the heavens as though begging the Maker for patience.

"I'm Anders, as you know," Anders said, stepping into the gap, "and these are Neria Surana and her husband, Jowan. We're all from Kinloch Hold, originally."

Mardra looked around, as though expecting more mages to come from behind the rocks. "Is this everyone who's come so far?" she asked.

"Yes," Anders said, trying not to let a defensive note creep into his voice. It had only been a few weeks since the proclamation had been sent, and traveling took time, after all. "So far."

Mardra's face pulled into a frown. "I was hoping to find my brother here," she said.

"Your brother?" Jowan piped up. "But if Daylen was taken to Aeonar..."

"Not him," Mardra said, waving off the idea. "My other brother, Daros. He was at Markham."

"How many brothers do you have in the Circles?" Jowan exclaimed.

"Three," Mardra replied calmly, "and a little sister beside. I don't know what was in the water at Kirkwall, but all five of Mamere's children turned out to be mages."

Anders felt his jaw drop. "Five?" he exclaimed. Magic ran in families, but that was ridiculous. It
was rare for more than one child, or two at most, to manifest magical potential, but *five*?

"Yes, five. They were running out of Circles to put us in, by the end," Mardra said, with a quirk of the lips that quickly flattened into a grim line. "But when I got word that his Circle had fallen, I was sure he'd be smart enough to come here." A certain amount of dismay crept into her face.

Anders was more stuck on the implications of that sentence. "What do you mean, Markham has fallen?!

"That was weeks ago." Mardra looked surprised. "You didn't know?"

"We should be out there, helping them fight!" Hamil put in forcefully. "Not hiding in caves like cowards!"

Anders rubbed at his forehead, even as a part of him agreed with the boy. "I'd keep your voice down on the 'hiding in caves' routine around the dwarves, if I were you," he said mildly. "Anyway, this is the first we've heard of it. We haven't exactly been kept up to date on the latest gossip."

Mardra pursed her lips. "Well, hopefully that will change," she said. "I have a great deal of correspondence to catch up. Fortunately, now that I'm back in Orzammar, that should be no problem."

Anders eyed her warily. "Why specifically in Orzammar?"

"I send most of my correspondence through the dwarves," Mardra said. "They have, ah, postmen in many different cities."

The Carta again. "Are these the type of 'postmen' that you can buy lyrium from?" Anders asked.

"Possibly," Mardra said dryly. She sighed, and shook out the hem of her cloak. "At any rate, if my siblings aren't here, then I can't stay. I must find them."

Anders paused, struck in dismay. "Wait, you're leaving again?" he said.

"I must," Mardra said. "I must find them. I've already lost one brother; I can't risk losing any more."

Anders chewed his lip, torn by conflicting feelings. On one hand, he didn't want to cage any mage against their will, however good the intention. On the other hand, he didn't like the thought of her leaving - as the situation escalated, it would be more and more dangerous for mages to wander around the countryside alone. "Ah... but they could be anywhere, couldn't they?" he suggested tentatively. "If you think they're likely to make their way here, doesn't it make more sense to stay in one place and let them come to you, instead of running all over the countryside and missing each other?"

Mardra looked struck by the argument. "You may have a point," she admitted.

"If nothing else, sleep on it," Anders argued. "It's a long way from Gwaren. You must be exhausted, and it's cold out here. At least have a hot meal and a night's rest before you go."

It was cold, and Anders' healer training didn't like the wan, grey-tinged look of all three of the travelers. Walking would have warmed them in the cold air, but they couldn't sustain that pace indefinitely, and they had most likely sweated through their clothes, leaving them wet and cooling against their skin. It was little surprise when Mardra gave in. "You're right," she said, with a glance at the kids. "Let's move this inside."

They returned to Brosca Manor with their newly-expanded party, Anla and Hamil lagging tiredly behind while Mardra strode ahead. Once they reached their destination, Jowan and Surana whisked the two teenagers away, while Mardra occupied their front living room.

"Maker’s tears! It’s good to be back in civilization," she exclaimed, as she reached down to unbuckle her heavy boots. "Please tell me you have tooth-mint. We’ve been chewing twigs this whole trip."

"Uh, I think so," Anders said, startled. Toiletries had been among one of the many impulse requisitions he’d made, and one of the more practical ones. He nodded at one of the cabinets. "Everything should be over there -- north corner, second shelf, on the left."

Mardra unwound the traveling cloak from around her shoulders and head; her thick black hair burst out of the untidy bun at the merest tug to the hairband, tumbling to a straight fall across her shoulders and back. Wearily, she began to methodically tug and pull at a variety of straps and bags that had been slung about her person, no doubt all her remaining worldly possessions.

Made conscious of his duties as a host, Anders stepped out to get a mug of water for his guest. Mardra accepted it with a grateful murmur and began to drink immediately, slowly lowering herself to the chair between gulps.

"So," Anders said, sitting somewhat awkwardly on the chair across from her. "You were born in Kirkwall?"

Mardra lowered the mug and took a deep breath, then nodded. "I spent my girlhood years there," she said. "Though I do not remember much outside my parents’ household. My magic manifested when I was eight."

"Of course." Anders winced and sympathy. "And you were sent to… Perendale? Not the Gallows?"

"Not the Gallows, thank the Maker." Mardra grimaced. "They didn't stop to explain their reasons to me, of course. But my mother was… strongly opposed to my removal, as she had been to Daylen’s. I suspect the Chantry authorities thought that it would be less… temptation, to have me half a continent away from my noble parents."

Anders' father hadn't been opposed at all to his removal, but he'd still ended up half a continent away. He nodded.

"There was some small silver lining, however," Mardra said with a sigh. "I was young enough, when I arrived at the Tower, that I was able to pick up Orlesian fairly easily. I gather it's nearly impossible to learn proper pronunciation, if you start too late."

So Anders hadn't been imagining the accent. "Orlesian?" he hazarded. "I thought Perendale was in
"Nevarra."

"It is," Mardra said with a small smile. "But a province near the border of the Empire, which had been... the site of much pushing and shoving between the kingdoms, in Ages past. All of the countryside along that patch of border still speaks Orlesian. And thus, so must I."

Anders could relate, more than was really comfortable. He had been twelve when he was dragged half a continent from his homeland to be imprisoned in a foreign place; certainly too old to make learning a whole new language any easier. It had taken him years to rid himself of the last of the guttural Ander accent, and some of the tarnish never had faded. Never would, he suspected.

Mardra polished off her water and looked at it wistfully for a moment, then sat up straight on the divan, clapping her hands together. "So!" she said briskly. "Let's get things started. Where do I sign?"

"Sign?" Anders looked at her blankly. "You mean, to live here? You don't have to sign anything."

"But I thought there was a service agreement with the king?" Mardra frowned, and dug around in her discarded travelbags to produce the ratty paper she had been showing to the guards. "The proclamation I got definitely seemed to imply that. Where's your charter?"

Anders gestured to the paper she held. "Er... I guess that's it?" he said.

Mardra stared. "Didn't you draw up a contract with the king?"

"It was more in the nature of a verbal agreement," Anders said, feeling apologetic although he wasn't entirely sure what he was apologizing for.

"What?!" Mardra exclaimed.

"I'm sure the Shaperate has it written down somewhere?" Anders offered. That seemed like the sort of thing they would interest themselves in, after all.

"So you're going to let the other party have full control over all documentation in your agreement?" Mardra shook her head in disbelief. "What were you thinking?!"

"Er..." Anders floundered. He hadn't been thinking of such things at all; he had no reason to think that Bhelen would not abide by his word. Although, upon further acquaintance of the cunning dwarven king, he was not sure he would at all put it past him to do something sneaky according to the word of the agreement, if not the spirit.

"Never mind," Mardra said with a sigh. "I'm sure we can get the Shaperate to give us a copy. I've already met all of the mages who have arrived so far, you said?"

"So far, yes," Anders said, feeling on slightly firmer ground here.

"How many are you expecting?"

"Uh... as many as show up?" And just like that, he was thrown off again. "I don't actually know how many will want to come... or how many will be able to make it." He frowned fiercely, thinking once more of the myriad hazards that his people would face, trying to cross hostile and dangerous terrain to reach safety. Whatever happened, he would not turn anyone away. "We'll shelter every mage in Thedas if that's what it comes to."

"So... anywhere between a dozen and five thousand. Lovely," Mardra said with a grimace, raising
one hand to rub at the bone of her brow. She lowered her hand and glanced around at the dwarven opulence. "Is this where we'll be staying permanently? It's a nice place, but hardly expandable."

"No, we're going to have a tower in the valley above," Anders told her proudly. "The King is seeing to its construction."

"So you've got a venue and a patron," Mardra nodded with satisfaction. "That's good. What's your budget?"

"Budget?" Anders said blankly, the foreboding feeling returning redoubled.

"How have you been paying for things if you don't have a budget?" Mardra asked in exasperation. "Where's your inventory lists?"

Feeling pressured, Anders dug around until he found the haphazard stack of delivery manifests he had signed for and then set aside, forgotten. He offered it to Mardra with a feeling like making an offering of meat to the wolves to try to placate their hunger. "Um... we have these…"

Mardra took them and flipped through them quickly, turning a few of them to orient with the others. Her scowl grew as she went rapidly through the stack. "These don't make any sense," she exclaimed, looking up at him. "They aren't organized at all, not even by date! Who's in charge of keeping inventory?"

"Nobody specifically?" Anders shrugged. They hardly had enough people to set anyone to any specific tasks, after all. Nor hardly enough tasks to set them to.

"Task flow chart? Personnel allocation?" Mardra said. "Where's your project timeline?"

Anders could do no more than shake his head, holding his hands palm up. He wasn't even sure what she was talking about, let alone have anything to give her.

"Do you have any experience organizing anything at all?" Mardra demanded.

"I ran a clinic in Kirkwall for seven years!" Anders protested. That counted, didn't it?

"...I see. Lady preserve us." Mardra went back to massaging her forehead, apparently against an incipient headache. She sighed. "It's a good thing I got here when I did. At least you all haven't had time to mess things up too badly."

Up against the wall of the drawing room was a large stout desk; Anders had put it atop a stack of tiles to bring it to a more comfortable height, thinking it might be worth trying to re-write his manifesto, although he'd never had the time. Mardra sat at it now, clearing away the miscellaneous trash littering the surface with a sweep of her hand. "Please bring me some logbooks," she ordered politely. "Four to start with, I'll need more later. And some graph paper, if you have any. Straight edges and charcoal, if you don't. I'll need at least three different colors of ink, and twice that many pens. Give me those manifests; they're a mess but at least it's a start."

"Uh…" Anders considered protesting, but really, would it do him any good? He shook his head, frustrated, and handed over the stack of manifests. They had a makeshift library further in the mansion somewhere; he set out there in search of the requested logbooks.

"Oh. And send in some food, if you could," Mardra's voice floated after him, from where she was already bent over her work. "We didn't eat on the road."
Fetching and carrying supplies for Mardra took up most of the next hour; but once she was safely absorbed in her self-assigned tasks, Anders finally got the chance to check in on the other new arrivals.

He passed by one of the side rooms, and a pair of masculine voices floated from behind the ajar door. Anders paused, recognizing Jowan and one of the new young mages, wondering if he should interrupt.

"So," Jowan said, in that awkward making-small-talk tone of voice that Anders knew too well. "What Tower are you from?"

Hamil's voice was thick and surly in reply. "The Circles are slave-pens. I don't make their titles part of my identity," he said forcefully.

"Oh," Jowan said.

Anders decided not to get involved. He continued on to the back bedrooms, towards one of the doors where a few liquid notes of music were floating out. From the clue of the music -- and also by process of elimination -- that had to be Surana.

He peeked around the door. Surana was seated in a chair by the bed, a small hand-held harp -- no bigger than a dinner plate -- in her lap. There was a bundle of cloaks and blankets on the bed, only the tips of brown braids and pointed ears poking out of the tangle.

He eased the door open and came in, walking as softly as he could. Surana glanced up at him, but didn't stop her soft idle playing. No tune that Anders recognized, just a wandering medley of notes.

"I'm not surprised she's tired," Anders said, pitching his voice soft. "They must have walked for days."

Surana gave him a small smile, but no answer. Her soon gaze returned to the elven girl.

Anders followed it. "One of us is going to have to take her year in the Deep Roads, of course," he said. "I can do it if need be. Maybe Hamil's, too; not sure I trust him out in the field at his age." He sighed. He'd insisted on that provision with Bhelen for just this reason, but hopefully they'd start getting more fully-grown mages before they got too many more children...

Surana nodded, then finally spoke. "We'll have to think about her training, too," she said quietly. "I would be willing to take her as an apprentice."

"An apprentice?" Anders frowned. He still had vivid -- and not all good -- memories of his own Circle education. Every mage's education was supposed to be overseen by one of the elder enchanter, in addition to the larger classes that were taught by experts on specific subjects. Anders had passed from one apprenticeship to another over the course of his time in the Tower, few of them doing him any good. He wasn't sure that he wanted to lift the Circle model wholesale for his new community.

"Yes," Surana said firmly. "We may have left the Circle, but mages still need to be trained. For their own safety."
Anders sighed. "I suppose you're right," he said. It wasn't that he hadn't considered the possibility of getting children in his new settlement -- apprentices or otherwise -- or he wouldn't have been sure to make the provision with Bhelen. But he hadn't considered the challenges inherent in their education. It was a daunting prospect -- trying to duplicate the Circle's educational model without also duplicating its poisonous, crippling induction of self-doubt.

But it would have to be done. As strongly as Anders objected to the Circles and to the Chantry's treatment of mages, they -- and Surana -- were right; an untrained mage was dangerous, plain and simple. Most mages manifested their powers in moments of stress or upset, and the magic reacted accordingly. They had to be taught control, for their own sake, before they could be taught anything else.

Surana played a few more bars on the lap-held harp, her hands pressed over the strings to muffle their sound. They wove together a distinct melody, soft and haunting, though not one that Anders knew. He welcomed the distraction.

"Is that a lullabye?" Anders asked. He nodded at the girl. "No wonder she went to sleep so quickly."

"Yes. It's an old Dalish song," Surana said. "Anla was Dalish, apparently; she was taken from her clan in the Nahashin Marshes and sent to Perendale."

Anders controlled his surprise at hearing that the girl -- Anla -- had been Dalish; that wouldn't have been his first guess. Most of the elves that ended up in Towers came from the cities, since the Dalish tended to fiercely protect their own. He wondered how that had come to be, and how painful the memory would be for her. "It's a good thing you knew their music, then," he said. "Give her something familiar to connect with."

"She knew the tune," Surana said, gazing straight ahead into nothing. "It was the same tune. But the words... the words she knows are completely different from the ones I learned. Was the version I read in the archives wrong? Censored by the Chantry? Or was the version her clan knows wrong, distorted over time and through oral history?" She heaved a quiet sigh. "Or maybe she just doesn't remember it correctly, because she was taken from her people too young. So much has been lost, never to be found again..."

There was so much sorrow in her voice, Anders felt desperately bad for her. He had to do something, if he could... "You know, I had -- an elvhen friend back in Kirkwall," he said tentatively. It was strange, looking back on it -- he realized now that Merrill had been a much better friend to him than he ever was to her. She'd stood up for him, even in the darkest hours; even when she was the only one who would. "I could write to her and ask, see if she knows, knows anything about this song."

Surana gave him a driven look. "Just because she's an elf doesn't mean she'll know," she said. "Not all elves learn the same things."

"Well no," Anders defended himself. "But she was trained as First to her clan's Keeper, so I'm pretty sure this was the exact sort of thing she studied."

Surana's eyes widened, and then dropped, as she ducked her head. "...I would appreciate that very much, thank you," she said after a moment. "It won't put you in danger?"

Anders shrugged. "I've already pretty much announced to the world who and where I am," he said. He'd decided, when he appended his signature to Bhelen's proclamation, that he'd face whatever consequences came of it up front. Better than trying to conceal it, then dealing with feelings of..."
betrayal when the truth came out later. "I'm not trying to hide."

"Good," Surana said softly. "I don't want to have to hide, either."

Anders thought about Merrill, how she'd never hid what she was, any part of it. She'd never lied or tried to conceal her use of blood magic, just insisted time and time again that it could be used safely, could be controlled. He'd never quite believed it, back in Kirkwall; now, for the sake of his fragile new home, he prayed that she was right.

Maybe when he was writing to Merrill to ask about the Dalish lullabye, he'd also ask her if she had any advice for a bumbling young man who couldn't seem to learn to leave blood magic alone. Mages, after all, were only dangerous if left untrained.

His head clouded with a dozen new troubling thoughts, Anders took his leave.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

I don't hesitate to change canon when necessary (as I'm sure you've noticed,) but in this case, I didn't have to. Revka Amell really did have five mage children including the Mage Warden.

Meet Mardra Amell!
Dagna

Chapter Summary

News from the outside world, not all of it good. Dagna is troubled.

Chapter Notes

I've changed the name of the Circle which revolted, in this chapter and the former one, from Ostwick to Markham. While I do think the Ostwick Circle rebelled -- it was the Mage Trevelyan's home Circle, after all, and they were at the Conclave for a reason -- I don't think that happens quite so early in the timeline.

Mardra Amell, as it transpired, could be as much of a holy terror as her cousin, albeit in an entirely different venue. Within the first cycle, she had gone through their entire supply of paper and ink, littering the Brosca manor with as many discarded duplicates as an entire draft of Anders' manifesto had produced, although all this duplication seemed to be on purpose, for some reason. The next cycle, she spent shuttling back and forth between Brosca manor, the royal palace, and the Shaperate where documents were stored, often commandeering Anders' presence as escort. Anders wasn't entirely sure whether she was bringing him along as a hall pass or as heavy-armed leverage, since she rarely asked him to say or do anything other than stand there and watch her arguing with whichever dwarf was her target of the moment.

After spending nearly a full day buried in the archives at the Shaperate Mardra drafted a charter, detailing the rights and duties of mage-citizens of Orzammar, codifying the Deep Roads service terms and the terms of their interchangibility. With Anders along she managed to badger Bhelen into signing it, and then it was right back to the Shaperate to file the original and get copies made. Then it was back to the Manor to write another charter, this one for the settlement itself, frequently calling on Anders to clarify or confirm some point or another.

Mardra had come into the workroom where Anders was busy distilling potions, paper in hand and frown on face. "What is this town going to be named?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't know," Anders said, startled. "I hadn't thought about a name. It's supposed to be a place of safety and refuge for the mages, a haven..."

Mardra grimaced. " 'Haven' is already taken, unfortunately," she said.

Anders frowned at her. "What, so there can only be one haven in the world?" he scoffed. "The Chantry get a monopoly on the concept of sanctuary and protection? Nobody else is allowed to be safe or welcome anywhere?"

"I didn't say that -- but legally, there is already an incorporated entity by that name," Mardra said, a touch of irritation in her voice. "If we were further north, Antiva or Rivain, or even in Nevarra, it..."
probably wouldn't matter, but as it is Haven is not only in the same country as but the same region of the country. It wouldn't stick."

Anders sighed. "Alright, then. 'Refuge' it is. Does that satisfy your need for individuality?"

"It'll do," Mardra said brusquely, and scribbled in the word in the blank space.

Then it was back to the Shaperate again, though Anders could not see why they needed to get involved in mage internal politics; Mardra seemed to think their notarization essential. The shaperate personnel, somewhat to Anders' surprise, had taken quite a fondness to Mardra by this time. Birds of a feather, he supposed. Or nugs of a feather, or whatever underground animal spent its life happily surrounded by nests of paper in carefully organized fileboxes of a feather.

What was more puzzling was that Anders liked her. Given the way she'd barged into his space and threatened to take over, he hadn't expected to; he'd never appreciated being bossed around, and if she had anything like a sense of humor he had yet to see it. Yet he felt a faint warm glow when she was around, and he wasn't entirely sure why. She was brusque, demanding, a bit of a nag really, and she was devoted to the cause of the mages and towards shaping a better world for them not only in deed but in law...

Justice? Anders queried silently. He got no answer, but a sudden sense of unease within him. It was not usual for them to be in discord; even less usual for Justice to feel approval -- let alone affection -- towards anyone outside of Anders.

Anders sighed, and gave in with a little shake of the head. Far be it to him to stand in the way if Justice suddenly showed an interest in making friends; he'd put up with her bossiness if it came to it.

At least, in the flurry of furious drafting and copying, there had been no further talk of Mardra setting out once more to find her missing siblings. Anders didn't want to hold anyone here who didn't want to be here, but they also didn't have enough mages that he could really spare any.

This one, least of all.

Mardra also brought news of the outside world. Much of it was focused around the political situation heating up in Orlais, self-obsessed narcissists that assumed the world revolved around them as the Orlesians were. But there were also plenty of mutters about mounting -- and breaking -- tensions in the Circle towers all over Thedas.

Perendale, Mardra and Anla's home Circle, had seen what amounted to a massive jailbreak -- three-quarters of the mages had made it out in one night, including them, and the Chantry had moved a massive force of Templars in to try to secure the Tower from any further loss. More Templars were sent to beat bushes in the wilderness, trying to round up the strays.

But Templars had to come from somewhere, and reinforcing one Tower meant weakening the contingent in another. As the Templars were stretched further and further, more mages took advantage of the opportunity to either run or strike back. The senior enchanters in Markham, where the Libertarians had always been strong, seized the moment to mount a coup.
They were successful in overpowering the Templar contingent, and claimed the Tower for their own -- for about twelve hours. Surviving Templars fled into Markham below, and whether they had led the townspeople into a violent frenzy or merely goaded them, the effect was the same. An angry mob stormed the Markham tower; most of the rebelling mages fled; those that remained were torn apart, as well as the store of magical artifacts and the library of the tower itself.

The room had gone very quiet -- solemn, even -- as Mardra's recitation drew to a close. And ever since then, Dagna had been acting strangely -- her normal cheerful and bubbly demeanor dampened, giving only the most curt answers to questions and, it seemed, avoiding Anders entirely.

Several cycles later, Anders found himself at the palace again, visiting the Commanders' niece and nephew. Endrin was finally beginning to relax a little in his presence, come out of his shell at least to exchange a few carefully courteous pleasantry, although it was plain that he thought Anders had little to interest him. Little Triana had no such qualms; she clearly thought he hung the stars and moon in the sky, or put the lyrium veins in the rock, as a dwarf baby. Rica happily discussed teething and walking progress with him, but had little insight or interest in matters concerning the Assembly, unfortunately for Anders.

As he was leaving the palace, trying surreptitiously to wipe royal-heir saliva off his trousers, his senses were suddenly caught. Like a bright, sharp wire through the nose to the brain, it took Anders a moment to realize that what he was smelling was magic.

Magic, in the Royal Palace? Anders didn't think any of the mages regularly came here, aside from himself. He turned off the cross-corridor where the smell had caught him, and found a pair of broad (if short) and ornately decorated double-doors.

The doors were closed, but there were no guards posted by them -- was this area of the palace off-limits? Anders hesitated, waffling between curiosity and decorum; when he saw a trio of dwarven figures turning into the hallway ahead of him, curiosity managed to broker a compromise. "Excuse me," he called out to the passing dwarves, hurrying down the corridor towards them. "Do you know where these doors lead? I -- oh."

Anders braked to a stop as the dwarves turned to face him, and he recognized at once the exquisite jewelry and elaborate gowns of the one in the lead. Queen Moira Aeducan, she of the inscrutable visage. "Pardon me, Your Majesty," Anders said, putting his hand to his chest and sketching a hasty bow. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Moira glanced over at one of her handmaidens in a look that clearly wanted to ask "why is this outlander addressing me?" but she must have been an indulgent mood that day, because she answered, "That is the Royal Library, and the workshop of the distinguished Arcanist of Orzammar."

"Arcanist of Orzammar?" Anders' eyebrows went up. "Er, excuse me, I didn't know that Orzammar even had an arcanist." Who in the devil could it be? Anders wasn't in the palace every day, but he wasn't sure how he could have missed another surfacer here for months on end.

The look the Queen gave him was one of driven patience. "I am quite certain you do, Warden Enchanter. You have been liaising with her in the matter of the construction of Orzammar's Circle of Magi, I believe."

"Oh!" The copper dropped; Dagna, of course. It had never occurred to Anders that Dagna had an official role in Orzammar aside from working with him on the mage settlement, and it should have. Come to think of it, he had never thought much about Dagna's situation at all. "She lives here? In the palace? I thought she had family here in Orzammar..."
Moira's lips tightened slightly, although Anders could not discern what emotion was driving it. "Smith Janar, of course, is a distinguished citizen and Dagna's birth father," she said in a clipped, precise tone. "Unfortunately, when Dagna chose to go to the surface, in doing so she also chose to sever all family and caste ties with Orzammar. She was permitted -- asked -- to return in this new capacity as the Arcanist, but for her to resume her former caste and family position would be quite… impossible."

"Ah." That sounded… really painful, and Anders felt a pang of sympathy for Dagna. He knew what it was like to have a father who refused to know you, to be denied the sanctuary of your own home. Still -- the problem sounded more like one of law and tradition than emotion, so perhaps she had been able to -- or would someday be able to -- reconcile with her father all the same? It wasn't his place to know, he supposed.

Still, he felt like he ought to put in a good word for his friend. "Dagna is extremely intelligent and knowledgeable, Your Majesty," he offered. "I am sure that her studies will be of great benefit to Orzammar."

Her expression did another one of those indecipherable changes; flames, the woman was hard to read, except that it wasn't positive. Disapproval? Frustration? Anger? Surely not that.

"That remains to be seen," Moira said, her voice just the polite side of chilly. "To this point, all of that intelligence and knowledge has yielded precious little practical benefit."

With a carefully precise tilt of the head, the Queen brushed past him and continued down the corridor, her handmaidens trailing in her wake.

Anders frowned after her, then his gaze was pulled back towards the carven doors. Here it was, a chance to sate his curiosity and get to talk to Dagna alone, all in one. Pushing past a final guilty pang -- it doesn't SAY to keep out, Justice, libraries are supposed to be PUBLIC -- he pushed open the right-hand door and poked his head inside.

The vision that met his eyes was full of marvels. A broad, round room stretched out beyond the doors, every wall lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. The floor stepped down towards a sunken dais in the center, each of the broad steps containing benches or tables loaded with more books, or bottles, or boxes, or -- apparati, that was the only way Anders could think of them, his eye unable to discern their purpose. At a few evenly spaced intervals around the room, long poles reared up from the floor -- or hung down from the ceiling, he couldn't really tell -- hung with racks of glass tubes and files, or globes of polished stone. The part of Anders’ heart that was and always would be a scholar -- no matter how many other concerns had crowded and stifled it, over the years -- jumped in instant satisfaction at the hushed, academic atmosphere of the place.

The stone walls had an odd, reddish-brown tint, that Anders couldn't identify, but in the brighter light of the steady gas flames all around the room it gleamed like polished wood. Was that deliberate, or merely an artifact of whatever material had been used to lacquer the stone? Over in a far corner -- almost concealed from the eye by a draping white curtain -- peeked the corner of a low, austere cot. Did Dagna sleep here, as well as work here?

The subject of his thoughts caught his attention a moment later; a series of thumps and shuffling preceded the small, red-headed figure backing out around one of the stacks, a clutch of books in her arms. She turned around, saw him, and stopped for a moment, eyes widening.

"Hi, Dagna," Anders said, and tried for a smile.

"Oh, it's you," Dagna said, with a distinct lack of her characteristic enthusiasm. "Hey, Anders."
Anders decided to take that as an invitation. He moved further inside the library, turning to walk backwards as he took in the elaborate carvings -- or was that apparatus? He honestly couldn't tell -- that climbed up the back wall. "I had no idea all this was here!" he exclaimed. "Don't the dwarves keep their records in the Shaperate?"

"The Shaperate is for dwarven things." Dagna let out a sniff of disgust, or maybe that was dust from the cracking leather bindings in her arms. "Surfacer stuff isn't allowed in there. They're probably afraid it might contaminate them with secondhand sunlight."

"Still, this is quite the collection," Anders said admiringly.

"It goes back years," Dagna said. "The old king, Endrin, was apparently quite an avid collector. And a lot of these books are mine --" one arm emerged from her book pile to wave vaguely at the back wall -- "everything from the third stack on."

"What are you researching now?" Anders asked, trying to entice her to open up on the topic of her latest project.

"Researching?" Dagna hauled another pile of books off the shelf, the volumes falling into place with a rough clatter. "I'm researching whether or not I have a copy of Toscha's Uncommon Applications in my Nevarra collection. It may be the only copy of it left in existence, since the Markham library burned to the ground."

She slammed a stack of books onto the table, and glared at Anders as though it was his fault that the Markham Circle had revolted and the library subsequently destroyed… oh.

"Is that why you've been avoiding me the past few days?" Anders demanded. "You're upset about the library?"

"Of course I'm upset about the library!" Dagna snapped. "What better reason could there be to be upset? All that knowledge, priceless, irreplaceable... and now lost forever, because of what you did!"

"What I did? Seriously?" Anders shook his head incredulously. "The Chantry taught people to hate and fear magic and as soon as they got the chance, they lashed out like they always did -- in fire and blood. The Chantry taught violence, the Templars instigated it, and the peasants carried it out. How is any of that our fault?"

Dagna scoffed. "Twist words all you like, the rebellion still wouldn't have happened if not for what you did." She glowered at him. "Everyone across Thedas knows it."

Anders threw his hands up in exasperation. "It wouldn't have happened if not for what a lot of other people did, either, but you know what? I'm fine with this. I really am," he said, changing courses in mid-sentence. "I don't mind being blamed for it, as long as it means real change is happening. What happened had to happen."

"I'm sorry for the loss of the libraries -- I truly am," he said, his voice softening with regret when he thought about it. None of the books in the library had been at fault for what happened to them, either. Did books have ghosts? His adventures in the Fade seemed to imply so. "It's a tragedy, it's a sacrifice. But we mages weren't obligated to keep on living passively in slavery forever just to protect your precious documents. If you're going to be angry at anyone for that, why not blame the people who actually lifted the sword and set the fire?"

"Oh, here you mages go again -- blaming everybody else but yourselves!" Dagna exclaimed.
angrily. "Typical! You're like children, whining 'It wasn't my fault' when you break things! When are you going to learn to own up to your screwups?"

"We'll start owning up to our mistakes when our lives are actually our own," Anders snarled in return. "How do you not understand yet that of all the people in this mess, we're the ones with the least power? We haven't had any for over a thousand years. Do you blame the slaves in Tevinter for the atrocities committed by their masters? I don't know, maybe you do! Maybe you've always lived with enough privilege that you really can't understand what it is to be trapped, to be caged, to live in constant fear of violence, of mutilation and death!"

"Don't you talk to me about privilege!" Dagna retorted furiously. "My privilege would have trapped me here, forever, in a world of unyielding horizons and stone! I gave up my privilege when I left my family behind to go see what was out there, to study and learn and make the world a better place. Which, as far as I can tell, is the exact opposite of what you've been doing to it!"

"I have always fought to make the world a better place!" Anders objected.

"For you and other mages, sure, but what about everybody else?"

"For everyone!" Anders felt like tearing his hair out with frustration. "Do you realize how much good our magic could do for other people, if only we were allowed? How much the ignorance and fear of the common people holds us all back? It doesn't have to be this way, it never had to be this way! Oppression of mages stems from the fears of men, not the --"

"Yes, thank you, I've read your manifesto," Dagna interrupted him, cutting a line in the air with her hand. "I've heard the arguments. You don't need to quote rhetoric at me."

Anders stopped. For a moment, he actually stopped moving and breathing, staring at Dagna while he tried to get his brain moving again. When he did, the first thing he could manage to choose out was, "What?"

"I said I've read it!" Dagna frowned at him. "Why wouldn't I have? It's become the most infamous document of the Dragon Age. I might not agree with everything that's in it, but I certainly read it. Run-on sentences and rampant comma abuse and all. Was there seriously not a single editor in Kirkwall?"

"You…" Strange. He'd been full of hot anger a moment ago, liquid heat just seething in his throat and on his tongue, waiting for the chance to ignite into hotter words, but now it was all doused. His face and hands had gone cold so quickly the edges were actually numb, pins and needle. "You... read..."

"What?" Dagna eyed him warily, a worried frown on her face. "Why are you freaking out? Why'd you write it if you didn't mean it to be read?"

Anders swallowed on a dry throat, trying to choke out words that seemed to have frozen in his mouth. "....No one in Kirkwall ever read it. Not even my friends, not even..." Not even Hawke. He'd teased Anders about the scribbled drafts scattered over every writing surface in the mansion, read a few lines aloud and laughed. But even Hawke, for all he'd borne from Anders -- all he'd done for Anders -- had never bothered to really read it. "Not even my closest friends. I thought no one would ever listen. I thought I was just screaming into the Void. You say people know it? People are... people are actually reading it now?"

"Well, sure," Dagna shrugged. "I mean, a lot of them are just reading it because, y'know, to try to understand the mind behind the Butcher of Kirkwall, but they are reading it."
"They're reading it," Anders breathed. He twisted his hands together, trying to work the feeling back into them, and brought them trembling to his lips. "They're listening. Oh Maker, oh Maker."

His mind seemed to race in time with his thoughts. Of course, his works were a curiosity now -- but an exciting, scandalous one, and the nobles of Thedas loved nothing better than scandal. To them the events of Kirkwall -- condemned as they might be -- were distant, abstract. To them, studying the causes and debating the outcomes -- playing the demon's advocate -- was just another parlor game. But if enough people read it, and the words, the thoughts, the arguments caught in a few minds -- just a few -- just enough -- then maybe --

Then maybe it wasn't all in vain, all the blood and sweat and tears. Maybe his dream of catching hearts, of changing minds, of arguing the world around wasn't completely dead, after all. If only it could have happened some other way, if only, if only…

"You all right, Anders?" Dagna appeared in his field of vision, a worried expression on her small face. Anders felt a chord of guilt and happiness, all at once; no matter how angry Dagna was, she still showed him this concern.

"Yes," Anders said. He cleared his throat, got his voice a little under control. "Yes, I -- I'm fine." He dropped his hands, now back to normal, and tried a tremulous smile.

By the look on her face, she wasn't entirely convinced. "Well…" she said, and then huffed. "Well, now you understand what I mean, right? I mean, you're an author! How would you feel if you knew there was just one copy of your work anywhere in Thedas, and some jerk blew it up?"

"As long as it did its work first. I wouldn't care," Anders said with conviction. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Dagna. It's not that I don't understand your position -- you're right. Knowledge and history are important. But some things are more important than that. Some things are worth the sacrifice."

There hadn't been much to talk about, after that; Anders took his leave. Fled, really; his steps steered him away from the familiar paths back to the Brosca manor, and instead took to the stairs leading up to the mages' valley.

It was night; the cold hit him like a slap in the face the moment he stepped out of the tunnel, the warm glow of dwarven architecture being abruptly replaced by a deep, midnight-black blue. Satina was overhead at three-quarters full, shedding a cold light that reflected blue off the snowcaps; stars blazed thickly overhead, their fainter light playing in more subtle shimmers along the ice.

He hadn't even realized what time of day it was, up on the surface. It was good to be reminded that night still existed, even if it was bloody cold. Anders shivered a bit, pulling his coat a little tighter about him; but he'd endured worse cold than this, in his various wilderness escapes. It wouldn't hurt to stay in condition.

Sand crunched under his feet as he made his way slowly across the floor of the dell towards the construction site. At night, it wasn't much to look at, just a barren sweep of ground and a few jumbles of stone; but he climbed up on one of the heaps, sat on the top of the pyramid, and stared out across the vision of promise. *Refuge*, he'd told Mardra; it was signed and sealed, now, a written contract, a promise.
So much hope, concentrated in this one small acre of ground. So much blood had been shed to make this possible; was being shed even now; was still yet to come. Was it worth it?

Yes.

Was it worth it, really? No matter what else went up in flames before the end; no matter how many others got dragged into the conflict? Even if they ended up losing half the people they were trying to save?

Yes.

He couldn't think otherwise, even now. Not when they had come so far, and were so close to his goal. Not when the Circles were beginning to rise, just like he had hoped and sweated and bled and prayed to create. Not when the prospect of a new life was here, within their grasp. A life where mages could be free, and safe, where they could live, and love, and die as they chose. Not when justice for an Ages old wrong was finally, finally at hand.

Anders sat there for half the night, watching the moon slide across the sky, and wondered when he'd lost the ability to doubt.

~tbc...
Mardra had been happy to take control of Anders' letter to Kirkwall, and assured him that it would reach its destination unmolested. Nevertheless Anders had, for obvious reasons, been reluctant to commit to paper an open inquiry on Thedas' most forbidden magical practices. He'd done his best to talk around the subject, and when the answering letter came, it came attached to a thick packet of what was, to the naked eye, entirely blank sheets of paper.

Anders read the note first:

"Lethallin,

"It's so good to hear from you again! It sounds like you've found a good place and are doing good work. I was very worried for you after the last time we parted ways, so I'm glad to hear you are well.

"I didn't understand at first your request about your friend who wanted to learn 'dalish magic.' Why would a human be interested in that? But then Varric helped me to understand what you meant. Please see the enclosed documents on safe practices. They are under an invisibility charm for security reasons but will become visible again when 'dalish magic' of any kind is performed nearby.

"Please ask your friend to write back if he has any more questions, and I'll help as best I can. I'd come myself, but I really can't leave the alienage right now. Things have been a bit hectic since you left and Aveline says it's really best the elves aren't left unprotected.

"Your Friend,

M.

"P.S. Your question about the Dalish lullabye, was that in earnest or just an excuse to write the letter? I'm not very good at this cloak and dagger stuff. Varric said I shouldn't write my full name and should just abbreviate, so I did. Oh dear, I just used Varric's name, didn't I? Anyway, here's all four versions of that song that I know. Hope to hear back from you soon!"

Surana had taken the sheet of musical notation with murmured thanks; Jowan had taken the packet of enchanted papers with first confusion, then after the circumstances were explained, astonished delight. Anders had been forced to quite vehemently deny that this signaled any kind of change in
his opinions towards blood magic, and also to fend off a clumsy hug from the younger man. This did not mean he approved, Blight take it.

Anders couldn't help but note that while both Varric and Aveline were mentioned in Merrill's letter, she had not passed on any mention of greetings or well-wishes from either of them to him. It was a bit depressing, but not surprising; very few people could be as soft-hearted as Merrill.

More of Mardra's information helped put Merrill's description of Kirkwall as 'a bit hectic' into its proper context of drastic understatement. With the death of the Viscount and the Knight-Commander, and the disappearance of the Champion, the city was left entirely without leadership. In its absence, the assorted motley of gangs had risen up to swallow the city from Hightown downwards. The Coterie made up the largest and most ruthless faction, though even they couldn't control the entire city; the Carta had a firm hold on Darktown and its underground routes in and out of the city, and could not be dislodged.

Meanwhile, every noble house in Kirkwall that wasn't cowering in their walled estates had made a deal with one or another of the ragtag smaller gangs, turning Hightown into a hundred warring little city-states. The city guard, led by Aveline, conducted a daily battle to try to maintain some kind of independent order, but she could make little headway. Knight-Captain Cullen had reportedly requested, more than once, for the Guard and the Templar to combine into a peacekeeping force under the aegis of the Chantry. So far, Aveline flatly refused, which Anders could only approve -- but neither could she call for reinforcements without the backing of a legitimate Viscount.

"Why don't they just appoint another Viscount and get on with things?" Anders asked the room with exasperation, when he read this. "It was Meredith who was blocking the appointment process, and we got rid of her. What are the rest of the nobles doing, sitting on their thumbs?"

Surana gave a noncommittal little shrug, and Anders returned to his reading. Mardra's correspondents didn't say outright what merchant-prince Varric Tethras was doing in all the chaos, but Anders suspected he could see the dwarf's nimble fingers at work: playing all the factions against one another, trying to maintain some balance. It was a precarious situation, likely to devolve into a bloodbath at any moment. Again.

News from further afar was no more heartening. The Orlesian civil conflict was heating up, with the rightful ruler and the dastardly usurper (whichever you thought was which) slamming each other in the press and attempting to sneak assassins behind each other's backs. Anders wondered how high the body count would rise before they got around to actually calling it a war.

Less bloodily, but more depressingly, came the news from Cumberland: the College of Magi had convened for their yearly summit, and in response to the attempted Annulment of the Gallows, the Grand Enchanter had called for a vote to secede from the Chantry, again. The College had been divided as ever; Senior Enchanter Wynne voted against the proposal, because of course she did, and the motion failed. Again.

More of the excitement was surrounding the Chantry's response than round whatever-plus-one of the failed secession movement; immediately after the failure of the vote, the Templars had marched in and declared the Conclave dissolved. That didn't surprise Anders; the only surprise was that they had bothered to declare the College abrogated rather than just murdering every Enchanter on the spot.

The surprise came afterwards. Within a day of the Conclave's dissolution, the word came down that the Cumberland Circle of Nevarra itself was abolished. Templars had spent weeks moving mages under heavy guard to other Circles; the now heavily-reinforced Perendale, to Montsimmard, to the White Spire in Val Royeaux.
It made sense to Anders, ugly as it was. Nevarra was the only country in Chantry-controlled lands where mages enjoyed any kind of social prestige or respect, and Cumberland had been the seat of their political power. Dissolving the College was a way for the Chantry to underscore their ultimate control over the mages, and to remind them of how powerless even the highest ranking among them was in the face of Templar authority. Montsimmard and the White Spire were closer to the Sunburst Throne, more tightly held by Chantry authority and dominated by loyalists; dispersing the troublesome Senior Enchanters among them was meant to sublimate any lingering illusions of autonomy.

At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder if this strategy was going to backfire on them. With the new arrivals from Cumberland, Montsimmard and the White Spire were now dangerously overcrowded, and overcrowding in the Towers was always a reliable predictor of trouble. Too many mages, not enough space, not enough food or supplies to go around; tempers would rise as mages who were used to respect and dignity were penned together like beasts, without even the illusion of privacy or release. In response, the Templars would clamp down harder just to try to keep some semblance of control. Eventually, it would boil over into violence -- riots, insurrections, and Annullment.

It had happened before. It would happen again. But this time, Anders wasn't sure the Chantry was going to be able to put the spirit back in the bottle once they'd uncorked it.

The next cycle saw new arrivals to Refuge; two older mages who introduced themselves as being from the Starkhaven Circle. Anders couldn't recall ever hearing their names or seeing their faces before, though he supposed that wasn't surprised; not all the Starkhaven mages had been sent to Kirkwall, and even if they had been, the Gallows had housed hundreds of men and women. Anders had only known the fraction of them that had been involved with the Underground, or those who had been successfully smuggled out. These two gentlemen had apparently managed to mostly keep their heads above water all throughout Meredith's reign, at least until the tide had risen too high to escape.

They were both aging, past their prime -- one frail and silvery, the other stout and grizzled -- but still in full command of their magics, if the frail one's exuberant display of lightning was any indication. Aside from signing Mardra's new charter and pledging themselves to the Deep Roads they mostly kept to themselves; there was a familiarity between them, in touches and glances as unconscious and natural as breathing.

Anders got the feeling neither of them liked him much, but that was fine with him as long as they did their part. It wasn't like he was running for office, after all.

"We should do something to mark the occasion of these new arrivals," Mardra commented, as she finished filling out some obscure paperwork relating to the Starkhaven mages. Except for the new mages, who were resting from their journey, they were all gathered in the common room that evening -- the Perendale mages, Jowan and Surana, and Anders himself.

"Do something?" Anders looked up blinking from his careful perusal of the news from Cumberland. "Like what?"

"Some celebration," Mardra replied. She pushed the logbooks away and sat sideways in her chair, a small frown on her face; her hands rested lightly over her lap, fingers twitching uncertainly as
though seeking some new task to be put to.

"Oh!" Anla perked up immediately, her face brightening. It was the first time since Anders had known her that he'd seen a smile on her perpetually worried face. "Are we going to have a party? Madame Amell's parties are always the best!"

Mardra flushed, but did not confirm or deny this assertion. Anders frowned, the letters crumpling in his hand before he made an effort to smooth them out. "I don't think so," he said. "While we sit comfortable here, thousands of our brethren are still imprisoned and oppressed. It would be dishonorable to engage in revelry while they still suffer."

"How so?" Mardra asked.

Surana spoke up from the other couch, where she'd been sanding and polishing the wooden belly of her lute. "Our suffering doesn't make theirs any less. We should recognize the blessings we have been given, and be grateful for them. What else is the point of being free?"

Anders wavered. "I suppose…" he allowed.

"This house is in dire need of a little revelry," Mardra said firmly. "Something to ease the tensions and enforce good memories of the new place." She turned fully in her chair and looked directly at him, her dark gaze pinning him. "And you are in even more dire need of a little loosening up. It would give the new arrivals a chance to see you in a more relaxed setting, make you a little less intimidating."

"Me?" Anders said in astonishment. "I'm not intimidating." How could he possibly be? Cherry-blond, freckled, skinny as a beanpole -- he was, after all, still the same mage that had made an escape from the Tower by shimmying down a rope made from the braided undergarments of the Senior Enchanters. Still the same swishy robes and tacky jewelry and bad jokes that he had ever been, dancing through life without a care in the world.

Outrageously, Anla, Jowan, and Surana all snorted in patent disbelief. Anders frowned at them, and Anla squeaked and covered her face with her hands. "I'm not!" he insisted. He appealed to the dark-haired woman. "Mardra, tell them I'm not."

Mardra pursed her lips, and declined to endorse him. "Well…"

"You've never been intimidated by me!" Anders accused at this betrayal.

"I'm flattered that you think so," Mardra said dryly, and then firmly redirected the conversation. "Well? Will we have a celebration? Or not?"

Anders wavered a minute, but the hopeful looks on every face were too much for him. Why did they need his permission, anyway? They could do whatever they liked. "Oh, fine," he capitulated.

"Wonderful." Mardra beamed. "I'll start making arrangements at once. Of course, we have rather modest means here, but a little can go a long way. Let's see. I can look into options for food. As mages we can, of course, provide our own lights and decorations. I don't believe Orzammar has orchestras for hire, though… would you be willing to provide music, Surana?"

Jowan immediately lit up as though someone had kindled a gas lamp inside him. "Oh, would she ever!" he exclaimed, not giving his wife a chance to answer for herself. "You couldn't ask for anyone better! Ria's worth a full orchestra all by herself!"

"Jowan…" Surana said warningly, but there was no real heat in her voice.
Jowan smiled at his wife, squeezing his hand on her knee. "Show them what you can do, Ria."

The elf gave a small smile back, the tips of her ears pinking; in embarrassment, Anders observed keenly, but not with humiliation.

"Remain quiet, please," she addressed all of them, and Anders mimed stitches across his lips. She smiled again, though not as wide as for Jowan, and raised the lute to her lap.

From the lute she coaxed a simple, pleasant tune; she played for a couple of bars, weaving a pleasant melody, then repeating it twice. After the third repetition, she lifted her hands from the strings for a rest; to Anders' astonishment, the song kept on repeating without her.

He almost exclaimed in astonishment, but remembered at the last moment to stay silent. After a moment, Surana set her hands back on the strings, and began to play again; this time, the melody wove a counterpoint to the original tune, still repeating itself in an endless loop. It was though there were two lutes dancing around each other; and when she finished six measures and took another pause, both melody and harmony kept on playing together.

Then she began to sing.

"When we arrive, sons and daughters
We'll make our homes on the waters
Steady your boats, stand aground
Making this cold harbor now home

Take up your arms, sons and daughters
We'll make our homes on the waters..."

She sang the chorus twice and then began to vary it, each verse picking up a different line of harmony, joining with the one that had gone before it. Just as one chorus ended, another began, an endless round of point and counterpoint. Anders and the others sat spellbound, listening to the music pour out over them -- except for Jowan, still beaming proudly as though his face would burst.

It was a song of courage and perseverance, of fellowship and camaraderie, of families new-found and homes new-made. A song of pushing on beyond hardships, of choosing to let go of the darkness of the past, of striking fresh ground and starting over.

At long last, the intricate harmony was stilled, and all that was left was a single thread of melody from the lute playing on by itself. After a few moments in the quiet, Surana began to sing again, and with every line her own voice joined her, again and again, until she was singing in a choir of perfect unison.

"Here all the pain fades away
Here all the shame fades away
Here all the blame fades away
Here all the pain fades away..."
Mardra sat spellbound, tears streaming down her face. Jowan looked at his wife as though he'd seen Andraste herself and Anders, well, he wasn't doing much better. It wouldn't have been so bad - - Anders had an indifferent-at-best ear for music -- but for the spirit within him: the rich cascade of music recalled the everpresent threnody of the Fade, and Justice was nearly undone by it. Anders found himself hollowed out, near to weeping, as the song reached a triumphant conclusion.

Once again, there was merely a single, slender elven woman with a small lute in her hands, smiling a mysterious smile. Mardra inhaled as though she were just remembering how to breathe, and began to clap enthusiastically; after a moment, Anders joined in.

"It's a Dalish traveling song I found in the archives," Surana explained quietly. "A translation, of course. But I thought it fit."

"That was amazing!" Anla exclaimed, admiration dancing in her eyes, and Jowan nodded as though his neck were a spring. "You learned to do that with magic...? I mean, of course it was your voice and playing that made the music. But the way you put it together -- I've never 'eard magic used for such a thing before!"

"It's not actually that hard," Surana said. "Wisps are attracted to music, you know, and it's not hard to convince them to hold onto a piece of a song and play it back."

"Yes, but it was you that controlled the spell," Anders said, not wanting Surana to get away with any less than her due. "Just the fact that you thought of that application in the first place -- just the fact that you used magic to create something so beautiful..." The words died in his throat.

Surana blushed again, the pink creeping down from her ears into the cheeks. "Well, I had to learn, if I wanted to play," she said. "I would have liked the chance to play together with other people -- maybe form a chamber group -- but there was never anyone else, so I just learned to make do."

"Well, I'd offer to play with you, but the only thing I know how to play is the lute, and I've been told it's not one of my myriad talents." The self-deprecating chuckle caught in Anders' throat, a clutching hand at the memories of Hawke's wry voice.

"I'm sure all you need is practice," Surana told him seriously. "Besides, if you can't play, you could always sing. Or dance."

"Well, why not?" Anders said, pushing out of his seat. Anything for a distraction, anything to keep the past in the past. "What do you say, ladies? Shall we dance? It's been a while since I had a chance to break out my Spicy Shimmy, I'm sure you'll appreciate it..."

He held out a hand to the Perendale mages, Mardra and Anla both. The girl took his hand eagerly; she weighed barely anything on his arm. Mardra was bright red, one hand over her mouth trying to stifle her giggles, but she gave her other hand to Anders and let him pull them both up. Surana smiled again, wider than Anders had ever seen her, as she picked up her flute again. Jowan began to clap, a loud enthusiastic rhythm, and Surana wove the sound into her music as well as she sang and played.

So the hours passed, and they sang, and they danced, and they played; and their music wafted up into the dark corners of the stone, to join with the singing of thousands of years past.
The song Surana sings in this chapter is 'Sons and Daughters,' by The Decemberists; slightly edited to remove the anachronisms. You can listen to it here.

We're starting to get to the point in the story where not every new character is going to be a major character. There are, eventually, going to be dozens or hundreds of mages at Refuge, and they're not all going to get a lot of screen time.
Dinner

Chapter Summary

The mages have a party! Everyone is having fun, except for Anders. A new tragically romantic ballad from the surface ensures that he has even less fun.

Chapter Notes

Tissue warning for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The promised (or threatened) party took place three days later, at a tavern in the Diamond Quarter that Anders had seen in passing but never visited. Styling itself 'Paragon's Fountain,' it was supposedly the location where three thousand years ago some Paragon or another had struck the Stone with an axe to conjure a wellspring of fresh water and save Orzammar from thirst. The spring had dried up long ago, but building a watering hole on top of it seemed fitting enough.

Anders had been expecting the party to take place at Brosca Manor, but Mardra had disagreed: the atmosphere was too everyday and not festive enough, and in any case it had proved easier to go to the food than get the food to come to them. He found out later that Mardra had struck a deal with the innkeeper, an older woman of the Artisan caste. (It should probably not have been a surprise to Anders to find out that the dwarves considered beer-making an artisanal craft.) Surana had agreed to perform several songs for the entire house, in exchange for waiving the normal hosting fee. They would only need to pay for the food and drink they consumed.

Even with the prices the Fountain was charging for imported surface food, this was still worth it, Anders had to admit. Jowan sat at the edge of the stage where his wife sang, stars in his eyes. Anla and Mardra both had their hair done up in fancy, complicated braids -- Anla's were neat and prim, while Mardra's hair was already falling out of hers. The Starkhaven mages -- Sheran and Menehi -- were getting along well with the rest of the group, though they still gave Anders himself the cold shoulder. Even Hamil had abandoned his usual standoffishness and was currently demolishing a good portion of their slow-cooked druffalo roast all by himself, and staring at the Perendale mages with calf eyes. Anders remembered being that age, the voracious hunger as the teenage body seemed to want to double in size overnight, and he felt rather sorry for the lad.

"Thanks for pulling this together," Anders remarked to Mardra in a quieter moment, while Surana took a break to speak softly with her husband. "I don't know how you managed it on such short notice."

Mardra gave him a small smile. "You're very kind," she said. "Although this was nothing, a trifle really. I remember back home in Kirkwall, Mamere used to hold grand parties for a hundred guests, and all the walls decorated --" She broke off, her expression closing down subtly, and looked out over the party in lieu of meeting his eyes. "Anyway, this was nothing. Less than a dozen guests,
with no particular agenda? A trifle."

Anders eyed her with some surprise. "You arrange these sorts of events often, then?"

"Oh -- yes." Mardra flushed again, and Anders remembered Anla's enthusiastic praise of 'Madame Amell's parties. "Among the nobility of Nevarra, there's often quite a lot of interest in the magi, you see... It's quite common among the upper class for a mage to be invited to parties, to provide conversation or entertainment. Or even be invited to host them, once your name becomes known in such circles."

"Oh." Anders blinked, trying to digest this news. This was so far from his experience in Calenhad and Kirkwall, where the nobility would cover their faces or cross the streets to avoid a mage, that he wasn't quite sure how to react. "And yours was?"

The flush grew, creeping down her neck. "Ah... well, I am an Amell. A good house, as such things are reckoned. Foreign nobility is always lower-ranked than local nobility, of course, but still carries a certain amount of weight among the Nevarrans. They get that from Orlais, really. Good breeding is everything there."

"I see," Anders said. "It's the other way around in the Free Marches. And Ferelden. Magic in the blood taints the whole family. It's one step above the pox, really."

Mardra grimaced. "I am aware," she said. With a murmured excuse, she pulled away from the conversation and hurried over to the bar, giving some last-minute instructions. Anders frowned after her, trying to determine whether he had offended her, or if she had offended him.

He did his best to put it aside, and return to enjoying the party. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying it, anyway -- certainly to most of them, being out and about in high society without having to look over their shoulder for Templars must be a novelty. It was certainly cleaner than the Hanged Man; less chance of rats in the ale, or a knife in his back. No angry elf warriors looking for any excuse to unload on him, for that matter, or severe guard-captains with an allergy to fun. No --

He pushed the thought away, and focused his attention on the moment instead: the food, the drink (hard cider for himself, and for Anla) and the music. Surana had finished her set, it seemed: she'd done a reprise of the Dalish marching song to much applause, then a sappy love ballad and another, less-sappy song about star-crossed lovers from rival families. Another sweeping, gorgeous instrumental piece, and she was packing up her lute and harp and flute and stepping off the platform into Jowan's arms.

Watching them together, Anders found himself wondering, again, what she saw in him. Surana was beautiful, talented and wise; she surely could have had her pick of anyone. Why, in the Maker's name, had she settled for Jowan, broken-down failure of a maleficar that he was? Was she really that lonely, that afraid to be alone...?

The cider had gone a little sour, or maybe that was his tongue. He put the cup aside and picked the last shreds of marinated meat off from the bones, trying to quash the sick feeling in his belly as he watched the rest of the party. Surana and Jowan were bent towards each other, whispering sweet nothings; two young people in the flush of love. Menehi and Sheran were sitting so close at the other end of the table they were practically in each others' laps, evidence of an affection that had lasted decades. He wondered how much hardship a relationship like that would have had to weather, and wondered that it -- and they -- had survived this long.

Mages in love. He ought to be glad for them, glad that they had that freedom, that blessing. He was glad.
They shouldn't be here. They ought to be out fighting -- *doing* something to make the world better, to advance the cause of the mages, to convince more mages to come to Refuge. Furthering his contract with the King, serving the years that his fellow mages could not. Perhaps he should take up writing again, new revisions to the manifesto meant to turn the ear of the common man. He'd given up after Kirkwall, thinking it useless, but Dagna had given him new hope that others might hear his words…

Another performer was taking the stage, a bright-eyed young dwarven bard with little ribbons in his beard. He sat a mandolin on his knees, pick in hand, and began to fuss with the tuning. After a loud clearing of his throat -- whether to ready his voice or to get his audience's attention, Anders wasn't sure -- and spoke.

"Thank you, deshyrs and craftsmen. It is my honor to perform before you tonight. For our first song, in honor of our guests, I'd like to perform a new piece that has been well received from Orlais to the Free Marches." With a showman's flourish, he struck a chord on the mandolin and began to sing.

It was a measure of his distraction that not until halfway through the first verse did Anders realize what the song was about, and he felt his gut go cold.

"*The hawk flies high, high, high over town*  
*But his love is dark, dark, dark underground*  
*He was called the Darktown Healer*  
*And he loved the Champion*  
*But their love will be sore tested*  
*Before their tale is done..."

Kirkwall. The ballad was about Kirkwall. About Hawke, and himself. The memories bubbled up in him like boiling water, scalding and relentless: the burning sky, the look of hatred and disgust on every face, the savage fury in Hawke's eyes. The glint of red fire on steel. He couldn't be here for this, he couldn't listen to this, he couldn't --

He stumbled to his feet, chair scraping over the stone floor with a loud bark. Surana, who had been absorbed in some quiet discussion with Anla, looked up at him in startlement. "Anders?" she said.

"I'm sorry," Anders stammered. "I have to go."

Mardra looked over towards them, attention caught. "Leave?" she said, startled. "But you're the guest of honor! The Fountain's reservation is all in your name."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry but I -- I can't," Anders backed away from the table, eyes darting around for an exit. "That song..."

Mardra's eyes widened, turning her head to take in the bard still singing and playing up on the dais. Her lips tightened as she parsed the words and subject of the song. "I'll give that performer a piece of my mind," she said angrily, beginning to rise from her seat at the table.

"No -- no, it isn't his fault," Anders protested. "He's just trying to -- I have to --"

The bard, seemingly unaware of the consternation his song was causing in his audience, seemed to be approaching the final verse.
"One hand holds the dagger
As the other holds him fast
But the love that burns within his breast
Stays his hand even at the last
He throws the dagger to the ground
And there their ways do part --"

It was too much. Anders broke, and fled out the nearest door.

The nearest exit turned out not to be the front door, or perhaps not even an exit at all -- it led him not to the main cavern of the Diamond Quarter but to a complex, twisty network of stone hallways and rooms further back in the stone. Anders didn't think he was in the restaurant at all -- the boxes and crates didn't seem to be of food, at any rate, and there were no restaurant employees around -- but he wasn't sure where, then. He could very faintly hear the noise of the party echoing down the tunnels, but at least he could no longer hear the song.

A song -- they'd written a bloody *song* about it. Maker's mercy, couldn't they have the decency to wait until Anders was dead? He wondered if all the subject of tragic ballads felt equally sickened, having the worst day of their life translated into fanciful verse. Anders stood in the shadowed corridor, arms wrapped around his torso as though that could hold his fractured self together, and struggled for some center, some control.

"Anders?" A familiar female voice from behind him made him start, and gasp at the unexpected pain of it; he hadn't realized he'd been grinding his teeth until his head throbbed in response. He didn't turn around, but a light pair of footfalls and a silhouette blocking the light from the doorway made familiar shapes in the shadows on the wall. "Are you all right?"

He tried to come up with a reassurance, some dismissal, but when he unclenched his jaw enough to speak he lost control momentarily over what came out of his mouth. A sob escaped his lips, and then a slightly hysterical laugh. "I guess not," he choked. No point in trying to lie after that, after they'd already seen him break down.

It felt like he had shattered his ribs -- a sensation he knew all too well -- pain, and more pain, and the feeling that if he moved or bent over his heart and lungs would all fall out of the ravaged cavity of his chest and splatter on the stone. He squeezed his eyes shut, then blinked them open on a blur. He'd left Kirkwall. He'd left it all behind. Why, why couldn't he leave it all behind…

Soft scuffing over the stone, so light his ears barely caught it; a light blur entered his vision as Surana sat carefully beside him. A darker blur hovered off to the side. "Is there anything we can do to help?" Mardra asked uncertainly.

Anders shook his head, and regretted it immediately when the movement dislodged tears from his eyes. He clenched them shut again, swallowing hard, and felt more than saw the wordless looks the two women exchanged over his head.

"I'll go keep things in hand in the party," Mardra murmured, and then her footsteps retreated.
Surana stayed, and after a few moments there were no other sounds in the smalls tone room.

"I'm here," she said in that soft way of hers. "If nothing else, perhaps it would help to talk about it? I can listen."

He shook his head again, not so much in refusal as in denial. "I can't keep doing this. I can't have an emotional breakdown every time something reminds me of H-Hawke." His traitorous voice broke on the name, and he clamped a hand over his mouth, to try to force the quaver back down. When he thought he had some measure of control, he removed his hand to add, "I've got to get myself together, get over it."

"Bottling up your feelings won't make them go away, Anders," Surana said firmly. "It just makes them stronger. Trust me, I know."

"What is there to say?" Anders said miserably. "You already know the whole sordid story. The whole of bloody Thedas must know, by now. What's left to talk about?"

"Well, let's start simple." Surana reached out and laid a hand on his forearm, rubbing soothingly. "How are you feeling right now?"

The words burst out of him without his entirely meaning them to. "Maker's breath, Neria, how do you think I feel? I feel wretched. Like something scraped off the bottom of a shoe." She was wrong, talking about it didn't help; it just made the feelings more real, more intense, thickening around him like water until he felt like he was drowning in it. "Everyone else has someone, and I'm all alone, and it's all my fault. I lost the most precious thing in my life forever, and I know it was all my fault."

Surana watched him steadily, her eyes gleaming like a cat's in the dim lighting. "What exactly did happen between you and the Champion?"

Anders let out a bitter bark of laughter. "Didn't you hear the song? He washed his hands of me. He told me to run and never come back. Maker's mercy, the look in his eyes..." His hands covered his face, trembling, remembering. "I did that, I made him see just how worthless and unlovable I really am."

"This is the man who spent a year working for smugglers and mercenaries, who swindled and fought his way through Kirkwall, who fought the fucking Arishok for the life of a thief, and I made him push me away!" He gestured emphatically in the air, his emotions driving him to more release than words can offer. "What does that make me? That even a man like him couldn't bring himself to stand by me? It makes me less than scum, it makes me worthless, it makes me..."

"Angry?" Surana cut in.

"N -" Anders sat stock still for a moment, dumbstruck, mouth open to refute the word. No, that wasn't it, of course that wasn't it... but it was. There it was, down at the bottom of his heart, a pool of seething white-hot rage, so suppressed and hidden and buried behind waves of guilt and remorse that he'd never noticed it, never seen it. Never let himself see it, because...

"No, I..." Anders finally finished his denial, much weaker than it had meant to be. "I'm not, I can't."

"Why not?" Surana said, in that infuriatingly reasonable way she had.

"I don't have the right," Anders answered, and closed his eyes. He swallowed, swallowed again, trying to swallow it all down. "It was all my fault. I don't have the right."
Surana raised her eyebrows skeptically. "Feelings are rarely about rights and rules, Anders," she said. "I'm not here to judge you. I'm just here to listen. Why are you angry?"

He struggled with it; *it was my fault, it was my fault, I don't have the right*. But drowning the feelings in guilt and shame hadn't done anything to make them go away, and Surana was right. Justice was no help here; Justice was as conflicted as he was, because for all they believed that Anders' own death would be justice for his wrongs, he still blamed Hawke for his part in it, because...

"Because he *promised!*" Anders snarled, and once he'd opened his mouth he couldn't stop it, the torrent of words, of feelings, of anger that poured out of him. "He told me he loved me! 'Until the day we die,' he said, those were his exact words! He told me he'd stand by me, that he'd stay with me... and then the moment it got hard, he dropped me like a hot coal! What right did he have to stand there and look down on me? What right? He cut his way through half of Kirkwall before I ever lifted a finger! Now I have to listen to every bard in the country sing ballads about how noble and generous it was for him to *not stab me in the fucking back*?"

Anders jumped to his feet, pulling away from Surana's soothing hand, and paced furiously across the little room. The fury bubbling up in him was too strong, too energetic, he had to channel some of it into activity before he accidentally set something on fire. Like the walls. "Do you have any idea how many people Hawke has killed? How much blood he waded through to get where he did in the world? He held hundreds of deaths on his head without a care on the world, they *all* did, but mine -- mine were too heavy for him? Why?" Fury became edged with anguish. "I told him what was at stake! He knew how important this was -- to me, to every mage! If he hated what I did so much why didn't he find me a better way? Why didn't he ever listen to me? Why didn't he help me? Why didn't he just... help me..."

The hot rage flickered and went out, the comforting heat fled, but Anders couldn't stop; he'd opened the cask and now it all came pouring out, all the grief, all the pain of rejection and betrayal that had been stopped up behind the solid clog of guilt. Guilt at what he'd done, guilt that even after all he'd done he still felt angry for what had been done to him. Guilt that he hadn't been able to accept Hawke's rage, his rejection, as completely as he'd tried to; guilt, at the end of it, that he didn't feel guiltier. That he still, at the end of the dark cold night, didn't believe that he'd done the wrong thing. Guilt that, at the end of it all, he'd chosen to put his cause over Hawke, and he would have done it again.

He wept, hunched over himself and rocking on his heels, and Surana crouched beside him and rubbed his back gently. She didn't say anything more, not even when the tears and spasms finally ran themselves out, and he quieted.

Anders took a deep breath, fighting tears and snot. His chest and throat hurt, his face was raw, but he felt better. Better enough, in the aftermath of the storm, to feel a little bit ashamed. "I don't... I don't want you to think any less of Hawke, Neria. He's still a great man, still a hero. I just..." He cleared his throat, shoved his sleeve roughly over his face to try to dry it. "I don't know what I expected from him. I wanted him to be like Andraste, all-forgiving. I wanted him to be able to accept even the ugliest of me. I wanted him to be a saint, but he's just a man."

"You don't need to defend him to me, Anders." Surana frowned at him. "I'm *your* friend, not his. Every man has his limit. I'm just sorry you were beyond his."

"I... I didn't make it easy on him," Anders said, painfully, finally. "I didn't tell him what I was going to do, leading up to it. I mean, of *course* I didn't. I didn't expect to live past it, and I didn't want to drag him down with me. So he had no warning. But I didn't... cut ties entirely, either. I
tried to push him away and hold him close at the same time, and in the end I got neither. It really was my fault."

Surana tilted her head. "Does it matter now whose fault it was?"

"I suppose not," Anders said, wretched. "It's gone, either way. There's no getting it back."

"Would you want it back? If that was a possibility?" Surana said curiously.

"Yes," Anders answered, without hesitation. Without thought.

Surana's frown deepened, and her voice took on a harder edge. "Even though he hurt you?"

Anders thought it over for a minute. "Hurt is not the point," he said. As a healer, he was more than familiar with pain; pain came with life. Only the dead were without pain. "People hurt each other all the time, even when they love each other. Maybe even more so then. But when we were together, he was… everything." His voice broke slightly, his heart even more. "He made me whole."

Surana moved her hand again, rubbing his back comforting. "You are a whole man, Anders," she said soothingly. "Even without him."

"Thank you," Anders said, voice choking.

For a long time they sat there in the dim, cool room; from far away, the sound of voices and laughter still filtered down through the stone. Surana did not suggest going back to the party, and neither did Anders.

"I wouldn't take back what I did," Anders said at last, the last part of his confession. "Not even to get him back. But I miss… him…"

He choked up again, still somehow finding the tears for it. It was the ultimate selfishness; that even though he had made the choice between his cause and his lover, between a better world and a happy life, he didn't want to. He still, greedily, wanted both. Even now. Even now.

"I know," Surana said. She stroked his hair, comfort offered without answers. "I'm sorry."

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

For anyone interested, here's the full version of "The Champion's Heart"
Lyrics by Philliam, probably
Arrangements by Zither!, probably

The hawk flies high, high, high over town
But his love is dark, dark, dark underground
He was called the Darktown Healer
And he loved the Champion
But their love will be sore tested
Before their tale is done
Though cruel fate is destined
To tear the two apart
Still deep beneath stone Kirkwall
Awaits the Champion's Heart

His lover was a mage who wished to live among men
And never to a Templar would he bow his head again
Before he would submit, he would shake the world apart
And such a man was what it took to win the Champion's Heart

He loved him for his passion, he loved him for his fire
He loved him for the war he waged to lift their people higher
But never did he dream just how high the flame would blaze
Until he looked to the sky and saw the Chantry razed

The sky burns red, red, red in the dawn
As the fire rains, rains, rains on the town
One hand holds the dagger
As the other holds him fast
But the love that burns within his breast
Stays his hand even at the last
He throws the dagger to the ground
And there their ways do part
And far, far, far over the sea
Fled the Champion's Heart
Chapter Summary

The Tower experiences a setback. Dagna gets an unwelcome piece of news. A wild cameo appears!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As dwarven hours wore on, restlessness began to set in. There was still no news of further Deep Roads assignments from Bhelen; what did he want all the mages for, if he wasn't going to use them? He'd taken up writing again -- so far, just scribbled fragments of thought -- but that alone could not absorb his nervous energy. A trio of new mages had arrived recently, from Perendale -- apparently at Mardra's invitation -- and while the Brosca manor was by no means full, it was another reminder that they could not stay there forever.

He channeled some of that nervous energy into climbing the stairs to the mage's valley twice a cycle to watch the construction progress. Though of late, the tower didn't seem to be progressing very fast. At first, he had been able to watch the landscape transform day by day; now, work seemed to have slowed to a crawl. The heaps of construction material still sat where they had been piled, but there were only a bare handful of workers doing anything on the site. It made Anders uneasy, but he reminded himself that he knew nothing about building, let alone dwarven building. Maybe this was all part of the process.

He took to hiking around the valley, exploring its little nooks and crannies -- though the high, impassable ridges meant he didn't get very far in any one direction. On one such day, he spotted smoke coming from over a fold of stone; curious, he went to investigate.

The smoke was coming from a little hollow in the stone, a clearing ringed by tree and rock no larger than his old clinic had been. A rocky, precarious trail snaked up away into the peaks, and a little trickle of a stream wended away down into the valley. A handful of humans in fur-lined leathers had made camp there, a low crackling fire that was the source of the smoke.

Avvar, here? Well, why not? They were said to roam the Frostbacks, and this was the Frostbacks. Anders hesitated, chewing the side of his lip as he wrestled with what to do. Withdraw the way he'd come, or try to make friendly contact? What was the worst that could happen?

Well… he could end up an arrow-pincushion. That was certainly a worst thing that could happen. But he wasn't at all sure that would prove fatal, for him, and better him than one of the hapless other mages without a guardian Spirit, right? And if they were the types of people who liked to make arrow-crafts with helpless mages, better to know now than later.

With that thought firmly in mind, Anders set off down the slope towards the Avvar camp. It turned out to be a little steeper than it looked, and he found himself skidding and sliding over uncertain footing. Heads turned in his direction as pebbles clattered ahead of him, announcing his presence. Oh, well, he'd never been any good at stealth. At least nobody had shot him yet.
"Hallo the camp!" Anders called out, as he got a little closer. There were three Avvar that he could see so far; one tall and bulky in a shaggy fur cape and hood, two shorter and slighter in leather jerkins and rugged fur-lined hoods. One had a dark blond beard, the other's face was clean-shaven, but streaked with black and white paint. The smaller ones just watched him, grim and unfriendly, but the big man raised a casual hand in greeting as Anders scrambled up to the perimeter of the camp.

He was a big man, bigger up close; even without the mask and cape he was tall, bulky and barrel-chested. With it, he could give a Qunari a run for their money in an ominous-loom contest. The cape covered his head and shoulders, thick white fur giving the impression of great age; but the part of his face that was visible under the leather mask, fashioned like a bird's beak, was smooth and unlined. He held a large, unpolished hammer casually to hand, the butt resting on the ground.

After a long moment spent sizing each other up, the cloaked man spoke first. "Not expecting to see one of your kind way up here, lowlander," the man said evenly. His voice was deep and resonant, with a heavy drawl that was like a rural Ferelden accent and yet not. "You're no dwarf."

Anders, as he usually did when he was nervous or tense, took refuge in sarcasm. "I'm not? Really? I'm shocked!" He put a hand to his breast in fake anguish. "Dear old mum and dad Stonehewer never told me I was adopted. They lied to me my whole life, those cheeky bastards!"

The two smaller Avvar -- man and woman? Teenagers? Anders wasn't sure -- looked at him like he was insane, but the big man chuckled, a deep rumble not unlike distant thunder. "I'm Amund," he introduced himself cordially. "Sky-watcher."

"Right..." Anders said. Parts of the big man's cloak and jerkin were colored a muddy blue; between that and the bird-like mask, Anders could definitely get the 'sky' theme. Wasn't that a religious thing? Didn't some Avvar worship the sky? Anders deeply regretted sleeping through so many of his lessons back at the Tower; all he remembered learning about the Avvar was that they lived in the mountains, didn't worship the Chant, and that they stole disobedient and noisy children from their beds to boil them for stew. That part, he was fairly sure he could disregard. Fairly. "I'm Anders," he said, offering his own name in return.

"Anders, eh?" the Sky-Watcher said thoughtfully. He cocked his head to the side, watching Anders with an unfathomable expression. "You're a long way from home."

"Well, I hope not," Anders said, mind racing furiously. He couldn't tell from that enigmatic comment whether the man recognized him, and was referencing Kirkwall, or didn't, and was referencing the Anderfels. Not that either of those places had been home in a long time. "That is to say... this is home now. That tower down there, it's meant to be a refuge for the free mages of Thedas."

"That right," Amund said laconically. It was not a question, but his tone gave away nothing of his opinion on it.

"Er... yes." At least, he dearly hoped so. "Anyway, what, ah..." Anders floundered, feeling out of his depth; he'd never been good with the diplomatic conversations. 'What are you doing here' sounded too accusing, didn't it? "What brings you, ah, here?"

Through the mask, he saw Amund's eyebrows rise in surprise. "And why wouldn't we be here?" he said. "This is part of our range. Time was, many winters past, this was the summer grazing field for the rams."

"Oh," Anders was suddenly worried. "Um. Is that going to be a problem? I mean, the tower? We're
not tearing up your pastureland, are we?"

"I said was. The rams moved on, and so did we. Things change. " Amund was looking at him in tolerant amusement. Then his expression changed, sharpened intently. "This tower of yours, is it going to act as a trading post?"

"N --" Anders started to deny it, then changed his mind mid-word. Why shouldn't it be a trading post? Why shouldn't they trade with the Avvar, or anyone else? "You know what, I won't let it out. Maybe. If you don't mind my asking, how did you and your fellows get up here? I thought these peaks were impassable."

Amund chuckled. "Impassable for fancy chevaliers and flatfooters in plate, maybe. Not for us."

"Well, that's... good, good to hear. I guess," Anders said. "It's a matter of safety, you see. Er -- not from you. It's not the Avvar we're worried about. We were kind of hoping to be out of the reach of the Chantry and their armies, up here."

"You won't find a better protection than the arms of the Mountain-Father, that's for sure," Amund nodded judiciously, the white cape fluttering in the crisp wind. "Your tower will be safe enough. If it ever goes up."

Anders was about to voice an agreement with that sentiment, when Amund's last sentence grabbed his attention. "What do you mean, if?" he demanded.

Amund shrugged. "Well, it seems like the building has stopped, hasn't it?" He jerked his chin over at the valley, still and quiet even in the middle of the day. "Me and my boys been camping around this peak for the last week, and we've hardly seen anyone out here at all, aside from you of course. Stones don't move themselves."

Anders took a deep breath, and then another, trying to keep hold of his inner turmoil. He'd already been doubting, trying not to doubt, but to have this confirmation from a third party... Betrayed! cried a voice deep in his mind, and he wasn't at all sure it was Justice's. Bhelen promised. He lied! They'd been promised a home, a refuge, a Tower of their own, and like every other promise that had been made to his people, that promise had been broken.

Wait. It was too early to jump to conclusions, to leap into action. The construction was stopped, yes, but there could be any number of things that caused that. Organizational delays, Anders was more familiar with that; maybe a flaw had been discovered in the building material, or any number of other things. He had to wait and see. He had to talk to the King.

He swallowed the bitter bile, Fade-tinted, that had crept up in his throat, drew in and released another deep breath, and opened his eyes. He hadn't even realized he'd shut them, in his struggle to master his emotions, and he realized that the three Avvar were staring at him. Intently, as though he were prey about to run -- or a predator about to strike, and they weren't sure which one.

"You're a strange one, lowlander," Amund rumbled. His eyes were sharp, behind the hood, and Anders felt a chill go down his spine. If he hadn't known that Amund was no mage, he would have thought it was magic calling to magic. "Bound in blood and bone, but there's something... " He broke off his intent study, shaking his head. "The gods keep you close, man of the Anders."

Anders rubbed his palms on his trousers, trying to regain feeling in them. "Thank you," he muttered. He'd take the protection of pagan gods over none at all, these days.

"That," Amund drawled, "was an observation, not a blessing."
Half a day of frustrations later put him in the corridor outside King Bhelen's study, Dagna at his side. The scholarly dwarf had received his bad news with dismay, but not with surprise; apparently she had been harboring suspicions of her own over the long delay. She'd spoken of rumors that had come to her ears, something to do with a resolution among the Smith Caste, but had refused to say more -- saying instead that they needed to speak with the King as soon as possible. Since that had been Anders' plan anyway, he agreed readily.

There was a squeak of hinges and scrape of stone, one of those discreet little doors that could only be seen from the right angle, and Vartag Gavorn came out, scrubbing at a patch of ink on his hands. He didn't look surprised to see Dagna and Anders there, but then again he didn't look pleased either. "Warden Enchanter. Senior Arcanist," he greeted them, sparing a nod for each. "What can I do for you folks?"

"We need to see the King," Dagna said immediately. "It's about the Circle Tower."

Gavorn winced and took a deep breath. "Unfortunately, the King is very busy with his duties right now," he said. "He won't be able to spare time for a meeting today, I'm afraid."

"What?" Anders exclaimed. This was the first time since he'd arrived at Orzammar that he'd been denied access to the King. Was that arrogant of him, to think that he had a right to the time of a leader of a sovereign nation? And yet... "But he gave his word!"

"Why has construction on the Tower stopped?" Dagna jumped in. "What's going on with the smiths? There's talk of collusion among the clan heads, rumors of price fixing --"

"We're aware," Gavorn said with a sigh. "The situation is... complex. And quite frankly, it's turned messily political. The short version is, the heads of the smith caste have decided to turtle."

Dagna's face paled. "Oh, no! They can't!" she cried.

Anders looked between Dagna and Gavorn; there was obviously a context he was missing. "What? What does that mean?" he demanded.

"It's a word for when the heads of a bunch of different families in one caste get together and agree not to do something," Dagna explained to him, bitterness thick in her voice. "Usually as part of some political protest against something the Assembly is doing that they object to... or the King."

"They haven't said so outright, but it's clear that's what they're doing." Gavorn rubbed a hand over his beard, looking tired. "The King contacted, ah, several highly placed Smith clans for contract work on the tower. They took the contract -- at highway robbery rates, I might add -- but now they're refusing to work the stone."

Anders frowned. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Not quite," Gavorn grimaced. "The contract includes a deadline, but they're legally entitled to petition for an extension, which can be granted by a member of the Assembly."

"Oh, no..." Dagna moaned.
Gavorn gave her a grim little nod. "They've requested extensions four times now, and each one has been approved. Theoretically, they could keep doing this forever."

"Can't you do anything?" Anders tried to think of some loophole. "If they won't do it, can't you get someone else?"

"Not while they have an open contract with a specific house," Dagna said angrily. "I can't believe this!"

"We do have the option to make offers to other Houses while this one goes unfulfilled, but so long as we remain contracted to one House, none of the others are obliged to take it," Gavorn sighed. "And so far, none of them have."

"They're all in league with that frog Ivo, I'd lay diamonds!" Dagna spat.

"So what? You're just going to let them keep putting it off and putting it off forever?" Anders demanded. He tried to get hold of his rising panic, the feeling of the stone walls tightening in on him. It had been months since the walls of Orzammar seemed to loom over him this way, months since this place had felt so cold and dark, so unwelcoming. But if they were all going to be trapped down here forever, shuttling between the manor and the Deep Roads, never to walk under the sky again… they'd suffocate. *He'd* suffocate. "You can't do that! You have to do something. Bhelen gave his word!"

"We're doing all we can..." Gavorn started placatingly.

"Not good enough," Anders growled. He stood up, and took a step towards Gavorn, towards the hidden door in the wall beyond that would take him to the quarry he sought. "I want to talk to Bhelen. I want to remind him of what he has pledged!"

Gavorn stood his ground, holding his stare for a long moment; behind him, Dagna seemed frozen to her seat. At length, Gavorn apparently realized he couldn't glare Anders into submission, and dropped his gaze. "Fine," he relented. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

---

The steward led them through a short maze of hallways to another office, indistinguishable from the one where they had met Bhelen before. Or maybe it was actually the same one, approached by a different route? Anders couldn't tell. This time, though, Bhelen was not working through breakfast; he was surrounded by stacks of papers, a pile of books sliding off the table behind him, and a dirty mug at his right hand that smelled of something piercing. Just a whiff of it was enough to bring Anders' view of the room into sharp focus; he wondered how much of it Bhelen had been drinking.

The King himself did not look happy, slumped in his chair and paging through a document with a tired and sour expression. When he looked up and saw them enter the room, his mouth turned down and his expression closed any further. He did not pretend to be happy to see them, but at least he gave them the courtesy of putting his paper aside and straightening up in his chair. "Dagna. Anders," he greeted them, and Anders couldn't help but notice that he forewent any titles this time around. "How can I help you?"

Dagna went straight to the point. "What is going on with the Tower?" she demanded, stepping
Bhelen's eyes narrowed, and his frown deepened into a scowl. "Gavorn already told you everything there is to tell," he said, giving the steward a sharp glare at Anders' side. The steward shrugged helplessly, a little 'I couldn't stop them' gesture. "The Smith Caste is refusing to do the work and with the backing of the deshyrs, there's no way around it."

That was the thing Anders didn't get. "Aren't you king? How can they just refuse to obey you?" he asked.

"I am king, but even my authority is not absolute," Bhelen sat back in his chair with a little grunt. "I must work within the laws and traditions of my kingdom, or my kingship is nothing. I can bend it to a limit, but beyond that I cannot go. They have the law on their side and can withstand any pressure I can bring to bear. If there's one thing you can count on a Smith to be, it's stubborn," he said bitterly. "They breath iron dust for so long it gets in their brains."

If anyone had asked Anders, he would have thought that applied to all dwarves, not just to the Smiths. But he didn't say as much.

"But you have to do something!" Dagna exclaimed.

"I am doing something," Bhelen snapped in return. His voice was tense, fraught with frustration and anger -- not at them, Anders thought, but at the situation, and a hint of something else in his expression. Guilt? That might have explained why he had been ducking them for so long. "I am doing a great many somethings, in fact, most of the details of which you neither need nor want to know.

"Believe it or not, I am doing everything in my power to get this case moved forward, but for now we just have to wait. And since this is not a life-or-death issue, you can wait. End of story." He slammed the document he was holding onto a stack, and picked up another folder, visibly wrenching his attention around. "Is there anything else?"

Dagna wrung her hands, looking distressed and frustrated. "I don't understand why they would do this," she protested. "The Smiths don't dance when the deshyrs sing. Fooling around on a contract this big is going to tarnish their reputation! Are they really that greedy?"

"This is no longer about just money," Bhelen replied. "They have a personal investment now in running this out to the limit. But you'd know more about than I would, Dagna."

"Me?" Dagna was taken aback. "What does this have to do with me?"

Bhelen hesitated, glancing at the taciturn steward. "Gavorn didn't say?" he said rhetorically, then sighed. "Well, I suppose he's learned some tact over the years. The ringleader of this little conspiracy is your father, Smith Janar."

"What?!" Dagna cried.

"I'm afraid so," Bhelen let regret soften his voice, for the first time in that interview. "Some say there's quite a lot of grumbling among the Smiths these days about the upstart prodigal girl who ran off to the surface and was let back in. And the mages who must have corrupted her mind. That's the version of the story tends to get favored more in Smith Janar's hearing, they say."

"No... no, he wouldn't!" Dagna said, turning from one man to another as though begging for a different hearing. "He... wouldn't do all that, just to get to... just to..."
Her voice broke, and she burst into tears. Startled, Anders stepped forward and reached a hand towards her shoulder, trying to steady her. She slumped against him, sobbing into his chest.

Bhelen's reaction was much less charitable. "Oh by the paragons, can't you do that somewhere else?" he groaned. "I have work to do."

Anders gritted his teeth, but there really was nothing more to be said, and nothing more to be gained by antagonizing their ally further. "We won't take up any more of your time, Your Majesty," he promised him, leading the crying Dagna back towards the door.

---

Outside, their first priority was to try to find a private corner, where Dagna could compose herself. Anders tried his best, awkwardly, to console her; aside from offering handkerchiefs and commiseration, though, there wasn't much he could do.

"I'm sorry," he said, as Dagna wiped her eyes and tried to swallow hiccups. "I know what it's like... to have to live with knowing that your own father hates you." He'd lived with it for thirty years, after all. Strange to think that he'd lived more of his life parentless and outcast than he ever had lived in his family home; those years still loomed larger, somehow, in his memory.

"He's not doing this because he hates me!" Dagna snapped, then gulped back another sob. "Ancestors, this would be so much simpler if he did. He's doing this because he loves me, or at least he loves the idea of his dutiful little daughter who does everything she's told.

"It's just so typical!" she ranted, kneading and worrying the handkerchief into rags and tatters. "Even now, even now after everything, he still thinks that he can get me to give up all this 'foolishness' and come back home. Even if he has to destroy every dream I've ever worked for to do it…"

Anders didn't know what to say to that, so he tried a hug. She didn't hug him back, but she did lean into him, so maybe it was helping.

"It's true what Bhelen says about the Smiths," Dagna said, quieter now, woeful instead of anguished. "The iron dust gets into your lungs, gets into your heart. It just... missed me, somehow." She sniffled for a moment, then added softly; "I wish my heart was as full of iron as his. So it wouldn't hurt so much."

---

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

I'm not honestly sure whether it's reasonable for Amund to be this far north; his appearance in the Fallow Mire in Inquisition is considerably further south. But, it's stated that's not his home range -- the Avvar chief's son came out of the mountains to find the Inquisitor, and Amund tagged along -- and besides, I'm just going to declare "The Avvar are semi-nomadic" and they can show up anywhere I want them to.
Anders brought the bad news back to the Manor, and shared it with the others: partly in hopes that they would be able to find some solution that he couldn't, partly because he didn't feel he had the right to keep them in the dark. The announcement provoked a flurry of discussion, worry and speculation, but no real solutions.

So far the best plan that had been floated was to try to go outside Orzammar to find contractors willing to do the work, but even that came with its own complications. Sheltered in Orzammar, it was easy to forget how much danger awaited an apostate mage down in the countryside, especially as the mage rebellion heated up. Anders of course was the most likely to be targeted, but any of them were at risk. Plus, of course, the complication that none of them had money, at least not in the quantities needed to make such a contract. The safest option would have been to go through Bhelen anyway, have him send his contacts out of the city, but Bhelen had told them in no uncertain terms not to act, to wait it out. Going behind his back was likely to do no more than anger him.

With the topic of the stalled Tower tabled for now, conversation turned to other things: news from the White Spire of strange happenings there, the complete lack of news or word coming out of Hosburg in the last month, the unseating of Goran Vael in Starkhaven, the latest assassinations out of Orlais. Empress Celene had commissioned a new series of ballads praising her which were now being sung all over southern Thedas, which topic brought them around to the events of the party last cycle.

"About the party the other night... that song the bard performed..." Mardra began, understandably hesitant.

Anders groaned and covered his eyes with his hand, leaning back against the low sofa. "Don't tell me someone in the Bard's Guild has it out for me," he grumbled.

"Well, no. I did a little asking around," Mardra said awkwardly. "Apparently, Orzammar doesn't really have a bardic tradition -- it doesn't fit into any of their traditional castes."

"I could have told you that!" Dagna chimed in.

"Are you trying to say that dwarves don't sing?" Anders asked. "They do, I've heard them."

"Certainly, dwarves have their own songs," Mardra said. "What I'm saying is that they don't sing or play as a performance art the way we think of it. Instead of just one person singing for an audience, everyone sings at once, the songs are communal. It is a group activity."

"The Dalish are the same way," Surana noted. "All of their songs are meant to be sung by groups,
with call and answer parts from many different people. None of them are meant to sing alone. When I was studying their music in the Circle Tower, I searched and searched for songs that could be sung by one person alone, but I never found any. That was why I eventually turned to using the wisps in my music -- so that I wouldn't have to sing alone."

"You couldn't sing with the other elves?" Mardra sounded surprised.

"What other elves?" An edge showed its way through Surana's usually quiet demeanor, a hard expression on her delicate face. "I was the only elf of my year, or the year above or below me. And the older I got, the fewer of us there were. You know that most elves don't make the Harrowing. Aside from two of the teachers, and a small handful of the youngest apprentices... I was alone."

"That sounds really lonely," Dagna said sympathetically. Anders was more disturbed by the comment about Harrowing than anything else -- was that really true, that more elves failed the Harrowing than humans? He'd never noticed that, but then again, he hadn't looked.

"It was a little, but the spirits became my friends," Surana said with a small smile. "And I learned new things from it, so there was a silver lining."

Dagna nodded, and Anders tried to steer the conversation back on track. "But dwarven bards?" he prompted Mardra.

"Right. This is something that only started recently," Mardra said. "It turns out that this is a program Bhelen started, modeled after the Orlesian bards. And just like the Orlesian bardic tradition --"

Anders groaned. "Let me guess. Spies?"

"Agents, at the least," Mardra ceded with a nod. "Every bard in this city reports directly to, and is paid by, House Aeducan alone."

This was not heartening news. "So wait, Bhelen is playing games with me? Or trying to send some kind of message?" Anders demanded.

"No, no. What this means is that they sing and play only things that suit his agenda." Mardra's hands twisted, wringing nervously together. "But Anders, you -- and Kirkwall -- are at the center of an incredible storm of controversy! There's not just one song about you, there's dozens! But every bard in Orzammar is under strict orders that they can only perform songs about you that are positive, or at least neutral. Which... lets out most of them, to be honest. The only ones that are left are the ones that focus more on the... the romantic angle of it all."

"Oh," Anders said. The word seemed insufficient, but then again, he wasn't sure what words would be sufficient.

"I just thought you should know what to expect," Mardra said. Her dark eyes were soft, sympathetic. "This is likely to come up again... quite a lot."

Anders swallowed, trying to relieve the dryness of his throat. This was fine. He could handle this. Even if, in all honesty, he'd rather have dealt with the songs that were neither 'positive or at least neutral.' He could deal with scorn and hate, he'd prepared for it; he wasn't sure he could deal with constant reminders of the one good thing he'd had and lost.

But no, this was fine. Really. If the worst thing he had to deal with in the fallout from Kirkwall was a slew of cheesy tragic love ballads, then he'd be getting off easy. He knew that.
Surana and Dagna had fallen into a deep, animated discussion of comparative Bardic traditions; that left Anders and Mardra sitting on the fringes. Mardra was looking at him with not-entirely-disguised worry; what had Surana told her about his breakdown on the night of the party?

"I wonder if any of these songs have made their way around to Hawke?" he commented to her, trying for a lighter tone. "He'd laugh his ass off if he heard that one. He could make a joke about anything, no matter how inappropriate." Anders liked a good joke -- it was one of the things he'd loved about Hawke -- but he drew the line when it came to reacting to the scoured remains of a murder victim with a crack about 'boneless women flopping through the streets of Kirkwall.' Honestly, at the time he'd been so scandalized, he hadn't even been able to get upset. Which, he supposed, was the point…

"That's an Amell trait, I honestly think," Mardra replied. "My brother Daylen was the same way. Always telling jokes, anything to get a laugh out of the adults. He had this one joke that he'd bring out every time Mamere had guests over, the one about the farting phoenix --"

"The farting what?" Anders choked on a laugh.

"Phoenix," Mardra said. "Sometimes a gurgut, it varied. It was more a routine than a joke, really, complete with sound effects and pratfalls. Mamere was mortified. Fortunately, the older women all thought Daylen was 'precious'."

Anders laughed uproariously, although a small part of him couldn't help but note that Mardra's story bore little resemblance to the Daylen Amell he'd known -- even in passing -- in the Circle. Not that Anders had paid much attention to anyone that many years younger than him, but he would have noticed a clown; Daylen had seemed very dull and stolid, a complete teacher's pet. Well, he supposed that being a clown was something Daylen had just grown out of. Or had beaten out of him.

"It missed me somehow, though," Mardra added glumly. "I took things more seriously, even then -- most of the jokes just went right by me. The twins used to call me 'Moody Mardy.' They'd follow me around the house chanting it until I lost my temper and hit them. I was bigger than them, but they outnumbered me. They'd run around in circles and pull my hair and trip me, at least until Daylen made them stop."

"Siblings can be like that," he said, twisting a wry smile. He'd had one, a younger sister, and in retrospect maybe he'd been more of a trial and less of a properly supportive older brother than he should have been. Flames, Mareke would be past thirty now, undoubtedly married, maybe even with children half-grown…

He changed the topic, clearing his throat of the rising sentimentality. "So... 'Mardy'? That used to be your nickname?" He tried not to snicker.

"It's what my family called me as a child, yes," Mardra said forbiddingly.

"Maybe we should start calling you that, 'Mardy,' " he teased her.

She gave him an extremely pained look. "Please don't," she said, her voice long-suffering.

"All right, all right," he laughed. "So your brothers were all clowns, but not you. What about your sister? You said you had a sister. Was she funny like your brothers, or more like you?"

"I..." Mardra looked away, frowning. "... don't know."

"You don't?"
Mardra shook her head. "Astrida was only a baby when I was taken away. I never got to know her, really."

Damn. Anders cursed himself for his carelessness; he should have known better than to go down this road. Another mage family torn apart by the blasted Circle, another unhealed wound. Although perhaps there was more of a chance of healing it, now, than there ever had been before. "Maybe she'll come to Refuge, and you'll get a chance to meet again," he said encouragingly.

"I hope so." Mardra frowned, and twisted the cuff of her tunic. "I only hope she'll make it here safely. It's a long way to travel from Dairsmuid."

"Enchanteur Anders, someone is 'ere to see you," a voice called him back to attention, and Anders blinked up from the scraps of parchment he'd been scribbling on. Just fragments of thought, on fragments of paper -- not enough of them to construct an argument, yet, but he wanted to get them down before he forgot them.

Anla was hovering in the door to the study, looking anxious. Anders gave her a smile. "Yes, Anla, who is it?" he said. "One of the House Aeducan guards?"

The elven girl shook her head. "No, it's a dwarf lady," she said. "She didn't give a name, and I don't know her. She has a lot of fancy vallaslin, though."

Vallaslin? It took Anders a moment to realize what the girl meant. "Tattoos, you mean? Tattoos on her face?" He stood up from the desk, reaching for his staff. "What kind of tattoos were they? Caste markings, or Legion markings?"

"No, I…" Anla hesitated. "I don't know? They were all over her face."

"Did she say what she wanted?"

"To see you?" Anla repeated uncertainly, and Anders gave over the effort. It would be faster just to go and see who wanted to see him, although he was baffled as to who would have come all this way.. He picked up one of his satchels from where he kept it ready to hand, a medium-weight bag with a fair mix of survival gear and healing supplies, depending on what was called for. He headed down the hallway to the Manor's front door, Anla trailing behind.

He hadn't known who to expect at the door, but it was not Killer. She was actually leaning against the wall of the Mansion, head hanging so that her bangs obscured most of her face. "Killer?" Anders said in surprise. Automatically, he looked around for Bardien and the rest of the patrol, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"Her name is Killer?" Anla exclaimed from behind him. "Andraste preserve us! What kind of a name is that?!"

Killer pushed away from the wall and looked up at him, a frown on her small face as she crossed her arms. "Anla, go on back inside," Anders said without looking away from the dwarven girl. "Thank you for coming to get me. I'll take things from here."
Anla looked disappointed and wildly curious, but she obediently went. For a long moment, the two members of the Legion looked at each other, before Killer broke off the gaze and looked down at the ground again.

"What's up, Killer?" Anders said lightly, aware of how weird that sounded. "What brings you all the way in here? Did Bardien send you?"

A head shake, but still no answer. Anders was growing increasingly perplexed, and he looked around as though an explanation would be waiting around the corner -- or maybe someone lurking to play some kind of joke. "Is there something you need?" he prompted her.

"Healer," Killer looked up at him again. "Can you help?"

"Of course, if it's something I can do," Anders said readily, still bewildered. She knew his name perfectly well, but she called him… oh. "You need healing? Is that it?"

Killer nodded. Anders frowned and hunkered down a bit, magic sweeping over the little Legionnaire, looking for injuries. She didn't seem to be hurt, not as far as he could tell; lots of old scars, but nothing recent…

Killer stepped back a pace, and scowled at him. "Not me," she said. "Not for me. For Mida."

There was a warble in her voice that, combined with her guttural accent, was hard to make out. But Anders gathered she was asking for help for someone else, not herself. Meter? Meeda? Who knew? But there was only one possible answer. "Sure," he said. "I'll heal your friend. Where are they?"

Killer relaxed, and nodded firmly. "This way," she said, and turned and trotted off. After a few paces she glanced over her shoulder, looking for him, and Anders hastily moved to catch up.

She led him off into a warren of stone, canting away from the main thoroughfare of the Diamond Quarter into darker, smaller back-alleys of stone. His perplexity grew the further away from the Manor they got; he hadn't come this way before, mostly sticking to the broad, clean-swept avenues of stone between the Brosca manor and the royal palace. Not that these tunnels were deserted, by a long-shot; they passed through a dozen or more cross-corridors or doorways arching off to the left or the right, openings of stone chambers both natural and crudely cut. Both corridors and caverns were filled with dwarves, lurking and keen-eyed as they watched Killer and Anders pass through.

This was a part of Orzammar he hadn't seen much of, narrow and crowded and claustrophobic. Though he supposed he had always known on some level that it must be here, the same way Hightown had been built on the backs of Lowtown. Maker, he had no idea how he was going to find his way back to the Manor after this; dwarves had an unerring sense of direction underground, but he didn't.

As they walked, Anders was left to ponder his unexpected guide. Anla's reaction back at the Manor, while rude, had drawn into contrast her strange name. He'd gotten used to referring to the little, odd-eyed Legionnaire by the harsh moniker, but surely it had to be a nickname. Even in Orzammar mothers didn't name their daughters 'Killer,' did they?

"So," Anders said, making an attempt at conversation as they went. "Killer, it's a nickname, right? What's the story there?"

Killer looked back at him, definitely a side-eye if he'd ever seen one. "Nickname?" she repeated.

"You know, a short name, a fun name. Something your friends call you," Anders said. "I mean, I'm not arguing that you being in the Legion of the Dead and all, it's not an appropriate nickname, I just
don't think it's likely that 'Killer' went down on your birth certificate. If Orzammar has birth certificates, that is. Do they? I honestly don't know."

Killer contemplated this chatter for a moment, then put her head back down and kept going. Anders tried again. "Then what's your name, actually?" he asked, more directly this time.

"Killer," she answered.

Anders sighed. He wasn't sure whether she'd misunderstood the question, or was being recalcitrant, but either way that line of questioning wasn't getting anywhere. "But isn't there something else, something that your family and friends call you?"

"My friends call me something else," she said.

Anders waited a beat, but nothing else was forthcoming. "So, what is it?" he prodded.

The look she shot him over her shoulder this time was utterly unimpressed. "You can call me Killer," she said.

Ouch. Anders settled back, properly rebuffed. Nothing to do but watch the scenery go by, then, as much as he'd been trying to avoid that. The tunnels were getting darker, the gas-or-lyrium lamps being replaced with cruder torches which guttered and smoked. There was a distinct stench rising from the tunnels ahead, too, that put Anders sharply in mind of Darktown. Everything about this place did, actually, from the abandoned traces of mining tracks on the floor to the sharp acrid smell of human waste that had nowhere lower to drain.

They stopped in front of an opening in the stone -- better described as a crack, really. It might have been a natural fault, once, opened by the implacable motion of the earth, but someone had clearly chipped away at the walls to hollow out a passageway. The tunnel beyond was utterly dark, devoid of the maintenance of servants or the scrutiny of guards. Anders knew this type of tunnel all too well from his time with the Underground. A back-passage, an unmonitored escape tunnel leading to… where?

"Where are we going, exactly?" Anders asked Killer, unable to keep his mouth shut despite the rebuff.

"Home," she answered simply, and disappeared into the darkness.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to break it here, but the first scene would have been too short by itself, and the second scene too long in full. Next up: Anders Does Dust Town!
Dust Town I

Chapter Summary

Anders sees Dust Town for the first time, and is not happy with what he sees.

Chapter Notes

Why did I think I could do all of Dust Town in one chapter? Oh well.

Anders had the feeling Killer hadn't thought this one through. The escape tunnel narrowed down to barely a crack at the end, hardly large enough for dwarves let alone a full-grown human male. If Anders hadn't been on the skinny side (a beanpole, as Hawke had often called him) and an accomplished escape artist, he'd never have made it through. As it was, he had a bad moment when he encountered a kink the tunnel, the dark and close stone combining to threaten a full-on panic attack. He managed to steady himself with the reminder that, together with Justice, they could tear down the very mountain around them if it became necessary, and was finally able to wriggle through.

Killer was waiting for him at the other end of the tunnel, shifting impatiently from foot to foot. Anders took a moment to catch his breath, straightening his clothes and brushing off cave slime, before he was able to continue. "When we go back, let's go by the main road, okay?" he said to his companion.

She glanced up at him, then looked away. "I guess you can," she said.

There was a faint emphasis on you that made Anders frown. Why him and not her? Belatedly, he remembered something he'd been told weeks ago about the Legion: once they had joined, Legionnaires were not permitted within the boundaries of the city. "Killer, is it okay for you to be here?" he asked in alarm. "I thought Legionnaires weren't allowed to come back. Will you get in trouble for this?"

She shrugged. By now Anders already knew that meant he wouldn't get any more solid of an answer from her, but he thought he could fill in the blanks. Given Killer's history as a juvenile delinquent, it was hardly surprising.

Really though, Anders was the last person on Thedas who could throw stones at anyone else for a little illegal living. He followed Killer onwards, out of the little escape tunnel into a broad and winding cavern, looking around for this mysterious Mida. He dearly hoped he wasn't being dragged all the way down here to heal a pet nug or something. Even he had to draw the line somewhere.

Well, he'd do it anyway, but he'd be surly about it for sure.
The floor was wrong. That was the first thing Anders noticed. Everywhere else in Orzammar was floored with stone -- polished flagstones in the Diamond Quarter, unpolished in the Commons, intricately decorated and set with semiprecious stones in the palace. Here, the floor was packed dirt, a thick layer of dust and gravel above which the stone foundations only occasionally peeked through. In any human town, that might not have seemed so strange, but given dwarves' obsession with clean stone lines, it felt less like an architectural choice and more just like the stone floor was unfathomably dirty.

That seemed to be borne out with the rest of Dust Town, as well. This was unmistakably a dwarven place, built with the same stone in the same formations as the rest of Orzammar -- but in a state of dingy disrepair. Foundation stones were cracked, arches crooked and askew; in many places there were gaping holes where stones had been pulled out, and then a little further down piled haphazardly against each other to create a ramshackle dwelling.

This was not fine dwarven craftsmanship; this was the makeshift work of someone who neither had the expertise nor the tools to build well. Grime covered every surface, thicker in some places with heavy black mold, dark liquids running along the low places in the floors to pool into mud. From the smell of the air, this place lacked the efficient ventilation and sanitation systems built into the walls in the rest of the city. What ran down into Dust Town, stayed in Dust Town; there was nowhere lower for it to go.

It was hard to even make most of this out, in the dim light that filled the cavern. The whole place glowed with a sooty, sullen orange light that concealed more than it revealed. The lanterns and torches of the upper city were missing here entirely; instead the light came from what looked like barrel fires littered haphazardly in the streets, burning trash for warmth and light. And there was plenty of trash to burn. The place was strewn with it, cracked glass bottles and torn-out cushions and broken furniture and other things too filthy and deteriorated to guess what they might have been. The same black mold grew over all of it, only occasionally relieved by grey lichens or pale white fungus.

And the smell, dear Maker. Anders had smelled worse -- he'd once cleared out a pit of three broodmothers, after all -- but he'd never been in a place that smelled so much like a sewer that was not, in fact, a sewer. Even Darktown hadn't been this bad -- those caverns opened here and there to air and sky, and the harsh salt winds off the sea had scoured the cave system on a regular basis.

It was so much like Darktown that Anders felt a dizzy sensation of déjà vu. He half expected to see Tomwise hawking poisons out of a niche, or turn a corner and see his old clinic. But Kirkwall had been flooded with refugees from the Blight, with nowhere in the city to fit them; what was happening in Orzammar to lead to such concentration of squalor? What was it Bhelen had said, that the Diamond Quarter was full of empty houses, just like the one he'd given Anders and the mages to live in? Was Orzammar not rich from its mines of lyrium and steel? Why was this here?

No one should be forced to live in such conditions, Anders thought, and he wasn't sure whether it was him or Justice who had originated the thought. It was both. Every city had its richer and poorer areas, but this was utterly unconscionable.

Around the fires, crouched in the improvised dwellings, slinking in the narrow dark alleys were bodies. Dwarven bodies, dull skin and brown clothes alike streaked with a grey dust that blended them seamlessly into the background. Only their eyes stood out, keen shining eyes in the dark that tracked their progress with a ferocious, hungry interest. Every face, bearded or not, was marked with angular black tattoos; not quite the full skull paint of the Legion of the Dead, but not one face was completely free of them.
"Killer," Anders said, and cleared his throat. "These people, with these tattoos. Why haven't I seen them in the rest of Orzammar? Where do they work?" He couldn't recall having seen them before, not anywhere; not working in the forges, or pulling carts of coal, or standing behind the merchant's stalls, not even on their knees cleaning the bases of the statues.

"Dusters don't work," Killer said, not turning around. "They're not allowed."

Anders blinked, dumbfounded. "Not allowed?" he repeated, sure he must have misheard. "That's absurd! You can't just 'not allow' people to work. How else are they supposed to earn money, buy food? How are they supposed to live?"

Another shrug. "Not allowed," she said.

Killer led them down into the cavern, wending their way between the fires and heaps of refuse. Anders stayed alert, tracking the humanoid figures as they flitted past; there was no way he was going to be able to blend in, an obvious outsider thrown into their midst, but as long as he didn't look like an easy mark no one would move on him. Probably. He hoped. At least not until he was further into the cavern, without a clear line to the exit.

One pack of scampering children came too close, and Killer warned them away with a dark growl and a hand on her axes. They shied away, scurrying off, and Anders couldn't help but notice that every girl child of the lot had the same tattoo under their right eye. Something about the design tugged at his memory, why did it look so familiar, ah!

Anders reached up to his neck and tugged the amulet out from under his tunic, tilting it into the poor light to be sure. There it was, the swirl of lines and angles that had adorned Natya Brosca's cheekbone, comfortable and familiar for all the time he'd known her. Anders had known enough people with tattoos, among humans and elves, not to see anything significant about the mark; now, looking from one branded face to another, he began to understand.

There was a change in the watching eyes after he brought the amulet out. Before they'd been watching him with barely veiled hostility, trying to sort him into either predator or prey, looking for the first hint of either threat or weakness. Now there was a shift in the atmosphere, a change in attitude, and he heard a mutter of commentary among the watchers. Brosca was the only word he could make out, leaping from corner to corner.

His guide led him through the maze of buildings and fires, turning left to inch down one alleyway barely wide enough for one dwarf body to pass, then climbing up a flight of grimy and broken steps. At the crumbling façade of one building she led them to an entrance, shoving the latch up in the slot and kicking the door till it opened.

More dark figures filled the corridor behind; a few made a move as if to intercept them, but Killer sprang forward with fists and feet and the shadowy figures retreated with pained yelps. Anders followed her up the stone stairs inside, along a shadowed hallway, and stopped before one tarp-covered doorway.

Here, Killer actually knocked, a brisk rap on the doorframe before she poked her head inside. A gruff male voice spoke from beyond. "Is that you girl?" it said. "Back from the deep roads again?"

Killer pushed aside the tarp and entered the room, Anders ducking under the frame to follow. Beyond was a dimly lit, dirty apartment, with a few pieces of actual furniture and a window in the wall overlooking the rest of the cavern. By most standards, it would have been a death trap, but compared to the rot and ruin outside, it was almost palatial. Sitting on a splintered chair by the window was an elderly dwarf, bald-headed, with sunken eyes and withered hands. His legs were
twisted up under him in a posture that looked both unnatural and painful.

Sharp eyes followed Anders into the room, but it was Killer he addressed; "Brought a friend, have you?" he asked. "Who's this?"

Anders waited to see if Killer would introduce him, but she moved off into the apartment without saying anything. "I'm Anders, at your service," he said, giving an awkward little bow. "And you are…?"

"Gersh, at yours I suppose," the dwarf answered, sounding doubtful. "An' what's a surfacer like you doing down in Dust Town with the rest of us blighters?"

Maker, was it actually called Dust Town? That explained so much. Anders shrugged a bit helplessly. "Well, Killer brought me down here to ask me to heal somebody, so…"

"It's me da," Killer supplied, as she reappeared with a broom in hand. Without a word, she began to brush up the cinders and cobwebs that cluttered the floor.

Mida. Me da. The lamp went on in Anders' head. "Ohhhhh," he said, feeling twice an idiot. "Well, er, I guess that's you, then."

Gershen shook his head, sighing in exasperation. "I told you girl, I'll be fine," he addressed the younger dwarf. "These legs of mine, they won't kill me. It's all part of gettin' old -- your bones get to break down."

Killer said nothing, instead looking up at Anders expectantly. He sighed. "Well, if I've come all this way, no point in just leaving," he said. He pushed up his sleeves, beginning to tie them back as he always did before healing work. "Mind if I take a look?"

"Eh..." Gershen shrugged. "Well, why not."

Anders knelt on the floor beside Gershen's chair, since the older dwarf didn't look like he'd be able to stand. The ground here was actually a lot cleaner than anywhere out in the rest of Dust Town -- Killer's work, he guessed. So she came here regularly, to look after the old dwarf and keep his place clean, try to ease his pains.

A little examination with his magic revealed the cause of those pains at once. The man hadn't been wrong, the joints of his knee and hip were breaking down -- although Anders suspected that malnourishment and cold and damp had as much to do with it as age. He wasn't that old, outside of the premature aging poverty had done on him.

The softer tissue that cushioned the bones from each other was degenerating, causing the bones to twist from their paths and rub against each other. More cruelly yet, the inflamed tissue had prodded the bones themselves to send out tiny spurs or hooks of bone, locking the joints in place and biting into the surrounding tissue. No wonder the old man was chair-bound; trying to stand or walk would be agonizingly painful.

This was not going to be a quick fix. Anders spread his hands over the man's knee, hovering a few inches from his leg. "I think I can help you," he began, "but this is likely to be painful."

Gershen laughed. "And you think it isn't now, lad?" the old man said. "Do yer worst."

Anders decided to take that as a yes. He started by summoning ice to his hands, to numb the nerves and calm the swelling; only once that had a chance to settle in did he call spirit magic to his hands, sending it to settle in the man's joints and begin the tedious process of reshaping bone.
While the healing went on, Anders cast around for some topic of conversation to keep the man's mind off the pain. Killer was flitting around the apartment behind them, busying herself with little chores that the old man wouldn't have been able to do himself. "I thought Killer was... well, I didn't know she had any family left alive," Anders said.

Gershen shifted. "Oh, well, I'm not actually her father, if it comes to it," he admitted. "Way back twenty years ago I was landlord of this block o' houses, and her mother was one of my tenants. Came in one day to find her gone... the lass was all alone. I did my best for her over the years, a bit o' money here, a bit o' guidance there. She needed the help, and no one else was inclined." He leaned forward a bit and whispered confidentially to the healer, tapping one gnarled finger against his temple. "She's not all there in the head, you know. Comes of her mum's drinkin'." "But now she's all grown up and in the Legion! Not bad for a duster girl, eh?" Gershen straightened up, pride in his voice. "She pays a visit every time her patrol is in town... brings in a bit o' food and help. And now you, eh? Eh? You've been looking after the lass?"

He sounded genuinely anxious. "I certainly try, yes," Anders reassured him. "I'm to accompany the Legion on some of their patrols... myself and the other mages."

"Eh." Gershen waved this aside; clearly he had little interest in the politics of the dwarf-mage alliance. Maker, he reminded Anders so much of Natya; they had the same accent, though hers had been polished thin by years on the surface, and his was still thick and guttural from a lifetime spent in Dust Town.

"Da, I brought food," Killer's voice broke into their conversation. She came around to a table along the wall, and upended a sack that she'd been carrying on her belt. A small shower of items pattered out; dried mushrooms, sticks of dark-colored meat jerky, long bones that could be cracked for marrow. She pointed to the mushrooms, a pale unassuming gray. "These are good, I ate some." Gershen shook his head. "You shouldn't give me your food, lass," he said reproachfully. "You got to stay strong in the Legion!"

Killer shrugged. Anders was momentarily captivated by the familiar shapes and colors of the deep-cavern rations; he'd eaten more than his share of such unappetizing fare on some of the longer missions with the Wardens. He whistled. "Flames, this takes me back to my time with the Wardens," he said. They were good memories -- mostly -- even with the poor food. "Throw in some spider palp, and I could probably still make a camp soup out of it."

"Oh aye?" Gershen's attention was repcatured. "You're a Warden?"

Anders smiled. "Yes, I served under Warden Commander Brosca," he said proudly.

"The Paragon!" Gershen exclaimed, his whole demeanor lighting up like a kid at a country fair. "You're the Paragon's mage lad!"

"Lad?" Anders mouthed to himself, shaking his head incredulously. He'd been five, six years older than Brosca even when she'd been made Arlessa. Well, no point arguing it with the old dwarf; no doubt anyone under sixty was 'lad' to him. "Did you know her?" he asked. He hadn't realized Natya had any family or friends left in her old hometown, or perhaps he would have sought them out before this.

"Aye, everyone knows of the Paragon! She's one of us, she is!" Gershen said proudly. Not a personal acquaintance, then; just the collective pride of a group when one of their own made it big. "Rose up from the dust to the highest office in the land. Just goes to show that there's hope for even
a brand like us to make it big, right? No matter how far you sink, there's always hope!"

His eyes shone with a near fever of adoration. Having grown up around devout Andrasteans, Anders knew idol-worship when he saw it. Was it a surprise? The dwarves revered the Paragons as more than legends, as something semi-divine; and Brosca had been one of them. *Their Paragon, the Paragon.* Even if the woman Anders had known had chafed under the weight of all her titles, who was he to take their hero away from them?

He sought a way to change the subject, to find some way to solve the riddles that puzzled him. "About that…" he said slowly, eyes still on the sparkling light flowing from his hands. "Killer said that the casteless aren't allowed to work. I don't quite understand."

"Eh? What's to understand?" Gershen sounded puzzled. "Every caste in Orzammar has a job; every job has a caste. No caste, no job, it's simple enough."

"But then how do you get money?" Anders said, outraged. "How do you survive?"

Gershen hesitated a moment. "Well… some don't," he said bluntly. Then he winked down at Anders, tapped the side of his nose knowingly. "But there are ways, Warden, if you ain't too picky. Deshyrs and merchants throw out a lot of junk, you know. Some of it worth more than others. Me, I figured out years ago that everybody needs a place to sleep. Them deshyrs, they think us brands are born to nothin' better than a life o' crime, but I showed them, didn't I?"

He went on. "There's always begging, for the cute ones. A pretty lass can hope to snag a noble, if he gets an heir on her. An' for the not-so-pretty ones, there's the Carta… or the Legion." He smiled across the room at Killer, the pride unmistakable on his face.

That made sense, more than Anders liked. Wherever the local government failed, the shadow government spread to pick up the gap. "I guess the Carta has a big presence down here," he remarked.

"Eh. Less now than they did." Gershen gave a shrug that looked much like his daughter's. "The Paragon came through, blew them right out of the holes they scurried in. Most of 'em left for the surface. Been quieter down here since then. Good not to have their boots on our neck, I suppose," he said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "But nothing else has really changed, not really."

"It seems… hard," Anders said, frowning. He flicked his gaze up to meet the old dwarf's. "I mean, didn't you ever want something more? What about your daughter, doesn't she deserve better?"

Gershen shook his head, and spoke sternly. "Listen, Warden, I've had about as good a run as can get, for those of us born without a Caste. I've had this building, and a good steady living from it; kept a roof over my head and clothes on my back all the years of my life without going out and shanking some poor blighter for his boots.

"I've lived my life in Dust Town, and I'll die in Dust Town, because that's all I was born to be. No point in shaking my fists at the Stone and wishing for the world to be different than it is, eh?"

Deeply disturbed, Anders bent back to his healing. It was a grim picture that Gershen painted, all the bleaker for the matter-of-fact way he accepted it as the divinely ordained way of the world. He should have been bitter, he should have been angry -- that he and his people had been sentenced from birth to languish in this pit, that a shabby rundown tenement was considered the very height of achievement and luxury. *Anders* was already angry, and he didn't even have to live here.

Anders had lived through worse conditions, many times by choice -- but he had subjected himself
to hardships in the hopes, in the dream of making a better future for others, for the mage children not yet born. By casteless standards, Gershen was a shining success -- what did it say about Dust Town, that the best future such a man could possibly imagine for his daughter was to grow up dead?

~tbc...
Healing Gershen kept him preoccupied, his hands busy and mind blank as he focused entirely on the problem before him. There were no clocks -- dwarven or otherwise -- in Dust Town, yet Anders was sure hours had passed as he painstakingly filed the bones down to their proper size and shape and healed the surrounding tissue. It was finicky, tiring work, but all worth it at the end for the look on Gershen's face when the old dwarf had stood from his chair again for the first time in months.

His pure delight had faded, though, as Anders gathered his things and prepared to leave, Killer silently shadowing him down the tenement stairs to the front stoop. Gershen stood in the doorway, nervously shifting from one foot to another as his hands clenched around a worn cloth hat. "I -- I suppose you'll be wanting payment," he mumbled. "Ain't got much to give you, I'm afraid. No more'n a few copper scrapings, not really anything up to your weight. I could call in some favors… but I don't suppose anything in Dust Town would be anything you need… or, or…"

It made Anders' chest ache, watching the proud, intrepid dwarf -- who had gotten so far, in his arduous world, with so little -- be humbled this way. "No need for any of that," he assured Gershen. "I don't charge people for healing. Even if I did, your daughter's in the Legion with me; any family of hers is family of mine."

"Aye, but still…" Gershen shuffled, a distressed frown on his face as he ducked his head. "You've done me and mine a mighty kindness today; its like don't come free. It never comes free. Everyone wants some repayment, in this world."

Anders could have argued further with him on that, or said that he was doing it to prove that magic could be a force for good; but he didn't think Gershen would understand that, or care. Instead, he smiled as a thought occurred to him, and turned to take in Killer, hovering silently at the edge of this conversation. "And what price did you ask of her?" he asked Gershen softly, gesturing to the odd-eyed girl. "What repayment did you ask for helping an orphan girl with no place to go?"

Gershen opened his mouth, then closed it, and his face creased in a smile. "Aye, there's that," he allowed. "Well. Thank ye kindly, Healer. Look after yourself. And you too, lass; see him back to the main way, and don't let no one harass him!"

"Yes, da," Killer said with a bob of her head, and ghosted past the old man with a quick brush of her cheek against his. She set off down the narrow, cracked stairs to the main cavern, glancing over his shoulder for Anders to follow.

"I'll come back again later to make sure it hasn't flared up again!" Anders called back as he
followed Killer down the stairs; and then he had to devote all his attention to placing his feet on the grimy, trash-strewn stones.

Killer offered no conversation as they made their way back among the narrow alleys, and his own thoughts quickly turned dark again. His surroundings were distressing -- more than distressing, they were appalling. How could Bhelen allow this to go on in his own city? How could any dwarf pride themselves on their grand traditions, knowing that this was happening under their feet?

More than any of that, why did the dwarves of Dust Town even put up with it? Natya had escaped this place; why did they stay? There were no bars on the doors to Dust Town, no Templars stationed to keep them in. They could find better lives up on the surface, in the air free of all this filth and despair; Anders had known many dwarves who had left Orzammar and lived happily on the surface. Bodahn Feddic and his son, Varric and even his brother Bartrand, before the disastrous expedition. Natya herself, of course.

There was so much Anders understood about Natya now that he never had before. She had spoken of her past and her hometown in passing, never in great detail, but Anders knew she had mentioned Dust Town before, and the brutal and miserable existence she had fought and clawed and scraped to escape. He understood now, why she would stop even in the most disgusting of battlefields for the chance of looting a few extra coppers, why she would snarl at even her friends and comrades over dinner, guarding her food with a ferocious curse and glare if anyone approached her while she was eating. How casual she had been, sometimes, to dole out death and violence in pursuit of her ends. He'd always thought that callousness had been taught to her by the Blight, but now he wondered.

Yet the Commander had been a noble woman, no matter how desolate and brutal the background from which she had risen. She had looked at the world with a clarity that saw past all forms of prejudice and bigotry, looked straight to the heart of things and saw the good and the bad in them according to what they were, not what others would say of them. She had saved him in the face of all odds, rescued him from the templar Rylock -- she had -- she had taught him so much about the world, she had -- he understood her so much better now -- she was a noble soul -- she was --

He was getting a headache. Anders faltered in his pace, pressing a hand up to his face with a grimace. He caught little flickers of blue fire at the edges of his vision, but he couldn't pinpoint where they were coming from. Similarly he could feel a great rage building within him, a white-hot fury, yet at the same time it felt detached and distant, like a furnace on the other side of a thick pane of glass that he could see but not feel. That was never a good sign. This was not the time for a panic attack. This is not the time for --

A scream, quickly cut off, drew his attention and snapped his eyes open. Killer was lingering a few paces away, looking at him strangely while she waited for him to finish whatever weird mage-thing he was apparently doing. Neither she, nor the half-dozen other shadowy figures lurking around the fringes of the nearest fire, took any apparent notice of the scuffle of bodies on the other side of the stairs.

Two dwarves -- he thought a man and a woman, but he couldn't be sure -- were setting on a third, the three of them grappling in the shadows. Anders caught the flash of a grimy blade in the firelight, and another cry, weaker and wetter than the first. Instinctively he took a step forward, meaning to intervene, before caution caught up with him. "Killer, what's happening?" he asked his guide, hovering on the brink of indecision. "Is this a Carta territory fight, or something else?"

Killer followed his glance to the struggle, and stared at it for a long moment before shaking her head. "Aren't Carta," she said. "He probably came from the city."
"From the city?" Anders repeated, puzzled. He could see that the third man had the same facial tattoos as the rest of them; he was casteless, so why would they attack one of their own?

It took Killer a moment to respond. "Sometimes people go to the city and get a little money… from begging, or little jobs," she said after a long pause. "The others take it away from them when they come back."

Anders felt a surge of outrage. "Why do they come back, then?" he demanded. "Why don't they just stay away?"

"They aren't allowed," Killer answered readily. "They have to come back here. Aren't allowed to be anywhere else."

"That's horrible!" Outrage overcame common sense, and Anders started towards the site of the mugging before he could have any third thoughts on the matter. "Why isn't anyone doing anything? Where are those hulking guards when they might be actually useful?"

Killer shrugged, that same resigned half-shrug that he'd seen from her father. "No one helps," she said.

As Anders hurried over, the two attackers looked up at his approach and melted away into the shadows, one in each direction. For a moment Anders was seized with the urge to pursue, to strike down the wrongdoers and claim justice for the victim, but he managed to suppress it. This man needed his help first --and besides, knowing what he did now about Dust Town, could he really find it in him to fault them? The people here were literally forbidden to seek out any kind of honest work; given a choice between stealing and starving, how could he call them wrong? The real fault lay in the corrupt, depraved institution which had reduced them to this, which systematically impoverished and degraded and --

_Not the time!_ Anders knelt down beside the man, who lay moaning weakly in the dirt. "You're safe now," he told him, shifting around so as not to block the light and reaching out to roll the man onto his back. He quickly pulled off his cloak and folded it to keep the man's head out of the dirt, then spread his hands to hover over his chest. "I'm going to heal you. Don't panic, and don't move."

The man looked up at him with eyes fogged by confusion and pain, but he stayed still -- whether complying with Anders' words, or simply because he was too weak to move. Several dark stains were spreading through his tunic; Anders peeled back the edge of one and saw a deep puncture wound welling with blood. There were several more stab wounds in his abdomen, and an ugly but shallow gash where part of his tunic and belt had been cut off along with his pocket.

The deep wounds were the most dangerous; one of them had pierced his liver, turning every moment into agony. But he couldn't ignore the other wounds, either; the blades that had made these injuries were not clean, and given the filthy conditions of this place, infection was practically a guarantee. After seven years of healing in Darktown, Anders knew the risks too well of leaving even minor wounds undressed.

This work went much faster than fixing Gershen's legs, since it didn't involve the bone; Anders was able to make do mostly with creationism and regeneration, summoning clean water to flush out the wounds and healing magic to seal them. He was half-aware of Killer moving up beside his shoulder, but it wasn't until he finished the spell with a small flourish and blinked up that he realized they were surrounded.

Killer let out a small growl, her body tensed as her hands flexed on the hilt of her axes; "Wait," Anders said, putting up a blood-stained hand to her shoulder. He looked around, trying to make out
the figures standing in the shadows. The atmosphere didn't seem hostile, and no one had attacked him yet.

He took the time to finish his work with the mugging victim first, washing the wounds and making sure he wasn't going into shock before he helped pull the man into a sitting position. Only once that was done did he slowly stand up, keeping his hands carefully raised and visible, and look at the crowd around him. "As you see, I haven't hurt him," he said, his voice carrying clearly. "What's all this about, then?"

There was a shuffling and murmuring; some people shrank and melted away, but others came to take their place. Nobody seemed to want to be the first to speak, until an older woman with soot-streaked hair and a large, square tattoo around the orbit of her eye edged forward. Her dark eyes searched his… chest? Whatever she found there, her mouth firmed in determination. She pointed towards him. "That's the Paragon's mark," she said, her voice bordering on accusation.

Anders blinked, and his hand flew up to pat at the amulet around his neck, the one that Natya had given him. He'd taken it out of his tunic earlier and not thought to put it back. "Yes?" he said uncertainly. What did the Paragon's symbol mean to them? To Gershen, she had been an object of almost holy reverence; what did that make him?

Another dwarf pushed forward to the edge of the crowd, this one a young man with only a few wisps of stubble on his face. "You were at Gershen's rooms," he said in a light tenor. "They say you fixed him up. With magic."

"Yes, I did." Anders glanced around the crowd. "That's what I do, I'm a healer. Does anybody here need healing?"

Another buzz went around the crowd; Anders caught a few words from it this time. Paragon's mage, Paragon's healer. "Is it true that you don't charge no money?" the boy said hopefully.

"Yes, it's true," Anders replied.

Another voice piped up from further back in the crowd. "Did the Paragon send you to help us?" the voice called out.

Anders opened his mouth to say no, but he found the word stopped on his tongue; partly because he did not want to quash their hope, but mostly because Justice disapproved of lies.

Natya knew who he was; Natya knew what he was. She had sent him here, to her old city, to her old home, knowing what he would find here. And knowing -- he had no doubt -- what he would do once he found it. What he would have no choice but to do.

"Yes," he said. "She did."

Another excited buzz, and the crowd surged forward. "Back!" Killer barked, stepping forward and brandishing her weapons. They gave way before the threat she presented, and Anders put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll heal anybody. Who needs help?"

They came to him, at first full of distrust and suspicion, but driven on by desperation. The stubble-decked boy was first, holding his left arm in his right hand; the arm had been crushed by some great blunt impact, the elbow shattered. Anders healed the joint, sending spirit magic to reshape the bones back into their proper position, healing the tendons and muscles into their proper place.
The older woman came forward supporting a husband who could barely walk, suffering from a hernia that hadn't been fixed properly; the front wall of muscle in his abdomen had split, loops of intestines poking through the gap and getting caught, twisting and pinching and filling the stomach with infection and rot. Anders cut free the dead length of gut and disintegrated it, weaving the intestines back together and pushing them back in their proper place with the barest application of force magic, sealing the muscle tear together again.

They came, one after another; a young man with a horribly shattered jaw, who couldn't talk beyond a strangling gurgle. A woman carrying a toddler, no more than a year old, covered all down his right side with nug bites that swelled and festered. A tough-looking brute with a tooth that had gone rotten, forming an abscess in his jaw that bloated up the side of his face until his eye swelled closed. Anders lost track of time, healing and purifying and washing and mending until his hands began to shake and his eyes glazed over. Killer kept the growing throng back, chivying patients one at a time onto the flat stretch of stone before the fire that had become his new clinic.

One young woman came towards him with a cloth bundle in her arms, a baby; her eyes shone with hope under brows tattooed to solid blackness. "Healer, please," she said, wringing her hands together. "My baby…"

Anders had years to guard against the association of the shorter, smaller dwarven bodies with children; but these Dust Towners were so skinny, so emaciated, that it was hard not to see her as a young girl herself. He took the baby and unwrapped the cloth, turning him towards the light, and summoned healing magic into the small body before him.

A minute later, he sighed and shut his eyes, letting the light dissipate. There was nothing for his magic to do. The baby was weak and fading, but not from illness or injury; he was simply starving. "I'm sorry," he told the girl, making his voice as gentle as he could. "There's nothing I can do."

He'd expected more of an argument, as he'd gotten before from parents whose children were beyond hope; instead, she bowed her head as she took the baby back, and began to cry.

More patients. More healing. So many of the hurts and sicknesses that came before him were things that should have been minor, if they had been treated properly; that should have healed on their own, if only the bodies that bore them were stronger. Every one of them was suffering from ills beyond the power of magic to cure; poor food, tainted water, filthy air. Even the smallest scrape could kill, if it festered; and everything here festered.

"Healer, please… please come…” Someone was begging him, tugging on his sleeve, and Anders wiped a hand over his sweat-drenched brow as he stumbled to his feet. "It's my sister, she can't get up, she can't walk… please…"

He couldn't say no. He couldn't leave them. Not when they were suffering, and he had the power to help.

The walk helped clear his head, a bit; enough that he remembered the satchel he still carried slung over his shoulder and the supplies within. He downed a stamina potion and two lyrium potions, and felt his second wind coming. Killer trailed along behind, a silent shadow.

He followed the anxious young man back to his house -- if it could be called that, more like a shack. The smell of decay and suffering was strong within, and Anders had to crouch down and bend nearly double to get his head under the roof. Lying on a crude pallet towards the back of the shack was a young woman, her face drained ghastly grey, her sweat-soaked hair in messy braids. She might have been pretty, before suffering had taken its toll on her body. She wore a tunic, but no pants or skirt under the blanket draped over her lower body. The stains under her hips were the
Anders knelt down beside her bed, and rested his hands gently on top of the filthy blanket. They were still stained with the blood of his last patient; he'd rinsed them with water between each patient, but there was no soap and no basin to soak in. He'd just have to do the best he could. The man -- her brother -- hovered in the doorway, hands clenched anxiously around the frame.

His healing magic confirmed what his eyes had suspected; the woman had given birth, recently, and the birth had gone badly. The uterine wall had torn, causing a violent hemorrhage, and collapsed partly into the birth canal. It was slow, careful work trying to put everything back into place and heal the damage; as he worked, he glanced around the dwelling. "Where is the baby?" he asked; thinking that if the birth had gone so badly, the infant might be in need of attention as well.

No answer. He raised his head to look for the woman's brother, who was giving him an odd look in return, as though the question had made no sense. "Her baby, I mean," he clarified.

The brother shook his head. "It was a girl, Healer," he replied.

Was, Anders marked. No baby, then. Sick at heart, he turned back to healing the mother.

There were more shacks, more patients who were bed-bound or too far gone to get up; a man who'd lost a foot, the stump not properly amputated, with gangrene creeping steadily up the thigh. Another who bore enormous spider bites on his hands and arms, who shook and seized on the bare floor in a room with no bed. An old woman lying gasping on a cot tended by her grandchildren, lungs too full of ash and fluid to draw more than a quarter of a breath. Anders went from one to another until he had long since lost track of where he was, until he had lost track of morning or night or even what day it was. The faces faded to streaks in his eyes, their voices crying or babbling thanks to a murmur in his ears, but he pushed on.

Several times, Killer tried to pull him away, tugging on his elbow with more and more insistent calls to stop; each time, the expressions of hope and despair on the people awaiting him made him push on. His satchel emptied out, every healing potion given away, every lyrium potion consumed in an attempt to muster up one more spell. Only when he could no longer form the words I'm fine, I can keep going, did he finally give in and allow her to lead him away, allow her to push the Dust Towners back with fierce growls and angry words.

He walked, barely aware of where he was, hardly able to feel the impact of one footfall after another, only following where Killer led. He had overdone it, he knew he had; only Justice's near-limitless well of strength had allowed him to go on so long. An ordinary mage would have been dead by now -- well, that wasn't quite true. An ordinary mage would have collapsed with exhaustion long ago. But he wasn't an ordinary man, he hadn't been in years; and for the gifts he had been given, this was the service he owed in return.

When he finally managed to blink his vision clear, he realized the ground underfoot had changed; he was walking on flagstone again, not dirt. Up ahead he recognized the main cavern of Orzammar's lower districts, connected to Dust Town by a low-ceilinged but broad tunnel. A pair of sentries perched at the entrance, watching to make sure that no one tried to leave.

"You go on from here," Killer told him, releasing his hand and giving him a little push that nearly made him stumble. "I can't."

Anders nodded, his head pounding with even the slight motion. "Thank you for everything, Killer," he said, his voice a croak.
There was a hesitation, and then Anders *did* stumble as a small body flung against him, strong arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him nearly double. "You can call me Rix," she said; a kiss on the cheek, and then she was gone.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

She's been in the story for a while at this point, but I think she really deserves her own portrait here: Rix, aka Killer, of the Legion of the Dead.
**Dissociate**

**Chapter Summary**

Anders is freaking out. Justice is freaking out. It's not a happy time inside his head.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anders knew there was no way he was going to make it all the way back to Brosca manor. His vision had gone grey and patchy at the edges, the world narrowed down to a tunnel ahead of him -- he hands, when he lifted them in the periphery, seemed not to belong to him at all. The faint, faraway ringing in his ears was all the sound he could hear out of his left one, and he could barely feel his clumsy footsteps hit the floor.

The healer in him totted the symptoms up methodically: mana burn, overstrain, exhaustion, severe emotional stress. He needed to lie down in a warm place, drink some water with salt or sugar added, and rest until he was awake and coherent enough to eat. Cooked grains, meat broth, and some sugar by preference, until his system stopped crashing. Valerian to calm the nerves, spindleweed to encourage the body to revive.

Food and rest and shelter and medicine -- all things that he could have, that the poor souls back in Dust Town lacked -- no, no...

A change in the quality of light alerted him to where he was -- the Hall of Heroes, Orzammar's only connection to the outside world. In the sliver of sunlight and bright sky outlined by the door, Anders was seized with a sudden urge to run: to go back to Dust Town and gather the casteless all up and leave this place, leave it behind forever, go away, be free.

No. No. He couldn't -- he could not abandon the mages. He couldn't abandon his cause, the future he had worked so hard for, all that he and the other mages had striven and built towards. He had already devoted all he was and all he had towards their future and Maker save him, he was only one man, he only had one life to give. He didn't have another to give to another hopeless struggle.

*But I can't just abandon them...!*

It was too much, too much for anyone to bear. The whole mountain seemed to press down on him, the weight squeezing him into a clawing panic, crushing the breath from his lungs. He could not lift the whole mountain by himself, he didn't have the strength.

The healer in him, the *human* in him knew that sometimes, not everyone could be saved: that sometimes you had to compartmentalize, to triage, to divide the patients before you into those that could be helped and those that must be left behind. But the other part of him would accept no such truth. *Could* not accept it, not without sundering all that he was.

Anders knew the searing bite of spirit magic; he'd thrown enough spirit bolts in the past, and Kirkwall had thrown back its share of the teeth-aching, nerve-scraping, heart-crushing attacks right
back at them. They'd felt much like this, this anguished soundless screaming inside his own head. He felt like he was flying apart, like he was boiling over in his own skin until it could not contain him any more. He wanted to scream until his voice ran hoarse, to run and not stop running, to fight someone-- anyone -- to strike out at the walls until his hands bled.

Had it always been this bad? They'd been so in tune since coming to Orzammar, thinking and feeling as one, that he'd forgotten. Or was it worse now than it had been in Kirkwall, the night he'd lost Karl, the night he'd very nearly killed Ella? He could remember little other than pain and an all-consuming rage, the unbearable need to see the world shaken apart down to its foundations.

His blurred eyes saw a familiar silhouette and his shaking steps carried him forward, until he collided with a jolt against solid stone. The impact stunned him momentarily, long enough for his vision to clear as he stared up at the statue of Paragon Brosca. His friend, his commander, his savior -- why had he never noticed before, that the face of the statue didn't have Natya's tattoo? Why hadn't he noticed how quick the dwarves of Orzammar were to expunge that part of her, how eager they were to pretend she wasn't one of their despised casteless? It was as though some pious Chantry artist had done a portrait of Shartan, and given Andraste's faithful companion rounded ears.

He slumped against the base of the stone pedestal, then drew himself up on it, folding into a small ball at the statue's feet. He wrapped his arms tightly around his chest and huddled forward, biting down on the ball of his thumb until he tasted the metallic tang of blood, struggling to focus on the pain to keep them grounded. To keep them both together.

He had to calm down, to get hold of himself. This senseless display of temper and fury was in aid of nothing. There was nothing he could hit, no one he could smite to make this right. There had to be another way. He had to do something. He couldn't just leave them…

"I know!" Anders hissed, huddling at the base of the pedestal with his hands clenched to fists at his temples. He tried to think this through, tried to force aside the noise and anguish in his head and think.

No matter how angry as he was, no matter how his his fury seethed for an outlet, confronting Bhelen in anger or violence would destroy everything he had sought to build. That would be a betrayal of those mages that had trusted him enough to come at his beckon, and a betrayal of all their futures. There had to be another way to walk this tightrope, another way to bring help to Dust Town without undermining Refuge.

That he would go back was a given. He'd go back again, and again, as many times as it took, to offer healing to whomever needed it. And so many needed it. But he also knew that by healing them, he was just papering over the cracks, just cleaning up the messes of someone else's atrocities. Atrocity which would go on, and on, until something fundamentally changed.

As tempting as it was, the vision of just packing up all of Dust Town under his wing and leaving for the surface, he knew that mass emigration was not a solution. Outside of Orzammar they could look for work, but that wouldn't guarantee that they'd find any. It would be the Blight Refugees all over again, except that while the Fereldens had been workers and craftsmen before they'd been forced to abandon their homes and flee for their lives, the casteless didn't have that pool of experience to draw on. What was it that Varric had once told him -- "we come to the surface with the skills our ancestors had?" And these people had nothing. From start to finish, they would find themselves in a situation as bad or worse as the one they'd started in, with the added stress and terror of being thrust into an utterly alien environment.

The only outcome he could honestly see of such an emigration was a sudden upsurge in the
strength of the Carta in the surface kingdoms, as they preyed upon the sudden banquet of homeless and helpless refugees. Worst of all, the ones most direly in need of help -- the children, elderly, and infirm -- were in no state to make such a journey. They'd be left behind, and once cut off from Orzammar by their blighted traditions, their healthier relatives would have no way of going back or sending money home to help them.

So whatever he did, he'd have to do it here, in Orzammar. And that meant he'd have to work with Bhelen. Scalding bile rose up in his throat at the thought, fury threatening to overwhelm his vision again; Bhelen had *let this happen!* He was no just king, no righteous man. He was dishonest and dishonorable.

For a moment he had a lurid, satisfying fantasy of exacting righteous vengeance on the dwarven king, but he threw it away quickly. *No.* That was a bad thought, beneath him. However much he disapproved of the dwarf king's policies, he was an ally; while the vision of stringing him up over a campfire until he agreed to play nicely was a tempting one, it was unworthy of the alliance he had striven to build.

Rationally, Anders knew that Bhelen wasn't all to blame for the condition of Dust Town. This had been going on for centuries, after all, and Bhelen had come to the throne not ten years before; he hadn't created this mess, he'd only inherited it. But those ten years had passed and Dust Town was still there, still plunged in filth and squalor and darkness, still trapped in the dark between coarse walls of stone, and Bhelen knew he *knew* and he did nothing, he'd said nothing, he'd lied to them he'd lied…

What was he planning, what did he want? If he could accept the subjugation of one group of people why not another, and you couldn't trust him, you couldn't ever trust him. What if Bhelen was secretly making bargains with the Chantry, with the Templars, keeping the mages ignorant and docile and safe in one place while he brought the Templars in to capture them all, sitting targets all fat and happy, to be thrown into another cell down in the dark under the earth --

He shook out of the spiral with a roughness that banged his head against the stone, and for a moment he saw stars. *No.* This was absurd. Bhelen was manipulative, but there was no reason to think he was planning such a heinous betrayal. The Chantry would not aid him in his cause, so as long as he held fast to it, he would have no logical reason to betray the mages to them.

Anders took a deep breath, held it for a ten-count then let it out slowly, then again. His hands were shaking uncontrollably, until they sparked with blue lines and the tremors ceased. He rubbed his palms up over his arms, trying to spread a little bit of that steadiness to the rest of him.

So Bhelen knew all about Dust Town already; there was nothing to be gained simply by telling him. Natya had *said* that Bhelen was a reformer, that he was working to help all of her people, not just Rica; Natya wouldn't have lied. But she might be lied *to,* or just overly optimistic. Either way, whatever reforms Bhelen was planning, they were progressing too slowly. His attention was all occupied by the planning of the Deep Roads campaign, exercising all his political influence to push that forward. The welfare of the casteless would come in a distant straggler to that ambition, if at all. For all he kept a lowborn concubine in his house, Bhelen manifestly did not care about the rest of the casteless left behind.

As little as Bhelen cared, the rest of Orzammar cared even less. That was clear enough in the hopeless, helpless way that the casteless had accepted their fate, without even the bitter resentment of the Darktowners. Would they even be able to accept a helping hand if it was offered to them? *It's like don't come free,* Gershen had told him. *It never comes free.*

*No one helps,* Rix had said.
But as close as their horizons had grown about them, Anders thought, they still wanted to dream of better. It showed in the light in Gershen's face when he spoke of Natya Brosca, of the hope that had infused their voices when they asked Anders if the Paragon had sent him to them. They wanted to believe, despite the brutal lessons of a lifetime, that someone was looking out for them, reaching out to them. They wanted to believe that they were not abandoned, not forgotten.

The Paragon represented hope to them. But that wasn't enough, wasn't nearly enough. Hope helped to nourish the spirit, but did nothing for the body; worse, it left you paralyzed, docile and complacent in even the most terrible situation. The Aequitarians had spent centuries resisting all chance of change and quashing all attempts at independence, in the hope that if only they proved themselves good enough, loyal enough, obedient enough, then the Chantry would grant them those freedoms out of the generosity of their heart.

These people didn't need hope, they needed help. They needed it here, they needed it now, and they needed it in greater quantities than one poor apostate could provide. They needed food and clean water, money and medicine, education and training and healthy occupation. They needed respect and dignity and the chance to grow into their better selves. And none of that was going to be provided by hope.

Anders thought he was beginning to see, now, why Natya hadn't been able to come home. Why she absented herself from her family and her kingdom, in spite of -- maybe even because of -- her newfound exaltation. She could never return to the filthy pit that was Dust Town, any more than Anders could allow himself to be forced back into the dungeons at Kinloch Hold. But the plainspoken warrior would be equally allergic to occupying the fancy manor that had been given to her, to pretending to the airs of the nobility that had scorned her all her life, the nobility whose contempt for her and her kind was written into the very stone.

Orzammar wanted to erase what she was, to wipe the brand off her face and wipe clean her past. Yet it was that same past that had made her what she was, and had made her into the person who could do the things she did. She couldn't go back again, couldn't return to the brutality and despair of the casteless, but neither could she be what Orzammar wished to pretend she was.

No wonder Natya had always been so ambivalent about her status as Paragon. On the road from Amaranthine to Orzammar (she'd met him well away from the docks; Anders had always found it ironic that the Arlessa of a port district had such an antipathy to boats) she'd mentioned casually that Orzammar had commissioned a statue of her following the Blight.

Anders had remembered the Champion's statue in Kirkwall, the one Hawke himself had nothing but rude comments for, and he'd managed to summon up a weak smile and a weaker joke. "Are you sure you're really okay with dropping me in the middle of your old hometown?" he'd said then. "I mean, the dangerous renegade Anders, who knows what he'll do? Your fancy statue might end up blown to smithereens."

She hadn't laughed -- which was fair, because it hadn't been funny -- but she'd stared into the campfire with the firelight catching in her blue-green eyes. "It was a joke," Anders had felt the need to add, suddenly anxious that Natya would call the whole thing off.

She'd snorted softly, then flashed him a brief smile to show she wasn't angry. "Only because you haven't been there yet," she said. "Sure it's my home, but I ain't got many soft and squishy feelings towards that old stone pit. You do what you got to, Anders. And if that means blowing up every sodding statue in the city, then you can start with mine."

He hadn't understood. He hadn't understood. But now, he thought he was beginning to.
The Hero of Ferelden could save the world from the Blight, but couldn't save her own people. She couldn't give them the help they needed. All she could give them was this: one man, scarred and sinned and broken, struggling to lift a mountain one-handed.

He'd just have to be enough.

Anders slipped down off the pedestal; still exhausted in limbs and body, but with his mind clearer now. He looked up at the statue, bland and blank and whitewashed, and his mind painted the image of the real woman over it: glowering down at him with her fierce blazing eyes, waiting for him to pick himself up and get back to work.

Blood still oozed sluggishly from the ball of his thumb where he'd bitten it earlier. It barely stung now when he brushed his fingers over the wound, reaching up to the statue's blank grey face to paint a symbol on it in his own blood. The same symbol on his necklace, on the lintel of the grand mansion where he'd been given shelter, on the faces of the little girls in Dust Town. The same symbol that had proclaimed to the world that the Hero of Ferelden, the Arlessa of Amaranthine, the Paragon Brosca was a casteless.

"I promise, Commander," Anders whispered up to that stone visage. "I won't let you down."

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes
Chapter art is by losebetter. I had originally posted this picture on the first chapter, but
honestly I think it fit better here.
Anders has an idea, and tries to get Bhelen to go along with it. Bhelen is getting very tired of having Anders in his office.

This time, Anders didn't wait for an appointment. He marched through the Royal Palace towards Bhelen's office, Mardra in step a stride behind him, and his air of determination was such that guards and servants hesitated before getting in his way. Even loyal, sturdy Gavorn didn't go beyond a protest and an outstretched hand, falling just short of contact with his arm. He'd been here enough to know -- and be known by -- most of them, and they would need a better reason to apprehend him by force than he intended to give them.

Gavorn's presence was the hint Anders needed as to Bhelen's location in this warren today, and he pushed the double doors open with no small amount of effort. Maker, everything in this kingdom was so heavy. Inside, Bhelen was seated at a small desk, studying an arrangement of small knickknacks -- was that a game board? Across from him, to Anders' surprise, sat Queen Moira.

Anders hadn't realized they had a board-game sort of relationship; he realized he had no idea what sort of relationship they had. Fortunately both royals were still fully dressed in their ornate, gaudy outfits and jewelry, so he hadn't interrupted some more intimate tryst. "Your Majesty!"

Bhelen looked up in surprise when Anders entered, then groaned in resignation. "Warden Enchanter," he said. "What is it now?"

Anders strode across the room, planted his hands on the edge of the desk, and leaned into it. "I want to hire your casteless!"

Bhelen blinked. In all the time he'd known the wily king, Anders didn't think he'd ever seen him this much at a loss. "...Say what?" he managed after a moment's confusion.

"I. Want. To. Hire them," Anders said, biting back the blue fire that wanted to surge up behind his eyes and take control of his mouth. Stay out of this, Justice.

Bhelen and Moira exchanged a long, wordless look; then with a barely-perceptible nod, Moira gathered her elaborate robes about her, stood from her chair, and moved aside. She withdrew behind a smaller, gilt-painted door, and Anders wasn't sure from here whether it led to the corridor, another room behind, or just behind a partition, but Moira was not his main concern at the moment. He waited, seething.

Once his wife had gone, Bhelen turned his focus to Anders, folding his hands on the desk and leveling his gaze at his unexpected visitor. "What for?"

"To build my Maker-forsaken Tower, of course!" Anders exclaimed.

Bhelen scoffed. "Don't be absurd," he said. "You can't --"
"And why not?" Mardra interrupted. "The Tower's construction is halted because we have no workmen. Meanwhile your city's foundations are awash with capable adults with nothing better to do." She gave the king a small, razor-thin smile. "It seems we could use one problem to solve the other."

Bhelen sighed, running one hand through his tawny hair. "Look... you can't just hire the Casteless," he said. "Construction jobs have always belonged to the Smith Caste --"

"Who are sitting on their hands! If they won't do it, find another! Competition," Anders said acidly, "will be good for them. And work will be good for the casteless. They need the money, they need the training, they need the dignity! This is criminal, Bhelen!" He slammed one fist on the desk, knocking over several of the game-pieces. "These people are starving on breadcrumbs unless they give up and go into the Carta. You're their king as well -- how can you allow this to go on?"

"I should have known that the plight of the casteless would catch your bleeding heart," Bhelen grumbled. "Anders, listen. I'm not blind to the sorry conditions the lower classes are in. I do want to help them, and I've been working on ways to do that. But I'm working against thousands of years of momentum and tradition here. Even if I wanted to contract them for this job --"

"Which you do, or you should --" Anders butted in, but this time Bhelen ignored the interruption.

"-- there are too many barriers that you can't just jump over," Bhelen said over him. "I've told you again and again that I can't just violate the laws every which way I please, not if I mean to have a kingdom to run tomorrow. The casteless are, by law and tradition, absolutely forbidden from taking jobs belonging to another caste --"

"-- Within Orzammar itself, that is," Mardra put in. "There's a long-standing precedent that if the casteless should chose to go to the surface and find work there, it's not the business of the Crown to pursue them, is it?"

"Well, no..." Bhelen frowned, rubbing his jaw distractedly. "But once they leave the city, they can't come back --"

"But they wouldn't need to leave the city. That's the beauty of it," Mardra said excitedly. "The laws governing the employability of the Casteless specifically restrict themselves to the old city boundaries, which is explicitly subterranean. 'In the stone-hewn citadel of the Mountain Father,' I believe is the phrase.

"But the laws which define Orzammar's legal boundaries in relation to trade with other kingdoms extend all the way up to the surface. The Tower sits in a peculiar legal limbo between these two definitions. Technically, anyone who enters the Tower valley is still within the bounds of Orzammar, but not bound by the traditions of Orzammar. Am I wrong? Or should all the surveyors and scouts you send to the surface be forbidden to ever return, too? Would you like to tell all the noble houses that those trading-houses and crates and caravans that had previously been legally considered Orzammar territory no longer are so?"

"Well -- well no, you're not wrong, but --" Bhelen seemed at a loss. "The Crown, House Aeducan and myself are still forbidden from employing them --"

"You wouldn't be employing them," Anders interrupted. "I would."

Mardra added, "He happens to be doing so with money that you gave him, but what he does with that money is no longer legally your responsibility."
Anders just pointed at Mardra, wordlessly punctuating her point.

Bhelen sat there for a long moment, visibly processing. At length he let out a sigh. "You've put a lot of thought into this, haven't you?" he said. "Look. It's a nice idea to chalk on a slate, but it's not going to pan out. These are casteless, Anders. They've never worked a day in their lives --"

"Because they haven't been allowed --" Anders started.

"Be that as may, they don't even know how to work," Bhelen raised his voice over Anders' objections. "They've never known, and they don't have the skills necessary for the project you have in mind."

"Blast and boil it, Bhelen, they have to start somewhere!" Anders' temper flared.

"Stonemasonry is not something you can pick up by trial and error!" Bhelen snapped. "I assume you want your precious mages to live in this tower, not to have it fall about their ears from half-assed work!"

"So hire tutors," Mardra suggested.

Bhelen looked over at her, at a loss. "Say what?"

"You don't need to pay the Casteless the full rate that you were prepared to offer to House Janar or its compatriots," Mardra said persuasively. "Even if you pay their workers, say, a base salary of half that, you'd have plenty of money to spare to employ additional tutors, as well as a healthy savings left over."

Bhelen sat back, expression slowly clearing from the mule-stubborn set of before. Like any dwarf, he was clearly struck by arguments of frugality and efficiency. "Hire tutors from where, though?" he said, more thoughtfully this time. At least he was starting to think with them, not against them. "No one in the Smith caste would ever agree, in the current political climate. Even if they would, there are laws against it."

"So hire them from the surface," Anders said. "There's no shortage of surface dwarves with just this expertise -- I knew some back at Amaranthine. I'm sure you could convince a few to come for a hefty enough price. Easier to import one or two of them than a whole work crew!"

For a long time Bhelen sat without speaking, and Anders could almost see the gears turning behind his eyes. Wheels within wheels, layers upon layers of calculation -- he was giving the idea serious consideration, Anders could tell, but he didn't know what factors were being considered. There was something else, still -- something that Bhelen wasn't telling them, and it made Anders itch.

"I could make some inquiries." Bhelen sighed at last. "Listen, Anders -- it's a tidy little notion, and I can see why it would appeal to you." He leaned forward, expression earnest. "But all this assumes that the Casteless even want to work. That they'd even agree to go up to the valley -- which most of them think of as the Surface, legal boundaries or no -- and sit lessons to sweat all day in manual labor."

"Whether by birth or by bearing, they've spent their whole lives indolent. It's always easier to stab someone for a few coins than to get them by an honest day's work, if you're so inclined. They'd have to want to go along with this scheme of yours, and I don't think that they do." Bhelen frowned deeply at some inner vision, or perhaps a memory. "You can open the way for them, but that doesn't mean they'll come out."

Anders thought of the Dust Towners crowding close around him, sullen wariness struggling against
hesitant hope. Thought of the religious near-exaltation in their voices, when they'd asked him if Paragon Brosca had sent him to them. "They will if I ask them to," Anders said, and he even managed to sound like he believed it. "They'll come for me."

Mardra moved to stand beside him, touching his arm in a discreet gesture of support. He appreciated the gesture, but he couldn't let himself look away or smile, not when Bhelen was teetering on the very brink of decision.

"All right, Warden Enchanter," Bhelen said at last. "We'll try it your way."

Once back out in the corridor, the tension that had been singing in the air diffused some -- the guards seemed much relieved to be escorting the mages out of the palace, and the mages were happy to let them. Anders was briefly pulled out of his whirling thoughts by a brief glimpse of a familiar face; bright blue eyes flashing at him from the shadows, the Queen of Orzammar watching his escort out with a heavy, weighing, calculating gaze.

The explosive sigh from his companion pulled his attention back; Anders glanced over at the dark-haired woman at his side. "Well!" Mardra exclaimed. "That... went better than expected!"

"Yes, I suppose it did," Anders replied, but he couldn't bring true enthusiasm to his voice. It could have gone much worse, it was true, and yet…

"But not as well as you would have liked?" Mardra looked at him intently, and Anders wondered uncomfortably if his eyes were burning blue. They couldn't always control it, when it happened. But Mardra said only, "You've got that thundercloud-look, that makes the whole manor turn gloomy."

"I do not like that the Dust Town workers will get only half pay for their efforts," Anders admitted. "It seems exploitative of their circumstance."

Mardra grimaced. "You're right about that. But, we have to work with the limits we're given to get results. It's better for the casteless to get a half-portion than none at all." Her voice turned persuasive. "Look at it another way: they'll get the other half of their pay in training, and experience they wouldn't otherwise have. That's not an insubstantial benefit at all. Once they have the know-how and the chance to prove themselves, then they can work their way up to equal pay."

"Perhaps." Anders frowned moodily at the stone floor beneath his feet. "Even so…" Even so, it felt wrong to compromise. Some things -- like the basic well-being of people, their rights to live free -- should never be compromised.

Mardra sighed with exasperation. "Anders, have you ever heard the saying that 'perfect is the enemy of good'? " she said with an acerbic edge. "We must always strive to do better, it's true; but it would be wrong of us to refuse to take an opportunity simply because it isn't perfect. If we push aside every solution because it won't solve every problem, we will never solve any problem at all."

She was right, and Anders felt a pang of remorse for it. "Yes... yes, you're right. I'm sorry," he said. He found a real smile, not for the deal they had made but for the person who had helped him to make it. "Thank you for backing me up on this, Mardra. I know you put a great deal of work into this."
"I was glad to do it," Mardra replied. She didn't say *it was nothing*, because that would have been untrue; she'd spent the last two days cramming in dwarven history and law to find the loopholes they needed. "I'm glad we'll be able to help those poor people in Dust Town."

"As am I," Anders said sincerely.

Mardra smiled. They came to a cross-corridor in the palace, and paused for a moment. "I'll leave you here, then," she said, and gestured off towards the hallway that led to the Royal Library. "I'd like to spend some time with Dagna, and see if she has any useful treatises in her collection."

"Later, then." Anders gave her a little wave, and Mardra headed off, half their guard-complement peeling off to join her. He spent a minute watching her walk away, the hem of her much-shortened robe swinging briskly over her leggings. With her height and skinny body, the dark material made her legs seem even longer, and her long stride sometimes reminded him of some great gangling water-bird, wading slowly through the shallows on legs like stilts, and the mental image made him smile.

Unexpectedly Anders felt a rush of anger, disgust and disapproval. This was wrong. Mardra was a brave, knowledgeable woman and a good ally. He should not disparage her for her looks, especially not on the heels of such a great effort she had put in the service of justice.

"Justice?" Anders murmured aloud, startled by the sudden surge of emotion. The guards and servants in the corridor looked over at the utterance, but Anders shook his head and closed his eyes. *What's gotten into you? It was just an observation. I wasn't planning to insult her to her face.*

The anger and annoyance muted, suddenly transforming to disquiet. *Justice?* Anders thought, though he didn't have much of a hope of getting a response.

A sudden memory popped into his head, one he hadn't thought of in years; Aura, Kristoff's widow from Vigil's Keep. Anders had only met her a handful of times, and the picture of the woman was fuzzy in his head. He remembered blonde hair, fair skin and pale pink lips, and that was really about all; the rest was just a vague blur of recollection and… a confusion of feelings.

*What in the Maker's name?*

But there was no further explanation coming from Justice's quarter -- no helpful clarifying thoughts or less-helpful surges of emotion. After a long moment waiting for anything more to happen, Anders continued on his way out of the palace.

There was work to be done. Anders had seen Bardien's handwriting on a report on Bhelen's desk; it wouldn't be long now before the Legion of the Dead was sent out again. Before that happened, he had a tower to build and Dust Town to rally.

~tbc...
Denounce

Chapter Summary

Anders runs into an unexpectedly familiar figure in the Orzammar Commons, and does not get his plums.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was kind of a bear to write. Hopefully, it's not so difficult to read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a day's intense preparation and a night's thorough rest, Anders was ready. He struck out for Dust Town with a satchel bulging with supplies and a new determination. Now that he knew what he would find, he wouldn't be so overwhelmed by the squalor and suffering of Dust Town; after all, he'd seen much the same in the Undercity. He knew how to handle it, and he knew what they needed.

Surana had firmly drawn the line at him appropriating half their food supplies to distribute to the casteless, and Anders supposed he had to concede her point. Still, some intense work with his herbalism station produced dozens of tiny bottles, concentrated with vitamins to combat scurvy and other deficiency disorders. He had health potions to give, lyrium potions to take, and a mishmash of other supplies tucked into the corners of the satchel. He was ready.

He felt the eyes on him the moment he stepped into Dust Town, but this time he felt not even the slightest bit of threat. He was here to help, but even if he hadn't been, he and Justice together were more than capable of standing up to anything Dust Town could throw at them. He encountered nothing worse than a few bold pickpockets, easily deterred with a mild spark of electricity or even just a barrier slapped over the satchel; several times he gave the would-be thief the potion they were after, anyway. All they had to do was ask.

It took a bit of searching to find his way through the maze -- Rix hadn't brought him this way last time -- but he found his way back to Gershen's tenement house, and the old dwarf came out to greet him with a beaming smile. Anders knew that for what he was trying to do in Dust Town, he'd need a native guide -- who better than the old man who'd rented rooms to half of the casteless population over the years?

After a quick checkup and a little bit of healing magic to clean up a residual flare-up, Anders explained what he wanted to do. Gershen was a bit doubtful, but willing to give it a try; he provided Anders with a list of names and locations, even a rough map.

Anders spent the rest of the day, and the days following, going around Dust Town and finding those in need of healing. Many times, they found him first -- but Gershen's advice led him to those who were bed-bound, infirm, or too weak to seek him out. He healed and handed out supplies and
talked, gave advice and friendly chatter to the patients and their hovering family members, and whenever the topic moved around to it, he mentioned the problem he was having with the construction of the Tower.

Here, now, he was healing a young girl-child while the mother hovered, hands clasped tightly and held hard against her stomach as she awaited the outcome. There'd been a collapse -- the makeshift stonework of most of the buildings around here made it an inevitability -- and the girl had taken several rocks to the head and shoulder. Anders was more than familiar with such injuries, and he'd healed the head injury first; now he was patiently coaxing the shoulder joint back into the right position, undoing the crush damage.

Even so, it still made his stomach clench to look at the small figure on the barren cot -- if even adult dwarves were too close to children for his peace of mind, underfed dwarf children were almost terrifyingly tiny. She had tangled, curly-black hair, chipped teeth, and the oh-so-familiar tattoo on her right cheek. Her mother, Rona, had said that the girl's name was Natia.

"You sure she'll be all right, Healer?" Rona asked anxiously. "I seen some people go funny after head knocks, they ain't never the same. Will my girl be all right?"

"Yes, there shouldn't be any lasting damage," Anders assured her. This was at least the fifth time she'd asked and gotten the same answer, but he knew to be patient.

Rona's eyes filled with a glassy sheen. "Thank the Paragon," she choked. "I was so scared, Healer, so scared. You know that cloudgazer came by an' looked at her, and all he said was I should pray. Pray! What good does that do, I ask? Ain't nobody listening, not to us. But you're a good one. You don't just talk, you help."

Anders tried to suppress a worried frown. This wasn't the first mention he'd heard of this mysterious surface priest -- a sun-touched surfacer in flamey robes, who comes here to moan at us about some topside religion, as the others had put it -- but he'd not laid eyes on the man. He hadn't seen any other humans in Orzammar at all, except for the other mages. How could a Chantry priest have slipped in without his noticing?

He glanced around the tiny room -- cramped, barren, but still better off than many others in Dust Town. A tiny raised cot for the daughter, and a double-bedroll of blankets on the floor beside it. "You take good care of her. I know she'll be all right."

Rona blushed, blotchy color stealing over her cheeks, and looked down as she scrubbed roughly at her eyes. "Ain't my doing. I'm just sitting around in the dust," she mumbled. "My man, Cenar, he brings in money, cares for us both. He does… deliveries… sometimes, but it's dangerous, and I worry…"

"You know," Anders said encouragingly. "Right now I'm looking for people to help me build my Tower on the upper slopes of the mountain. Steady work, on-the-job training provided, pay is fifty copper a day, and a much lower risk of getting stabbed in a Carta territory dispute."

Rona's eyes lit up at the sum named, and Anders felt almost guilty. Fifty copper, the maximum rate Bhelen had been willing to pay, seemed incredibly stingy to Anders -- but to many of the Casteless, it was more money in a day than they could hope to acquire in a year. For some, it was more than they had ever had in their lifetime. When all the merchants in your area sold boiled deepstalker and mushroom soup for a half-copper per serving, when a month's rent was five copper, then fifty copper was a prince's ransom.

Part of Anders felt a little uncomfortable even for this straightforward manipulation, but there was
nothing dishonest about it. He did not ask their help in return for his services -- he did not ask for any payment at all -- but there were many among his patients who, like Gershen, were uncomfortable or even distressed at their inability to give in return. Was it manipulation to ask people to do things that helped you, if they wanted to do it, if it helped them too? It seemed like it shouldn't be, and yet there was still a deep-buried part of him that disapproved, that insisted he should only give while getting nothing in return, that to receive anything was wrong somehow.

When the healing was finished, the mini-Natia slept peacefully, and Anders patted Rona's back while she sobbed over his hands. He left them with three vitamin bottles and a health potion, filled her cracked and tarnished cooking pot with clean water, and instructions to send word through Gershen if the child's condition worsened.

He stepped out of the jumble of shanty dwellings and stretched, and spied the open, brighter glimpse of the main cavern not far ahead. This had been his last stop of the day on a wide circuit of the buildings, and his supplies were well depleted; time to head back.

Anders picked his way through the Commons Market, ducking his head under the awnings to get a good look at the wares. His stomach clenched and rumbled, and he was looking for something to fill it with before he returned to the Manor to sleep. It had been a long day of walking and healing and he was tired, but not so completely wiped out as he had been on his first day. The burn of fatigue was good, was a satisfying indicator of work well done. He had helped the Casteless and was helping his Tower at the same time. Things were going well, and Anders hummed a little under his breath as he looked for something easy on the stomach.

Although the market was crowded, Anders didn't have much trouble moving through the crowd; he was easy to see, after all, and most of the dwarves in the crowd seemed willing to give way before him. He still attracted a multitude of stares -- most curious, some hostile -- and a few scowls, but most people were civil enough. It was nothing he wasn't used to, as an apostate, and the more the dwarves of Orzammar got used to the strange humans in their midst, the better.

The vendors in the Commons had a wider variety of goods than the Diamond Quarter, of much more varying quality. Anders paused before an exotic import seller, perusing their array of fruits. To his spoiled surfacer eyes, many of the fruits looked sadly withered by their journey here, but there was a selection of plums that had been rolled in sugar to preserve them for the trip… Anders asked for a price and the vendor, a shorter-than-average dwarven woman with a doubtful expression, quoted him one that wasn't too much more exorbitant than it would have been on the surface.

As coins exchanged hands and the seller began to wrap the plums up in paper, Anders' attention was caught by a snatch of sound. Like the brief scent of ozone in the Palace, it immediately struck him as out of place not because it was so strange, but because it was so familiar -- and had no place in this underground city. The Chant? Here? How?

Murmuring a hasty excuse, Anders turned and hurried off in pursuit of the elusive fragments of verse. It took a bit of navigating the crowd -- and carefully squeezing himself sideways while ducking -- before he rounded a corner to an open space and stopped short.

Standing on a small ledge at the side of the road, his voice rising and falling in the familiar singsong cadence of the Chant of Light, was a dwarf. Not just any dwarf -- though his appearance was unremarkable, his hair drab and his features homely -- he sprang out from the crowd immediately in his red-and-orange Chantry robes.

"From the sky-tearing peaks of the sacred mountain," the dwarf recited -- Andraste 1:18, Anders knew the verse -- "a lonesome choir I, song failing unanswered, voice on wind returning, answered
no more. Brothers and sisters of Orzammar, how long can you stand to hear your voices go unanswered? Why do you keep your faces turned towards barren stone, and ignore the call of the Light, of the Maker and his Bride? Open your hearts and He will come to you, as he came to our Lady: 'Eyes sorrow-blinded, in darkness unbroken, there upon the mountain a voice answered my call. My eyes opened, shining before me, greater than mountains --'

So far, it looked like his entreaties were falling on deaf ears: the Commons crowd mostly just walked on by the robed dwarf, most of them not even turning their heads except to spare the same kind of curious and incredulous glances they'd given to Anders. "Leave off yer whinging, Burkel," somebody called in an aggravated tone from the rows of stalls. "Or at least take it elsewhere. Nobody wants to hear!"

The dwarf seemed undaunted by his cold reception, passion and entreaty infusing his voice as he pleaded for his countrymen to hear the words of the Chant. The whole picture was so bizarre, so incongruous, that Anders almost wanted to laugh: seeing a dwarf wearing the vestments of the Chantry was as unlikely as seeing a golem wearing a ball gown.

It took a moment for the association to click: a sun-touched surfacer in flamey robes. Anders had assumed that by surfacer they meant human; he'd forgotten that Orzammar dwarves considered those who had left the city in the same category. A surfacer dwarf who had returned to Orzammar, that was unusual enough, but a dwarven Chanter?

"I can't believe it!" Anders blurted out. He hadn't meant to speak, but the realization startled the words out of him. "The Chantry priest they were talking about in Dust Town is a dwarf?"

Burkel paused in his evangelizing, turning to face Anders with a frown on his face. "And what about it?" he demanded.

Anders shrugged apologetically. "You do realize that you're barred from ever becoming an actual priest due to your race AND your sex, right? The Chantry doesn't exactly care about dwarves. Or men." Or mages, he thought bitterly. There had been many times in his life when he'd felt that longing, the yearning for the purity of the Song in his heart; and just as many times when he fell into despair, knowing that the Maker's grace was not meant for him. Would never be for him.

"I let the Light into my heart, I am faithful to the Maker and his Lady," Burkel insisted fervently. "I serve them with my whole being, regardless of whether I could ever be anointed in the Maker's sight --"

He cut himself off midsentence, taking a step back as his eyes widened with recognition -- and loathing. "It's you!" he hissed. "The Butcher of Kirkwall! The apostate who murdered the Grand Cleric!"

Anders rocked back on his heels, taken aback by the sudden reversal of the tide. All of a sudden all eyes were on him, and the bystanders that had been paying idle attention to Burkel were focused instead on him. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the sobriquet, but it was no easier to wear now than it had been before.

_The Butcher of Kirkwall._ What could a man say to a name like that?

Burkel wasn't done, though his tirade had taken on the sing-song tone of the Chant. "Foul and corrupt are they who have taken His gift and turned it against His children. They shall be named Maleficar, accursed ones, and they shall find no rest in this world or beyond --"

Transfigurations, again. Anders was getting so blighted sick of Transfigurations. But if Burkel
wanted to try quoting the Chant at him, then he might as well return the favor. He took a step forward. "Sweet song of victory rising from the lips of the vanquishers; a thousand freed men to the Maker gave thanks," he said. "But for every one who stood and sang the hymn of praise, two lay at their feet, soul seeking the Light eternal."

It was a verse from the oldest part of the Chant, detailing Andraste's campaign to victory against the forces of Tevinter; a song of victory, but also a reminder that victory always came at a sorrowful, but necessary cost. "And there, the Lady of Restitution drew her shining sword and plunged it into the ground at her feet, saying: "All sins are forgiven! All crimes pardoned! Let no soul harbor guilt! Let no soul hunger for justice!"

Burkel glared at him hatefully. "Don't you quote the Chant at me, apostate," he spat. "You defile its purity by twisting the words as you do, as you defile all things that you have touched, including holy ground! Did you think the truth was not known? Did you think your identity was a secret? It was you who destroyed the Kirkwall Chantry! It was you who murdered the Grand Cleric Elthina, and seventy-two other innocent, virtuous men and women of faith! You killed them, in cold blood! It was you!"

Anders opened his mouth, then closed it and looked aside, giving a helpless, involuntary little shrug. The old Anders might have tried to make a joke, a quip, to deflect the heavy and painful accusations and turn them aside. The old Anders might have argued, defended his actions or protested the rightness or necessity of them. But Justice wouldn't let him do that. It was all true, and nothing that anyone said or did could make it untrue. Burkel's anger, however painful, was just.

His own death would have been justice, and he'd been prepared for it, after Kirkwall; when it hadn't come, he'd fallen for a time into utter despair. It had been a long, difficult climb out of this pit, but with help from others Anders -- and Justice -- had finally come to an understanding.

Justice, in the mortal world, was not as simple and fair as one life for another life. In truth, they had already killed far too many before they had ever set foot in Kirkwall for those scales to ever have been balanced. And his death would not undo the past, would not bring the dead back to life nor return the lost to their bereaved. The only chance for justice -- the only chance for them -- was to find a way to give the sacrifice meaning, to redeem the deaths and horrors in purpose of a better world. If they abandoned their cause, if they failed, if the world went back to the way it had been -- then all the deaths truly would be senseless and without purpose. Only by success, only in victory could he redeem them.

The guilt would never go away. It still hurt, but wallowing in his own pain would be selfish, and allowing himself to be paralyzed by doubt and grief would be senseless. There was nothing to do but go on.

His lack of response had done nothing to deter Burkel; if anything he was getting in his stride now, reaching full voice as he delivered his angry rebuke. "-- without provocation to the least of his children, are hated and accursed by the Maker," he was saying, and wonderful, they were on to Transfigurations. "You should have been executed for your crimes! You should never have been allowed to set foot in this city!"

"Instead Bhelen allows you free run of the city that no human has ever been granted, heedless of what fester's in the shadows that you cast, of what stained and corroded footprints you leave!"

Anders couldn't help the wince, recognizing that verse from the Canticle of Silence; the association of his own mages with the Sidereal Magisters had not been an accident. "He even permits you to spread your corruption in Dust Town, amongst the most simple and vulnerable of our people,
where he does not even allow the Chantry to spread its good works. He refuses to allow even a modest waystation of the Chant of Light in this city, but he builds a tower to arrogance and pride! He --"

Anders hadn't been able to get a word in edgewise even if he'd had a defense, but he finally managed to interrupt the tirade. "Wait, is that what this is about?" He demanded. "You're upset about me helping the casteless because YOU wanted to preach to them? That's kind of… egomaniac of you."

"I could have helped them!" Burkel was shaking all over with the strength of his emotion, and Anders wondered if the lay brother was not about to burst into tears. "We could have done so much for the people of Dust Town if we'd been permitted, as the Chantry does for the poor and downtrodden on the surface lands. But no! Bhelen would not permit it! I had nothing more that I could give them but words, and hope. And then you came -- with your guile and your promises and your temptations -- and put the poor people of Orzammar in your thrall, and now they are deaf even to my words!"

In some ways, Anders couldn't help but sympathize with Burkel. An outcast among his own people, forever marked as not belonging, he was nevertheless trying his best to do good for his people. Anders didn't have much faith in the Chantry's charitable outreach efforts, but at least Burkel believed, and continued to fight for his belief in the face of institutional oppression. He'd been there, and he could understand how Burkel felt, even if he couldn't agree with his methods.

But Burkel wasn't done. "I shudder to think of what foul enchantments you laid upon those poor people under the guise of healing magic," the dwarf spat. "I have no doubt that you enthralled their minds, as your kind always does -- as you probably did to the King himself, to get him to listen to you and obey you --"

All of Anders' sympathy went up in a flash, like a leaf of paper on a roaring fire. That was not just insulting, it was dangerous -- if people got it into their heads that Anders had somehow enthralled or enchanted Bhelen -- "I have not!" he growled, interrupting Burkel's torrent of words. "I have not, I would not, and frankly I didn't need to. Just because you don't want to face up to the fact that Orzammar has more use for my magic than they do for your sermonizing!"

He shouldn't have spoken; he'd let Burkel know that he'd gotten under his skin. A spark lit in his eye, and an unpleasant smile played at the edge of his lips. He turned part of the way away from Anders, addressing the crowd instead. "Brothers and sisters!" he said grandly, sweeping his arms outwards. "Do you know the truth of what, exactly, has been invited under your roofs? Do you know what kind of serpent has been brought into your midst? I have been to the surface; I have seen the perversions of these mages. Not content to steal the lives of their fellow men, they can use dark magic to even steal their minds!"

"What's he talking about?" he heard one of the crowd ask another, sounding baffled. "Beats me," another muttered.

"Blood magic, people of Orzammar, it is blood magic you should fear!" Burkel shouted. "With this most forbidden of arts, mages can slip into your very thoughts -- even into the thoughts of a king! -- and whisper their unholy influences, turn good men and women to puppets of their evil commands. Blood magic is the sin that marks the mages, that stains them in the eyes of the Maker, for it was blood magic that brought about the very darkspawn!"

The circle around Anders and Burkel was becoming more defined; people were drawing away, leaving them standing together in an open space, but more people were also coming up to join the
growing perimeter, listening in. "Here, what's this nonsense?" one man called out, sounding annoyed, but another woman said: "I don't know, maybe he's on to something. The darkspawn had to have come from somewhere, didn't they?" "They do say the king went mad --" "Yeah, but they've always said that about Endrin's kid. Long before the Warden got here."

More uneasy mutterings in the crowd; Burkel turned back to a seething Anders, triumph written on his face. He leveled one accusing finger at Anders. "So! The truth is known!" he blustered. "You who have turned against the Maker's children -- I name you maleficar, Mage Emissary! You have twisted and poisoned King Bhelen's mind with blood magic --"

"You lie!" The words ripped from his throat, his voice reinforced and strengthened by another, fueled by the outrage at Burkel's accusations. "These are but the blind, cowardly accusations of those who seek to destroy what they cannot understand! I have not used blood magic; I have never used blood magic!"

The overlay in his voice faded slightly, but Anders pushed on passionately. It wasn't enough just to deny Burkel's words; he had to counter it with an image more powerful, or the only thing that the crowd would remember would be the accusation. "I was kept chained in a cell for a year, before I had ever raised my hand against anyone, even to defend myself -- for a year, while the templars tried to force me into blood magic. They tried to force me to fall and I never did, I never did and I never will!"

Burkel stumbled, for a moment bereft of words in the face of Anders' anger, his remembered pain and despair. Anders pinned him with a glare, lips drawn back from his teeth. "Are you not satisfied that all of southern Thedas is raised to fear and hate my people, to punish them before they've ever committed a crime -- to make us the scapegoat for all your failures and follies? That you have to do it here, too?" he demanded. "Well, it's not going to work! We are going to live here in peace, and you can't stop us; we are going to march beside Orzammar's soldiers to drive the darkspawn from the Deep Roads, and you can't stop us!"

"Here, what's this?" A new voice broke into the tableau, and Anders with difficulty tore his eyes away from Burkel to look over at the commotion in the crowd. A patrol of dwarven guards in the Aeducan colors was plowing their way steadily through the crowd towards them. Anders thought he recognized the one in the lead -- Dorton? Dorlon? Something like that -- who pushed his way into the cleared space and leveled a thunderous frown at Burkel. "You again, eh, Brother Burkel? You know you ain't allowed to spout your nonsense in the public squares. Keep it to private parties, if anyone will invite you -- unless you want to just pack it in and go back to the surface."

The other two guards arranged themselves behind the leader, their posture making it very clear that they were prepared to move Burkel if he was not prepared to move. The lay-brother looked at them, then turned back to Anders, glaring pure hatred. "You think you've won," he said in a low, intense voice. "But the Assembly is not taken in by your foul scheming, and when the vote happens, you and all your kind will be banished from Orzammar forever."

The smile that had begun to form on Anders' face was wiped out in an instant by those words. "Wait, what?" he said.

"Come on, move along," the guards said brusquely. Burkel didn't answer again, but he spat at the cobblestones before Anders' feet. The guard grabbed his elbow, pulling him forward, and in a clanking of plate and chain, Burkel was hustled off. He didn't look back, and Anders' next words were lost in the hubbub of the dispersing crowd: "What vote?"

Nobody answered. But Anders thought, with a cold sinking horror, that he already knew. And he thought he knew -- at last -- what Bhelen had not been telling him.
A lot of lines were pulled from the 'Chant of Light Verses' page at the DA wiki. Here are the relevant verses:

Andraste:
From sky-tearing peaks of the sacred mountain
To secret-steep'd roots of the ancient oak trees
A lonesome choir, I, song failing unanswered,
Voice on wind returning, answered no more.

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."
Lo! My eyes open'd, shining before me
Greater than mountains, towering mighty,
Hand all outstretch'd, stars glist'ning as jewels
From rings 'pon His fingers and crown 'pon His brow.

Apotheosis:
Victory! Sweet song rising from the lips of the vanquishers,
The host of Shartan, the clans of Alamarri, a thousand freemen
Held aloft blade and spear and to the Maker gave thanks.
But for every one who stood and sang the hymn of praise,
Two lay at their feet, soul seeking the Light eternal.

Exaltations:
And there, the Lady of Restitution
Drew her shining sword
And plunged it into the ground at her feet, saying:
"All sins are forgiven! All crimes pardoned!
Let no soul harbor guilt!
Let no soul hunger for justice!
By the Maker's will I decree
Harmony in all things.
Let Balance be restored
And the world given eternal life."

Silence 3:
"Surrounded by glory, the Seven stood,
In the hall of apotheosis, heedless
Of what festered in the shadows the cast there,
Of what stained and corroded footprints they left."

"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!"

And of course, Transfigurations:
"Foul and corrupt are they
Who have taken His gift
And turned it against His children.
They shall be named Maleficiar, accursed ones.
They shall find no rest in this world or beyond.

All men are the Work of our Maker's Hands,
From the lowest slaves
To the highest kings.
Those who bring harm
Without provocation to the least of His children
Are hated and accursed by the Maker. "
Discretion

This time, Anders didn't get all the way to the office door before he was intercepted. Vartag Gavorn saw him coming and rose hastily from his desk, planting his formidable stoutness like a bulwark across the doorway. "No! No! Absolutely not!" he hissed, crossing his arms firmly across his chest. "The King is in audience with several very highly-ranked Deshyrs, and you absolutely cannot go in there right now!"

Anders caught the interested, alert looks of the palace guards, and decided there was nothing to be gained by pushing it. Besides, Gavorn was as likely to have the answers he needed. "What's this I hear about an Assembly vote to turn the mages out of Orzammar?" he demanded. Gavorn's face gave him all the confirmation he needed, even without speaking; Anders' blood chilled. "How is that even possible? I thought Bhelen was king!"

"He is. He is," Gavorn said hastily. He glanced around the room as though looking for some ally or escape route. When none was forthcoming, he went on grudgingly: "But the Assembly's powers are rooted in traditions thousands of years old. It takes a two-thirds majority vote to overturn a royal decree, and getting two-thirds of these old fossils to agree on anything is a once-in-a-lifetime rarity."

"Oh, I'm honored!" Anders said scornfully. "Why am I hearing about it from itinerant street preachers, instead of from my own allies?"

Gavorn gave him a dark black glare. "Because he knew you'd go storming off in a rage and smash any hopes of coaxing a compromise out of the Assembly!" he snapped. "This isn't a battle you can fight, Anders. The Deshyrs aren't impressed by grandstanding or passionate rhetoric. If you, a surfacer and a human, go in there and start making threats or demands, you'll cement their conviction without a doubt!"

Anders took a step back, reeling. Bhelen had... how dare he? Even if this was true -- and Anders wasn't just going to accept that without an argument -- even if this was true, Bhelen still should have told him, and laid out his reasoning in plain terms. This, going behind his back, was a dishonest, cowardly act --

The steward heaved a sigh, running his hand through his grey-peppered black mane. "Negotiations are in a very delicate state just now," he said, keeping his voice low and reasonable. "Bhelen thinks he's almost persuaded a couple of their supporters to stay neutral in the upcoming vote. That might be enough to tip the balance."

"'Might?' " Anders went rigid. Things were even worse than he'd imagined. "So they've already got the votes they need?"

Gavorn looked like he wished he could call back his last few words, but it was too late to deny it. "Yes. But nothing's decided for sure until the votes are actually cast," he added quickly. "There are a few who still might break away."

"Is..." Anders swallowed. "Is this because of what I'm doing in Dust Town?" Maker, if his own actions had sabotaged all they'd worked for -- if he destroyed everything, unknowingly, because Bhelen hadn't told him --
"Well, that didn't help," Gavorn admitted. "But this has been coming since long before that. Ivo set the motion on the Assembly floor the first convention after your arrival. It's just taken this long to come to a vote. 'The Thing moves as slowly as the mountain, but it does move,' as the old saying goes."

"I can't believe this." Anders was ready to tear his hair in frustration. "I have to --"

" --Stay out of it!" Gavorn overrode him. The black scowl was back. "I'm serious, Anders. There's nothing you can do that won't make things worse. If you want to make yourself useful, then here." He pulled a bundle of papers, wrapped in linen cloth, from his desk and slapped it against the middle of Anders' chest. Anders took it automatically. "What's this?"

"The new patrol orders for the Legion of the Dead," Gavorn explained. "We've heard rumors of --"

"Are you kidding me?!" Anders exploded. "We're about to be voted out of Orzammar, everything we've worked for is at risk, and you want me to leave the city now?"

"Yes." The dwarf stared him down unflinchingly. "We want you to do the job you signed up for. The first patrol you went on was outstanding -- high success, low casualties. Those were the results we needed. Now we need some more.

"Trust me, Anders, this is the best way you can help -- by reminding the deshyrs of all they stand to gain by keeping you and the other mages in the city. Remind them that we dwarves swore to a bargain, by showing that you will uphold yours." Gavorn gave Anders a firm push, backing him out of the doorway, before letting him go. "Dwarven politics is our job. Let us do it, and you do yours."

Anders walked back to the Manor in a daze, not hearing or seeing the familiar sights of Orzammar around him. How had they grown so familiar, in such a short time? How had he so quickly come to take them for granted? All he had here came from the generosity of his friend, the Commander; from the sufferance of King Bhelen. It had come too easily, without sacrifice; maybe he shouldn't have been surprised that it could be taken away just as easily. That was what it meant to be a mage, wasn't it; everything was transient, and nothing ever truly belonged to you.

As he stepped through the doorway to the main room, a burst of laughter jolted him out of his reverie. Anders blinked, his eyes adjusting to the brighter, higher light levels of the mage enclave. The air inside was warmer, either because or in aid of the myriad half-dressed bodies draped over every piece of furniture.

What seemed like most of the mage population of Orzammar was crowded into the living room, in various half-dressed states of smallclothes or bared limbs, piled onto the couches or sprawled on the carpets. For a moment, Anders was genuinely unsure if he'd walked in on an orgy; but then his old, near-buried Circle memories kicked in and he recognized what was going on here.

"Anders, welcome back!" Jowan piped up. He was barefoot, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, perched on the back of a facedown mage Anders didn't immediately recognize, giving a vigorous backrub. Similar noises of welcome floated up from others in the room; he spotted Hamil giving a shoulder rub to Anla and looking very disgruntled about it while the young elf's eyes half-closed in
bliss. Surana had her legs stretched out along the couch over three other mages, ankles propped in Mardra's lap, who was giving them a vigorous foot massage. All over the room, mages sat or lay or leaned against each other, amiably exchanging hand rubs and scalp massages and back scratches.

Such spontaneous massage parties had been a staple of Circle life, a way for mages to relax and connect with one another that required no more props or preparation than their own hands and bodies. Living in such close quarters forced mages to be casual about personal space and boundaries, and to turn to each other for what comfort they could -- but only casual, superficial contact, nothing too serious or too intimate, lest the Templars take unhealthy interest.

"Yes, welcome back," Mardra agreed, and Surana smiled up at him but didn't speak. "Did everything go well in Dust Town today?"

"You must be very tired," Anla contributed helpfully. "And sore, too. You should let Jowan give you a backrub. 'E is very good!"

Anders stood there blinking, momentarily bereft of response. But instinct kicked in to give an automatic, sarcastic retort. "Er, Jowan? Are you sure you really want to let him that close to you? I wouldn't want to end up the subject of a new experimental blood magic massage technique."

A titter of laughter ran around the room, and Jowan looked indignant. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "I'll have you know I'm more than just blood magic. I can do other things too!"

"He can," Surana voiced quietly, her green eyes half-closed as she slouched further down on the couch. "His hands are very talented." She gave a half-smile, much deeper and more private than the first one.

The chuckle increased to outright laughter, and Jowan blushed a deep red but gave a sheepish smile as well. "Well, I try," he said.

"I missed this, from back at the Circle," groaned the subject of Jowan's ministrations; Anders thought she was one of the Perendale mages, but wasn't sure which one. "It's so nice not to have the Templars watching all the time, though."

A murmur of agreement went around the room, and the unhappiness in Anders' heart suddenly rose up, threatening to swell his throat shut.

He had to tell them, tell them about the vote and the threat of doom that hung over their peaceful refuge. But how could he destroy their innocent happiness, their relief at being somewhere safe and free? He had to tell them, he had to -- they had a right to know, and if he concealed it from them he would be no better than Bhelen.

Just... not right that moment. He'd tell them later, Anders thought, with a stab of guilt and censure in his chest. Later tonight, before bed. Just not yet. Please, Maker, not yet.

He couldn't stay in the Manor, not with the anxiety and the guilt eating away at him like a candle burning at both ends. When the flames met in the middle, he feared the last of his composure would melt down, and Maker only knew what would become of him then. As had become his habit when upset, he found himself wandering the city, restlessly prowling the halls of stone. So long as he kept moving, he didn't feel so trapped.
Orzammar brought less comfort to him than it had before, even as he passed the magnificent stonework of the Diamond Quarter, the wealth of precious stones and metals worked into every corner, he couldn't help but think of how much the well-dressed, well-fed nobles must hate him. The bustling industry of the forge district and manufactuaries were less able to distract him than before, when he reflected on the determined efforts of the Smith caste to block and stall him.

And Dust Town… just thinking about it hurt, the need to go to them and continue his work battling with the horrible, cold sinking feeling that meddling with the Casteless was the final straw that caused Orzammar to reject them. That all they had worked for would be lost, all his people made homeless and hopeless, simply because Anders couldn't turn down the opportunity to play savior. That without the protection of Orzammar, the mages would once again be at the mercy of the vengeful Templars and the Chantry, and it was all his fault.

It was so frustrating, to have come so close -- to have just begun to think of Orzammar as a home, only to lose it all. He could read the dwarven clocks now, could think in stone-ticks; felt them trickling away like sand from an hourglass with no bottom, tick tick tick tick, and every second brought the vote closer. The hours seemed to slip away as easily as minutes, in the eternal dark under the mountain, and Anders still couldn't bring himself to go back.

So lost was he in his own agonized thought, that Anders almost failed to notice at first that he was surrounded. Oh, they were good about it -- very subtle, on the very periphery of his personal space. He almost wouldn't have noticed them at all, if not for the fact that they all kept pace with each other and with him, and subtly herded him away from the main thoroughfare and onto smaller, twistier, less well-lit streets. Not that the Diamond Quarter would ever deign to have alleyways, of course; but they were certainly access roads.

Ambush? He wondered, but as he began to pay more attention to his herders, they didn't seem to have an aura of menace. They were all dressed in the elaborate, jewel-bedecked fashions of the noble classes, none of them carrying any visible weapons… and they were all women.

Anders cleared his throat. "Excuse me, ladies," he said. A couple of bad jokes about buying him dinner first flitted through his mind, and were discarded. "Er… are we going somewhere?"

They looked at him, almost identical expressions of careful blankness on their faces; and they looked familiar, where had he seen this particular trio of dwarven women before? "Warden," one of them acknowledged him, bobbing a perfunctory curtsey. That was a good sign, right? You wouldn't curtsey to someone you were about to shank for their money. "You have an appointment."

"I do?" Anders wondered, but he didn't object as they picked up the pace again. His strange guides led him further into the maze of alleyways behind the Diamond Quarter's extravagant thoroughfares, further and further away from the crowds until they passed into a series of alleys that seemed completely deserted.

Deserted, all except for two figures waiting at the junction between two dim-lit roads. The eye went first to a blonde dwarf, unusually tall for her race, with a pair of axes poorly-concealed on her hips and a stone-hard glint in her eye; the other, smaller and slighter beside her, cloaked and hooded from head to toe.

When Anders came to a stop in the alleyway, the cloaked figure looked up at him, then pushed back the hood. Anders' eyes widened, and the whole scene took on a startling new perspective; the cloaked woman was Queen Moira.

"Your Majesty," Anders said, startlement almost overcoming his courtesy. "I didn't expect to meet you… here. Wherever here is." He glanced around the deserted streets, a little lost.
"It is a simple fact of being royalty that much of your life becomes public theater," Moira replied, in her precise, even tones. "But there are some conversations that should take place out of sight."

"Hild." She glanced over at the blonde dwarf, and they shared a gaze that seemed to communicate far more in code than Anders could decipher. Moira touched the other woman's wrist with her fingers, lightly and discreetly, and the taller dwarf nodded and moved off. Ignoring Anders, she began a slow circuit of the vicinity, hands on the hilts of her weapons. The other women -- Moira's handmaidens, Anders remembered them now -- had vanished.

Moira turned back to Anders, and the shrewd focus of her gaze was unnerving. "You have a problem, Warden Healer," she said. "You and all your mages, and the Tower you hope to build. The Assembly vote threatens to render all your plans stillborn in the making."

"You know about that?!" Anders blurted, then cursed himself under Moira's scornful, withering glare. *Stupid,* he castigated himself. *She's the bloody Queen. Of course she knows! Likely nobody kept her in the dark for fear of what she might do. Who would dare?*

Moira continued as if Anders' outburst had not happened. "The vote takes place in two month's time, and as it stands, Ivo's faction has the upper hand," she said. "My husband's scheming may well come to an abrupt and ungraceful end, and as for you and your mages -- well, you may find yourselves homeless."

"I don't understand this," Anders admitted, frustration and anguish creeping in at the edges. "Do so many of the nobles really hate us this much?"

"Hate you?" Moira's delicately sculpted eyebrows rose. "Not really. In all honesty, most of the deshyrs do not care about you mages one way or another. They stand indifferent to the Circle Tower project, as they will be little affected by the outcome."

That… was unexpected, actually. "Don't they want to reclaim the Deep Roads?" he said. "I thought that was what they all dreamed of -- a chance to reclaim their glorious past."

"They certainly revere the idea of their glorious past," Moira said, with some distaste. "But the reality of it? Most of them are far too preoccupied with the comfortable present. The deshyrs of the Assembly are the wealthiest, most privileged men and women in Orzammar, and they do not retain their wealth by gambling with it. Very few of the deshyrs stand to gain from Bhelen's expeditions into the Deep Roads; aside from a few crumbs of treasure or historical curiosities, all land and artifacts regained are to be retained by the crown."

"No, the deshyrs do not care about the Deep Roads expedition. Neither do they particularly care about you. Apart from a few rabid isolationists, like Vollney or that fool Frandal Ivo, they are largely indifferent to you." Moira's lips tightened, her eyes clouded with some deeply buried anger. "But neither do they love my husband, for his raw ambition and his unprecedented expansion of royal power. There are a handful who support him, a handful who support Ivo, and the rest are somewhere in the undecided middle."

"Then how did Ivo get so many votes?" Anders frowned.

Moira shrugged. "Politics. How else? Ivo is a canny, experienced player of the game, a worthy opponent. But he has also expended a huge amount of capital -- both in terms of money and influence -- to sway the other deshyrs over to his side. An astonishing amount, far more than Bhelen had anticipated." A smile quirked her ruby-painted lips; it was not a nice smile. "Really, if the stakes of the vote were not so high, it would be a marvelous opportunity to rebuke him for his extravagance." She sighed. "Most of Ivo's supporters are only tentatively committed to his cause;
but given how uninvested they are in the outcome, a tentative commitment is all he needs."

"So are you telling me it's hopeless?" Anders demanded. Why drag him out in the middle of nowhere -- just to gloat about his imminent defeat?

Moira leaned back slightly, her hands folded into her sleeves. She could be so still, sometimes, she seemed like a statue, always watching, never moving. "Hope may be found in unexpected places," she said. "I believe that I may have a solution for your problem, if you have a solution for mine."
Anders couldn't help to feel the strangeness of the situation: in a dim back alley in Orzammar, strangely deserted of its bustling populace, face-to-face with the most highly ranked woman in the kingdom. She should have looked out of place here, so far from her jeweled furniture and gaudy decorations, and yet the grim stubbornness he saw in her eyes said otherwise. Wherever she went, she carried the mountain with her, for it was her kingdom.

"I've been observing you, Warden Healer," Moira said. "Your work in Dust Town has surprised many… and intrigued me."

Anders was immediately wary, on guard. It wasn't clear from the Queen's reserved tone whether or not she approved, and he knew there were many among the Orzammar nobility who saw his meddling with the casteless as an outrageous subversion of the proper order of things. Was she one of them? "I won't ignore people in need of my help," he warned. "No matter what anyone thinks. I can't."

"Admirable -- if impractical," Moira said dryly. Her gaze became even more sharp, even more focused on him. "But my sources report that you do not seem to have the usual surfaecer difficulty with healing dwarves -- and more, that you can heal far more than the gross wounds of the flesh. That you can also heal more subtle malaises… and diseases."

"More subtle…" Anders caught where this was going, and he looked at the woman before him with a new concern. "Your Majesty, are you ill? Do you need healing?"

Moira didn't answer at first, her lips tightening as to hold whatever words she might have said locked inside. She turned away, and began to pace back and forth over the dark stone. When at last she began to speak again, her words were low and seemed directed more towards the shadows than to him.

"I have been married to my husband for over fifteen years," she said quietly. "We shared a bedchamber almost every night for the first five, and there was nothing. Not even a false hope. Every corner of Orzammar, every rumor from the world above tells that you are a powerful and skilled healer." She stopped in her pacing, and turned to face him again. "I thought that perhaps you could provide more than a false hope."

"You want… to be pregnant?" Anders tried to make sure he was hearing this correctly. "You want me to help you conceive?"

"Can you?" Moira challenged him.
"I... um." It was Anders' turn to close his mouth, to think before he spoke. He had a feeling that his next words might be more important than he knew.

Most of his Circle medical work had focused on the opposite kind of reproductive problems; no woman in the Circle was actively *trying* to get pregnant. But his time in Kirkwall broadened his scope of experience considerably. In the seven years he'd spent running his clinic there, Anders had attended a number of women who had trouble falling pregnant. The female reproductive system was not a mystery to him. He'd seen everything from cysts or growths within the ovaries that killed or blocked the eggs from dropping, damaged tissue on the uterus walls that prevented a baby from implanting, to more subtle humor imbalances in the blood that stopped the pregnancy from ever forming at all. In some cases, he'd been able to help clear the problem; in some others, he never even found what the problem was.

Could he help her conceive? Maybe. But the next question became, *should* he? Natya's family, her sister and nephew and niece, were spared the rigors of Dust Town only because Bhelen's wife had no child. If that changed... might they be put aside? Even if they weren't, did he want to place them in the position of being between an ambitious woman and the throne?

"Listen -- I'm not saying I won't help you, although I don't know whether or not I can," he said. "But if I do, I want your promise that you won't do anything to hurt Rica or her son."

Moira's head jerked back as though he'd slapped her, her blue eyes going wide. "Endrin Aeducan is the son of my husband, the heir to my kingdom," she sputtered, sounding incredulous. "I would never harm him, nor would I harm his mother for no other crime than being a silly girl who was more fortunate than I! What sort of monster do you think I am?"

"Well -- I've known a lot of nobles over the years who wouldn't hesitate," Anders defended himself. He hesitated. "But I have to ask, I mean, if not for the chance to have your own heir-contender, what exactly do you get out of this? What are your aims?"

"What do you care?" Moira snapped back, still sounding stung by his accusation. "What does the future of Orzammar matter to you -- human?"

Anders lifted his hands placatingly. "I am sorry if I offended," he said. "Truly. But -- the whole point of coming here, of bringing my people here... was that we should make a home here, a future here. If our survival depends on yours, then don't I have every reason to care?"

Moira calmed herself, visibly making an effort to draw back her imposing reserve. "I suppose that is true," she allowed. "My aims? My aims are the same as those of my husband -- the betterment of our people, the uplifting of our kingdoms. But Bhelen is too preoccupied with his masculine ambitions to see the bigger picture."

"The revival of an underground empire? That picture seemed pretty big to me."

"And yet missing some very fundamental brush strokes," Moira said. "Who exactly is going to *inhabit* all these cities that we reclaim? Who is going to work the land that we conquer? Where does Bhelen expect to find the next generation to carry on the work that we begin?"

She spoke with such passion, such frustrated intensity, that Anders sensed they were drawing close to the very heart of the matter. But whatever was driving this, it was something that seemed so obvious to her that she didn't even feel the need to explain. "I don't understand," Anders admitted. "What are you saying? What's stopping you?"

"Infertility, Warden Healer," Moira said. "Infertility is the curse that haunts our people, that
hobbles all our dreams of the future. We can barely afford to replace our current population, let alone fill the grand horizons that Bhelen dreams off. And it's getting worse with every generation. More and more of our women are barren, and the pressure it places upon our society is twisting it to something our ancestors would barely recognize."

That reference, Anders did understand. He was getting better at this. "You're talking about the noble hunters."

"That is exactly what I'm talking about," she said with a nod. "So few dwarven women in Orzammar are fertile, that a woman who shows a spark becomes a prize to be fought over by every man seeking an heir for his House. Talent, ambition, education, hard work and training; all of it becomes secondary to the ability to conceive! Our women are reduced to nothing but vessels to carry the next generation!"

Anders couldn't help be moved by her passion, her frustration. But the memories of the casteless trapped in Dust Town, the ones the nobles would happily see kept there forever, wouldn't leave him. "But at least it gives the women born into poverty a chance to improve their lives," he pointed out. "That's something, isn't it?"

"By selling their bodies? What kind of chance is that?" Moira snarled. "There should be avenues for the lesser classes to improve themselves, yes -- but not like this. For every duster girl who strikes it rich by bearing a babe for a higher-caste father, there's a woman of that caste who is being thrown aside because her womb cannot kindle.

"And don't forget, the elevation only occurs if the babe is male!" She was pacing again, steps quick and full of suppressed anger, hands making short, aborted movements in the air. "What do you think happens to all those girl children of casteless mothers, those who cannot afford to even feed themselves let alone a child -- whose only hope is to make their bodies ready again for another try as quickly as possible? It is only a short walk from the lowest part of Orzammar to the Deep Roads, after all, by back passages that have no guards. How can we hope to battle the darkspawn, when they grow fat on the flesh of our own children?"

A sudden memory flashed on Anders with stunning force; a ramshackle dwelling in Dust Town, filled with the smell of sweat and blood and rot. A dwarven girl who might once have been pretty, pretty enough to attract the attention of a noble man. A woman suffering from the aftereffects of a bad birth -- but no baby in sight.

It was a girl, her brother had said, as though that explained everything, because to him, that was all that needed to be said.

"I... I didn't realize," Anders croaked, cold with horror.

"Men never do," Moira said coldly, drawing her hands back into her cloak, wrapping her arms around herself tightly. "At least not until it's too late. Did you never stop to wonder why you see so few young women around Orzammar, Warden? Certainly, many of them are cloistered away; but many more of them simply are not there. There are six men in Orzammar for every five women, and the longer the situation goes on, the worse it will become."

Anders shook his head, in shock and disbelief. "Surely the king isn't just ignoring this?"

Moira sniffed. "If Bhelen has a strategy in mind to repopulate these roads he plans to conquer, he has not made it known to me," she said icily. "Perhaps he plans to raid the lower castes for their fertile wombs to act as broodmothers to his new army. Or perhaps he hasn't thought on the matter at all. Myself, I would prefer a more elegant solution."
"And you think I can offer that?" Anders said, beginning to realize the full shape of things. "With healing magic?" Just a hint of doubt touched his tone; he was good, but not good enough to heal a whole city.

"Not just you," Moira said, just faintly scornful. "You, alone, would not be enough -- even if it is possible at all -- but a tower of your kind, a city of your kind..." She looked him up and down, then back up to meet his eyes directly again. "Your power for me, but not for me alone -- others of your kind for others of mine. Yes, perhaps then we might have some true hope.

"Your first Proving showed good results, gained you much respect and valor," Moira went on. "Now I offer you another. If you can prove your abilities to me, then you will find yourself with a silent support that cannot be shaken. If it were made known -- discreetly -- what a mage's healing power could do, then every noblewoman who has suffered long without a cure, every married deshyr will find themselves all at once remarkably deaf to calls to evict you and yours from Orzammar."

Anders rocked back on his heels, stunned by the magnitude of what she was proposing. "You... you can really do that?" he said. "Change the course of the Assembly vote?"

Moira smiled, a small, wintry smile. "Oh, I have done it before," she said.

"If you have that power, then why haven't you used it?" Anders exclaimed. "I thought you said you and your husband had the same aims. Why hasn't Bhelen had you use this influence for him?"

"Bhelen does not command me." Moira looked deeply insulted by the thought. "My service is to Orzammar and to her people, not to his ambitions. It seemed to me that to start a war of conquest that we could not sustain in twenty year's time would be worse for us than if we had just stayed home. But if there were hope..." Her lips pursed, the sentence trailing off into speculation. "If there was a cure... then perhaps that is a future worth reaching for."

Anders nodded slowly, his head spinning as the Queen's vision of the future seemed to open up around him. Imagining a true partnership, where dwarves did not merely tolerate the mages' presence in their kingdom but welcome them, where mages could be part of Orzammar's future. Could be part of any future.

"I understand," Anders said. He took a deep breath. "And I accept your offer."

Anders made his way back to the Manor, mind still whirling. Moira had promised to send for him again before he left for the Deep Roads, to attempt a first treatment, but she hadn't said when or where. The secrecy was a bit annoying, even if it was nothing new to him after his years with the Mage Underground.

But if his mind was busy, his heart was much lighter than when he had set out from the manor. He could face it, and the people within it, without the crushing burden of guilt and silence -- because now when he told them of the doom that hung over them all, he could also offer them hope.

He found Mardra in one of the narrow side rooms which had become her study, cluttered with ledgers and walls plastered with diagrams and flowcharts; at the sound of his voice, Surana poked her head out from a nearby room and came to join them.
"Welcome back, Anders," the elf said when the door closed behind the two of them. She gave
Anders a shrewd, discerning look. "Are you finally ready to tell us what's been eating at you?"

Anders blushed a little. "Yes, I am," he said. "I'm sorry for freezing you out -- I just didn't know
what to do. But now... I can deliver good news along with the bad."

He took a deep breath. "I heard from the King's steward, Gavorn, that the Assembly is holding a
vote in a month's time," he said. "The subject of the vote is whether to overturn Bhelen's decree to
have the Tower built -- and ban all mages from the city." Like a demon, saying it aloud seemed to
invoke the specter of it, give it power -- but at least it was out in the open now, and the nagging
urge towards truthfulness was finally eased.

The two women were looking at him expectantly, as though awaiting the punchline to a joke.
"And?" Mardra prompted him after a minute. "What about it?"

She wasn't surprised at all. Anders stared at her, mouth falling open in shock. "You
knew?!" he sputtered in disbelief.

Surana tilted her head to the side. "...Yes?" she ventured.

They'd both known. Anders had agonized over his secret-keeping for no purpose at all. "It's not
like it was exactly a secret," Mardra protested. "Not to anyone keeping up with Orzammar news,
that is. I heard the news from Shaper Ezerain when I was there two cycles ago."

"And I heard it from Tovez," Surana volunteered. "We often meet to exchange music and news,
and practice together."

Anders felt like he'd been pushed off-balance, and he couldn't help but irrationally resent the fact
that the two other mages had lives and hobbies and contacts of their own, and didn't just sit around
all day when he was busy doing other things. Keeping Jowan from blowing himself up, he was
sure, must be a full-time job; and how did Mardra find the
time? "And neither of you thought to
tell me?"

Mardra and Surana looked at each other, then the human woman looked back at him. "We thought
you already knew?" she shrugged.

Anders clutched at his hair. "Don't worry, it's probably just a formality," Mardra hastened to
reassure him. "Ezerain says that the isolationist faction is actually pretty small, and they would
need a two-thirds majority to overturn a royal decree. Two-thirds of the Assembly can hardly agree
on which is the ceiling and which is the ground, let alone a vote like this.

"There have only been five times in Orzammar history a vote to overturn a royal decree has
actually gone through, and the last one only because nine-tenths of the Assembly had just been
slaughtered in a civil war. So I'm sure we have nothing to worry about," she finished confidently.

"...I see," Anders said, as he let his hands drop. What he saw was that although the news of the
vote itself was more widely known than he'd thought, the truth of just how close the vote might
come to passing was not. They would not, could not have been so blithe and casual about the
prospect of the vote passing if they knew just how far Lord Ivo was willing to go to expel them.

But they didn't need to know the odds, as long as they knew of the possibility. "Well, hopefully
you're right," Anders said instead. "I've just come from a meeting with... with an ally in the
Assembly. We worked out a deal, and she seems confident that she can keep things under control."

Surana's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And what did you promise in return for this aid?" she
"Healing," Anders responded, but hesitated on the details. On one hand, if the mages did get called on to help the women of Orzammar with their infertility problem, it was bound to become known sooner or later; but it didn't have to be sooner, and he owed his patients their privacy. He settled on, "For… a chronic condition."

"Makes sense." Surana nodded, satisfied. "I'm just glad you didn't decide to offer to do it for free, again."

Anders did not admit that if Moira had asked for his help directly, rather than offering an exchange right out the gate, he very well might have. "It's a bit different when they can afford it," he said instead. "Anyway, I wanted to make sure you know about it before I leave."

The vote wasn't for another month and a half; there was no possible way that he could delay his Deep Roads mission long enough to see it. Not that there was anything he could do even if he were here for it, or anything he could do if Moira decided for some reason to withdraw her support, but he still wished --

"Leave?" Surana demanded, shocked.

"You're leaving?" Mardra cried out. "To go where?!"

Anders blinked. "The… Deep Roads?" he ventured. "The Legion of the Dead patrol is back, and Bhelen wants me to go out on another mission with them."

With matching expressions of anger and dismay, the two women said nearly in chorus: "You didn't tell us!"

This was the reaction he'd expecting from the news of the vote; Anders was left stammering, bereft of a response. He'd had absolutely no idea this was going to be this much of an issue.

"What are we going to do when you're gone?" Mardra fretted.

"What? You'll be fine," Anders said with surprise, scoffing a little. "You don't need me, it's not like I do anything around here anyway."

Mardra looked like she might contest that, but Surana interrupted: "And if you don't return?"

Anders blinked. "Why wouldn't I return?"

"Have you lost your senses?" Mardra exclaimed, wringing her hands in dismay. "It's the Deep Roads! They don't call the dwarves that go there the Legion of the Dead for nothing -- the casualty rate is tremendous! You could be killed by a darkspawn, or -- or shot by a Hurlock, or crushed by an ogre, or eaten by deepstalkers, or gored by a bronto, or fall into a pit of magma and die!"

Anders stared at her in astonishment. "What in the world have you been hearing about the Deep Roads?"

To his surprise, the question made Mardra blush. "…When I was younger, I-I had a book about the Deep Roads," she mumbled. "Well, it was Daylen's book really, but I read it. You know, one of those 'Choose Your Path of Peril' type books, where you turn to different pages based on the choices you make? It was called 'The Fatal Curse of the Deadly Roads' and I always ended up falling into the magma pit."
"Listen," Anders said firmly. "I'm a Warden. I know the Deep Roads and yes, they're not pleasant, but they're a far cry from instant death. If they were, I never would have made a bargain with Bhelen to send mages down there." He looked from one of his friends to the other, reached out and took hold of their hands to squeeze firmly. "I will be fine. We'll all be fine. You'll see."

"You're right," Surana murmured. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Mardra looked far from reassured. "Yes, but..." she fretted. "Do you have to go now?"

Anders sighed. "I do. I made a promise to King Bhelen that I would serve him in the Deep Roads," he said. "The Seneschal told me that the best thing I could do for this vote was to show everyone in the Assembly that we mages keep our promises. And I mean to."

The dark-haired mage looked struck by those words, and she nodded in acceptance. 'I understand," she said. "When will you be taking your leave?"

"Tomorrow night," Anders said.

"What," Mardra exclaimed, and jumped to her feet. Without another word, she dashed from the room, leaving Anders to stare after her in astonishment.

"What was that about?" Anders demanded of Surana, who only shrugged.

He just hoped he hadn't upset her. Anders resolved to try to find Mardra again before he had to leave, so that at least he wouldn't leave on a bad note. In the meantime, there were a thousand things he had to do before tomorrow night -- gathering supplies, and packing, and meeting again with Moira, and one last check of Dust Town to try to help the worst-off patients so that they could last until he was gone, and, and, and --

Putting his friend's strange behavior out of his mind, Anders went back to work.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

I'm having to retcon myself again: specifically, the date of the vote. Bhelen had originally stated that it was due to take place in just over a week, but I think it makes more sense for it to be a month or more out still. Either way, Anders will leave for the Deep Roads before the vote takes place.

One chapter left in the Act!
Anders tried to ignore the ache in his legs as he followed his dwarven guide into the unfamiliar house. It felt like he had walked the height of the entire mountain today alone, and realistically he might have; Moira's messengers had met him just as he emerged from Dust Town, and led him up what seemed like thousands of steps into the crown of the mountain. The further up they had gone - though still confined by the stone roof overhead -- the fewer other dwarves they'd seen, and the sparser houses and dwellings became among the hollowed-out natural caverns. It had gotten colder, too, relying on gas lamps instead of the familiar red glow of lava vents, and Anders found himself wishing he'd had a chance to bring warmer clothing.

"Are we there yet?" Anders said, a whine in his voice as he tried to pull his ragged sleeves further down around his wrists. He wasn't used to being cold. Normally he could just summon heat when he wanted -- but with all the healing he'd done this morning, and what he was going to have to do next, he was reluctant to waste the mana.

His guide glanced up over her shoulder at him, an annoyed expression on her face, and Anders quickly held his hands up in surrender. "Just wondering." He wouldn't make the mistake of underestimating Moira's 'handmaidsens' going forward. A pair of thugs had accosted them in one of the narrow alleys on their way up from Dust Town, and while Anders was still trying to find a way to talk them past without having to fireball anyone, the woman had slid forward with a stiletto knife appearing in her hand from nowhere, and dispatched both opponents with a quick and ruthless efficiency. Even after seeing it in her hand, Anders had no idea where she'd been keeping the knife; it seemed to vanish from the face of the earth as the handmaiden walked on past the bodies.

The woman -- she hadn't given Anders her name -- let out an exasperated sigh. "In fact, we are there," she said, as she slid open another heavy stone door. "We have been on Meino property for several minutes now."

"This is somebody's house?" Anders looked about the stone corridors in surprise. "But then where is everybody?"

"This is not the primary Meino residence, of course," the handmaiden explained. "That is back
down in the city. This is more of a... private retreat, for when members of the family wish to
absent themselves from the noise and chaos of city life."

It was another one of those weird moments where Anders had to turn his mental picture of the
world upside down, to think like a dwarf. He was used to thinking of the surface world as where
city and civilization were, and the further you went underground, the wilder it got. But Orzammar
had been built not from the surface down, but from the Deep Roads up: as the arteries of commerce
and intercity communication, naturally most of the interest would crowd close around the Deep
Roads entrances.

Although the dwarves of Orzammar could -- and had -- continued to expand upwards into the
mountains overhead, expanding natural caverns and tunnels as they went, such places would be
inconveniently distant from the machinery of city life. A dwelling this far from the heat and light
of the dwarven magma tubes, far from the deposits of precious metal and huge refineries that were
the city's economic livelihood, far from the underground highways of trade and travel, would be
the dwarven equivalent of a bucolic country estate.

He followed his guide through several more rooms. Furniture started to appear, carefully covered
in drapes and pushed into corners, and he heard the murmur of voices ahead. Light spilled out of a
chamber at the end of a short hallway; lingering outside the doorway was the tall blonde dwarf
who had accompanied Moira the other night.

Anders gave her a long look as he approached, appraising her. She looked him up and down in
return, a scowl drawing down her lips at whatever she saw, and he wondered what exactly her role
was. He'd assumed she was the Queen's bodyguard, but now it seemed that all of the handmaidens
were more than capable of filling that role; so perhaps not a bodyguard, then. Or perhaps not only a
bodyguard.

As he drew level with her, one thick-muscled arm shot out and took hold of his elbow in a grip like
iron. It would probably have hurt a lot more if not for Justice's strength within him; as it was, he
could barely conceal a wince. The blonde woman leaned in close. "I'm giving you one warning,
cloudgazer," she said; her voice was an almost melodic growl, like a tiger's purr. "If you hurt her --
if you poison her with lies and false promises -- you'll only wish that the Assembly had forced you
out of Orzammar."

It was second nature for Anders to push back when people threatened him -- a sarcastic 'You and
what army?' was already on his lips, even if the answer in this case might be only too obvious. But
he'd also been a healer long enough to recognize when anger and belligerence was driven by fear,
and he held his tongue.

"Hildegard, stop terrorizing my doctors," a familiar voice called from inside, and the blonde dwarf
glanced through the door, her scowl softening around the edges. She stepped aside, reluctantly
releasing Anders' arm, and pushed the door open. He could feel her eyes boring into his back as he
steps forward.

The furniture in this room was pulled out, freed of drapes and dust. Moira and another of her
handmaidens-cum-bodyguards were already within. The queen had dressed plainly today, in an
unbelted gown of light fabric that swept loosely around her ankles and wrists, and it fluttered and
floated as she paced restlessly across the flagstones. Her customary jewelry was also missing -- her
idea of dressing discreetly, he supposed, although the quality of fabric and embroidery on her dress
and slippers still proclaimed her wealth and status to anyone who looked close enough.

"Warden Healer." The change of clothes didn't disguise her haughty manner, either, as she pulled to
a stop and nodded at him. "My thanks for your prompt arrival. I apologize that I could not give you
more advance notice, but I understand you depart for the Deep Roads tonight. I thought it best to make use of your services sooner rather than later, before you ended up in some darkspawn's belly."

"Your Majesty has every faith in me," Anders said sarcastically, then bit his tongue again. He gave a little bow. "I will do my best for you."

"Of course. I have no doubt you will, in exchange for the security of your people. But let us not waste time." Moira stood still, her fingers working over some small bit of embroidery at the collar of her gown, and Anders realized that she was nervous. "What... what is required? Do I need to undress?"

Anders shook his head, starting his habitual motions of tying back his sleeves. "No, that shouldn't be necessary. But you will need to lie down. And," he said, keeping an eye on the impassive-looking dwarven women hovering at the edge of the room, "I will need to touch you."

"All right," Moira said. Her voice was iron, expressionless as befitted a politician, but he didn't think he'd imagined that moment of uncertainty.

A low, flat divan was one of the pieces of furniture that had been pulled out; Moira climbed stiffly onto it and lay on her back, her hands tightly clenched. Anders pulled up a low footstool, just so that he wouldn't have to sit on the floor, and settled in, raising his arms and beginning to call power to them. Just a diagnostic, at first; just a small inquisitive wisp, to seek out the body ahead of him and feed back to him its secrets.

Despite all his confidence, he hoped fervently that he was going to be able to help. Dwarves were not humans, after all -- although for the most part the parts were the same, just smaller. Even allowing for the smaller scale, however, something definitely seemed to be amiss. The ovaries were shrunken, almost atrophied, though Anders could see no direct cause why that should be so.

He took his time with the examination, moving from a close scrutiny to a more holistic view of the body and blood. And there -- he wouldn't have known what he was seeing if he hadn't spent time healing Wardens in the past. There was a shadow in the blood, a lingering trace of what almost looked like Blight -- not alive, growing like it was in the truly Tainted, but inert. Stubborn, still, clinging to the tissues like a layer of grime that refused to be washed away.

Anders did not know what to make of it. How would the Queen of Orzammar have acquired the Taint? It was unlikely that darkspawn would have somehow snuck their way all the way into the palace to attack her in her sleep, and unlikely that this civilian woman would have ventured into the Deep Roads on her own. "You said you were not otherwise ill?" Anders said, keeping a tight control over his voice so as not to let any of his sudden worry creep in. _Healer voice, Anders; don't frighten your patients._ Especially not when your patient could have you exiled from Orzammar with a word.

"No," Moira said. "No more so than all other women of Orzammar who share my affliction."

That bit of perspective made Anders pause and reconsider. Perhaps it was not a case of individual blight, but something more generally environmental? Something in the air or water of Orzammar itself? In Kirkwall, many had suffered from the smoke and ash of the foundries, even those who were not actually exposed to the Chokedamp. Perhaps there was something similar at work here. Anders hadn't seen it in the other Orzammar dwarves he had healed -- but then again, he hadn't looked.

Moira, it seemed, was not interested in explanations. "Is there anything you can do?" she asked,
and the hint of anxiety creeping in undermined the imperiousness of her tone.

"I can try," Anders replied.

The Blight was notoriously -- even infamously -- resistant to cure, but there were ways to stave it off. Most of the time, the Wardens didn't bother -- if the ending would be the same no matter what, why prolong the suffering? Still, with a case of non-fatal taint, perhaps it he could do some actual good here. Anders released the exploration spell, instead summoning a wave of powerful creationism to his fingertips. "This may feel uncomfortable," he warned her. "You might experience heat, or a pins-and-needles sensation, but if it turns into actual pain, tell me immediately and I'll stop."

"I will be fine," Moira said firmly. "I can bear it."

Anders barely managed to stop from rolling his eyes; if he'd had a sovereign for every time he'd heard that line from his patients in Kirkwall, he wouldn't have needed to scrounge in middens for supplies. It wasn't a question of whether the patient could bear it or not -- though certainly, he would never push a patient past the limits of their tolerance except in an emergency -- but most of the time pain meant that something was very wrong and he needed to know.

He held the spell until it made his fingers tingle, then released a powerful wash of cleansing aura over Moira's body, who gasped and stiffened but made no complaint. He let the cleansing magic surge until the dark shadow of taint had faded almost to invisibility -- though it could not be eradicated completely -- and then let it go. He followed that up by shaping creation magic into a vigorous Rejuvenation spell, targeted specifically at the ovaries, and set it in place.

"Almost done," he promised.

He took a few long minutes to check his work, to make sure that nothing was leaking over inappropriately; both spells looked good, though even in the few minutes he watched he saw a faint hint of decay around the edges of the cleansed area, where the taint was already trying to creep back in. It would hold for a few days, at least, he estimated; and in the meantime, her tissues and organs would work to get back up to full function again. Hopefully.

He dropped his hands, the last of the glow fading from them, and blew out a tired breath. "All finished," he assured her, and held out a hand to help her up off the couch.

Somewhat to his surprise she took it, allowing him to help her sit up; she sat on the edge of the couch and gingerly touched her own stomach, her fingers questing along the border of her waistline. "Did it work?" she said anxiously.

"I can't say yet," Anders said, his need for honestly battling with his desire to be reassuring. "I think this should help quite a lot, but fertility is a hit or miss prospect at the best of times. When were your last courses?"

Moira actually blushed slightly, though her expression didn't crack; more embarrassment than she'd shown when she'd asked if she had to disrobe. "One week past," she said.

"It's a little early, then," Anders decided. "If nothing changes for you in the next month, then come and see me again after I return from the Deep Roads, and we'll try another treatment. If still nothing, then I'll have to think of a different approach." He hoped she took him at his word, and didn't demand immediate results or think he was trying to string her along somehow. He couldn't promise success, and didn't want to raise her hopes only to have them dashed again.
"Very well," Moira said. She stood up from the couch and clasped her hands in her sleeves again, every inch the dwarven queen once more. Her handmaidens closed in around her almost immediately, as much a part of her ensemble as her clothing. She started to sweep out of his chamber, only to stop and add over her shoulder at the last minute:

"Thank you, Healer."

Those last three words surprised him almost more than the rest.

Anders took his time making his way back to the manor, since his legs were already protesting from the amount of walking he'd had to do. Thank the Maker for Warden stamina; there was a lot more marching in his near future. Was there time for him to sleep before his appointment with the patrol that night? He still had some packing to do before then, but sometimes even a few hours' sleep was better than none at all.

He was in the middle of a mental review of everything he'd have to pack with him to the Deep Roads, and how to carry it, as he mounted the steps to the Brosca Manor and pushed open the door. Immediately, he was assaulted by a flash of lights and a roar of noise. "Surprise!" called out a chorus of voices.

Anders jerked back, a fireball forming in his palm before his brain could catch up to the rest of him; he stood there blinking stupidly, hands full of fire, at the common room of the Manor which had been transformed.

Glittering decorations had been strung up on the walls, including what seemed like every lamp and candle in the Manor tinted bright colors, and the room was crowded and stifling with people. Every mage in Refuge was there -- his eyes moved from one to another, counting -- the Perendale trio, plus Anla; the miscellaneous Calenhad mages; yes, even the older Starkhaven pair were sitting together in a far corner. Dagna was there too, almost hidden behind the press of larger bodies as she waved a cheerful hand at him. Front and center was Mardra, Surana and Jowan slightly behind her, standing with her hands clasped and a worried-looking smile.

Anders opened his hand, carefully dispelling the fireball as he looked around the room. "Did... I miss something?" he asked cautiously. "Is it somebody's name-day?"

Anla bounced on one of the couch cushions, delicate face wreathed in a beaming smile. "It's for you, silly!" she exclaimed.

He blinked, and actually had to stop a moment to count the days. It was leading into winter now, and even if it'd been a while since he celebrated it, he knew he'd been born in the summer. "It's definitely not my name-day."

"No, it's because you are going away to the Deep Roads!" Anla wriggled excitedly. "Mistress Amell decided you absolutely must 'ave a leaving-for-the-Deep-Roads party!"

"It's not much, since I only had one day's notice," Mardra managed to combine an apologetic expression with a baleful glare, "but I thought it would be a good note to see you off. Such an occasion definitely deserves to be marked. After all, what if -- well, at any rate, since you are representing all of us, we should definitely give you all the support we can!"
"I --" Anders was taken aback. "Thank you. I know I didn't give you much warning, but that you all cared enough to do this... well, thank you! It means more than -- more than I can say -- " His voice, traitor that it was, broke on the last word. Just the thought that they had done this for him, that they had cared enough to hold a party for him, even at the last minute…

Anla rescued him. "Enough of that! Let us have cake!" she said impatiently. "And presents!"

Anders was ushered to a narrow chair, the only free seat in the room -- many of the mages were sitting on couch arms or the floor. And yes, there was cake, obviously purchased from some Orzammar bakery: the top was decorated with glittering rock candy over smooth marbled frosting, giving the overall impression of a very attractive stone formation. Despite the inorganic look, however, the cake was delicious, and Anders tried to quell a pang of guilt as he scraped the plate for crumbs and then went back for seconds. They'd gone to all this trouble for him; it was only right to show his appreciation, wasn't it?

While the cake was being passed around, Surana climbed nimbly onto a makeshift stage formed of planks and boards and pulled out her lute. The chattering died, if not completely, at least to a respectful background murmur while she settled herself onto the platform, robe flowing over her feet and trailing off the stage, and arranged her hands onto the instrument.

"According to Singer Tovez, an accredited bard of Orzammar," she said, "this is an ancient, traditional song of the Legion, sung now in honor of our fearless leader's upcoming expedition."

Just as Anders was thinking that most of the Legion of the Dead songs he'd heard were rather on the morbid side for a party such as this one, she struck a chord on her lute and began to sing.

"Captain Brasten heads the Legion  
Roaming through the Deeps  
There they met a nest o' Darkspawn  
These lads, they play for keeps!

The captain hewed a mighty Hurlock  
Felled him with one swing!  
And as the head went on a' bouncing  
Hear all the Legion sing:

'Hail the Hearty Hurlock's Head!  
The beast who owned it is stone dead'  
But the head keeps bouncing on and on  
The head keeps bouncing on!"

Through the next dozen or so verses, to frequent bursts of laughter from the audience, the decapitated head went on a lengthy and physically improbable journey through the Deep Roads, bouncing down shafts and along tunnels and splashing through underground rivers. Over the course of the song the bouncing head was made a plaything of a pack of wild deepstalkers, a furious bronco, rolled through a pitched Legion battle, barely avoided being incinerated in a lava slide, and was witness in passing to an amorous dwarven couple apparently looking for a romantic private spot in the Deeps. At the end of the song, the head was still going, disappearing into the darkness to continue its adventures as long as the listeners cared to imagine it.
As the song wound down, and the cake dwindled, Anla began bouncing impatiently in her seat again. To Anders' great surprise, there were indeed gifts: the mages took it in turns to come by his seat and drop off a gift with well-wishes, something they hoped would be useful in the Deep Roads.

Dagna gave him a pouch of small pebbles enchanted to emit a bright and steady light for hours when activated. Hamil had made a batch of potions of slightly dubious provenance -- someone really ought to explain to him that rage potions were for warriors, not mages. Jowan approached him and sheepishly presented a leather band with -- of course -- smears of blood worked into the creases. He explained somewhat nervously that it was a blood ward -- once primed, it would react to any other touch of blood by springing a powerful barrier around the wielder. Anders didn't especially want it, but he had to admit, it was about as benign a use of blood magic as could be imagined: he managed a painful, short, begrudging thank-you. Jowan moved off, looking greatly relieved.

Not all of the gifts were magical. Mardra gave him a marvelously crafted traveling mess kit, the finest he'd ever seen, very nearly a puzzle of interlocking parts that spread out to provide an entire set of cookware and yet folded up as small as a card case. Anla proudly presented a brooch of worked silver, of her own crafting, that she claimed was in the Dalish style: "It is Fen'arel, the loup terrible," she explained proudly. "The elves wear this symbol in the ‘opes of pacifying him, to turn ill luck aside." Anders took it, and didn't have the heart to say that the elvhen girl had obviously never seen a real wolf up close. The creature's ears were rounded, making it look more like a mabari than a wolf; the sight of it gave him a pang, thinking of Hawke's dog Hogger. The faithful hound had passed of old age shortly after the Qunari invasion of Kirkwall, and Hawke hadn't found another pup before it had all gone to shit. Anders wondered if he ever had.

Aside from those, the most common gift was runes; it made sense, since they were both useful in combat and light enough to carry a lot of them at once. Anders was surprised that they had managed to get so many of them ready in such a short timeframe, and thankful that they wouldn't add on too much weight for him to carry. Fire and lightning runes from the Starkhaven mages; guardian, resistance and immunity runes from the Perendale trio. Surana was last, dropping a rune in his palm and then closing both of her hands around his, leaning in close to murmur under her breath.

"Anders..." she said softly, her words not carrying to the other mages, still laughing and chatting amongst themselves. Her bright blue eyes searched his, pinning him in place. "I know the past few months haven't been easy for you. I want your word that when you go out there, you intend to come back."

"I -- what do you mean?" Anders stumbled. "I've been on a lot of Deep Roads tours, I know what I'm doing, but there's always some risk. It's a risk I accept, a risk we all have to accept."

Surana gave a slight shake of her head. "That isn't what I mean. I've been... keeping an eye on you, I know that your memories of Kirkwall... of your lover... weigh heavily on you. I know that sometimes it can feel overwhelming, like there's no other way out." She took a deep breath, squeezed his hand between her own. "But remember that you have people who are waiting for you to come back. We care about you. And we need you. Refuge needs you."

"Surana..." Anders hardly knew what to say; he was more touched and humbled by her concern than he knew how to express. "You know you don't really need me. You're smart, capable -- I hardly ever do anything around here, anyway. Even if something happens to me, I know you all could carry on without me."
"No. You're wrong," Surana said firmly. "There are things that only you can do. Just..." She looked down, fair hair curtaining her eyes. "Promise me you won't do anything final, all right? I've lost enough friends to suicide."

Anders tried to blink back the sting of tears. He'd like to believe that it was just all the extra lamps and candle smoke getting in his eyes, but Justice disapproved of lies. "I won't. Thank you for caring, but you don't need to worry," he tried to reassure her. "I could never do that to Just --"

He cut himself off, barely in time. The truth was that even in his most despairing moments, he had never seriously considered ending his own life. It was one thing for them to submit themselves to the judgment of Hawke, or any other court; another to take such judgments into his own hand. His life was not his own, had not been his own for years; the choice wasn't his own to make.

"What?" Surana met his gaze again, her eyes narrowing.

"--To just make my own life easier, I mean," Anders stuttered. Maker, he really had to control himself better. He hurried onwards. "Listen. I can't guarantee that I'll make it back. But I swear that if I don't, it isn't because I didn't want to."

Surana looked at him for a long moment, considering, and Anders tried not to sweat. At last she smiled that small, enigmatic smile, squeezed his hands again, and moved away.

Anders opened his palm, looking down at the gift she'd given him. He recognized the symbol, recognized the rune though he'd rarely ever seen it: Diligence. Carrying this rune would increase mental clarity, promote calmness of thought and focus; it was one of the hardest and most expensive runes to craft. He closed his hand over it again, and tried to swallow down the lump in his throat.

With the giving of gifts, that seemed to mark the end of the party; although the mages likely would have been happy to stay and party well into the night, Mardra broke them up with practiced efficiency, claiming that Anders needed to pack and rest before his departure. Anders was grateful to her for that mercy, almost as much as he was for arranging this for him in the first place.

The first time he'd left for the Deep Roads -- had it really been half a year ago? Time here slipped by like water, smooth and dark like an underground river -- there had been no one to throw parties for him, sing songs for him, give gifts or worry for his health. There had been Dagna, and he would always treasure her friendship for being there for him during the darkest time -- but he was not a dwarf, and she was not a mage, and there would be things that neither of them could ever fully share.

Every mage deserved this feeling, Anders thought, as he finished sorting his traveling gear and lay down fully dressed on the bed for a short rest. Every mage deserved to feel, just for one night, that they were the focus of the love and care and worry of all the world. That their courage was recognized, that their lives mattered. That they were loved, and would be missed.

Maybe he could convince Mardra to make this a regular event -- to hold a similar party for every mage who departed for the Deep Roads for the first time. He smiled drowsily at the thought: convincing Mardra to throw more parties probably wouldn't be hard. He wouldn't be surprised if she'd already thought of it herself. It would be a good way to make sure that they were properly outfitted... to see that they had the best, all that they needed... a way to bring the community together...
He drifted off into the Fade, his hand still clasped around the smooth warm stone in his palm.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is curious, 'The Hearty Hurlock's Head' is more or less sung to the same tune as 'Coming Through the Rye.'

One last short chapter following this, and that'll be the end of the Act. Whew.
As he headed out past the Orzammar city limits into the Deep Roads towards the rendezvous point, Anders couldn't keep a certain spring from his step. By all rights it shouldn't be there -- nothing that had happened over the past year had lessened his undying hatred for the Deep Roads by a whit -- but the memory of his last night in Orzammar stayed with him, buoyed him.

The multitude of gifts the other mages had pressed on him before he left clanked as he walked, weighing him down, and Anders decided that the best way to make use of this bounty was going to be redistributing it. Future mages, heading out into the Deep Roads without a Warden's training or protection, might well have need of such extra defense and firepower -- but for Anders, together with Justice, it was entirely redundant. Others needed it more than him. He would give it to his friends and partners in the Legion, and it would help keep them safe even when he could not keep them close. He'd made a promise, after all.

A blurry light in the gloom ahead resolved itself into a campfire, with the familiar stocky shadows moving around it; they saw him coming, too, and raised their voices in greeting and welcome. Anders' steps quickened to take him the rest of the way, and then he was there, at the Legion encampment on the border between Orzammar and the Deep Roads.

"Welcome back, Warden Enchanter!" The familiar strong voice of Bardien Saelac greeted him as the captain himself advanced in the firelight, a big smile on his handsomely-groomed face. Other Legionnaires greeted him with varying degrees of enthusiasm, except for one small body that ran out of a tent and made straight for him. The small dwarven girl hit him like a ballistae bolt, and Anders let out a grunt that turned into a laugh as Rix actually knocked him back a pace. He hugged her back, his arms going around her shoulders and picking her up slightly off the ground as she pressed her face against his stomach.

"Oh, I see our little Killer has warmed up to you," Bardien observed, sounding surprised. Surprised, but not displeased; there was a definite glint of approval in his smile as he looked over the two of them. Then he clapped his hands, rubbing the palms of his gauntlets together. "So! Welcome back. Ready to plumb some Deeps, aye?"

Anders grinned as he set Rix back on her feet, though she stayed close to his side as he turned to face the patrol leader, hands on his hips. "Oh, if only you'd known me in my youth!" he said, with a false sigh and flutter of eyelashes. "You'd be surprised at the Deeps I've plumbed in the old days!"
"Did you hear that boys? This surfacer thinks he knows what *old days* really means!" Bardien addressed the rest of the patrol, to hoots of laughter. He turned back to Anders with a grin. "Well, you'd better gird your loins, old man, because we've got a long way to go."

"So I'm told." Anders' smile faded slightly as he recalled the description of their current assignment.

According to reports from the Legion going back years (and Warden lore, too; Anders could have told them that) there was a depth below which the darkspawn did not go. On one level it had been known for years, but only anecdotally; no one had ever set out to explicitly confirm whether that was true. How deep was the no-darkspawn zone? Was it the same depth everywhere? Was the entire layer truly free of the Darkspawn taint, or were there just clean patches for unexplained reasons?

Over the next patrol they were being sent to four different known deep-drops, which were thought to go far enough down to reach the supposed Blight-free layer. They were to descend each one, measuring the distance as they went, until they could reach a depth where they could confirm no darkspawn ventured. For this mission, a Warden presence was invaluable; his own affinity with the Taint could confirm in a moment what would otherwise take days or more to estimate.

But he didn't want to focus yet on that deep darkness, on spending what would likely be weeks or months in the bowels of the earth without sight of light or air. Not when he could focus instead on the camaraderie at hand, the time spent with his friends and comrades. "I've got some things that might help with that," he said, pulling out the bulging satchel he'd brought with him.

"Presents!" one of the dwarves yelled, laughing. "What have you got, Anders?"

"Gifts from our mage friends up in Refuge," Anders said with a smile.

He pulled them out and passed them around one at a time, looking for the faces of the friends he remembered from the first patrol. For Dougal, the first Legionnaire he'd healed, a barrier ward to help keep his legs in one piece for a change. For Jasi, the woman who'd lost a hand, a fire rune to help make up for the lost damage. He explained what each piece was for as he handed it out, going through the items in the satchel one after another until he came to Anla's mabari-wolf pin, and then he hesitated.

It was a lovely piece of jewelry, dog ears aside, but Anders could hardly look at it without remembering Hogger, and his owner. One of the Legionnaires pointed at it and asked: "So what's that fancy brooch do, hey?"

Anders grinned. "It makes you fashionable, of course!" To the general laughter of the patrol, he tossed the pin across the fire to Bardien, who caught it with a look of mock outrage.

"Hey! Are you saying that I'm not absolutely fashionable already?" he complained.

"There's always room for improvement," Anders said.

Bardien huffed. "Nug shit. Can't improve on perfection," he said, but Anders saw he looked pleased as he pinned the silver brooch at the fold of his cloak.

"And this one..." Anders hesitated as his hand came on the Diligence rune, the gift from Surana. After a moment, he turned to Rix, who had not left his side since he'd reached the campsite. Remembering her silent, steadfast dedication to Gershen, how she broke law and tradition and risked her very life to see that he was comfortable and cared for, he could think of no one more
suited for it. "This one's for you, Killer."

Her blue eyes lit up, shining in the shadow of her Legion tattoos as she took it. "For me?" she exclaimed, as Anders placed the rune in her hands. She stared down at it, expression shifting to something surprised as she held it in her hand. "It's..." No words followed, and at last she just looked up at Anders and smiled, that sweet little smile. "Thanks."

He was getting to the bottom of his satchel, but he still had a few gifts to give; he picked out a protection rune and looked around. "Now, where's Harold gotten off to?" he asked. "Maker, I've missed that man's roast deepstalker."

The cavern suddenly went quiet, the group of dwarves losing their happy party mood. Anders was struck by a sudden misgiving, looking from one face to another; some he knew, some he didn't know, but some not there at all. They all avoided his eyes, except for Bardien.

"He's guarding the deeps for all time now," Bardien said quietly, "safe within the stone. With him Gethur, Pyram and Olivia; may their spirits endure."

"What?" Stunned, Anders nearly dropped his satchel. "But..."

"The patrol never sleeps, even if the King doesn't have a special mission for us," Bardien interrupted him. "And neither do the darkspawn. That's life in the Legion, lad."

Anders took a step back, feeling as though he had been struck. While he'd been away -- while he'd been gadding about with building towers and arguing with politicians -- the Legion had continued their deadly, lonely work in the Deep Roads. His friends had died while he wasn't even here to help them. It was a stunning reminder that although he could leave, they never could.

Bardien sighed, sweeping his gaze around the suddenly-subdued camp. "Speaking of which, we've got a job to do," he said. "Let's move on."

Another long march with the Legion; this time Anders could track the time, just about. Six hours marching, a break for a short meal and rest, then four more hours marching before they made camp for the night. He found himself drawn back into the rhythm of life in the Legion, the songs and the meals and the banter, as though nothing had changed. Even though, for some of them, everything had changed; they would never be the same again. They would never be again at all.

Anders sat apart when the Legion made camp for the night, trying not to look too closely at the campfire where most of the rest of the Legionnaires congregated. There were new faces and voices he didn't know, hadn't been introduced; wasn't sure he even wanted to be introduced. Harold gone, Gethur gone and Maker, he hadn't even known those others. They'd come and gone in a blink between when Anders had left them and when he'd rejoined them. He knew in the abstract how short the career of a Legionnaire usually was, but it was another thing to be confronted with the horrific reality.

It wasn't a surprise when he heard a step behind him, felt a hand gripping his shoulder before Bardien moved to sit beside him. "It's good to have you back, Anders," the patrol-captain said quietly. The silver wolf pin glittered on his shoulder, reflecting the firelight. "Especially when we
head out on a long patrol like this. With you here, I know there's a chance of keeping my boys alive."

The words were kindly meant, but they stung. The corollary was obvious: when he wasn't here, their odds were worse. But he couldn't spend his life with the Legion, he just couldn't -- he had other obligations. He had other people that needed him. "For how long?" he muttered. "What's the point of staying alive today if it just means they'll die tomorrow?"

Bardien's eyebrows rose, and he reached up to trace his beard-braids thoughtfully. "Well, among other things," he said, "it means they'd be alive tonight. Warden, I've seen a lot o' dead people in my time, and I can promise you that with very few exceptions, being alive is always better than being dead."

Anders' head dropped forward. "But..." he trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

"But it hurts?" Bardien supplied. "Not them, but you? But you're afraid to lose more friends?"

"Yes," Anders said, with the barest of nods. "It hurts."

Bardien pondered that for a long moment, before he shrugged his broad shoulders. "Well..." he said, "Deal with it."

Anders' head jerked up to stare at him. "What?" he choked.

"I meant what I said. Just lump it," Bardien repeated, a steely glint in his eye. "It's all part of being head of a patrol, head of any band of brothers.

"If you mean ta be a leader -- a real leader, not just a figurehead counting marks on a ledger and days on a wall, taking your pay and calling in the rest of the time -- then you've got to know your men. You've got to know them inside and out, their strengths and weaknesses, what they can give, what they need to take. You've got to open your heart to them, let them in." His expression, and his voice, softened. "And yes, that means it hurts when they're gone -- but that's just the price you have to pay. They give their lives for us; the least we can do is give them our respect."

He sat back, his head spinning. In a way, it wasn't so different from being a healer, he thought. He'd lost patients before, he knew the pain of it -- but he still made a point to look each of them in the eye, to talk to them, to find out their names and introduce himself to them. It might have been easier just to see them as a collection of wounds for his magic to heal, indifferent to their fear and anguish, but he'd never been able to do that. That was cruelty, and worse, it was cowardice.

"You're right," Anders said at last. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. S'all part of the growing pains." Bardien gave him another pat on the shoulder, then used him as leverage to get to his feet. "Now. Ready to get out of your funk?"

Anders got to his own feet, smiling. "I'm ready," he said, and turned towards the fire. "Let's go meet my new brothers and sisters."

"Good lad."

Together, they walked further into the Deeps.
Announcements!

This chapter marks the end of Act II, and the halfway point of the fic. With that in mind, I am going to put this fic on hiatus for a while. There are a couple of reasons for this, primary among which that I have other fics I want to work on -- and while I can occasionally manage short things, it is very difficult for me to work on more than one large project at a time. This fic has sort of eaten my life, and I don't want to grow to resent it for blocking me from doing other enjoyable things.

Secondarily, I need some time to work out what exactly is going to happen in Act III. While the major landmark events are set, and I have an idea of what themes and arcs will need to be addressed during that Act (Act III will turn the focus from the dwarves somewhat and more onto the mages, wrestle with dividing factions and conflicting priorities, and cover the major events of the Mage Rebellion from Refuge's POV) I don't have anything like a solid scene plan or timeline. I need more time to work out what exactly I'm going to do and when and how I'm going to do it.

On that note I feel like I want to open the floor a bit here. Are there any things that you, the readers, would really like me to address or include in the next parts of One Elegant Solution? With the disclaimer that although I'll read all suggestions, I may not include them -- or they may already be included at some point down the line. But if you think I've been badly neglecting some characters or parts of the narrative, or just have a few off-the-wall headcanons you'd like to see, drop them in a comment and I'll see if they mesh with what I have planned :)

At any rate, I just want to assure readers that I am NOT abandoning this fic. At this point in my writing career I've had enough completed works under my belt that I feel confident I can finish this one, barring a major change of life incident. I will come back to this story -- I just want to write other things for a while, and this seemed like a good stopping point!
ACT III

Chapter Summary

Anders returns from the Deep Roads, and is struck by how much has changed in his absence.

Chapter Notes

Well, this is it! One Elegant Solution is officially back on. The hiatus ended up lasting longer than I expected, due to a combination of writer's block on a number of different projects (the Fenhanders In Space fic fought me at every turn oh my god) and me getting very sick in November and December of last year. But, I'm back on the horse and building steam (in this metaphor, the horse is steam-powered.)

Another reason for the delay was that I had a lot of challenges and frustrations with trying to plan this Act: I've managed to iron out some of them in outline, but others I just have to hope I will manage to resolve them when I get there. In the meantime, I have the first few chapters written out, and will be returning to my once-a-week posting schedule, which I will hopefully be able to keep up with once the pre-written chapters run out.

Happy reading!

Whereas, three consecutive Conclaves have passed without Grand Enchanter Briaus in attendance;

Whereas, half a year has passed without notice or correspondence from the Grand Enchanter by letter, messenger or crystal sending;

Whereas, the Conclave must address matters of increasing urgency to the very survival Circle of Magi and with regards to its future course,

The Conclave thereby invokes Article 25 of the Charter to call a special election for the post of Grand Enchanter.

Votes will be cast by secret ballot and tallied independently by two Tranquil. Results tallied thereby will be considered binding, and cannot be changed or rescinded once cast.

The new Grand Enchanter will be selected from the slate of following candidates:

First Enchanter Vivienne de Fer, (Mntsm., Loy.)
Emerging from the Deep Roads always felt a little like being born again, leaving behind the close and cloudy world with its shifting boundaries and enigmatic shadows for a world of color and beauty, solidity and safety.

Anders' steps were slow and weary as he made his way through the streets of Orzammar, but every step took him further away from the Deep Roads and that made them worth taking. This time around had been especially harrowing, delving below the wide flat avenues of the dwarven halls, below even the twisty stinking tunnels of the darkspawn into chains of caverns not built or shaped by any hand that had ever seen the sun. There were creatures down there that had no equivalent on the surface at all -- some hungry for blood, some indifferent even to their existence -- and ugly horrors interspersed with bizarrely beautiful caverns of quartz and rivers of crystal, shining with a sourceless light.

How long had he been gone? It would take time to re-accustom himself to the rhythm of normal life, it always did. He'd been gone a month on his first trip; this second trip had been much longer. Of the year he'd pledged to serve King Bhelen in exchange for his service, he'd served maybe half of it, if he had to guess.

Maker, but he hated the Deep Roads. It was irrational, but he thought he could feel every extra length of rock over his head as a stone on his chest, compressing him and shutting down his breath. He'd vowed when he left the Wardens that he'd never set foot there again; a fine job he'd done of that. Somehow, despite renewing that vow every time he got back, he always ended up being dragged out on the next expedition. Usually by Hawke…

He never had been able to say no to Hawke, not when he knew the man was walking into grave danger that he could help him to face. He'd been willing to walk into the Void for Hawke -- and then when it came down to it, Hawke wasn't willing to do the same for him…

The thought was nasty, unworthy, and Anders stepped on it. That wasn't fair; Hawke had done what Anders had asked of him, even going so far as to sift through piles of dragon excrement and sewers for the ugliest of ingredients. It was only the one time he hadn't asked that Hawke had rejected him utterly. Maybe if he'd asked, if he'd been honest…
Too late now. No point in dwelling on the past, Anders told himself firmly. Right now he had an appointment with a hot meal and a soft bed.

It was late in what passed for Orzammar's day, and the streets were mostly empty as he made his way to Brosca Manor. He half-expected to hear Surana and Jowan's voices floating down from the windows in song, but the manor was quiet.

Anders let himself in. The front room had acquired more furniture and clutter while he was away, every surface crowded with the working parts of some project, but there was no one around. He poked his head in the small room Mardra had claimed as an office, but the dark-haired woman was nowhere in sight.

For a moment he contemplated whether he really was set on checking in with someone to inform them of his return, or just going to bed and continuing in the morning. In the end he decided to check one more room, and this time he hit the jackpot: Surana was sitting on a bench in the workroom, meticulously carving a small block of wood.

"Neria," Anders called out, and the elven woman looked up at him and smiled. He glanced up and down the hallway, noting the mostly dark and quiet rooms. "Where is everybody?"

"Oh, Anla is asleep upstairs, and Menehi and Sheran are around somewhere," Surana said. "But most everybody else is up in the valley. I know Mardra went up there this morning to work something out with the stonemasons, and Jowan is up there as well."

Anders nodded, coming into the room and sinking onto another bench. "I just got back from the Deep Roads," he said.

"I know." Surana tilted her head to the side, eyeing him. "You look about done in. Do you want the news now, or tomorrow?"

Anders grimaced. "Is there a lot of news?"

"A fair amount."

"Then just give me the highlights for now, and I'll get the details tomorrow," Anders decided.

Surana nodded, and picked up her wood carving to continue work on it. She seemed to be cutting notches into a small fan-shaped piece of wood, the purpose for which Anders couldn't fathom. Runecrafting, maybe, or instrument-making; both crafts were equal mysteries to him. "Probably the biggest piece of news," Surana said as she carefully applied a knife to the wood, "The Conclave is convening again to elect a replacement for First Enchanter Briaus."

Anders started. "The Conclave?" he said. "Convening where? I thought the Cumberland Circle was dissolved by the Templars."

"It was," she said. "They're congregating at the White Spire this time. Enough of the Senior Enchanters were already there, combined with the ones moved in from Cumberland, that they thought they had a quorum despite the lockdown."

"What lockdown?"

"Oh. Yes, that also happened while you were gone," Surana said. "The Templars have instituted a lockdown on all travel between Circles."

He sighed. "If anything, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner," he said. "But maybe this will help
the Senior Enchanters realize that this isn't business as usual any more."

"We'll see," Surana said, her tone guarded. "Still no word from Hosburg, and the Senior Enchanters are getting pretty frantic over it. Some chatter from the Seekers makes it sound like they're worried, as well. Let's see, what else? The Empress and the Duke still haven't kissed and made up in Orlais."

"Didn't really expect them to," Anders muttered. "No skin off our backs, I suppose."

"It might be," Surana said. "In news closer to home, Queen Moira is pregnant."

"Oh," Anders said, startled. The thought Well, that was quick popped into his mind, but he managed not to say it aloud. He definitely hadn't expected his treatment to have an effect so quickly or definitively -- but, well, you never knew with fertility; it was a dice roll at the best of times. And apparently, this time around it had landed on all sixes. "Well good. Good for her. And for the King, too, I suppose."

"Good for all of Orzammar, to hear them tell it," Surana said. "The whole city is in an uproar over the news -- if you go out shopping, expect to hear about nothing else. Construction of the Tower is going well, by the way. There were some problems at first -- I suppose there always are -- but the workers seem to have overcome their learning curve and are progressing quite well."

"Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of vote in the Assembly?" Anders asked, as casually as he could. "About removing the mages from the city?"

"Oh yes, there was," Surana said. "That happened about a month after you left. Frandol Ivo of House Ivo proposed a motion to ban all mages from the city -- it was defeated in a landslide."

Anders breathed out a sigh of relief, a knot of tension untying itself in his chest as he did. He'd trusted that Moira would keep her word that she would try to swing the vote their way, and the fact that the mages were still here on his return was proof that the vote hadn't succeeded, but it was still heartening. "A landslide, huh?" he said.

Surana nodded. "Ivo only received a dozen votes in addition to his own," he said. "Not a popular man among his peers, apparently -- not a single woman in the Assembly voted with him. He broke down in a fit of rage on the Assembly floor, calling everyone there traitors and backstabbers, and had to be pulled away by the guards."

He grinned. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," he said. An involuntary yawn caught him by surprise, and he winced as his jaw cracked. "Sorry," he said.

Surana waved it away. "Don't apologize for being tired," she said. "Are you going to go rest? Or do you plan to head up to the valley to see the others?"

Anders considered it. He was tired, but after months on end in the Deep Roads with countless fathoms of stone above him, he didn't want rest nearly so much as he wanted a view of the sky. "I'll go on up," he said. "Thanks, Neria."

"You're welcome," she said, and gave him her small but heartfelt smile. "I'm glad you're here. I was waiting for the chance to talk to you again."

Something about the way she said that made Anders stop and take a second look, harder this time. It had been a few months, but... There was something different about her, about the way she sat, the way her weight shifted when she leaned. Something very subtly different about her aura, an effervescent glow that hadn't been there before.
A suspicion planted itself in the back of his mind, threatening to blossom into dawning delight. "We definitely should talk again, as soon as I have the chance," he said. "If you're up for it, Neria, I'd like to give you a more thorough medical exam, see if there have been any changes recently."

Surana gave him the widest smile he'd ever seen come from the reserved woman, a broad grin that told him that she already knew, or at least suspected, the same thing he did. "A medical exam sounds like a wonderful idea," she said. "Welcome back, Anders."

Anders spent the rest of the climb to the mountain vale contemplating the news that Surana had given him. It was frustrating, though perhaps not surprising, that the Towers continued to stand despite all the abuse the Templars were heaping on it. If recent events didn't convince them to take a stand and unite for independence, then what could?

The problem was that the ones casting the votes were the ones with the most invested in the system, the most entrenched in it, the most exposed to the lifelong brainwashing and conditioning towards powerlessness. By definition, the only ones voting for the perpetuation of the Circle system were the ones who had been lucky enough to survive this long; the unlucky ones were dead. Or worse.

There wasn't even any incentive among them to look to the future, trace the arc of history as it ground their people further and further under the Chantry's heel, and to push for a better lives for their children; because they had been denied children, denied a future of any kind. They'd spent all their lives sealed in the narrow stone corridors of the Circle, looping constantly back to the starting point; they could no longer even imagine what it was like to step out of the darkness and stand under an open sky.

An open sky like the one ahead of him; the reflected glare of sunlight ahead pulled him out of his mauldering. He slowed his steps, letting his eyes adjust to the light, and then --

He stopped on the stoop, one foot hanging in the air as he stared, mouth open, at the scene before him. Surana had set him up, that devious woman. She was probably laughing right now, imagining his reaction. She had said that "everyone" was up in the valley, and named two, and conveniently forgotten to mention all the rest.

When Anders had left Orzammar for the Deep Roads there had been nearly twenty mages at the Brosca manor, including himself -- Surana's family, the Starkhaven mages, Mardra and Anla, and a few other strays that had wandered in over time. With all of them in residence at once the manor had been a little crowded, but nothing they weren't used to from the Circles.

The valley, which had been so empty and peaceful the last time he'd seen it, was full of people. He saw dozens of people -- no, more than a hundred -- moving or sitting or standing around in a scene that had been completely transformed. The wide-open, empty foundations of the Tower had sprouted a first and second story, broad and squat and with square windows punctuating the length of its walls. Scattered around the valley like small satellites were a score more buildings -- a few longhouses built of stone blocks, and many more tents.

The whole scene was bustling, buzzing with energy, and even as he watched a team of short stocky
figures passed into his vision hauling a stack of flagstones cut at even lengths. Short figures moved easily and nonchalantly through crowds of tall ones, and -- were those children? Too-tiny figures ran around in groups with gawky adolescent taller ones, chasing each other heedlessly through the crowds of adults and raising shouts of recrimination when they crossed into a workspace, easily ignored as they raced off to their next adventure.

He wandered through the crowd, almost in a daze -- his exhaustion wasn't helping any, but this whole thing just felt unreal. How long had it been since he'd seen this many mages in one place? How much longer than that since he'd seen them not fighting for their very lives…?

"Anders!" a voice called out -- and then another, from another direction. Anders started out of his reverie and looked around. From two different places in the valley, two different -- three different figures were hurrying towards him, two tall and one short. He winced as the first got close enough for him to match face and name; Jowan, Neria Surana's husband and persistent thorn in his side.

For a selfish moment he wished that he could pretend he hadn't heard the hail, turn around and walk away, but the other mage walking purposefully towards him was Mardra, and he couldn't do that to her. So he stopped and waited for them to catch up, angling his body away from Jowan towards the other two.

He would recognize Mardra's quick, forceful stride anywhere, but the dwarf accompanying her looked oddly familiar as well. Anders was still trying to place his face when they caught up with him. "Anders! Welcome back," Mardra said, genuine pleasure in her voice despite the tight, concentrated expression on her face. She had a sheaf of papers in her hand, because of course she did; he'd been back in Orzammar for less than an hour and she probably already had a list of chores for him.

"Yes, welcome back, Anders," Jowan piped in, although he lingered awkwardly at the edge of Anders' personal space.

"Thank you, Mardra. It's good to be back," he replied, and managed to wrench himself around to give a choppy nod of recognition to the blood mage, as well. "Jowan. And who's this?" he asked, gesturing to the dwarf accompanying Mardra.

The dwarf grunted, folding his arms across his chest. "Don't recognize me, eh Warden?" he said. "Suppose it's been a few years. You've certainly changed."

Recognize him? Anders was still wracking his brains when Mardra came to his rescue. "This is Voldrik Glavanok, foreman-in-chief for the construction of the new Tower," she supplied. "He's done wonders in leading the building efforts, and working with the casteless employees as well."

"Voldrik!" Anders exclaimed as the copper dropped. "From Vigil's Keep? Maker's Breath, has it really been… eight years since I was in Amaranthine, I suppose. What are you doing here?"

"A contract's a contract," Voldrik said with a shrug. "This one came right from the King of Orzammar himself, and that's good for the rep as it is for the coffers. I gather the Paragon put my name in for the job, and suggested I might want to be on the lookout for it. Said I'd done such a good job on the Keep, the reward for a job well done was another job."

"Oh," Anders said, his voice quiet with some of the awe that had touched him. Even now, almost ten years after he'd deserted her, almost a year since she'd helped him get his foot in the door here, Natya was still looking out for him. "Well, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have. Good to see you again, Voldrik."
"I hear from Kirkwall that you're getting into the city planning business," Voldrik said dryly.

Anders winced. "Er... not really. More just the... destruction part of the business."

Voldrik brushed that aside. "It's all part of the same, boy," he said. "Destruction, construction. Got to knock down before you can build up. Can't build anything if you don't clear the ground first."

He frowned thoughtfully, turning the thought over in his mind. On a metaphorical level, if nothing else, Voldrik had a point.

"Got something for ya," Voldrik said, and thick fingers dove into the satchel at his hip. He pulled out a stack of parchment and envelopes and sorted through them, surprisingly neat and nimble despite the rough calluses on his fingers, before pulling one battered envelope out of the stack. He held it out towards Anders. "This was addressed to you. Carried it here from Vigil's Keep."

"Vigil's Keep?" Anders reached out to take it, then hesitated. The fold of the envelope bore a seal of blue wax, stamped with a stylized griffon imprint. "Is this from the Commander? Did she come back?"

"You mean Paragon Brosca?" Voldrik said. He shrugged. "Not from her. This came from one of the courier Wardens, one of the ones what came in from the Anderfels."

The Anderfels. He felt a chill steal down his back; a Warden courier with news from the Anderfels almost certainly meant Weisshaupt, the stronghold of the Grey Warden Order.

He almost wanted to shrink away from the letter, as though by refusing to pick it up he could avoid all the consequences that would surely follow. But his sense of duty took over soon enough, and he reached out to pluck the envelope from Voldrik's hands. "Thank you," he said. After a moment's indecision, Anders slipped the letter into his satchel. He didn't want to open it here, with so many people around -- not when he didn't know what to expect. Better to wait until he was somewhere private.

"And thank you for your work on the Tower," he added after a moment. He turned back to face it as he did, marveling once more in the solid reality of it; their dreams made stone. "It's looking great. And... very square?" He squinted at the tower base, wondering if this was some sort of mid-construction scaffolding phase. "I thought the final version of the plan was for it to be round." He hadn't been very happy about that, but he'd been outvoted.

Voldrik let out a strangely disconsolate grunt that reminded Anders of Wade the blacksmith, during one of his many rants about being forced to work with inferior materials like 'mere' iron and steel. Mardra rolled her eyes theatrically, and a laugh burst from Jowan's mouth before he smothered it. "Did you plan it this way?" he said. "Neria was convinced you'd planned it this way."

"Planned what which way?" Anders said. "Planned what?"

"By using the Casteless for the labor for the Tower, of course," Jowan said, as though it should be obvious.

"I really have no idea what you're trying to imply," Anders said testily. "What do the Casteless have to do with the shape of the Tower?"

Jowan gestured to Voldrik for an explanation. With a sour expression on his face, the mason said: "Cutting stone blocks to fit into curves is an advanced technique that these dusters are leagues away from mastering," he said. "The tower's a square because at the very least, I can trust them to cut a straight line and fit corners at right angles. The tower might not be pretty, but at least it'll be
"Oh," Anders said, and tried not to grin too widely. He wasn't very successful at it. "Well, that's too bad. A shame, really."

Voldrik shook his head in disgust; and with the chore of delivering his letter absolved, he turned and stumped away. Anders did his best to get his expression under control, looking at Mardra with his best wide and innocent eyes. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"The shape of the Tower is less important than the fact that it exists," Mardra said, a trifle testily. "The sooner we get livable housing up, the best. We already have over a hundred mages here, with more arriving every day."

That sobered Anders up. "So many," he marveled, looking around the crowded valley. "I take it you've been managing the arrivals?"

She nodded. "It hasn't been easy, finding places to put all these people," she said. "Fortunately the stoneworkers had put up several temporary outbuildings that they no longer need at this stage of the work -- it wasn't too difficult to convert those into bunkhouses. And the masons have their own tents, of course; tracking down their supplier was easy enough, convincing him to put in a rush order was more difficult... I'm afraid I spent a bit more than I budgeted for on that phase; but it was worth it, since the temperature dropped overnight. If we'd still had people sleeping out in the open, we might have lost someone."

"You're a miracle worker, Mardra," Anders said admiringly. If he had to be truthful, he'd never actually considered where the mages would stay before the Tower was ready for use. He hadn't expected construction to take so long, nor for so many mages to arrive so early. "We couldn't have done this without you."

She smiled in genuine pleasure at the compliment; it made her severe features look warm. "Once the bottom floor of the Tower is completed, of course, we can start moving people in," she said offhandedly. "Once they're shifted over, we can collapse the tents -- give the masons back their buildings, if they still want them, or break them down for materials if not."

Anders looked around the valley, the central Tower surrounded by the scattered spread of buildings. Little dust-worn footpaths wove their way through the outbuildings, each one representing a path of interest for enough people for their feet to trace this imprint.

From this angle -- although they were not really all that high -- it was like looking down at a castle town from above, a miniature version of the real thing. The half-started keep at the center of it like the wheel of an axle, the rest of the village revolving around it. "Actually," he said, "let's keep them."

Mardra looked at him, puzzled. "Keep the outbuildings?" she said. "I guess we could use them for craft workshops --"

"No, no," Anders said, the idea taking hold of him. "Let's keep all the external buildings. Make them permanent. Let mages be able to live in their own houses, individually and separately, if they choose."

Mardra actually dropped her papers in shock. They fluttered across the ground, punctuated by her sputtering. "You -- what? After all the effort we made to build! -- To secure the permits, and wrangle the compromise with Bhelen -- after all the money we spent --"
"Oh, we'll still use the Tower, of course," Anders said. "We can house all the apprentices there; it'll be easier to protect them and provide damage control in case of magical accidents if they're all in one space. And anyone else who wants the familiarity of the Tower can stay there, of course. But no one should be forced to live there, either by a Templar's sword or simply for lack of any other options. If they want to live apart -- marry, form families, have children -- they should have that option."

With a great effort, Mardra seemed to get hold of herself. She took a deep breath and stood bent over, hands on her knees, before she started picking up the scattered leaves of paper. "And I suppose you've got a plan for constructing all these little houses?" she snapped. "You have no idea how complicated this is going to get, do you?"

"Why should it be?" Anders asked, puzzled. "The buildings are already there, aren't they? Just build on that."

"Augh!" Apparently he was too stupid for words, as Mardra's only reply was a wordless growl before she turned and stalked off.

"What did I say?" Anders said plaintively, and from behind him came a quiet chuckle that turned into a cough.

"Er..." Jowan said, and Anders sighed and slowly turned around to face him. "Uh, welcome back, again. Good to see you're... um... er... all in one piece."

"What do you want, Jowan?" Anders said wearily.

"Um." Jowan scuffed his feet through the dust, then looked up at Anders. "So, if you're back... does this mean that the Legion patrol is back in Orzammar, as well?"

"Obviously," Anders said, unable to keep a sarcastic drawl out of his voice.

"Well, I was just wondering when I should start to. You know, go with them? To serve my year in the Deep Roads. And Neria's, too."

That was right, Anders remembered -- Jowan had volunteered to take his wife's term as well as his own. It made more sense now, with Surana's suspicious glow, than it had at the time. If what he suspected was true, then there was no way he was going to let her put herself in danger in the Deeps.

But a part of Anders balked at the thought of Jowan going out there, either. Not because it he would be especially heartbroken if Jowan met an unlucky end -- well, beyond the fact that he didn't want to lose any mages to the Deeps, and the fact that Surana would be heartbroken -- but because Jowan was a blood mage. No doubt if he went down there, out from under Anders' watchful eye, he'd go right back to cutting his wrist every time they ran across a mob of darkspawn.

Anders didn't know which was worse: that the Legionnaires would react with horror at seeing the worst stereotypes of the evil maleficarum play out, or that they would just accept it in stride as being the natural state of the apostate mage. He didn't want Jowan representing his people, Maker take him; he didn't want anyone to think that Jowan was normal.

Besides. From what he'd heard, Jowan had a remarkably consistent track record of bad decisions and absolute failures at everything he put his hand to. Anders wasn't sure he wanted to inflict a walking disaster area on Bardien, or anyone else in the Deep Roads who'd be forced to rely on him for their survival.
"I mean, it's not like I really want to go -- I mean, who wants to go to the Deep Roads? You'd have to be pretty weird to want that, wouldn't you?" Jowan said, nervously joking. "But I'd really like to get it out of the way, to clear the runes from my name, get a clean start without anything hanging over us --"

The incongruity of the statement caught Anders' wandering attention. "What runes are you talking about?"

"Oh, haven't you been to the Shaperate, yet?" Jowan said. "It's the new system they've set up. Because there's so many mages now, and everyone wants to move their years around. They've got all the mages' names in a book, and a rune with each mage's name for each year's term spent in the deep roads. If you take someone else's year, they move the rune to your entry, and then when the year gets served, it gets taken out of the book completely."

"Oh." Anders frowned. It made sense, he supposed; they had to keep track of it somehow.

"So... you know... any hints as to when I should get ready to go?" Jowan said nervously. "I mean, any time I'm needed, but... I'd like to know when, you know?"

"I don't know when the next patrol is going out," Anders said evasively, "without talking to Bhelen. Without knowing what their patrol route will be like, I don't know what specialization of mage they'd need, yet. It might change, from one patrol to another."

Jowan frowned. "But you've been going on every patrol since Refuge got started," he said.

"Healer, remember?" Anders tapped his finger against his chest with a smirk. "Always in fashion, always in demand."

"Right, but, I'm a healer too," Jowan persisted. "I mean, a - a blood healer, but that still counts, right? I mean, it does count."

Anders bit his tongue before he could say something rude about the kind of chutzpah it took to compare blood magic to real healing magic. He wouldn't deny that the enchantments Jowan had been doing -- the 'blood wards' that he'd given to the Legion -- were effective. But... "I'll let you know," he said, with firm finality.

Jowan looked like he was going to argue some more, so Anders turned his back to him and firmly walked away.

He walked through the valley, trying to adjust to the changes in layout. The half-constructed Tower still dominated the landscape, forming the hub to the wheel of all the activity that spread out around it -- a ring of scaffolding, first, and another ring of bare dirt paths and carts for the dwarven workers to shuffle around. Then spaced-out hubs of the materials waiting to be used for the Tower, staging areas where stone could be shaped into blocks or wood cut into boards for use, piled in stacks and pyramids to wait its turn.

Beyond that, another ring of tents and small wooden outbuildings; it was here that the wheel began to lose its neat circular shape. Against the north and east sides they were squashed up against the sides of the valley, sharp slopes or sheer cliff faces forming a definitive boundary. To the south and west, most of the buildings and activity followed the stream, or clustered in open meadows clear of the trees. Most of the mages were in this area, along with the dwarven workers who were taking a break in the meal tents. Anders heard his name shouted from the rows of benches, and turned around to see someone waving enthusiastically at him: one of his patients from Dust Town.
"Rona!" Anders exclaimed, a warm pleasure filling him at seeing her again. "I didn't expect to see you all the way up here!"

"Yep!" The dwarf beamed at him, showing a gap-toothed smile where several of her teeth had broken or rotted away. "The pay's so good, Healer! My Natya eats like a princess every night now!"

"I'm glad to hear that. I… ah…" Anders glanced around, baffled. "I'm sorry, didn't you have…? You talked about having a husband, Natya's father…"

"Oh, he's around here somewhere," Rona said. "A right hand with the chisel, my man is."

"I see. I just thought… well, I thought that your husband would be the one working on the Tower," Anders said. "And… not you."

Rona gave him a blank stare. "But if we both work, we get paid twice as much!"

"I… can't really argue with that," Anders said, bemused. "Well. I'm glad to hear your family is doing well."

"It's all thanks to you, Healer," Rona said earnestly. "That Natya's alive and that me and my husband have this chance. Thank you. Thank you, Paragon's healer."

The praise made him uncomfortable on a deep level. It was her own work which had earned her pay, after all, and the right to work was one she should have had with or without his intervention. He was saved from the need to reply, though, by the sound of a sudden, muffled report from the far side of the valley.

"Eh, don't worry so much," Rona said in response to his sudden alarm. "It's just those kids, fooling around again."

Kids? That was the opposite of reassuring. "Excuse me," Anders said, climbing to his feet and striding off in the direction of the explosion.

His stride lengthened as a second explosion followed, although the secondary warning signs -- columns of smoke, sounds of screaming people -- fortunately did not manifest. In fact, aside from a few heads raised to glance at the source of the noise for a short moment before going back to their business, nobody reacted at all. "What in the Maker's name?" Anders muttered.

A few minutes and some ridge-climbing later brought Anders to the scene of the crime: a little dell up against the edge of the mountain, a meadow with a thin layer of grass and scrubby bushes over stone. The north wall of the meadow was a cliff, an almost-sheer face of stone rising well over head height before it began to slope back. Visible on the smooth face of stone were a number of careful delineations of paint, some of which were almost obscured by the enormous black charcoal smear in the middle.

A group of about a dozen mages were clustered in the meadow, mostly men, all young -- Anders recognized Hamil and one of the Perendale mages who'd arrived before he left for the Deep Roads, but all the others were strangers. One of the strangers, a teenage-looking elven boy, was in the middle of channeling a massive fireball; just as Anders stepped over the rise he let loose. The orb of fire shot forward and impacted against the wall, letting out a FWUMPH and a wave of heat that Anders felt even from where he was standing. Cinders exploded from the point of impact, most thankfully falling on the bare gravel to smolder and go out without igniting anything.
Before the cinders had even cooled, several of the young men swarmed over to the -- target, Anders realized -- painted on the wall. "That's a new record!" the fireball-flinging mage crowed triumphantly. "It reached the red mark! Pay up!"

"No way!" another of the young men shouted. "You hit it off-center, Korio! It wasn't even as big as Tisha's."

The group quickly fell to heated argument as to whose fireball had been bigger and whose aim was better. "All right!" Hamil called out when the argument devolved to punching and hair-pulling. He stood on a boulder, arms folded authoritatively as he surveyed the group. "Enough chatter. Marco! You're up next!"

Another teenage boy took his place, the others falling back -- though the hair-pulling one did not release his victim. The new mage -- presumably Marco -- began channeling mana with a distinct smell of sulfur, and Anders felt it was time to intervene.

He stepped forward, his boots scraping through the gravel as he did. Heads began to turn in the crowd, and Anders frowned and folded his arms across his chest as he took in the assortments of fresh singes, scrapes and bruises on those faces. "What exactly is going on here?"

Marco lost his fireball with a sad sputter as the entire gathered crowd froze, like apprentices caught raiding the kitchen pantry.

"Who's that?" the elven boy muttered to his partner, who finally managed to wrench out of the grip he had on his hair.

"What are you, stupid?" the human mage hissed, rubbing his scalp while darting nervous glances up at Anders. "It's him!"
"Him who?"

His partner looked scandalized. "The Healer of Kirkwall! The Warden Enchanter, you flatear!"

"Don't call me a flatear!" the elf said, scowling darkly.

His companion smacked him upside the head, leading the elf to wince and rub the spot with an even darker glare. "Then don't act like a dumb flatear, flatear! Everybody knows who he is!"

Anders tapped his boot, silently demanding a response to his initial question. Hamil stepped up. "We're training," he said, sounding defiant and a little proud.

He supposed he should have guessed. "Training for what, exactly?"

Hamil puffed himself up further. "For the fighting against the Templars, of course!" he declared.

Anders wasn't sure whether to laugh in his face or shake the boy. "Oh, really?" he drawled. He began to walk slowly towards the far end of the range, measuring up the scorch impacts as he did so. "And do you expect that the Templars will just patiently stand around waiting while you take turns casting your slowest spells, one after another, with breaks to measure their impact between each one to see who has the biggest… blast radius?"

This produced some shuffling among the crowd of teenagers, and even Hamil avoided his eyes. Anders sighed.

Knowing Hamil, he probably really did intend to prepare seriously for field combat against the Templars, and the other boys had probably been enthusiastic volunteers for the prospect. But with
none of them having the first idea how templar-on-mage combat really worked, or how to leverage their talents effectively in a battle, the natural teenage urges towards competition and one-upmanship had won out.

"I can see your enthusiasm, and I commend your understandable desire to improve yourselves," Anders said, softening his disapproving demeanor somewhat. They had courage, at least; he would not deny them that. "But this is not the way to do it. If you're going to train, then train together. Practice feeding each other mana in relays, or taking turns shielding and casting. You need to be able to cast from behind a barrier anyway."

In demonstration, he threw up a barrier around himself; then, before his audience could react, he shot off three bursts of fire in quick succession, landing in a staccato line across the top of the blast crater. "You should be focusing on coordination and speed, rather than size; the Templars won't be impressed by how big your fireballs are, and neither will the darkspawn."

This produced intrigued murmurs in his audience; before any of them worked up the nerve to ask a question, Hamil stepped forward. "You've fought them, haven't you, healer?"

"The darkspawn?" Anders said. "I should think so. That's what Wardens do, after all, when they're not --"

"No! The Templars," Hamil rejected the thought of darkspawn scornfully. "You fought back in Kirkwall, you beat them too. Will you train us in how to fight them properly?"

Anders frowned at the boy; he didn't like where this was going. "Well, the first tip I'd give for fighting Templars is: Don't!"

"Even a novice Templar has spent years training specifically in methods to disrupt and destroy you. They're specialized in canceling out every form of offensive magic you can do, and their gear gives them an overwhelming advantage in hand-to-hand combat." Unless, of course, you had the strength of a newly rebirthed Fade spirit inside you; that berserker strength, not even Templar training could overcome. Not an advantage these boys were likely to have… thank the Maker. "Do not go looking to fight Templars. It's always better to run if you can, and if you can't..."

He trailed off, and Hamil pounced. "If you can't?" he pressed.

Anders hesitated, then said, "Have friends. Friends that are loyal enough that they fight the Templars while you stand off at a distance."

In Kirkwall, Hawke and his crew had been those friends. In Amaranthine, the Commander and her Wardens -- Oghren and Nathaniel and Sigrun and… Justice. Strange to think that Justice was still protecting him in that role, even now. The thought made him feel strangely sad -- and proud, at the same time.

Hamil seemed outraged by the suggestion. "That's a coward's strategy!" he scorned.

"That's a winning strategy," Anders said repressively.

Hamil scowled at him. "Well, we don't all have Champions whose skirts we can hide behind!"

Anders rocked back on his heels, reeling slightly. It hurt. It hurt, because it was true. He didn't have Hawke any more, by his side or at his back or standing between him and danger; he never would again.

"No," he said softly. "We don't."
But... but even before Hawke, even after Vigil's Keep, he still hadn't been alone. The Darktowners had served a similar buffer, in a way, even before he'd met Hawke. Maybe they wouldn't fight Templars for him but still they'd stand, putting their bodies between him and the Templars, passing warning and telling lies and giving whatever protection they could.

Maybe mages didn't need warriors so much as they just needed friends -- nonmages who would form that bulwark, stand between them and those who sought to hurt them. The Chantry tried to ostracize them, cut them off from the rest of the world, isolate them to make them easy targets. If they could get around that -- make new connections, break old barriers -- then they'd never be alone.

The dwarves could be that for them, Anders thought, looking at the field where the casteless mingled in with the mages. Orzammar could be that bulwark for them, if they could make this arrangement work. If they could make themselves so valuable to the king, to the kingdom, that this alliance was worth the cost. If they could pull this off.

If.

ANDERS: Φ

*Years remaining: 1*
Maternity

Enchanters and mages of the Conclave, I stand before you today humbled by the trust which you have invested in me. I am aware that in these troubled times, the choice of leader is no easy task, for the stakes of the trials we now face before us outweigh any that have gone before. I assure you that I will take this responsibility with the utmost grave sincerity, and do my utmost to secure a safe and prosperous future for all mages, no matter their Circle or country of origin.

I am aware that there are some concerns among you due to my affiliation as a Libertarian, those who fear that what I seek for our people is nothing less than Tevinter domination. I beg you be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of magical tyranny, and every species of spiritual persecution. Yet the time is near at hand which must determine whether we mages are to be free men or remain slaves. Do we intend to allow the outrages that occurred at Calenhad, at Starkhaven, at Kirkwall to go unaddressed? Are we to remain silent on the matters of our own life and death? If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.

Enchanters, I propose to you the following consideration: A movement for the separation of the Circle of Magi from the hand, which increasingly of late has grown heavy and oppressive, of the Chantry. A study of the history of the Chant makes it clear that liberty is the proper state of man and mage, and it is an unjust and unwise jealousy to deprive a man of his natural liberty upon the supposition he may abuse it...

--First address of newly elected Grand Enchanter Fiona, to the quorum Conclave at White Spire.

"Well?" Surana said.

There wasn't any other indicator of her nervousness, but Surana always preferred to let others speak first, respond only if called for. That she had prompted him first showed her impatience, and Anders did his best to control his expression as he lifted his hands and let the spell fade.

"Well," he said, drawing it out for a long moment before he smiled. "You're about six weeks along."

This early on, there was nothing to see in her womb just yet; but her blood had changed tenor in ways that Anders had learned to look for, in his time in the Circle and later on in Kirkwall. Trace elements that never appeared in the female body at any other time, or in the male body at all.

At the Circle, now would be the time that Anders would brew a certain potion of herbs and offer it to help deal with the "blockage," a careful code word that every woman in the Circle learned young. The longer the pregnancy went on, the more severe measures would have to be taken to end it, and the greater the danger of attracting the attention of the Templars. Once the Templars caught wind of it you could expect any number of disastrous outcomes, including harassing or even threatening the poor woman to force her to divulge the name of the father.
But that was in the Circle, in the past, far away from here, Anders thought, dragging his mind firmly out of a brooding preoccupation with old injustices. "So... congratulations!" he said cheerily, before he checked himself. Surana had seemed enthusiastic, but -- "This, er, is something to congratulate about, right?"

Surana smiled up at him, a beaming smile that quickly dispersed his doubts. "Yes, I would say so," she said. "Jowan and I, we were trying. Or, well, at least we weren't trying not to. We agreed that this was something we both wanted, and this was the best place we'd find for it... so if it was going to happen, we'd let it happen."

"Well, it's definitely happening now," Anders told her, extending a hand to help her up. Now that he knew he was allowed to be pleased about it, he couldn't help the excitement that bubbled up inside him. It felt oddly... possessive, in a way he hadn't felt towards the many children he'd helped deliver in Kirkwall. "Just think of it -- this will be the first child born in Refuge. The first child of a free mage village in all of Ferelden!"

Surana let out a soft laugh. "Unless someone arrives in the next few months who's further along than I am, I suppose you're right."

A shadow darkened her eyes, though, and she put a hand on her stomach protectively as she sat at the edge of the bed. It was only because Anders had known her for some months now, that he was able to see the subtle shifts of expression on her face.

Fears about pregnancy weren't that uncommon, especially for first-time mothers -- but Anders and the other healing mages would be here, and should be up to the challenge any pregnancy could offer. For most mage mothers, fears of the pregnancy itself were dwarfed by the terrors that would come after -- fears of being found out, of having your baby taken away, to a life of what knew what suffering and privation?

"Neria, I promise you," Anders said earnestly, placing a hand on her shoulder and looking into her eyes. "Your baby will be safe here. There will be an entire community of mages to protect them, and when -- if -- the child comes into their magic, they'll have the finest mage teachers in the world to guide and support them. No one will hurt your baby, or demean them or degrade them, or call them a monster for having magic. I swear it to you."

Some of the shadow left her leaf-green eyes, and she smiled up at him. "Thank you, Anders," she said quietly. "I know you're right -- I would never have dared to let this happen if I didn't believe this was the safest place in the world to have our baby. But I still can't help but worry... I suppose every mother has the same worries over what their child will face."

"Being mage-blooded is nothing to --" Anders started, but Surana interrupted him.

"Not because they will be mage-blooded, Anders," she said. "Because they will be elf-blooded."

Anders sat back. He blinked rapidly, trying to get his bearings. He hadn't even thought of that as being a source of a problem. His first impulse was to deny it. "Nothing like that would happen here," he said firmly. "Not at Refuge. Not among other mages."

Surana's eyes flashed, and her lips went flat, a dangerously tight line. She took a deep breath and for a moment Anders expected her to shout, but instead she spoke in a very tight, controlled voice. "Listen to me, Anders. You think you know what it means to be a mage and an elf. You think that because you're a mage, you understand everything there is to understand about oppression. But you
Anders opened his mouth to object, but Surana's voice rose over his. "No, don't interrupt, and don't talk over me. Let me finish!" she said, and Anders closed his mouth again. Surana went on, "You think that being a mage is all that matters, that it wipes out every other part of your identity. But it doesn't. You don't stop being an elf when you're brought to the Tower. You're no less a rabbit just because you're a robe, no less a slant-ear just because you're a spellbind. You're twice as vulnerable, and the Templars know it, and so do the other mages."

"What? They wouldn't --" Anders started to object. Surana cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Anders, I've listened to enough of your bitching about the nug-brained imbeciles at the Conclave and the boot-licking suckups among the Loyalists to know damn well that you know better," she said, her voice acid. Anders couldn't object to that; he'd been bitching about the Senior Enchanter's foot-dragging in her hearing for days.

"You know that we mages fight among ourselves, that we destroy our own, that we can be close-eyed and narrow-minded and bigoted. Mages aren't monsters, but they aren't saints, either. You know this. Why do you have so much trouble accepting that it applies to elves, too?"

"I…" Anders trailed off, at a loss for words. He wasn't sure how to answer her. He knew everything she said was true, but there was still a part of him that insisted that mages weren't like that; mages were good, until they weren't.

"Because it's true, you know," Surana said. "We don't just get it from the Templars, we get it from the other mages too. Did you ever wonder why there are so few elves among the senior enchanters?"

Anders was silent for a moment, thinking. "There are fewer elves in the Towers to begin with, I thought," he said. "The Alienage elves have no love for the Templars, and the Dalish protect their own. You're less likely to get caught."

It was something that he'd always admired about the elven community, something he'd envied; the way they drew together against the threat of Templars, the way they stayed true to their own, even when they showed signs of magic.

"That's not wrong," Surana admitted, "but we do get caught, and brought, often enough. To a Tower that was built by humans, for humans, staffed by humans, teaching a course of study designed for humans. Elvhen apprentices struggle more with the course of study than humans do because it was designed for and by humans -- and because the human teachers don't care if we learn, don't believe we can learn, because they think that elves are just one step above animals anyway.

"But in the Tower, you don't fail out. You pass or you die. That's why there are so few elves among the senior Enchanters, Anders. Most of us don't make it that far. Too many of us don't survive the Harrowing, or don't even get to try -- elvhen apprentices are made Tranquil at twice the rate of humans, because as everyone knows, savages like us can't control our emotions and that makes us easy prey for the demons!"

Her voice rose in passion at the end of the speech, full of frustrated anger and grief, and Anders was rocked back, stunned by the force of it. "I…" He swallowed. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"I know you didn't know," Surana said, her voice still harsh, but she was visibly getting her emotions back under control. "I don't want you to be sorry, I want it to stop happening."
"I won't let anything like that happen here," Anders promised her. "Not in Refuge."

Surana snorted. "Are you sure?"

"There's no need to sound so skeptical," Anders said, hurt. He hadn't known, but there was a difference between not knowing and not caring.

"I think there is need," she said. "Not that I don't doubt your commitment to a glorious cause, Anders, but I don't know that you'd even know harassment when you saw it, let alone move to stop it. Not the obvious things -- the slurs, the attacks -- but the little things. The merchant whose goods mysteriously double in price when an elf approaches, the guardsman who arrests an elven man for 'loitering' because they don't think he's classy enough for the neighborhood. The instructor who doesn't bother to help an elven student who's struggling, because he already knows she's going to fail. If it didn't affect you, would you even see it?"

That gave Anders pause. As much as he wanted to deny it, he had too much respect for Surana to dismiss her words out of hand. Would he even see it? He was acutely aware of the sorts of slights, big and small, that their society leveled against mages -- everything from slurs to fairy tales to the violence built into the very language. Joining with Justice had only increased his sensitivity (to a pitch that was far too high, according to his friends in Kirkwall.)

But he was not an elf; he'd never been an elf and never would be. He didn't have the same sort of sensitivity to the problems that plagued the elven community, for all the elves he'd seen in his clinic at Kirkwall, for all the time he'd spent working and fighting beside Merrill and listening to her offhand chatter about the horrendous state of the Alienage. It had seemed more important at the time to focus on those most constrained, most vulnerable; apart from attempting to persuade the elves in general and Merrill in particular to stand with the mages against the Chantry, he simply hadn't spared thought for their concerns.

"I don't know," he admitted, and Surana gave a little huff that almost shouted 'I thought so.' "But you do?"

"Yes," Surana said. "I've lived it, after all."

Anders nodded. "Then you can put a stop to it, when you see it. Take whatever stands you think need to be taken, whatever measures you think need to be made. And I'll back you, when you do."

He wasn't an elf, and never would be. But he worked with elves, lived with elves. He could listen to elves, too, and maybe they could work together.

Surana sat back, tension seeming to leak out of her as she let out a long, slow breath; and Anders somehow got the feeling it was the same one she'd taken when the argument began. The thought hurt, somehow; he didn't think that Surana of all people would be afraid of him.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Anders," she said, her voice back to its usual quiet. Anders made a 'think-nothing-of-it' gesture, and Surana shook her head, pressing her hand against her eyes.

"There's been so much changing lately, and now this… this makes me happy, but it's one more thing to worry about. And then there's Anla."

"Anla?" Anders was bewildered by the turn in the conversation. "What's wrong with Anla?"

"Nothing. Or, nothing yet," Surana said with a grimace. "I've been doing my best to mentor her, and I meant… well, for one of us to take her year in the Deep Roads, so that she wouldn't have to go. Not until she's older and ready. But now…"
She gave a little shrug, indicating her current condition, and Anders fervently agreed. "No, you definitely shouldn't be running around in the Deep Roads now! Or with an infant... or with a small child." He frowned. When he thought about it, pregnancies and babies were going to take the female mages out of the pool of fighting mages for considerably more than nine months. Children needed their mothers, even beyond their infant years -- and while he meant for the mages to fight in ways that kept their risks as low as possible, there was always the possibility than an accident in the Deep Roads could deprive some child of their mother.

He'd never really considered that complication before. "What about Jowan?"

"Yes, but he's already taking my year, and his own..." Surana bit her lip. "And what about the baby's? Will this mean that our baby will go three, four years without ever knowing their own father?"

He hadn't considered that complication either. He still didn't think much of Jowan as a man, but it wasn't just Jowan he had to think about any more, or even Jowan's effect on Surana: The new child, when it came, deserved a father. Deserved to have its parents in its life for as long as any other child got to keep them. Having experienced the best and the worst of what parents could offer... Anders still thought Jowan would be a father that a child deserved to keep.

There was only one solution. "You know what," he said, hating himself even as he said it. "I'll take care of Anla's year. Don't worry about it."

Surana smiled up at him, so tired and grateful that Anders couldn't regret it, even as he kicked himself.

Another year in the Deep Roads. Maker, what had he gotten himself into?

Despite all the progress made on the Tower up in the valley, Anders still slept most nights -- when he slept through the night at all -- down in Brosca Manor. There certainly wasn't room to sleep anywhere else, and anyway he'd been spending as much time down in Orzammar below as in the valley above. He was still needed in Dust Town as much as he was in Refuge, because Maker knew there was never an end to work to be done in either place.

For a moment he lingered in the doorway, his eyes pulled towards the envelope laid out on his desk: the missive from the Wardens that Voldrik had brought for him, that he hadn't yet opened. He knew he should, and yet... Given the circumstances under which he'd left the Wardens -- memories that shook both halves of himself with both remembered horror and remembered rage -- he couldn't fathom that it would be anything good.

And yet, how bad could it be? He'd already considered himself a deserter from the Wardens for the last eight years; would it really be that bad to see it confirmed in print? How much harm could the Wardens do to him now, really, surrounded by the dwarves on whose respect for the Wardens he was trading...

Quite a lot, now that he came to think of it.

But the letter had come to him, not to Bhelen. If they intended to publicly denounce him, that
would be an odd way to go about it. So that put him back at square one, having no idea what the Wardens could want from him, and not having the courage to open that letter to find out.

He'd come back to it later. He had an appointment elsewhere, first. An excellent excuse, Anders told himself as he left the Manor and headed for Dust Town, and one which was pretty much perpetually true.

As he passed the unmarked boundary into Dust Town, the grimy darkness closed around him like a shroud. He missed Rix, back with her comrades in the Legion of the Dead; missed her steady presence and guiding hand through the filthy Warren that was Dust Town. At least his fame had grown enough that no one was likely to try attacking him -- or if they did, desperate or even delirious enough to try, he'd have half the population of Dust Town leaping to his defense.

For the most part Dust Town was as filthy and disheveled as ever, but already he was seeing some signs of change. Not all of the casteless could work, but the influx of money from those who could was already circulating among the neighborhood. The faces he saw peering out of windows and alleys were a little less gaunt, the eyes a little more bright, although certainly no more clean. Here and there -- standing out of the general disrepair of Dust Town like trees formations in a desert, or rocks broaching the surface of the sea -- were a few stone buildings that had been painstakingly, clumsily reconstructed into proper shelters. It was clear that the tools and training of the construction workers was being put to use here, as well.

More than anything, the atmosphere was different. Even though Dust town was, in physical terms, much the same as it had always been, there was an aura of excitement, of almost feverish hope among the casteless. For the first time, there was the chance that things might change, and that meant more to them than any amount of money or sturdy buildings.

It was uncomfortable to be the focus of that much energy, that much concentrated hope and fear and almost reverence, but it wasn't the first time. He'd learned to work with it when he could, work around it when necessary. What mattered to him -- to them -- was that things were finally going in the right direction.

So far he hadn't made an attempt to recreate his clinic at Dust Town -- not officially, anyway. Most of the casteless who were able-bodied enough to come to a clinic were already working at the construction site up on the mountain; the ones who needed him most were bed- or house-bound, so it was easier for him to come to them. Instead of one fixed clinic, he made the rounds as best he could, finding in the run-down tenements and darkened alleys the people who needed him the most.

He stopped outside one such doorway, the corridor only dimly illuminated by a burning brazier at the end of the row and the room inside illuminated not at all. "Hello?" he called out, knocking on the frame -- there was no door in the archway -- but received no response. "I'm coming in."

The room beyond was small, cramped and not particularly clean, but it was warm enough and there were a few small cabinets in which food and belongings could be stored, which made it practically a luxury suite in Dust Town. There was a small bed, and a chair at the end of the bed. A young woman sat in the chair, facing the wall, and she did not look up when Anders entered.
"How have you been, Shara?" Anders asked, keeping his tone normal despite the unpleasant atmosphere of the room. He'd been to worse bedsides, over the years. He hefted a package. "Cosh sent some groceries down with me; he won't be back down from the work site tonight."

Anders had first met the brother and sister pair under a filthy shanty in Dust Town, Shara bleeding her guts out on a dirty blanket while Cosh begged Anders to save his sister. Since then he'd gone to work with many of the other dusters up at the valley, and the money he earned had been enough to move his sister into one of Gershen's tenement rooms. It was a dramatic improvement in quality of life, yet the girl hardly seemed to notice the change in her surroundings.

He'd been able to heal her body, stop the bleeding and the infection and mend the mangled organs, but for all his claims of being a spirit healer he couldn't heal wounds made to the soul. He wasn't even sure what was afflicting her so deeply -- the traumatic childbirth, the loss of her baby, or maybe even something else -- since she refused to speak to him. Her brother said that she spoke to him, sometimes, but wouldn't give any details as to what she said.

"I'm just going to give you a quick check over to make sure you've healed up all right," Anders told the unresponsive girl. She turned her face away, but didn't make any other move to stop him, so Anders sighed and went over his quick diagnostic spell anyway.

"Well, the wound looks like it's healing well," he said as the spell flickered out. "There's scarring, of course, which will gradually reduce over time. You can probably expect your menses to come with additional pain for the next year or so. I can prescribe some herbs to stop that, if you'd like."

He paused, waiting. There was no answer.

"All right then." He swallowed disappointment, and set the package of food and painkilling potions in the crooked cabinet. "I'll be going then, and I'll let your brother know you're doing well."

He couldn't win them all, he thought, as he left the dark apartment before. Just because you healed somebody, didn't mean that they would stay healed. But knowing that didn't help as much as it should.

Anders finished his rounds in Dust Town and made his way out back to the main city, stopping at one of the recent additions -- a craggy stone fountain of clean water -- to wash his hands and face, and rinse off his boots. Given where he was going next, he didn't think the guards would appreciate him having the look of someone who'd just been in Dust Town, even if it were true.

He headed to the Shaperate next, in order to get Anla's rune moved to his own name. Outside of Dust Town, the rest of Orzammar was reassuringly unchanged; the honeycomb of tunnels, the echoing breadth of the central cavern, the bazaar with the rows of shiny wares laid out to best catch the reddish light. A few other mages were here, mostly clustered in twos and threes as though finding safety in numbers, looking longingly over the imported grocery stalls.

It seemed to Anders that the gazes and voices that were directed towards them -- and, by extension, him -- were more friendly than they had been before. A few of the guards and merchants hailed him as he passed -- Anders thought he recognized the House Haver guard who'd gossiped cheerfully with him about his Proving -- and there were more friendly smiles even from dwarves.
he didn't recognize.

Most of the attitude seemed to stem from the news of Queen Moira's unexpected pregnancy; the details of his medical treatments were of course private, but there were always rumors. No matter the details, the gossip of the city seemed certain that the strange mages and their uncanny magic had something to do with their long-barren Queen suddenly turning up pregnant, and the celebratory atmosphere surrounding that event carried over to the visiting mages.

Anders just hoped that it would last. Or even better, that it could be repeated. The more reasons the citizens of Orzammar had to associate the presence of the mages with good things, the deeper the bond would be forged.

Before long he found himself crossing the chasm bridge, approaching the familiar stolidity of the palace. The guards posted on the bridge recognized Anders and greeted him with formal nods, and assigned a guard to accompany him into the palace even though he could just about remember the way this time.

Moira herself had undergone her own startling transformation. While Surana's pregnancy had been too early on to see any but the most subtle of changes to her physiology, the dwarf queen was already beginning to show.

"Ah, Warden Enchanter Anders, lovely to see you," she said, greeting Anders with an absent cordiality wholly unlike her usual icy, rigid formality. "We appreciate the work you do, as always. Let's get started, shall we? --Can you believe that scoundrel Bruntin Vollney really thinks he can get away with it? There's an Assembly meeting later today, you see, where Lord Vollney is going to put forth yet another iteration of his ridiculous border customs plan. Everyone knows perfectly well that he's only sponsoring that bill in an attempt to distract attention away from his son's outstanding wage payment lawsuits. Never try to cheat a Shaper, Warden Enchanter; they have memories long as the Stone, and grudges to match…"

It was as though pregnancy had shifted some switch deep inside her, causing her to emerge from the icy fortress of the self she had spent years building around her. Throughout the whole exam -- as Anders barely got a word in edgewise -- Moira gave a running monologue about her outfitting of the royal nursery interspersed with asides about three bills she was currently pushing through the Assembly, a recent craving for grapefruit, and a blueprint for special terraced gardens to be built along the sides of Valammar, once it was reclaimed, for the growing of food.

"I must think of some way to extend greater opportunities to the lower classes," Moira said, shifting tacks yet again as Anders tried to find some tactful way to ask her to stop talking for a few minutes so that he could listen for heartbeats. "It seems to me that if Orzammar wishes to improve the quality of its children, then we must start by improving that of the mothers. Of any rank. I'm thinking of investing in an institution -- an academy open to young women of all ranks, so that they can come and be educated in the ways of proper society, and their own babies brought up in security. Even if it doesn't take, anything that reduces that dreadful practice of abandonment can only be a boon to us as a society. A shame to us all!"

Anders thought of Shara, sitting in the dark and staring at a dirty wall, and could only agree.

The exam completed in good order; nothing seemed to be wrong apart from the startling rate at which she had visibly progressed, and the Queen drifted out of the exam room with the same benevolent abstraction as she'd entered it. Anders caught the eye of Hildegard, her bodyguard, who moved over to speak with him before he left.

"Well," he said. "Her Majesty certainly seems to be, er. In good spirits."
Somewhat to his surprise, the grim-looking bodyguard actually quirked a smile at this. She glanced through the doorway at Moira, now humming to herself as she swayed and absentely rubbed her belly, her eyes softened. "You have no idea how long she's wanted this," Hildegard said, keeping her voice low. "Or what it's meant to her. For years it was just this solid granite block she couldn't get past -- all her life's been about duty, and one way or another, everything she tried to do circled back in the end to the one duty she couldn't fulfill. You can bet the noble pricks were quick to remind her about it, too, every time she tried to have her own way in the Assembly.

"Now you come along, years after she'd give up hope… and it's like a whole new world, for her. All new possibilities." Hildegard's grin suddenly sharpened, looking rather shark-like. "Doesn't hurt to stick it in the eye of every gangue-eating deshyr who ever called her a dust belly, neither!"

"I can imagine it doesn't," Anders said, and let himself out.

He couldn't help but wonder, as he navigated the maze of corridors, what was between the Queen and her bodyguard. The looks, touches and words they exchanged spoke more of lovers than of guardian and guarded -- and yet, Moira was carrying the King's child! He didn't quite understand Moira and Bhelen's relationship -- allies certainly, friends perhaps, but he didn't see love there, not as such.

That part wasn't in itself too hard for Anders to understand; he'd certainly had enough flings in his youth to separate sex from love. But he wasn't quite at the point of understanding how you could love one person, and yet sleep with another. Clearly, Moira and her household had been managing it for years -- but how was it possible to split yourself in such a way, to hold enough of yourself apart for one person to love them and accept their love in return, while still devoting yourself so wholeheartedly into fulfilling your duties to another?

It was a balance he'd never quite managed, himself, and at least he hadn't been contractually obliged to bear anyone's children.

He almost made it clear of the castle -- almost -- when the hallway ahead of him was suddenly blocked by two burly guards in Aeducan colors. Anders gave nods of greeting to them, trying to step aside to clear the way, when the stone-faced guards suddenly hustled him into a nearby chamber. Anders found himself face to face -- well, face to chest, anyway -- with the other subject of his pondering; the King of Orzammar, Bhelen Aeducan himself.

"Your Majesty," Anders said, startled by the abrupt confrontation. "Can I --"

"Warden," Bhelen growled, and there was none of his usual easy good humor in the tone. "What did you do to my wife?"

ANDERS: Φπ

Years remaining: 2
Chapter Summary

Anders tries to clear the air with Bhelen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Seeker,*

*The senior enchanters have elected the ex-Warden, Fiona, as their leader. This is precisely what I warned you might happen! Fiona is dangerous. She's spent too much time outside the Circle. We should never have allowed the Grey Wardens to meddle in Templar business; they upset the holy order of things. The whole Tower is a seething kettle of discontent and these new rumors are not helping us keep order.*

--C.

*Calm yourself. The robes can hold as many elections and votes as they want; nothing will change. We have the White Spire locked down, our Templars on every corner, watching every movement. Our duties and our traditions are clear. Do not forget that we have options. We have the Rite, and we have the Maker on our side. This Warden bitch seeks to tempt her fellow robes into treason? Let her. Let the Divine see the monsters they truly are. As soon as they cross the line, they will be done. And once the Towers are cleaned out, we will be at liberty to move on those maleficars still at large. All in good time.*

--L.

Exchange between Seeker Lambert and one of his lieutenants at the White Spire.

"Warden," Bhelen growled. "What did you do to my wife?"

It was perhaps fortunate for Anders' continued health that so many inappropriate responses to that question all leapt to mind at once, that they tripped each other up and tangled his tongue. The next thought following on the heels of that one was, logically enough, *Oh, blight. He thinks I slept with Moira. His wife. The queen.*

Bhelen's face was red, his usually ruddy complexion bright with a fury that looked near apoplexy. A part of Anders couldn't help but be concerned with his blood pressure, even as flecks of spittle flew from his mouth as he ranted. "I let you in my city! I struck a bargain with you, I trusted you,
and stab me in the back like this?"

This… was a disaster; it could prove fatal for the Refuge project, and possibly even literally fatal closer to home. The seriousness of the situation was enough to knock the sassy responses out of his head, and Anders kept his face straight and his voice level as he responded, "Your Majesty, I have no idea what rumors are flying around, but I assure you with absolute truth that nothing inappropriate passed between Queen Moira and myself. She came looking for me in the role of a healer, and I only wanted to help --"

"I know that!" Bhelen snapped, cutting Anders off mid-explanation. "Moira's been barren since the day we married! Fifteen years! Then you show up in my city, with your magic and your medicines, and she sprouts a sprogling within a month? You blighted better well believe I know what you did to help!"

"You do?" Anders said. "I mean, oh, well. Good. Wait, so why are you upset, again?"

"Because I had everything under control!" Bhelen shouted. "I had the Aeducan heir, and the Meino alliance locked down, before you stuck your glowing hands in to upset everything! Do you have any idea what this is going to do to the succession?"

Anders' eyes widened. "Moira said… Endrin is your heir," he said, stuttering slightly. For the first time, it began to uneasily occur to him that even if Moira had not precisely lied to him, she was entirely capable of manipulating him to her ends with the truth. He simply hadn't thought that following the Queen's ends would put him at odd with the King. "She said that her having another baby wouldn't change his status, that there was a long established tradition of concubines providing heirs when the wife could not."

"Of course there is, because there's never been a case of the senior wife suddenly getting over a case of barrenness before!" Bhelen exclaimed, his hands moving in tight, furious motions. "It's the Assembly who selects the next King -- not me! The pressure to put Endrin aside and make this new babe my heir is going to be immense! Even if I don't change the inheritance, this kid is going to grow up knowing that their blood is higher than Endrin's, seeing a lowbown heir exalted over him - - do you have any idea what that's going to do to him? What that might drive him to do?"

From what Natya had told him of Bhelen's past -- of how the seemingly weak and underaccomplished younger brother had managed to slip past two of his older siblings to win the throne -- Anders had the feeling that Bhelen was thinking less about his new child than about himself here.

"Do you imagine that any of the nobles are going to accept this?" Bhelen demanded. "Do you have any idea what you've done? To the caste, to the city, to me? You've lit a thirty-years long fuse on the next civil war! You, and my wife between you may have destroyed this kingdom!"

Past his teeth-gnashing and beard-tearing, Anders couldn't help but notice that for all his carrying on, Bhelen had chosen to aim this tirade at him, and not at Moira. That seemed to him a strange, and highly significant omission, since it was Moira and not Anders who would have any kind of understanding of the political consequences involved and how best to defang them.

Which said to Anders that no matter how furious he was, Bhelen was unwilling or unable to trample on his wife's obvious happiness. This was him venting some steam, nothing more.

Of course, even steam could scald and burn, if not handled carefully. "Your Majesty -- Bhelen --" he started, keeping his voice as calm and conciliatory as he could. "The Queen came to me in my capacity as a healer, to help. There was no way I could refuse, no reason to even consider refusing.
I assumed that, as her husband, you and she were working on this together."

"Wrong," Bhelen fumed. "You should have told me she was --" 

"Moira was my patient, and as such, I was not at liberty to discuss her condition or treatment with anyone, not even you!" His voice grew edged. "She wasn't even sure, I wasn't even sure if any treatment I could provide would make a difference. But she believed that if a cure could be found, it could make a difference to all the women in Orzammar who are afflicted --"

"Ah!" Bhelen thrust an accusing finger in Anders' face, his eyes nearly crossing as he tried to focus on it. "So now you plan to extend this disruption to half the kingdom?"

"Only the half that need it, Your Majesty." Anders leaned back, setting some space between him and the King. "Look… When we made this contract, part of the deal was that the mages -- and me -- would provide healing to your people. I have done that. If it's really going to be such a disruption to your domestic policy, then maybe you should rethink a status quo that rests on half your population to continue suffering."

"I… uh…" Bhelen's manner shifted, some of the brick-red color going out of his cheeks as his temper diminished slightly. "Hm."

Anders breathed again. "What's between you and your wife is your business. What's between Moira and myself is healing business. I'm not going to refuse her, or anyone else in your kingdom, the best medical care that I can provide." He paused to watch Bhelen's expression for a moment, the way the apoplectic expression turned suddenly introspective. "May I suggest that instead of complaining about it to me, you find a way to turn an advantage from it?"

Bhelen opened his mouth several times, then closed it again without completing a word. Finally he snapped out, "You're dismissed!" and turned to storm out of the chamber.

While he thought the worst had been averted, the confrontation with Bhelen did serve to make Anders feel a little more uneasy about the security of their position at Orzammar. With so much uncertainty, he couldn't afford to be left in the dark about any other threats that came from the outside. And so, reluctantly, Anders returned to the envelope sitting innocuously on the desk.

The letter was short, only a single sheet of parchment. Anders read through it, bafflement growing; when he reached the end he flipped the paper over, and checked the envelope for anything that might be missing.

What was missing was about eight years of history, that was what. There was no reference to his desertion, nor even the fellow Wardens that had died by his hand on the disastrous day he had left the Wardens behind. Not even a passing mention. None.

Was this letter even meant for him? Anders checked the address, but no, there was his name in there with Natya's name listed as his sponsor. Was it possible they didn't know? How? Even Natya couldn't have covered for him for eight years, and the murdered Wardens hadn't even been hers,
so she couldn't have covered up their deaths even if she'd been inclined to.

But the letter acted as though Anders was just another recruit being given a post: it commented on Anders' recent assignment to Orzammar, remarked on his excursions to the Deep Roads, asked him to keep an eye out for any unusual items or events that might be of interest to Weisshaupt, and directed him to write any such reports to the enclosed address.

And that was it. No thundering letter of denunciation, no announcement of expulsion, no retaliation at all. Well, not unless the 'special messengers' that were supposed to show up at some bringing 'essential Warden equipment' was some kind of euphemism for Warden assassins; Anders wasn't sure what else that sentence could be read to mean. What even was 'essential Warden equipment?' In his experience, a Warden carried everything they needed under their skin. Whether they wanted to or not.

The lack of threats or cold denunciations should have been a relief, he supposed; at the very least it didn't add to the list of people trying to kill him. But the lack of any kind of reprisal or consequences left him feeling confused, almost unbalanced, as though waiting for the other boot to hit ground.

Anders sighed, and slid the letter carefully away in the drawer. He was tired, but he needed some fresh air.

It was late afternoon on the surface and the valley was bustling with activity, not just around the Tower, but scattered here and there through the woods and meadows. Despite the close proximity to Orzammar -- the heart of dwarven industry and culture -- it was clear the mages of Refuge regarded themselves as roughing it in the deep wilderness. Fortunately, for the younger mages this mostly manifested in an atmosphere of determined adventure. Anders was constantly tripping over makeshift campfire sites spotting the valley, most of them not even constructed properly -- without a proper stone base or any attempt to clear back the foliage first. Maker, they were going to burn down the entire mountain if he couldn't instill some basic lessons on fire safety into them.

The older mages, understandably, were considerably less enthused about the prospect of sleeping out in the woods. For the most part, they also understood better than the younger ones that this was not a game, and were willing to endure the discomfort at least until the first few levels of the Tower were built. Anders met with most of them over the first few days, giving exams and treatments were he could, and singling out the few who most needed the shelter and warmth offered by the Brosca manor.

While he was most worried about the elder mages, there was much more around Refuge that needed his attention -- a hundred-plus mages of all stages of life and health, most of whom had gone from a sheltered indoor existence to forced treks through the wilderness in the still-cold season. Anders had his hands full treating frostbite, wrenched limbs, bruises and gashes, and all manner of cold and flu. He just hoped their bodies would adjust to the expanded pool of bugs and variance of temperatures before the real winter cold season hit them.

Unfortunately, most of the mages had little to no concept of practical life skills. Of the hundred, less than ten could cook; Mardra had taken charge of these few and directed them into a large, makeshift, communal kitchen. The cuisine was nothing to boast about, but there were stews and sandwiches enough to keep everyone fed, and that was what mattered the most.
Nor was that the only arena in which their lack of practical skills was woefully evident. While exploring the changed contours of the valley, Anders stumbled on a squared-off plot of stirred-up dirt near the stream. Asking around, he found it to be the work of a trio of former Kinloch Hold mages (none of whom Anders remembered from his time there) who proudly announced it to be the first vegetable garden at Refuge.

It was manifestly clear that none of them had any clue what they were doing; only one had even lived on a farm before being taken to the Circle, and even that had been young enough that their memories were dim and vague. They had picked a plot of land too close to the stream -- the soil at root level was constantly soaked, which would likely rot the roots of any ground vegetables they tried to plant -- and overshadowed by nearby trees and cliffs, getting indirect sun at best for only a few hours a day. They hadn't mulched the soil once they'd planted, nor did they seem to understand the importance of weeding, and they'd planted no stakes for the vines to cling to as they grew.

In short, it was as amateur and hopeless an effort as you would expect from people who'd been kept indoors their entire lives and never been tasked to produce their own food.

Anders held very little hope of anything edible growing out of that garden. Nor was he the only one; when he mentioned it to Mardra, she informed him in no uncertain terms that she was 'not counting it as a future production site.' He found himself torn between whether to tell them the truth, or wait and let them find out for themselves. Justice usually compelled him to honesty, but in this case, he thought they might learn better if they were allowed to make mistakes for themselves.

If they'd been depending on the hapless would-be farmers for food, they'd have been in real trouble -- but between the patronage of King Bhelen, and the presence of the Avvar, they fortunately had other sources of food. Just as the Sky-Watcher had suggested to Anders all those months before, the Avvar had happily taken to the new colony as a trading post. The flat sandbar where their goat-path out of the mountains met the stream had quickly turned into a sort of crude, open-air market, where the Avvar came once a week or so to offer up fresh meat and cured hides in exchange for what goods the mages had to offer.

So far that was mostly potions -- the Avvar had little interest in runes, and none at all in books, papers or other transcription-based crafts. It cut into their sales in the Orzammar marketplace, but at least herbalism and potion-making were well-known among most of the mages that they had at least one craft they could rely on.

As well as fresh meat -- rabbit, nug, ram, and occasionally bear -- the mages mostly traded for clothing. With few exceptions, mages had come in only the clothes they'd carried on their backs, most of it terribly unsuitable for the outdoors. It became common to see Circle robes overlaid with fur capes, cloth cowls replaced with open-backed leather hoods, and Tower slippers discarded eagerly in favor of rugged, fur-lined boots. Some of the younger mages seemed to make it a kind of game to see how many different kinds of leather they could pile onto a single outfit. Others found the plain cuts and drab colors boring and attempted to decorate them with strips of cloth, or feathers, or sometimes even fresh flowers.

Apostate fashion, Anders thought wryly.

For the most part, the mages fell into groups according to their age, moreso than their Tower of origin or by whatever fraternity they'd been part of back in the Circles. Well, Anders supposed that made sense; if they'd decided to come here in the first place, they probably weren't Loyalists (most of whom had no doubt stayed in the Towers or run to the nearest Chantry) or Lucrosians (most of whom were over in Orlais selling their services to the highest bidders, according to Mardra.) For the most part he was relieved, he thought; fraternity politics had been tedious enough in the Circle
without replaying them at Refuge.

Apart from Hamil’s ‘combat training’ group, other teenagers and young adults formed their own clusters of activity throughout the valley. Many of them seemed to have formed friendships with the casteless laborers, and could be seen spending time sitting and talking together. Anders saw at least one group of women -- humans, elves, and dwarves all together -- sitting in one of the clearings and braiding flowers into each other's hair, an image so teeth-achingingly sweet he half expected to see deer and rabbits frolicking through the scene to the accompaniment of an orchestra.

As of yet, there were no young children at Refuge; the youngest was still Anla, at twelve years of age. But there were a handful of others around the same age who had showed up tagging along behind their older counterparts. Anders had mixed feelings about that absence. On one hand, the world was growing increasingly dangerous for mages, and the youngest apprentices were the most vulnerable; he could wish they were here and safe instead of still trapped in the Towers -- or worse. Anders knew far too well that youth and innocence was no protection from the violence of the Templars; to a Templar, no mage was innocent. It would have been funny to see a grown man in plate consider himself threatened by a runny-nosed child still in possession of their full set of baby teeth, were it not so horrifying.

On the other hand, Anders had to admit that they weren't exactly equipped to handle a large number of very young children. Once the Tower was set up, then maybe… but not yet.

The younger mages, the ones not quite old enough to join Hamil's enthusiastic templar-fighting squad, tended to cluster together and hover at the fringes. It wasn't long before Surana, at least on the days when she was up in the valley, quietly took them in hand. She was certainly good with the younger ones, Anders thought; maybe she was getting in some practice for having a child of her own. Or maybe she was just one of those people, like Wynne, who had always been naturally motherly and good with kids.

He had to admit that he never had been good with kids himself; before joining with Justice, he had a young man's usual disdain for the drool and snot-producing segment of the human race, and after Justice… well. Justice had a peculiar fascination for children, and a much deeper appreciation of their importance in the long run of things, but he understood them even less than Anders alone did.

Anders came out of a meeting with Voldrik to see Surana sitting on a log in the center of the rustic lecture circle -- Anders thought the clearing and its ring of crude benches was mostly used by the stonemasons to demonstrate skills to the casteless, but it also made a fine performance area. Surana was singing -- of course -- and a small crowd of apprentices hovered in a cloud of adoration.

Snippets of the song made their way to Anders' ears as he walked; he caught the words “…Enchanter… free… Circle…” and his interest was piqued. He made his way over to the edge of the clearing and leaned against a tree, listening in.

Surana sang:

*Enchanters remind*
*That time will not unwind.*
*What is not broken will not mend,*
*What is not opened will never end.*
*On our own strength we can rely*  
*And history will not repeat.*

*What we plea will be*
Living faithful but free,
Where a man will not retreat
From what ten thousand blades decree.

Enchanters!
A time has come for battle lines.
We will cut these twisted ties,
And some may live and some may die.

Enchanter, come to me
Enchanter, come to me
Enchanter, come to see
The place where all men can live free!

The ring of young mages surrounding Surana certainly looked like they would cross half a continent to get here, if she asked it; they were enthralled. Anders couldn't help be reminded of the legend of the Pied Piper of Val Foret, a story of a vengeful bard who had led the village's children away with his enchanting tunes.

Anders glanced over to see that Mardra had come up next to him and was listening in on Surana's performance. She had a list in her hands (of course) but didn't seem in any hurry to ambush him with it.

"Funny," Anders remarked to Mardra, as Surana began to repeat the chorus. "I'm pretty sure the version of that song I learned back in Kinloch Hold was a little more pro-Circle and a lot less subversive."

Mardra smiled. "Surana claims this is the original, with a few 'contemporary interpretations.' " She gestured in the air to indicate quotation. "Whatever that means. Anyway, it's all the rage among the Mage Collective right now."

"Really?" Anders said, pleased. That was a good sign, after far too long a stretch of disappointing lack of news. He sighed. "I don't understand why no more Circles have revolted!"

"It's not as easy to do that as you think, you know." Mardra said in a droll tone. "The first few Circles had the advantage of surprise. The Templars are on alert now, and every mage is kept under close watch."

"Besides, most of the ones who were really determined to get out did so in the first wave," she added. "The more Libertarians leave, the more of those who remain are Loyalist."

Anders shook his head, mouth turning down with disappointment. "Typical," he muttered.

"On the other hand, the Conclave elected Fiona as Grand Enchanter," Mardra said. "The first time since the Storm Age that the post has gone to a Libertarian. So there's some movement there. But most of the senior Enchanters still hold out hope that there's some way to fix the Circle, instead of tearing it down."

"They've had a thousand years to fix it," Anders complained. "And in that time it's gone from bad to worse to crisis point! How much longer do they plan to wait?"

"It might not happen all in a single season," Mardra said; her expression was sympathetic, even if her words were unflinching. "But that doesn't mean it won't happen at all. 'The arc of the universe
is long, but it bends towards justice.'"

For a moment Anders froze in panic, certain that somehow she knew; a wash of tingling energy surged out from his core to the tips of his fingers, before he forced it back again. No, she didn't know. She couldn't, or her reaction would be very different, surely. She was merely quoting to the topic at hand. "That was Martinus of Carastes, wasn't?" he choked out, trying to stay casual.

"Yes," Mardra said. "Leader of the slave rebellion of Carastes, back in Towers. The Crows got him in the end, sadly."

Anders sighed. "Far too many of the great men of history meet such ignoble ends," he remarked.

"Just so long as one of those ends doesn't meet you," Mardra said. "Fortunately, I think even the Crows would have a hard time getting through Orzammar and a hundred variously dangerous mages to get at you."

"I'm more than capable of taking care of myself," Anders grumbled. "Honestly, the last thing I'd want would be half-trained adolescents throwing themselves in the way of trouble for my sake."

Mardra looked politely incredulous. "Anders, with all due respect, you are primarily a spirit healer," she said. "I don't have any doubts that you're capable enough with combat magic, but a knife in the heart kills a mage as dead as any other man. It only takes one hit --"

Anders couldn't help himself; he laughed. It wasn't entirely a pleasant laugh, dark memories of that bloody day flashing through him of Rolan's sword running down his arm, but the situation was just too funny not to. Mardra stopped, looking confused and a bit offended, and Anders bit back his laughter. "I'm sorry, Mardra," he said. "It's just that --"

He might have told her everything right then and there, had they not been interrupted. Anla came up to them, playing messenger today red-faced and blowing from the long climb up the stairway tunnel from Orzammar. "'Ardon me, Warden, Enchanter," she said, panting slightly. "You're needed down in Orzammar. There's more new people at the gates."

Anders groaned. It was a compromise they had eventually worked out with the Assembly, to appease their intransigent insistence that total strangers should not be allowed free run of Orzammar just because they said they were mages. A signer of the Charter had to be on hand to go meet them at the gates, verify that they were who they said they were and escort them to the Shaperate for their tokens.

In theory, any of the mages present could have done it; in practice, it was usually one of the senior members: Jowan, Surana, Mardra, or himself. Normally Anders had no objection to greeting new members of the community and assuring them of their safety and respite -- but he'd already climbed up those blasted stairs once today, on top of a long day spent healing.

Mardra saw his expression and took pity on him. "I'll go down," she said. "I wanted to go to the Shaperate anyway --"

"No, no," Anla interrupted, their face creased with worry. "I think, um, I think the 'ealer had better go."

"What's wrong?" Anders said, suddenly urgent. "Is one of them injured?"

"Not exactly... it's... um..." The young mage fidgeted with the hem of her robes, tipped with rabbit furs, and wouldn't meet their eyes. "I think maybe you should come see..."
Anders and Mardra exchanged another look, this one of alarm, before Anders gave in. "All right. I'll go on down."

"Are you sure?" Mardra asked.

"Yes," Anders sighed. "At least it's all downhill from here, and I'll just spend the night at Brosca Manor once we get them settled in."

Mardra nodded. "Send another message back to me with whatever is going on," she said, and the young mage looked a little daunted at the thought of another stairway climb.

Nevertheless, she followed Anders dutifully down through the mountain passage into the heart of Orzammar; through the winding tunnels and open caverns to the front gate. In the Hall of Heroes, the door beyond barely cracked open enough to let in light and air from the outside world, two dwarves in Aeudcan colors stood watch over a cluster of tired-looking figures in dirty, bedraggled robes. This was a common enough occurrence that there had been benches set up for waiting, even jugs of clean water for tired travelers to refresh themselves. Despite the messenger's alarming words, there was no sign of blood or injury that Anders could see, and the guards seemed only barely interested in the strangers.

Anla dropped back as they approached, as though the newcomers were carrying some contagious disease that she didn't want to get too close to. Puzzled, Anders took a few step forwards and took them in. All human this time, looked like; one older woman, grey and tired and sagging, and three younger men.

Then the taller man raised his head, hood falling back from his face, clearly revealing the silvery sunburst scar on his forehead.

"We have arrived," the man said, softly and without emotion.

ANDERS: Φ

Years remaining: 2

Chapter End Notes

The song Surana sings is a variation on "Enchanters," one of the songs from DAI. It always annoyed me that the only song the mages get in DAI was so blatantly pro-Circle, so I rewrote it a bit to serve the Mage Rebellion.

You can actually listen to the Rebellion version of this song being sung! Timesorcerer
actually recorded a performance of this song, so Surana now has a real voice! ;}
The arrival of Tranquil at Refuge is going to cause some complications. Anders does his best to clear the air.

A blotted note:

*Another dead body in the atrium today. What a mess. I wish robes who wanted to off themselves would find better places to do it, in the bathroom or something.*

A tattered note:

*This was no suicide. These wounds were deliberately inflicted. Somebody in the tower is chopping their way through the ranks of the apprentices. Maker only knows what they're up to. We have to find and eradicate this maleficar before they finish whatever it is they need all this blood to do!*

A hidden note:

*Lanya is dead. They found her body in the atrium this morning. They're telling everyone it was suicide. Do they think we're stupid? No one stabs themselves in the front of the belly! The Templars are doing this. They're butchering their way through the apprentices, and they expect us to believe that we're doing it to ourselves?*

A charred note:

*Of course not. They don't care whether we believe it or not. What are we going to do about it even if we had proof? This is all part of their plan to murder us all, a little at a time. Don't say anything, if you want to keep living. If you protest, they'll just use that as an excuse to get you next.*

*If we fight back, they kill us quick. If we don't, they kill us slow. There's only one other choice. You know what we have to do.*

-- A series of notes found in the White Spire Tower.
"What I don't understand is this: the Calenhad Circle fell months ago," Anders said, even as he handed out the last mug of tea. Chamomile and embrium, mildly energizing to the body while soothing to the mind, it was a recipe he'd gotten a lot of mileage from in Kirkwall. "What have you been doing all this time? Where were you staying, that you only just got here today?"

Anders had moved the newcomers to Brosca Manor, where they could rest and refresh themselves for the night. Tomorrow, he or one of the others would escort them to the Shaperate, to pick up their tokens and sign the Charter, but there was time and space to rest for a little while before then.

The older woman -- Ertha, she had introduced herself -- took the tea with a faint murmur of thanks. Her hands shook under the weight of the cup until she brought up another hand to support it; hard to tell whether that was fatigue, or age, or a synergy of both. The younger men looked just as weary, though their grips were steadier.

A pang twisted in Anders' heart every time he looked over and saw the Tranquil brand. Only one of them was branded, thank the Maker -- but even that was enough. He wasn't even sure why it was affecting him so badly; he'd seen, spoken with, even worked with plenty of Tranquil in his time with the Mage Underground, and they hadn't affected him this badly.

It had to do with the age of the brand, he decided. Most of the others had been Tranquil all their adult lives, the scars given plenty of time to heal -- but Karl's had been fresh, the skin still healing over, that night at the Chantry. This man -- whatever had happened to this man, it had been within the last year.

"Not all of us can move as fast as we used to," the old woman replied. She glanced over at her companions. "These two youngsters were kind enough to stay with me, when otherwise I would have been stranded on the road. Old age hobbled me more than I like to admit."

"I believe Ertha is being disingenuous," the Tranquil man said, his voice soft and level. He looked to be in his middle years with small wrinkles around the lips and eyes. His hair was a light ashy blond mixed with silver, turning it nearly white, and his eyes were so pale they seemed almost the same color. "Many times she was not the slowest member of our party. It was I who slowed the others down. She and Jury might have made it here many weeks ago, if they did not make special consideration for me."

"Don't talk about yourself like that, Omel," the other man said fiercely. He had dark hair and eyes, and otherwise would have looked rather plain -- almost fading from the eye -- if not for the fierce anguish that burned in his eyes and words every time he looked at his friend. "I wouldn't leave you behind!"

"Of course not," Anders said, his throat closing up even as he tried to keep his composure. Those few words, those lingering touches, the anguish in his eyes when Jury looked at the Tranquil man spoke volumes.

Watching them together -- seeing the way the dark-haired man moved protectively around his friend -- was hard in a way he could never have imagined. Would that have been him and Karl, if Karl had survived? Could it have been? But Karl had asked him, begged for death as the final wish of his free mind, and he could not have --

It still seemed like yesterday, the sensations were so vivid; the smell of burnt blood and shit on the chantry floor and ozone in the air, the feel of the knife under his hand as he drove it home. Even Karl's final breath, that shuddering gasp, had been so quiet it was more felt through the blade than heard.
No! He forced the memories back. That was then, this was now; there was no reason to think they would have to perform such a terrible act again. Karl had begged for release, for mercy, and Anders could not have denied him -- but the situation was different now. They were no longer in Kirkwall, in the Gallows with all the horrors that were inflicted on the defenseless Tranquil. This place was safe. Here they could be free… and if not truly free, not in their own mind, then at least protected.

"Either way, there was no way we could outrun the Templars on the road," Ertha said, answering his earlier question. "We sought to hide instead, to find a place to go to ground until the hunt for escapees died down. The three of us ended up staying the winter at a small homestead up in the mountains. We were lucky the winter storms weren't worse."

"I helped!" Jury volunteered, obviously proud and trying not to sound like it. "I hunted."

"Between all of us, we were able to make it to spring," Ertha said, with a nod of agreement. "Then we heard rumors of a place… a refuge… where other mages were gathered. We set out to try to find it…"

"It seemed prudent to avoid the roads," Omelas put in. "As anyone on them would be most visible. Attempting to cut through the rough country had its own hazards, however."

"We got lost," Jury sighed. "So very, very lost, in the backwater ass-end of the Ferelden hinterlands. And then it started to rain. And then when we tried to take shelter from the storm in a cave, we nearly got eaten by a bear."

Anders winced in sympathy. "What happened then?" he said. "A few fireballs convinced it to run off?"

"If only." The old lady grimaced. "We underestimated how strong the beast could be, and how tough its hide would be. My own spirit blasts simply bounced off, and Jury's lightning only made it angrier."

"That's when we were saved by that stranger!" Jury brightened up at the memory of it, waving his hands as he retold the happy meeting. "That Hawke."

Anders sat bolt upright, both feet on the ground as he stared at the mage. "What?" he demanded.

"He introduced himself as Hawke," Ertha confirmed. "He was a very nice young man, really. He said he'd been exploring the area, and heard the shouts and commotion. Well, the bear certainly was hollering fit to wake the dead, and Jury's lightning only made it angrier."

"That's when we were saved by that stranger!" Jury brightened up at the memory of it, waving his hands as he retold the happy meeting. "That Hawke."

"A dire need by that time," Omelas observed. "We had been without food for three days."

"And he even showed us how to navigate without any roads!" Jury said enthusiastically. "I never knew you could tell north from south in the woods just by looking at where the moss was growing. We were able to stay north until we hit Gherlen's Pass, and from there we just prayed we would find Orzammar before the Templars found us. And here we are!"

"This man you met," Anders said, his voice finally coming back to him as he seized on the most important part of the story. "The one who called himself Hawke. What did he look like? Can you describe him?"
The young man and the old woman exchanged a puzzled glance, but answered: "He was still a young man, with dark hair and eyes, and a thick black beard --"

"Everyone's young to you, Ertha," Jury complained. "He was in his mid-thirties, maybe -- at least, the skin of his face and hands was weathered. He mostly wore leather -- I assumed he was a hunter or trapper out of Redcliffe. He didn't have much of an accent, anyway --"

"It would be more correct to say that his accent was Ferelden," Omelas interrupted to point out. "As yours is, so you do not hear the difference."

"Yes. Of course, you're right." Jury flashed Omelas a smile that was only slightly tinged with sadness. "I would have thought it was just another hunter, except he had a really wicked pair of daggers. Not for carving up deer, those stickers."

Anders sat back, stunned. Maker. It really was him -- Hawke -- they had described him down to his preferred war knives. But what was he doing out in the middle of nowhere? What was he doing in Ferelden?

Once he asked himself the question, he thought of something -- Hawke had been Ferelden born before he'd come to the Free Marches, and he'd grown up in... Where was Lothering from here, anyway? He knew it had been lost to the Blight, along with a dozen other nondescript villages from Crestwood to Gwaren. That presented half a dozen reasons for Hawke to return to the country of his birth, though why alone, without his sister, Anders couldn't imagine.

But of course it was him, and of course -- of course -- he had stepped in to help. Not everyone would go out of their way to help a mage -- no, he corrected himself meticulously, it wasn't just because they were mages. Hawke would help anyone who was in trouble, and if they had nothing to pay him with after he wouldn't even ask.

It was just part of what had made him Hawke, that willingness to take the step from "someone should do something" to "I will do something" that most men never bothered to take. There was so much injustice in the world, so much suffering, and too few people who were willing to take that one first step. Whether he was able to succeed, in the end, at saving the people he'd tried to help, it still set him apart from so many others that he tried.

It was one of the things Anders had loved most about him, one of the first things that had gotten him falling in love.

A warm glow began to creep up his chest at the thought, but his reverie was broken by a shuffling and throat-clearing from his guests. "If you don't mind my asking," Ertha said firmly, "what comes next?"

"What? Oh!" Anders exclaimed. "Well, the three of you can rest here tonight, and in the morning go by the Shaperate. If you decide you want to join Refuge, you can sign the charter, get your Orzammar pass -- that will allow you to go freely about the city -- and move upstairs."

"May I inquire," Omelas said, in that too-familiar eerie monotone that sent chills up Anders' spine. "We were given to understand that in order to find shelter at this community, that there would be a price of service given. One year in the Deep Roads. Is that correct?"

The other two winced and looked away, daunted and guilty expressions on their faces. For the first time, it occurred to Anders to wonder if the knowledge of that term of service, the danger and fortitude required, was actually keeping mages away -- particularly the elder, the younger, the ones who feared they would not be strong enough? The tranquil? The very ones who were most
vulnerable, the ones who Anders most sought to protect?

He would have to think of a way to deal with that. But later. "It is correct," he said, "but you don't need to worry about that. Nobody will expect you to go into the Deep Roads."

"I do not know how much help I will be, but I will try --" Omelas began, but Anders cut him off.

"I promise, you don't need to worry about that," he said, his voice firmer. "No one will be turned away, and no one will be forced into something they can't handle. We'll find a way. One way or another, we'll find a way. You will be safe here."

The four of them went to the Shaperate the next morning -- morning by surfacer reckoning, anyway; mid-cycle by the Orzammar clock. He spent most of the walk from Brosca Manor to the Shaperate trying to explain the mathematics of the dwarven clock to the newcomers, which among them only the Tranquil man seemed to grasp.

It was kind of a shame, Anders thought, watching them as they watched the city; most new arrivals were excited and interested in the dwarven city, looking around with hope at the people who had promised to help them. But the old woman was too tired; Jury only watched Omelas; and the Tranquil man, of course, was equally disinterested in everything.

Mardra was already there, at the Shaperate, deep in discussion with her colleague (or friend? Anders wasn't sure) Ezerain. She looked up when they came in, and gave Anders a nod of acknowledgement, but didn't move to join them.

Not until the three new mages were engrossed in reading over the Charter and murmuring among themselves did Mardra make their way over. "Anders, a word?" she said quietly, tipping her head towards one of the stacks of shelves that offered relative privacy.

Anders followed her, a little puzzled. Back in the Circle, an invitation into the stacks usually had a particular meaning, but somehow he doubted that was what Mardra had in mind. "What's up?" he asked, as they stopped in the cool shadows.

Mardra glanced out into the main room, the three new mages clustered around the stone slab. From here they could see them, but not hear them. "So the Tranquil..." She bit her lip. "Sorry, what is his name?"

"Omelas," Anders supplied.

"Omelas, will be staying here?"

"Of course," Anders said, still puzzled. "He's been trying to get here for half a year, we could hardly turn him away now."

Mardra chewed on her lip for a moment, then gave him a sideways. "Are you sure that's wise?" she said.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Anders said, starting to feel a touch of anger through his bewilderment.
"They have as much right to live in safety from the Chantry and the Templars as any of us!"

"Certainly. By all means," Mardra said hastily. "But are we going to use this to set a precedent?"

"Precedent?" This conversation was not growing any less confusing. "You mean for other Tranquil?"

Mardra shrugged. "Tranquil, and others who lack magic. At some point we were always going to have to decide: should non-mages who want to join the community be able to do so?"

Anders boggled. "Non-mages? Here? Why would they even want to?" In his experience, most non-mages wanted nothing more than to be rid of the presence of mages and never see them again; he had trouble imagining why any of those people would seek out a community composed entirely of mages, if not to make trouble.

"There are lots of reasons." Mardra began ticking them off on her fingers. "Maybe they want to come here just to learn about magic, like Dagna. Maybe they're a family member of a mage, or a friend, or a lover. We're already starting to expect new children; what if some of them don't inherit their parents' magic? Would you expel them from Refuge, separating them from their parents, just because they aren't mages?"

Anders had been momentarily distracted by the mention of 'lovers,' but Mardra's last words jolted him out of that line of thought before it could go anywhere. "No, of course not!" he exclaimed, horrified. "There's been too much of that already. Children taken from their mothers by the Chantry, denied even the chance of a normal family…"

"Then we have to decide how nonmages will be integrated into the community." Mardra spread her hands. "We'll have to come up with appropriate guidelines, maybe a modified Charter that excludes issues explicitly pertaining to magic…"

Anders groaned. "More paperwork?" he said, with a bit of a whine in his voice. "Maker's teeth, I think I see stacks of it in my dreams."

He'd been going for a laugh with that, but he ought to have known better; Mardra never joked about paperwork. "It's work, yes, but it's work that needs to be done, Anders," she said seriously. "You have to realize that this is going to set a precedent. Future decisions will be weighed on the back of this one.

"There's no existing body of law to draw on in Southern Thedas to decide these things," she said, emphasizing the negative. "There are no other guidelines for us to follow; we are the guidelines now. Everything we do, we are the first. That's why it's so important that we do it right."

Anders was still chewing over Mardra's words as he stepped out of the stone passage to the valley above. The three newcomers were still down in the Shaperate -- Mardra was rewriting the contract to exclude mentions of magic-specific duties and obligations for Omelas to sign, and the other two had chosen to stay with him, but Anders wanted to get back to his own duties.

Somewhat to his surprise, there was a cluster of mages already waiting for him when he stopped.
out into the sunlight. He blinked, trying to identify them. He could only remember a few of their names -- Danum, an senior balding mage with a portly stomach, who he'd helped treat for arthritis and strained ligaments after his arrival. One of Hamil's teenage training buddies -- curly-haired Marco, if Anders remembered the name right. Others he recognized faces, but not names; and the expressions on all the faces gave him pause.

"Is something wrong?" he called out as he stepped forward, bracing himself for the news that there had been another disaster -- a collapse at the construction site, a campfire that had gotten out of control, some hapless mage falling in the stream and half-drowning. He looked out past them, but didn't see any other signs of trouble -- no smoke, no screaming, no panicked running around…

"Healer, is it true?" Marco said, interrupting his thoughts. "Are the rumors true?"

"What rumors?" Anders said, confused.

Danum frowned, folding his arms across his wide chest. "That a whole group of Tranquil arrived and are being let in!" he said, challenge in his voice and manner.

Anders began to be on his guard, choosing his words a little more carefully. "A new group of mages has arrived from Calenhad, yes -- but only one of them was Tranquil." He turned to face Danum, drawing himself up to his full height. "And why shouldn't he be let in?"

Danum faltered somewhat, losing some of his bluster. "Well, this is supposed to be a place for mages, like us," he said. "Tranquil aren't really mages any more, are they?"

"They are mages, mages who have suffered more greatly than any of us here." Anders struggled to keep hold of his rising temper, his voice growing sharp. "They are in as much danger from the Templars, the Chantry, and the ignorant as any of us are. He came here for shelter, for refuge, and he will have it. As will any other Tranquil that comes here for help. None will be turned away. Why is this even a concern?"

"Well, it just doesn't seem right..." Danum muttered. "I mean, it's just one for now, but where do we draw the line?"

"No, hold on, the Healer's right," Marco said unexpectedly, and turned to face the others in the crowd. "Why shouldn't we let the Tranquil stay here? I mean, somebody still has to do the laundry, right?"

For a moment, Anders could not believe what he had heard. Unless Marco was joking, if badly -- but no, his expression was entirely serious and earnest. Fury flared, and Anders had to throttle it back down before he could speak again.

Marco was still young; he didn't know better. Still in his teens, Anders doubted he had gone through his Harrowing yet -- and now never would -- but he had likely lived his whole childhood in the Tower, surrounded by blank-faced Tranquil who cleaned and swept up around him. To him, and others like him, that was just the natural way of the universe: he made messes, and Tranquil picked up after him.

"But it's the rest of us who are going to have to cover for them!" Danum objected, face pinking with bad temper of his own. "They can't pull their weight, after all. Someone else will have to do their Deep Roads years for them. Why should all of us have to do more work, and carry more risk, just so that they can get a free ride? It's not like they can even feel fear or pain, you know!"

"The Tranquil only exist because the Circle failed them!" Anders said, temper snapping. What if it
had been Karl? What if he had somehow survived Kirkwall, escaped together, come looking for help from their fellow mages only to be turned away at the last minute because of closed-minded morons like this? "Because we failed them! Because for years we stood by and looked the other way while the Templars maimed, abused and exploited our brothers! It ends here!"

More of a crowd had gathered while they argued, mages drifting casually over to linger within earshot; Anders looked out over them, pitching his words to land on every listening ear. "This is a community for mages, all mages, even the ones who have been crippled and abandoned by the Chantry! Yes, we will take on their share of the work, and their share of the risk, because that is what we owe them for the harm that we have done!"

"That's not true! I never did anything to any Tranquil!" Marco protested, outraged and offended. "I don't owe them anything. It was the Templars that did it, not us!"

Anders bared his teeth in imitation of a smile. "Yet there are no Templars here now," he pointed out sweetly. "And still you turn your back on them, just the same."

He held Marco's eyes for a long moment until the younger mage looked away, dropping his head. It was satisfying -- but had he truly changed the younger man's mind, or merely intimidated him into silence?

Danum, at least, had certainly not been intimidated into silence. He let out a loud huff, crossing his arms and raising his chin belligerently. "Well, I'm not going to put myself in danger for a glass-eye," he retorted. "And that's final."

Anders gritted his teeth. He couldn't force any mage to do anything, he reminded himself; he had not come here to set himself up as a master over these mages, to force them to work and fight for him as the Chantry did.

"No one who seeks shelter here will be turned away," he said softly. "Not the Tranquil, not even you."

He turned his back on Danum, and looked out over the crowd. "If you're so worried about being forced to do extra work for the sake of a Tranquil, then put your mind at rest. I will take his year myself."

Two days later, Anders went looking for Omelas again. The newcomers had been given the usual settling-in tour -- escorted through Orzammar up to the valley above, shown all the points of interest, given a room (or a tent) and allowed to settle in. The time had also given Anders a chance to settle himself, to come to terms with his own feelings and to lay to rest some of the ghosts of memories that had been so abruptly resurrected for him.

He hadn't been able to save Karl. He might be able to save Omelas -- and while that wouldn't change what had happened to Karl, it was still worth doing for its own sake.

Now that he'd had some time to settle his thoughts, a new thought had occurred to him, one that
was just as disturbing in its own way. Through Justice, Anders had been able to restore Karl to himself -- for just a moment. The cure had faded as soon as Justice had, but... before that night, nobody had ever thought that any cure was possible at all, even a temporary one. Didn't he owe it to Omelas to offer him that, to regain what he had lost, even if could only be for a few minutes? Didn't he owe Omelas the chance to decide his own fate?

With that in mind he went looking for Omelas, climbing the stairs from Orzammar to the valley with a mission on his mind. He didn't find them in any of the temporary bunks that had been set up for those newcomers recovering from their journey. Of course, it was the middle of the day on the surface; no reason for them to still be resting. Anders kept forgetting that most of the mages didn't follow the dwarven clock.

He headed for the mess tent -- the name was a bit misleading; it was not a single tent but a ring of tents around a cleared firepit, where outdoor ovens and huge cooking pots had been set up. The tents themselves mostly housed long tables and banks of cabinets where ingredients could be stored and food prepared, and stacks of dishes ready for the hungry to take with them. It was a constant battle to get them to wash them and bring them back again, but they were getting there.

As Anders approached the cooking area he spotted a flash of ash-blond hair, and turned towards it. As he rounded the corner, he felt an unpleasant shock to see Omelas standing over one of the medium cook pots, a long stirring spoon in his hands and an expression of concentration on his face.

"Omelas," Anders greeted him, stepping up. "Good to see you again."

"Anders," the Tranquil said, inclining his head in a nod. "Pardon me, but I must attend to this stew. It would be wasteful if it boiled over."

The shock in his middle was beginning to curl and scald into something hotter, indignation smoldering into anger, and Anders tried to tamp down on his temper. "Omelas, you don't have to cook, you know," he said, struggling to keep his voice calm and reasonable. "This isn't the Tower, you don't have to do menial chores any more just because you're Tranquil."

Omelas blinked at him, mild surprise in those pale eyes. "I beg your pardon, Anders, but this is what I was instructed to do," he said in that soft, eerily calm voice. "After myself and my companions had settled into our new quarters, I was instructed by Mistress Amell to take up station in the kitchen and help prepare food for the other mages until further notified."

It felt like a bucket of ice-cold water had splashed on his chest, trickling down through his stomach. "Oh, Mistress Amell said that, did she?" Anders said, tone going waspish. "Then maybe I need to have a word with her." He turned on his heel and began to march off, seething under his skin.

"As you wish," Omelas said placidly behind him. "I will be here."
Years remaining: 3
Chapter Summary

The mages try to work out the best approach to the Tranquil, when life at Refuge unexpectedly starts to heat up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Anders marched across the compound, other mages stepped quickly out of his path. He struggled to keep a lid on his temper, to keep his emotions in check, although truth be told what he was feeling was not so much anger as it was hurt.

He thought Mardra understood. The Tranquil had been abused and exploited for too long in the Tower, set to endless menial tasks or thankless drudgery with no expectation of reward or release, simply because they couldn't object and wouldn't complain. The Tranquil, more than any other mages in the Tower, truly were slaves -- endless work without recompense, they could not leave and they could not refuse. The fact that they were uncomplaining -- that they could not complain -- only made it more unjust.

Mardra should have known better. He'd thought she knew better. They had not come to Refuge to escape their Templar jailors, just to repeat the same outrages and injustices that had been inflicted on them in the Tower!

He spotted a familiar lanky silhouette among the thinning crowd of mages, just emerging from the foreman's headquarters. "Mardra," he called out, turning towards her and quickening his steps.

She turned her head and saw him in return, and hurried his way. "Oh, Anders," she said. "I was looking for you. I needed to ask you about --"

"Mardra, what were you thinking?" he exclaimed, cutting her off mid-sentence.

" -- about the placement of the -- what?" Mardra stumbled to a stop, staring at him in astonishment. The spike of hurt feelings, of betrayal, wavered even higher at the sight of her. "What's this about, Anders?"

"It's about Omelas!" Anders exclaimed, because what else could it have been about? "It's about putting the Tranquil to work like they're just slaves to be redeployed to suit our needs --"

"Oh. No," Mardra said, and turned on her heel. "I am not having this conversation. Not with you, not in the middle of the open with half the camp watching." She marched away, leaving Anders staring in astonishment at her departing back.

"I mean it, Mardra!" Anders exclaimed, chasing after her. "He came to us for shelter! They all came to us for shelter! How can we betray that trust they've placed in us --"

Passing by the mouth of a canvas tent, Mardra ducked her head inside. When Anders followed, she
reached out and grabbed his arm, yanking him inside. "I am trying to run a community here, Anders!" she hissed, the two of them standing face-to-face in the dim canvas shadow. "This is not some fun holiday, this is a matter of life and death! We all need to work together if we're going to survive, and that means yes, even the Tranquil!"

"It is demeaning, to treat Tranquil like maids or kitchen drudges --" Anders began, but Mardra cut him off mid-sentence.

"It's work that needs to be done!" she said heatedly. "Nothing about it is inherently degrading, if we all do our share. I asked Omelas what he was good at, what skills he had to bring, and he said cooking. There aren't nearly enough people in this community who know how to cook, do you understand? I need every pair of hands I can get!"

"That is not the point!" Anders shouted.

"Then what is the point!?" Mardra returned, matching him volume for volume. A part of Anders was dimly aware that the canvas walls weren't doing anything to keep the rest of the camp from hearing them, but he couldn't make himself care.

"The point is that you're taking advantage of his Tranquil state!" Anders said heatedly. "The Tranquil can't say no, you know they can't say no! They do exactly what you tell them do, nothing more or less. It doesn't matter what he said he's good at, he has no choice but to do what you tell him to, and without complaint! How is that not exploitation?"

Mardra threw her hands up beside her face, exasperated. "And what's the alternative?" she said incredulously. "Have him -- and however many more Tranquil end up coming to Refuge -- just sit around on twiddle their thumbs all day, while everyone else around them works? Do you imagine that's any better for them, to be reduced to a burden on everyone around them, when they know perfectly well that they're still capable of contributing? You complain about demeaning them, but you're the one who wants us to treat them like -- like small children, or like things that can't even speak their own minds?"

"I'm not saying that!" Anders denied vehemently.

"Then what do you want us to do, Anders?" Mardra shouted, frustration clear in her voice. "What approach to the Tranquil would make you happy?!"

*I want them not to be Tranquil any more.* The answer was final, and clear, but there was no point in saying it; not if there was no way to make it come true. It would just be petulant, asking things of Mardra that weren't in her power to give.

What *did* he want, short of that? He didn't want to reduce the Tranquil to infants or burdens, whatever Mardra said; he just didn't want them to be abused, exploited for no recompense like -- "We can pay them," he said in a flash of inspiration.

Mardra stared. "*Pay* them?"

"Yes!" Anders snapped. "That's how it works in the real world; you work, you get paid. It's not that radical of an idea. We have money, don't we?"

"Well... yes," Mardra stuttered, but there was less frustration in her voice now; she was thinking forward again, trying to solve the problem instead of just run up against it like a wall. "But -- we're not paying anyone at the moment, for chores done or crafts made..."

Anders took a deep breath, trying to scale back. "Maybe we should be."
Mardra shook her head, incredulous. "We don't have enough money to pay every mage in the camp," she said. "And what would they even do with money? We supply everything they need -- or they can barter for the Avvar with it, payment of goods in kind. Honestly Anders, I don't think most of these mages would even know what to do with money if they had it!"

"Then they need to learn, don't they?" Anders said. "And the sooner the better. Look, I'm not saying we should drain our treasury dry on this. But this money isn't for us, it's for them, for all of them, isn't it? Besides, it's not like the money is going to be really going anywhere, is it? Where will they spend it? Either with the Avvar, in which case we'll have the goods they spend it on, or in Orzammar, in which case I'm sure Bhelen will be happy."

Mardra frowned stormily, her thick brows drawing together to a point between her eyes. At last she sighed. "I… suppose so," she allowed. "I'll look into it, at any rate. But Anders, you can't keep doing this!"

"Doing what?" Anders said, bewildered by the change in topic.

Mardra glared at him. "This!" she exclaimed, gesturing vaguely but with furious emphasis. "Going off and doing your own, whatever-it-is you do for days or weeks or -- disappearing for weeks or months at a time and then coming back and blowing up at me because I'm not doing something the way you think it should be done!"

Anders was taken aback. "What? I'm not --"

But Mardra wasn't finished yet. "This community needs a leader!" she said. "And you, you're the one with the visions, you're the one with the big ideas. All of us are only here in the first place because of you. They look to you for leadership, so why don't you just step up and lead already?"

"I don't just disappear on some sort of vacation, Mardra!" Anders protested. "I've got a contract to fulfill with the King -- we all do, if it comes to that. I need to go with them, to develop mage-dwarf combat tactics and get them used to the idea of us --"

"I'm not disputing that!"

" -- and it's not like I'm doing nothing around here, either! There's work to be done, important healing work to be done, and --"

"We have other healers!" Mardra interrupted him. "We have other mages who can heal! We don't have anyone who can lead!"

"Sure you do!" he snapped. "There's you! You're already running the place as you see best; why don't you take the final step and step up as leadership? What is it that you're looking for? You want there to be a First Enchanter? Why not you?"

"This whole, this whole town, this whole alliance-with-the-dwarves thing was your idea!" Mardra flung at him. "You were the one who started this whole mess, you were the first one to step foot on these grounds. Who else would it be except you?"

"Listen, I never claimed to be in charge, I never asked --"

"Well, if you care about this community succeeding," Mardra interrupted. "Then act like it! And if you don't care, then stop trying to control what other people can and can't do!"

With that, Mardra stormed out of the tent. This time, Anders didn't pursue her. He could see through the tent flap that there was a crowd of mages that had gathered around, and he knew better
than to think they hadn't heard every word. Maybe he would just stay in here until the crowd dispersed. Or possibly until the sun died and the Maker came back to the world to clean up the mess.

He was going to need to apologize to her. Now that his first flare of righteous indignation had died down, he realized how far out of line he had been. His anger had never really been directed at her -- he was angry at those responsible for Tranquility, who were far out of reach. Of course Mardra hadn't been trying to exploit Omelas; she was far too just at heart for that. But, he asked so much of her already, and gave her precious little support in return. If they were to make Refuge work, they had to be able to work together to move forward.

He'd find a way to make it up to her. Somehow --

"Anders?" A familiar voice drew him out of his mortification, and Anders looked up to see Surana peering around the tent flap.

"Neria," he said, unable to keep the embarrassment out of his voice. "You, uh, heard that?"

Surana pursed her lips. "Having loud public arguments with your lieutenants is not the best way to get made First Enchanter, you know," she said.

"I don't care about who gets made First Enchanter!" Anders exclaimed. "If it comes to it, the first mage to arrive after me was you. Why shouldn't you be First?"

Surana snorted. "I'm sure they'd adore having an elf for a First Enchanter," she said. "Either way, I didn't arrive alone. If order of arrival is all we're counting, then Jowan --"


"See?" Surana said with a sour smile. "You do care about who gets elected First Enchanter after all."

Why was she so hung up on him being appointed a leader? First Enchanter, Champion, King of Mages, none of those were right for what they were creating here. He hadn't brought the mages here just to enslave them under another banner. They were free, they could rule over themselves. They didn't need another leader telling them what to do.

He'd told Bhelen that he spoke for the mages, because nobody else would. And he would continue to do that, the best that he could. But the last thing any struggling community needed to have inflicted on them was putting him in charge.

It was another cycle before Anders finally got a chance to see Omelas in private; his own healing duties had kept him busy, and being drawn into the cycle of life at Refuge had kept the Tranquil busy. But at last he had a chance to bring Omelas into one of the finished rooms of the first floor of the Keep, which was the closest you could get to privacy in this crowded camp.
Not that they were alone even here; the young mage who had come with Omelas on the road continued to shadow his elbow everywhere he went. Jury, his name was; Anders tried not to see the shadows of his own past heartbreak in those dark eyes.

"You wanted to see me, Anders?" Omelas said in his calm, monotone voice when the door had shut behind them. This was one topic that he didn't want word getting out into the community about -- not yet.

"Yes," Anders said, trying to project a calm he didn't really feel. "How have you been settling into Refuge?" he asked, putting off the real question for a moment.

"Quite well," Omelas replied. "The other residents of Refuge have been extremely kind and helpful."

"Really?" Anders said, then kicked himself for sounding surprised. "Uh, well, good, that's great. I'm glad to hear that." Apparently it had only been a small minority of the mages that had a problem with the Tranquil presence in their midst -- as usual, their loud obnoxiousness made them seem bigger than they were. "Right. Anyway, I wanted to get a chance to talk to you alone. About your -- about your condition."

"My condition," Omelas repeated.

Jury interceded. "You mean, the fact that he's a Tranquil, don't you?" He hovered behind Omelas, hands worrying at one another.

"Ah… yes, that condition," Anders said. He chewed on the side of his thumb a bit. He wasn't sure how best to package this offer, how to explain what he had done and could do without giving away too much. The fear of demons, even of spirits was still so deeply ingrained in mages who had received a Circle upbringing; he didn't want to start a panic, or ostracize himself. "You know that I'm a spirit healer, right?"

"I have heard people talk about that, Healer Anders," Omelas replied.

"Well --" Anders took a deep breath. "Back when I was in Kirkwall, I… knew a man who had been made Tranquil as well. A friend of mine -- Karl. And under some… very intense… circumstances, it happened that I was channeling a Fade spirit in a very -- a very direct way, while in his presence. And -- even though neither of us knew this was going to happen -- it temporarily reversed his condition. Made him… not Tranquil."

"What?" Jury cried, jumping forward with his hand outstretched. "You can -- there's a cure? You can fix this?!"

"Temporarily!" Anders said, raising his hands palm outwards. He wanted to emphasize that, not to raise any false hopes. "I'm sorry. I wish… it was only for the few minutes that the spell was in effect. Once it faded… he returned to his previous state. Tranquil state. And it wasn't exactly something that I could maintain continuously, even if I could have been in his presence continuously. But, I wanted to tell you… to let you know…"

"Could you teach it to me?" Jury demanded. His hands were outstretched, pleading, as though Anders could physically deliver the cure into his hands. "This cure! I'm -- I'm not a spirit healer, but could you, can you show me how to do it?!"

"No." Anders winced even as he said it. He and Justice had come to a peace with each other -- after a long and painful road and with an enormous amount of help and emotional support from Hawke.
But it was a journey he'd barely survived; it wasn't a gauntlet he wanted to inflict on anyone else. Even if he had, it still wasn't really a practical cure. "I'm afraid not. It's -- it's a very school-restricted spell, to spirit healing only."

Jury slowly sat back down again, the light dying in his eyes almost painful to watch. "But -- even just for a few minutes," he muttered. "Even just -- that just might be long enough…"

"It might be," Anders said, and turned to Omelas. "I wanted to give you the opportunity. I can try it again, if you want me to. To reverse your Tranquility, for a short time."

He paused, waiting for an answer. Omelas took a long time to reply, seeming to be waiting for some cue; he glanced from Jury back to Anders. "You are asking me?" he said, and in that level tone there was the faintest hint of surprise.

"Yes," Anders said, his heart making a painful thump. "I am asking you whether this is something you want."

"I…" Omelas trailed off, looking slightly perplexed. His gaze dropped, staring at the flagstones. "I do not want anything."

Anders sighed. "Yes, I understand that, that's the problem," he said. "But this is your decision to make."

Omelas was quiet for a long moment, seeming to deliberate his answer. He looked up at Anders again, meeting his eyes. "You say there is no way to make it permanent?" he asked.

"No," Anders admitting, the words sour in his mouth. "None that I've been able to find. When the spell ends, the effect also ends."

Omelas nodded in understanding. "Then, with all due respect, I would prefer not to," he said. "I'd half expected the answer, but it still hurt. Jury jumped to his feet, shock and consternation taking over his features. "What?" he exclaimed. "But… you could be back to normal! You could be cured! Even for a few minutes, you'd feel again! Isn't that… wouldn't that be better? Wouldn't anything be better?"

"I believe that the return of my connection to the Fade might prove a traumatic experience," Omelas explained his answer, voice still utterly calm. "In the pursuit of a long-term goal, such trauma might be worth the pain. But, if there is no permanent goal to pursue, then it seems pointless."

"It's not pointless!" Jury said through gritted teeth. He seemed to be fighting off tears. "You know… you know how I feel about you, Omel! But how you feel… how you really feel… Maker damn it, this might be your only chance! You have to take it, you have to!"

"I do not believe I do have to," Omelas replied after a moment. "And I would prefer not to."

Jury made an inarticulate noise of grief, and Anders saw the tears overflow his eyes for an instant. Then the young man turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Anders let out a breath, releasing the tension that had grown in the room. "I am sorry," he said to Omelas quietly.

"For what?" Omelas said.
"For…" Anders sighed. "For not being able to offer a better cure. For the grief I caused your…" He paused a moment. "Omelas, if I may ask… you don't need to answer if this would impinge your privacy, but were you and Jury lovers?"

"No," Omelas said flatly. "We were in the Tower together for several years after he was transferred from Montsimmard. I believe… in hindsight, I believe he held some feelings for me. It is possible that I held some admiration for him, as well. But given the atmosphere of the Tower, the political tension, it did not seem wise to spend time on such pursuits. Neither of us ever spoke of our intentions."

Until it was too late, Anders thought. Jury's grief made more sense, now.

"Again, you don't have to answer if this is too personal," Anders started. "But from what you've described, it sounds like you were -- unusually old, to be made Tranquil. You passed your Harrowing, didn't you?"

"Yes," Omelas said with a brief nod. "I believe the decision was political in nature. I was a member of the Libertarian fraternity, before the fraternities were disbanded. On more than one occasion --"

Before he could get any further in his tale, they were interrupted by an explosion.

Anders started, going quickly to the one external window. "What in the Maker's name?" he exclaimed. Unfortunately, this window was on the far side of the Tower; there was nothing to see from here but a few trees and the side of a cliff.

"That sounded serious," Omelas said. "Perhaps you should go see what caused the problem. They might be in need of a healer."

He'd selected the room for this consultation because it was a rare slice of privacy, on the far side of the tower away from the main encampment. Now that became a hindrance as he tried to hone in on where the explosion had come from. Trying to go through the active construction site would only create more delays, so he would have to go around; should he go right, or left?

More shouting pierced the air, and Anders made up his mind and galloped to the left. He rounded the Tower to see a group of people gathered around an area where stacks of stone blocks and wood planks were piled up -- often used by the mages as benches or tables for work or study.

Something was wrong. Anders had seen scenes like it too many times before: a cluster of people bent or huddled in a circle around something on the ground, others fluttering around the edges, wringing their hands, clearly wanting to help but not knowing how. As Anders broke into a run, approaching the scene of the disaster, one of the flutterers spotted him and immediately started towards him. "Anders! Anders!" they cried. "Come quickly! There's been -- been an accident -- "

He needed no more urging than that. He made a beeline for the heart of the confusion, and caught the glimpse of a body on the ground in among the crowd of worriers. "Get back!" Anders ordered, his voice harsh as he strode forward, and the startled mages gave way before him.

Only three people stayed: Hamil, crouched on one of the stone stacks with his arms spread as
though ready to catch someone as they fell; Jowan, hovering with his gangly hands in mid-air as though uncertain where to touch; and Menehi, the frail silvery mage from Starkhaven. His partner Sheran was the one in trouble; laid out on the ground, skin ghastly pale where it wasn't red-black.

"Please, let me --" Jowan was saying as Anders reached them. "Let me at least try, it's my fault he - -"

"Let him alone!" the old man snarled. "Haven't you done enough?!"

A bolt of alarm shot through Anders, dark suspicion followed by anger. "Jowan," he growled, and the blood mage jumped as though he had been shot and turned quickly to face Anders. "What have you done?"

"I didn't mean to!" Jowan said, holding out his hands in a pleading gesture. He was bleeding, too; a cut on his arm, the bloody knife still in his hand, but also a dozen smaller pinpricks of blood on his arms and face, tiny shards of glass still embedded in some of them.

Anders went for the front of Jowan's tunic, hauling him forward, but Hamil stopped him by grabbing his shoulder. "Anders, this isn't the time!" the boy hissed, and Anders glared furiously for a moment before he acknowledged the truth and stepped back. With great difficulty, he managed to shunt his attention away from righteous wrath and into healing mode. There was a patient here, one who needed him.

"Menehi, the healer is here! Let him help!" Hamil shouted, and the old man reluctantly moved aside.

Sheran was suffering from what looked on first glance to be a massive scalding burn; one side of his face, neck, and the skin on his hands were badly burned. The burn extended up past the sleeve of his robes, even where his clothing should have protected him, Anders realized as he swiftly cut the obstructing clothing away with his knife.

Thank the Maker, the burn wasn't as bad as it had looked on first glance; the black specks that dotted the red skin were the remnant of some other char, not the skin itself. Anders had seen burns so bad that the skin and flesh blackened and turned to charcoal; but so long as it was still red, still bleeding, the tissue was still alive.

He dropped a weak Winter's Grasp spell to cool the worst of the dangerous heat and hopefully numb some of the pain, and then dropped into healing. The healing itself was not too difficult; he'd healed wounds like this many times before, and knew exactly what to do. The greater danger was posed by Sheran's age and condition; even the healthiest of elders was less resilient than the young, and lesser wounds than this could send their system into a shock from which they never recovered.

Anders spent less time healing the burn itself than he did on trying to prevent just such a shock, magically stabilizing Sheran's condition. He spent a good deal more time than he usually did moderating his vitals -- temperature, blood pressure, breathing -- before he finally let the spell drop and sat back.

"Is he going to be okay?" Jowan said tentatively.

As awareness of the rest of the world returned, so did his anger. Because he had seen injuries like this before -- and they were no ordinary scald burns. The burns he'd seen like this before had been inflicted by blood magic.

Fortunately for Jowan, the edge of his anger was blunted -- which was the only reason he didn't take the bloody man's head right off. He settled for pinning the blood mage with a murderous
"You," he spat. "You did this?"

"It was an accident!" Jowan blurted again. "This shouldn't have happened -- I don't know what -- it was just a routine experiment...."

"Experiment?" Visions of Kirkwall danced before his eyes, of Quentin, of the filthy laboratory in the darkened foundry warehouse. "How dare you? I let you stay here -- I trusted you. And this is how you repay our trust -- by experimenting on your fellow mages?"

He took a step forward, only to find another of the mages holding onto his arm, dragging him back. He didn't recognize the man, except that he had been part of the crowd when Anders burst onto the scene. "It's not like that, Healer!" the man exclaimed. "Sheran volunteered!"

"It's true," Menehi confirmed, grudgingly, from where he knelt on the ground next to Sheran's immobile form. "He agreed. Even knowing there was a risk... Blighted fool!"

That gave Anders pause, as more mages came running up; it seemed like all of Refuge was crowding around, trying to get a view of the scene or buzzing whispered explanations from one mage to another. There was a tinge of fear in those whispers, deepening with every person they passed to, and Anders thought he could guess why.

Blood magic. Here, in the heart of the one place on Thedas they should have been safe -- the one enemy they had been taught to always fear, always beware. Here, in their very refuge.

The world around him was fading out into black and white, colors drained in the stark white-hot fury of his anger; he fought to contain it, to rein them both in before he started glowing. As much as he wanted to strike out in righteous fury, to cleanse the source of the evil, he knew that was the wrong thing to do. Instead, he advanced on Jowan, putting himself directly in the younger man's space, and jabbed a finger into his chest. "Now you listen to me," he hissed.

"The only reason I let you stay here, in this refuge, when I first learned you were a blood mage is because you assured me that you could use blood magic safely, you could use it to help people. Does this look like helping to you? A wild gesture of his arm took in the scattered chaos of the scene, the scorch marks on wood and stone, the injured mage laid low on the grass. "Does this look safe to you?"

"Do you realize yet that there is no such thing as 'good' blood magic, or a 'good' blood mage?" Anders shoved Jowan back, who stumbled a few steps but kept his feet, rubbing at his chest as he stared up at Anders. "It starts small, the sacrifices. And it always, always gets worse! I'm not having it in my city, do you understand me? You can swear here and now that you forsake blood magic for good, or else you can get out!"

Jowan stared at him, sweat beading on his forehead, his eyes wide and round. He swallowed... and said, "No."

For a moment, Anders couldn't believe his own ears. "No?" he echoed.

"No! I refuse. I won't... back down on this!" Jowan exclaimed. "Maker knows, I've screwed up, time and time again. I've failed almost everything in my life that I've tried to do. I've never had any talents for anything... except for this! I'm really, really good at blood magic!"

He half-turned, gesturing towards the crowd that had gathered, raising his voice into a shout. "So you can laugh! Everybody laughs! I'm sure the Maker's laughing too, but I have to believe that He gave me this power for a reason! That he made it the only thing I ever had, so that I'd eventually
Anders felt his face twist into a scowl -- what was it with bloody, stupid, stubborn blood mages? What was it about blood magic that warped their brains until they were unable to give up a patently lost cause? "Fine," he snapped. "Then you'll do it somewhere other than here. Get out!"

"But --" Jowan protested.

Anders flung his arm outward, pointing towards the horizon showing beyond the ridge of mountains. "GET OUT!" he thundered, and this time he couldn't stop a hint of blue lighting that flickered at his fingertips. By now, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

Jowan opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Another voice cut in, as calm as the previous exchange had been heated. "If he leaves," Surana said, making her way forward through the crowd, "I leave with him."

"What?" Anders spluttered, his outrage suddenly short-circuiting.

"You heard me." Surana took Jowan's hand in her own, and met Anders' gaze steadily. "Jowan is my husband. I go where he goes. If he leaves Refuge, then so do I. Whatever danger may be out there… we'll face it together."

Whatever danger is out there. Anders felt a thread of panic. Mardra's letters painted a grim picture that was worsening by the day -- Templars of every tower growing as brutal and paranoid as Meredith at her worst. Ordinary townsfolk, excited to a frenzy by preaching Chantry sisters against the evil mages, turning on every stranger or strange figure -- even if Jowan and Surana managed to hide the fact that they were mages, just the fact that she was an elf would be enough in some towns to get them lynched. And if Jowan refused to hide what he was doing…

There was no place out there for any mage, but especially not for them. And Surana was pregnant. If she left now, the community would not only lose her, but her baby; the first child of a mage to be born free and safe in southern Thedas in a thousand years.

He couldn't let that happen. And she knew that perfectly well, damn her, using it as a tie to pull him up short. For a moment he admired her almost as much as he resented her for it.

"Anders, you don't have to decide anything now," Surana said, and her voice had turned calm, persuasive. "Right now everyone's upset, everyone's… blood is very high. Let's all go apart for a little bit, calm down. Talk to everyone involved, make sure you have the facts straight. Then, tomorrow, you can decide."
"Your facts?" Anders said sourly, even as he knew she'd won this round.

So did she, judging by the way she exhaled, the tension leaving her frame and taking much of the tension of the scene with it. "Let's just say that there are some things I think you don't know yet," she said. "We can talk it over… later."

Another groan from Sheran drew Anders' attention away from the clash of wills; the older mage was now trying to sit up, aided by his husband and half a dozen other mages, and his movements were feeble and shaky. He needed to be lying down -- and not on the ground; somewhere indoors, or at least sheltered -- with warmth, quiet and liquids. The room where he'd been meeting with Omelas would do, if he could send someone for supplies…

"Later," Anders agreed, and moved to take care of his patient.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Cutting things in an odd place, again, to try to keep the chapters a consistent length. We'll learn more about Jowan's blood magic research in the next chapter. But I'm curious... what do you think Jowan is trying to do, readers? ;)


Excerpt from the prison log of Kinloch Hold, Cloudreach, 9:40 Dragon.

Prisoner name: **Piros**  
Crime: **Alleged use of blood magic**  
Date arrested: 3/24  
Date released: N/A Found dead in cell  
*Suicide admission of guilt?*

Prisoner name: **Varawen**  
Crime: **Stealing food**  
Date arrested: 3/25  
Date released: 4/11  
*Knife-ears just can't help themselves. Maybe this one learned her lesson*

Prisoner name: **Martin**  
Crime: **Attempted escape**  
Date arrested: 4/01  
Date released:  

Prisoner name: **Dietgard**  
Crime: **Alleged use of blood magic**  
Date arrested: 4/08  
Date released:  

Prisoner name: **Kinney**  
Crime: **Assault of a Templar officer in the course of their duties**  
Date arrested: 4/14  
Date released: N/A Found dead in cell  
*Good riddance*

Prisoner name: **Torrin**  
Crime: **Alleged use of blood magic**  
Date arrested: 4/15  
Date released:  
*Cheeky bugger - Half rations*

Prisoner name: **Rhys**  
Crime: **Alleged use of blood magic**  
Date arrested: 4/21  
Date released: 4/25 -- **BY ORDER OF LORD SEEKER**  
*Still think he's guilty. These spirit healer types are all demon lovers anyway. Apparently the robes are rioting about him. Don't think we should cater to them -- that's not why we're here. I've registered my objection*

Prisoner name: **Briadra**
It turned into the next day before Anders was happy leaving his patient alone; his blood pressure had remained low and his pulse high and irregular well into the night. By midnight he'd recovered, apparently with no lasting side effects, and Anders had taken a few hours to sleep -- as Surana had suggested -- before he went to see her.

She'd returned to the Brosca manor, where she still spent most of her time; on the walk down Anders had plenty of time to think about yesterday's argument, Jowan's response and Surana's defense. He still didn't think he'd been wrong -- Jowan was clearly out of control -- but Surana seemed determined to stand by him.

It hurt, to see that stalwart defense -- to know that somewhere out there was someone so loyal that they would stand by even a known maleficar, even through the worst of crimes. Jowan didn't bloody deserve her, Anders decided.

Surana looked up from where she was sitting on one of the low benches in the front room. She had a sewing needle and a bundle of fabric in her lap, and after several minutes of staring Anders tentatively ID'd it as a very, very small tunic. Baby clothes, maybe? It was true that none of them had anything on hand that would be the right size. The craftsmanship was clumsy and sloppy, compared to Surana's usual beautiful woodwork, but he supposed she was learning new things. He supposed they all were.

When Anders came in Surana put her work aside, and cocked her head towards him in silent question. "Sheran will be fine," Anders answered. "Shouldn't even scar."

Surana relaxed slightly at that news. "Of course he will," she said. "I would expect nothing less. You're the most talented healer I've ever met."

Anders huffed a little. This was obviously an attempt to butter him up, even if the look in her eyes was sincere. If anyone could be sincere and manipulative at the same time, it was Surana. "Even if he's healed, that doesn't make it okay that he was hurt!" he retorted. "That doesn't make any of this okay! I can't believe he --"

He broke off with a sigh, running his hand through his hair. The tight bun that kept his hair out of his face was beginning to give him a headache. "What do you even see in him?" he complained. "How can you stand by him, even now?"

That had been a little over the line, he admitted to himself with a cringe. But Surana said simply, "I have my reasons." She leaned forward, her eyes intent. "Anders, listen. I know you don't like Jowan..."
"This isn't about that, Neria," Anders interrupted. "It has nothing to do with my liking him or not liking him as a person." He'd liked Merrill just fine as a person, after all; she'd been sweet and kind and Void-bent obsessed with that blighted mirror. "Blood magic is dangerous, and it's wrong, and..."

"And what?" Surana prompted when he trailed off.

"I keep thinking about something Mardra said the other day," Anders admitted. "About how everything we do here sets a precedent. What does it mean if someone like Jowan is allowed to stay here? Is welcomed here? Do we really want to become a haven for malefics?"

"Aren't we already?" Surana said. "Each and every one of us here is an apostate... many of us fought with the Templars to make our escape. 'Those who set magic against their fellow man,' more than any blood mage, are the very definition of malefics. But if we are to be free, it's the only way."

"I know that. I do. But this..." Anders shook his head. "This is a bridge too far. People are going to think we're some kind of, I don't know, cult! A cabal of wicked mages, cooking up evil blood magic in the mountains."

"'People?' Or you?" Surana said shrewdly. "Accidents can happen to any mage, Anders. Will happen, whether it's a fire spell that blows up in someone's hand or a hex that goes out of control or something else. What matters is not that we don't have accidents, but that we have the ability to control them and repair the damage. This isn't about the accident; this is about your prejudice against blood magic."

Anders scoffed at the word. "There's no need to call it a 'prejudice' like I'm slandering it somehow," he said incredulously.

"But you are," Surana said. "You still want to be a 'good mage,' Anders. I know why you do. But if there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that you'll never win if you only ever allow the other person to decide the rules. The Chantry makes sure that we never win, that we can never be good enough to pass their tests. They aim to keep us trying all our lives to reach a goal that will always be out of reach, and then blame it on our own inherent unworthiness when we fail. And if, by blood and sweat and great good fortune, we succeed, then our reward is a lifetime of imprisonment."

"If our independence must depend on the good opinion of the Chantry, then we've already lost it."

Surana shook her head slowly. "It's time to stop chasing that chimera, Anders. We can't let them define us any more."

She had a point, Anders had to admit. More of a point than he liked. How could it be that even now, years down a path of committing blasphemy after greater blasphemy, he could still turn around and find the Chantry right in the back of his head this way?

"Then who defines us?" he said aloud.

Surana shrugged. "We define ourselves."

Anders snorted. "So 'defining ourselves' means running around slicing our wrists and trying to take over people's minds?"

Surana gave him a sardonic look. "It means letting go of baseless superstitions and judging each thing on its own merits, for its own benefits and risks," she said. "Not all spirits are demons. Not all blood magic is evil. Anders, there is nothing about blood magic that makes it inherently any
worse -- any more dangerous or less moral -- than any other kind of magic.

"Yes, when it's used as a weapon, the effects are ugly. Is it any more pleasant to be burned alive, or smeared against a wall, or crushed into a pulp by telekinetic magic? Death is always ugly. Blood magic is a tool, nothing more, nothing less. The only question that matters is this: are the benefits worth the risks? I believe they are."

"So far he's already caused one explosion and put an old man in the infirmary!" Anders exclaimed. "I don't see any 'benefits' that could be worth all this!"

"Because you've been walking around with your eyes closed," Surana said, her voice growing sharp. "Do you even know what Jowan was trying to do yesterday? What he's been working on for the last six months?"

"I -- " Anders stopped short, realizing that no, he didn't.

Surana heard the 'no' as clearly as if he'd said it aloud. "But you're willing to condemn it, without even knowing what it is?"

"Fine," Anders said, conceding the point ungraciously. "What was he working on?"

"Go ask him that," Surana ordered, her voice firm. "Go find Jowan, sit down with him, talk in a regular tone of voice, and ask him what he's trying to do. You owe him at least that much respect, for the appalling way you've treated him since we arrived here."

Anders climbed the stairs, thinking back to the first time he'd met Jowan and Surana in this very building -- had it been a year ago already? Things had changed so very much since then; it seemed like it had been much longer, and also as though nothing had changed at all.

Jowan certainly looked the same, Anders thought, stopping in the doorway to look at the man. Still awkward, still gangly, like he'd never quite grown into his head and hands. His skin was a little darker from more time in the sun; his hands were laced with more tiny scars. He was tracing the smaller ones with his thumbs, eyes abstracted and distant, when Anders stepped across the threshold and cleared his throat.

Jowan jumped a little bit, then scrambled to his feet. While Surana had been utterly composed, Jowan was all nerves; Anders could see the fear in him. Fear of losing his home, of being cast into an uncertain future… and, stranger and more familiar, fear of not being able to finish what he'd started.

Anders thought that, Surana aside, there was a distinct possibility that he could get Jowan to cave. Without Surana to brace him, Anders could likely convince him that the risk to his wife and child was too great; if forced to choose between their safety and his work, he would voluntarily agree to give up his work. If Anders forced him to choose.

"Your wife sent me," Anders said, finding a chair in the room and sitting down in it. "Apparently, my behavior towards you has been 'appalling.' "
Jowan twitched a smile that was more of a grimace, but didn't deny it. "Well… you know… I knew when I started down this path that I'd get reactions like that," he mumbled, looking down at his hands again. "You're not the only one who thinks that I'm dangerous, that I'm a crazy blood mage, that it's just a matter of time before I slip and go evil."

"But you keep doing it anyway?" Anders pressed him.

"Yes." His answer came without hesitation, and when Jowan looked up at him, his eyes were clear and certain. "Because if I can succeed, it will be worth it. My own feelings, how I'm treated… that doesn't matter. Only the results matter."

And, well, Anders could certainly understand that. "What results, exactly?"

"I'm trying to find a cure for phylacteries," Jowan said.

"A cure for what?" Anders came half out of his chair, bolting upright with the shock.

"For phylacteries!" Jowan repeated. "Well, I mean, not a cure exactly, because a phylactery isn't a disease. But it is still a kind of... condition. I'm looking for a way to break the influence a phylactery has over a person, or, well, it's more the other way round really -- the influence that the person has over the phylactery -- the point is, to destroy the connection so that the phylactery can't be used any more."

"And you think you can do this... from a distance?" Anders said, disbelieving. "Suppose I'm here, my phylactery's in Val Royeaux, and you think this will still work?"

"Yeah! Why shouldn't it?" Jowan said enthusiastically. He leaned forward, getting more engaged with his subject. "You're familiar with the principle of telegressive transitiveness, right?"

Anders wasn't. "Um -- what?" he managed.

"The principle that what happens to a part of the whole, affects the rest of the whole, even at a remove. It's what enables the enchantment on the phylacteries on the first place," Jowan explained. "That small bit of blood still has a morphic resonance with the rest of your body, even when the two are separated in space and in time."

"I've been researching a way to reserve the polymorphic flow -- to isolate a small part from the whole on the transmitting side and send an annihilative signal back to the receiver, to overload the preserving framework and destroy the phylactery. …You know, it's a good thing the Chantry doesn't have much imagination when it comes to blood magic," Jowan said as an aside. "If they understood the principles they were playing with, the Templars wouldn't even need to catch us to kill us."

Anders shook his head, not so much in denial as disbelief. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if someone gives me a little bit of their blood, I can use that to blow up their phylactery," Jowan said. "No matter where in the world it is. Mages wouldn't have to risk their lives going into the heart of Templar strongholds to get their phylacteries, any more. We could do it from the safety of our own refuge!"

Anders sat back, stunned. If that was true… if that was true, it could change everything. When he'd conceived of Refuge, a sanctum deep inside the kingdom of Orzammar, he'd done so with the phylacteries in mind: since there was nowhere in the world they could go that the Templars could not track them, the only other option was to put the mages out of reach behind stone walls. But if the phylacteries were off the table… if the phylacteries were gone, then mages could be free to
move around. They wouldn't be trapped in one place; once they'd come to Refuge and had their phylactery destroyed, they could go anywhere. No, more; this would give them a whole new reason to come to Refuge, even if they didn't intend to stay. Freedom, safety, possibility… "Are you serious about this?" he choked out.

"Absolutely," Jowan said. "The first few tests worked perfectly, creating a mock phylactery and using this spell to destroy it. It was only when I tried to transfer that principle to the actual thing… that was why I needed a volunteer, one whose phylactery still existed in the real world. Mine was already gone, so I couldn't test it on myself, not this time.

"Sheran volunteered. His phylactery, and his husband's, got moved to Ostwick after the Starkhaven Circle was destroyed, it wasn't sent with them to Kirkwall. Oh, and it was working!" Jowan's bony, scarred hands clenched in frustration. "I made contact, I did, but…"

"What went wrong?" Anders asked.

Jowan gave a helpless little shrug. "I established a protective filter to keep the backflow from affecting the subject, of course, but… well… I think maybe it was because the phylacteries are surrounded by wards. I had trouble getting the spell through, so I... I pushed. I shouldn't have pushed," he said miserably. "When the energy of the spell exceeded the harmonic threshold, it bounced back and overloaded my filter, and hit Sheran instead."

"Which nearly killed him," Anders growled, still feeling a gleam of anger over that.

Jowan wilted in place. "…Yes. I'm... I'm so glad you were there, Anders," he mumbled. "I don't know what I would have done if... But I want to keep going."

"And what if you keep going?" Anders said severely. "What's to stop it from happening again?"

"I'll be more careful next time," Jowan said earnestly. "I won't put more power into a spell than I know for sure my safeguards can handle. Please, Anders. Let me learn from my mistakes. Let me make it worth the cost. That's all I want to do."

From Surana, Anders would have known that to be manipulation of the finest quality -- turning his own words, his own doubts and wishes back on him. But from Jowan -- well, Jowan doesn't have the finesse for that kind of subtlety.

Blight take me, am I really considering this?

He was, he knew it. He'd already decided; he was only resisting out of sheer stubbornness. And that wasn't fair to any of them.

"All right," Anders said at last.

Jowan lit up like a sunrise. "Really?!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I don't like it," Anders growled warningly. "I'm never going to like it. But you've convinced me that you know what you're doing... and that what you're trying to do is worth it. If you actually succeed, if you pull this off..."

"And… what about my other research?" Jowan looked like he could hardly believe what was happening. "The… the wards, and blood healing…"

Anders' first instinct was to refuse, but he stopped himself. If the phylactery research paid off, who was to say that other avenues would be any less valuable in time? "I won't say you can just do
whatever you want. There have to be limits," he said.

Jowan looked like he was ready to cry with happiness. "Yes, yes of course!"

"No experiments that could affect a large area," Anders said, wondering how he was going to explain this to Mardra. He had no doubt that she could draw up an appropriate code of laws governing blood magic use and research; she had the gift, for enshrining the concept of justice into practicable form. "Nothing on unwilling subjects. And no coercion."

"I understand. We'll keep it safe." Jowan nodded furiously, his head bobbing on his gangly neck. "I can do so much better than I used to. The letters your friend sent me, they were so helpful. She knows things my book never told me about…"

Anders was already thinking ahead to the unpleasant fallout that was likely to result from this, so it took him a moment to react to that, coming back to the present conversation with a start. "Wait, what book?" he demanded.

"Um… the book I learned blood magic from?" Jowan said, sounding confused.

"I didn't know you could learn it from a book," Anders said with astonishment. "I thought the only way to -- didn't you make a deal with a demon?"

"No…" Jowan's eyebrows wavered up and down on his forehead, caught between surprise and confusion. "Why would you think that? Wait, you thought that I --?"


"It wasn't hard? It was just… lying around," Jowan stammered, still sounding bewildered. He cleared his throat and went on in a quieter voice: "I, uh… I heard from Eadric later that… that first Enchanter Irving would do that. Sometimes. He would leave the book where apprentices could find it, then tell the Templars…"

"Maker's breath!" Anders exclaimed. "Why?"

"I guess…" Jowan shrugged helplessly. "They said it was in order to weed out the ones that were… susceptible." His voice went even quieter. "Like me."

Years of practicing self-control were all that allowed Anders to keep his seat, not giving voice or outward display to his suddenly skyrocketing fury other than the clenching of his jaw. Every time, every time he thought he had come to the end of the Circle's atrocities, of the Chantry's crimes, he turned a corner and found another. Bad enough that mages faced the temptations of blood magic -- the expediency of using their own blood or others for fuel -- or the temptations of malevolent demons from across the Fade, but this -- this -- even the Chantry itself colluded with such dark forces to terrorize mages?

If there was any argument to be made for the Circle at all -- no matter how much Anders disagreed, valuing the principals of freedom over that of security -- it was that mages could not be trusted to make their own decisions. Mages could not be allowed to make their own decisions, the Chantry decreed, so they must be removed to a place of safety and watchfulness, removed from all temptations, sheltered from malicious influences, all decisions made for them.

And then, and then having done that, trapped mages in a place with no escape, to learn that they were spoon-feeding those same foul influences to young mages -- coming from the people they had been taught and led to trust the most? To deny them all choices, and then offer only bad ones?
How could they possibly justify this to themselves? This invalidated the very purpose of the Circle itself! What else, what was the Circle even for if this was true, if not a herding kennel to trap mages in while they went about their purpose to cull them, one by one?

"A-Anders?" Jowan stammered, drawing Anders out of his entrancement with a start. He realized that his hands were clenched on his thighs, and smoke was beginning to wisp from the charring leathers. He hastily loosened his grip, trying to banish the blue-tinged flames, and looked up at the other man. Jowan looked mildly terrified, but stood his ground. "Are you angry at me?"

There was no point in trying to hide what was obvious. "I am angry. Not at you," he clarified. "Not now. What happened to you was wrong, Jowan. We'll find a way to make it right."

After leaving Brosca Manor, Anders went to check on his patient again -- more of a compulsion than any real need, as Sheran was doing well. His partner had turned up in the infirmary room at some point in time, and the two of them were so deeply absorbed by one another that they hardly noticed Anders checking in.

He went to the palace next to check on Moira, spent some time with Rica and playing with the Commander's nieces and nephews, but finally admitted to himself that what he was really doing was procrastinating.

He needed to find Mardra. He needed to tell her about the result of his discussion with Jowan, but more importantly, he needed to apologize to her. He'd been putting it off for too long, because he'd always been a bit shit when it came to apologies. Thanks, he was good at. Apologies, not so much.

He'd had a lot of people to be grateful to, over the years.

And that was it, really. He owed Mardra -- both apologies for his 'appalling behavior' as Surana would call it, and a thank-you. There was no getting around it; he had been taking her for granted, and disregarding the work she put into keeping Refuge running because it wasn't interesting to him. She'd done most of the groundwork, the small, tedious details without which this experiment would have ground to a halt long ago.

Mardra thought of things -- things like the legal status of non-mages in a mage community -- that would never have occurred to him until it had already blown up in his face. She thought of what needed to be done, and how to do it, and she made it happen, turning abstract concept into solid reality.

Anders was starting to suspect that Refuge needed Mardra far more than it needed him.

So he sought her out at the Shaperate; he found her paging through long lists of names and runes and making tallies on a slate beside her, and he felt bad to interrupt -- but if he waited for a moment when Mardra was not busy, he'd be waiting for a very long time.

He cleared his throat. "Mardra," he said.

She glanced up at him. "Oh -- Anders," she said, and if she was civil enough, there was a certain coolness in her manner. "Can I help you?"
"I'd just like to talk for a bit," he said. Her bushy eyebrows raised over ink-dark eyes, and she gestured to a bench opposite hers. He sat, feeling awkward on a bench made for a much shorter person, all knees and elbows.

"I wanted to apologize," he said, and saw her stiffen slightly. "For my behavior the other day -- about Omelas. I was out of line, and I'm sorry."

Mardra relaxed slightly and nodded. "You were," she said levelly. "Apology accepted."

For a moment Anders was thrown off balance. "I was expecting a lot more groveling to be involved," he joked.

Mardra blew out a breath. "And what exactly would that have accomplished?" she demanded. "We still have to work together, going forward, to make this community work. There's no benefit to holding grudges."

"Well, and that's another thing I want to apologize for," Anders said, forging onwards. Mardra looked faintly confused. "You've been -- you've been working incredibly hard the past few months, to try to make a home for all these mages. I've taken advantage of that, and I'm sorry."

Mardra looked slightly uncomfortable. "I wouldn't say that," she objected. "You've been working just as hard. Maker knows, you're still up writing most nights when I go to bed and already up healing when I wake up in the morning. It's enough to make a woman feel lazy."

"Well, yes, but I'm -- me," Anders said, stuttering slightly as he tried to explain. He could hardly remember any more what it was like to sleep a full night, to not feel your skin buzzing and crawling with the endless restless energy of a spirit's purpose aching to be fulfilled. "The point is, I've been an ungrateful wretch, and I haven't appreciated nearly enough what you've done for all of us."

"Anders, where is this going?" Mardra said, looking increasingly uneasy.

"Let me make it up to you," Anders said. He stopped for a moment, staring at the page in front of her; swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and lifted his eyes to meet hers. "Let me do this right. The mages need you -- here, not in the deep roads. More than they need me. I think I should take your year."

ANDERS: ΦΩΩ

Years remaining: 3
Mortise

Chapter Summary

Anders makes plans with Dagna, a day in the sun, and a new and unexpected factor appears at Refuge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Oh. No," Mardra said. "Anders, no. That is -- that's not going to happen, we are not doing this."

"I mean it," Anders protested.

"I know you do," Mardra said, sounding exasperated. "I know that you're ridiculously sincere and self-sacrificing, but Anders, that's not going to work. Bad enough that you are already pledged for multiple terms in the deep roads without adding on unnecessary years just for the sake of some -- misplaced penitence!"

"You're too vital to be spared," Anders said. "Refuge needs you --"

"We need you just as much!" Mardra snapped. "If not more. I'm not denying that I contribute, but the community could get along without me for a time. It will need to, sooner or later. And Anders, we can't set a precedent of people being exempt just because they're important. Once we start that, where does it end? Leave our best healers behind because healers are always needed? Leave our best warriors behind to defend against Templars? Leave our best cooks behind because someone has to do the cooking? What kind of message does that send to the ones that aren't exempted -- that they're unvalued, unimportant, expendable? We all have to be seen to all put in the same effort, sacrifice and risk. It would be incredibly unfair to duck out of that -- bad for morale, as well as just being wrong."

Anders sat back a moment, mouth hanging open. He was feeling more stunned than such a pragmatic speech ought to warrant, part of him thrumming like a struck bell to the sentiment in Mardra's words.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Yes, and I already accepted your apology," Mardra snapped wearily. She rubbed at her temples. "You don't need to apologize for minor social slights with grand sacrificial gestures, Anders. If you've really gotten it into your head to do something for me, you already know what I want of you."

"You want me to be a leader." Anders looked away. "Mardra, I don't know how."

"No, you don't," Mardra agreed, much to his surprise. "Nobody's born knowing how. It can be learned -- aren't you the one who's always saying the mages need to learn to do things they've never had to do before? Listen, I've drawn up several different possible models for government…"

Anders groaned. "Mardra, I don't understand -- I mean, I understand that you do feel strongly
about it," he said hastily, in response to her black-browed glower. "I just don't understand why it's so important to have a leader at all, whether it's me or anyone else. Why do we even need a government? We're all free men; we don't need a tyrant setting up over us."

"We are going to need a government of some form at some point," Mardra insisted. "There's got to be some ruling body to decide the rules and procedures controlling the community, who keeps records and judges crime and does a thousand other day-to-day tasks."

Anders had his mouth open to object again, but he sat back. He'd already acknowledged that Mardra thought of things that he did not; he owed it to at least hear her out. "All right…" he said slowly.

"Now, like I was saying, I've come up with a few possible models," Mardra said, and she reached into her satchel -- was she going to pull out documents? Was she just carrying these around with her? Yes, of course she was. "There's one where we subsume fully into Orzammar's government structure, with Bhelen as our king, and rights and duties equivalent to other subjects -- but I don't know that the dwarves would really appreciate that, or if we even really want to yoke ourselves to their archaic code of law and governance."

Anders thought of the stranglehold the caste system had on dwarven society, the squalor in which the Casteless were forced to live in Dust Town, and shuddered. "No, definitely not," he agreed.

Mardra flipped a page. "Another option is a direct forum system where every mage casts a vote on every issue, but that's massively inefficient, and is likely to run into problems when some mages are away for long periods in the Deep Roads," she said. "I think our best option is an indirect representative system -- an adaptation of what we had in the Circles, but obviously without the Templars or Chantry influence."

"We would have a Council, with its members chosen by the larger community, and those Council members would make decisions and lay down laws. This has the advantage of being familiar to most of our people. We still would want a First Enchanter, though --"

"Why?" Anders interrupted. "If there's no templars, there's no need for a liaison with them. Why not just keep the Council?"

"Because ultimately there has to be one man, or woman, who casts the deciding vote," Mardra explained patiently. "In a time of crisis or disagreement, there can't be any doubt over who has the ultimate authority. Even in times of peace, there are decisions that have to be made that can only be made by one person. What kind of community is this going to be? What will be allowed, what will be forbidden? What message are we going to send to the world?"

She flipped her papers closed, and looked up at Anders with grave seriousness. "It has to be you, Anders. You are the one with the message. You are the message."

Anders stood before the grand double doors to the Arcanium and hesitated. He'd just come from another checkup of Moira -- she was growing startlingly fast, but everything still seemed normal otherwise -- and had turned his steps aside on the path out.
He hadn't sought Dagna out since returning to the Deep Roads. He'd seen her in passing a time or two, but their first friendship had cooled in the fight after the fall of Markham, and other things had always taken up his time. Still -- Dagna had been his first friend in Orzammar, the only one there to support him and to worry on his first journey with the Legion of the Dead. He didn't want to lose that friendship.

Besides, this new mage settlement -- not a Circle -- was her project too. With new determination, he knocked on the door.

There was a series of clattering on the other side, and then Dagna's voice called out "Who is it?"

"It's me," Anders said. "Anders."

"Come on in!"

He almost dreaded what he would find when he opened the door, but the library-workshop beyond was almost tidy. Only a few books were littered here and there, and the benches appeared to be clear of experiments. From behind the workbench popped up Dagna, and while her smile was sunny and radiant, there was a bit of redness around her eyes.

"Hello, Dagna," Anders said.

"Anders!" Dagna said, coming around her workbench. There was none of the coolness in her manner and voice that he had seen after their argument; perhaps she'd forgotten all about it? "It's good to see you!"

He returned her smile, and her hug. "I was in the palace, so I thought I'd drop by the visit my favorite Arcanist," he said.

"What other Arcanists do you know?" Dagna pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips. "You replacing me with someone younger and cuter?"

"That would be a tough bar to clear," Anders joked, and Dagna laughed. "But seriously, what have you been up to? I haven't heard much from you since I got back from the Deep Roads."

Dagna faltered slightly. "Oh… well… there honestly just hasn't been much for me to do. Right now the Tower is in the construction phase, so it doesn't really exactly require much input from me." Her nose wrinkled slightly. "Not to mention, the place is crawling with dusters."

"So I've been…" She looked around, eyes fluttering over the handful of books laid out on the benches. "…catching up on my reading, I guess…"

She sounded so forlorn. This was not what Anders had been expecting; he'd figured he'd come here and catch her in the middle of one of her experiments. Or at least spending time with some of her friends from Kinloch Hold. "What about the books and artifacts recovered from the Circles?" he asked. "I remember us talking about that… even if the Tower isn't up yet, you could already have amassed quite a collection for it."

"Oh, I wish!" Dagna said vehemently. "I've been keeping a close eye on the collector's auctions… I really thought some of the stuff from the Markham collection would have turned up already. But they haven't! Usually the looters are all over ruins and battlefields as soon as the dust settles, but not this time. Apparently they're afraid the Markham circle is 'haunted.' " She rolled her eyes and muttered, "Stupid human superstitions."

"They may be right, actually," Anders said slowly. He'd never heard them before joining with
Justice -- the cries that echoed from the very bones of places that still remembered past atrocities. "Depending on how much magic was used, or how many mages died there -- and since it's a Circle Tower, we can be sure that was a lot -- the Veil might be thin there, and the stones saturated with ambient magic. Elves and humans would do well to stay away. Dwarves should be all right, though."

"So... do you think I should go there myself?" Dagna frowned, looking both intrigued and doubtful. "I mean, not that I wouldn't, but it's a long trip..."

"No, no," Anders said hastily. "I was just thinking that Bhelen could send his agents to comb the place. Surely he has, ahem, merchants in the city?"

"Yeah, the sort of 'merchants' you can buy black-market lyrium from," Dagna said, rolling her eyes. Her frown deepened, becoming more thoughtful. "...Do you think the King would agree?"

"Why not? He wants his mage army to burn up the Deep Roads, doesn't he?" Anders shrugged. "Any artifacts that we can use would just add to his own power. And anything we can't use, he can sell for a profit."

"You're right!" Dagna clapped her hands together, her eyes glowing with excitement. The last traces of dolor were wiped from her eyes. "I'll do it. I'll ask him!"

Better that the request come to Bhelen from her than from Anders right now; Dagna might have forgotten her grudge against him, but he had the feeling Bhelen had not. "Let me know how it goes," he said.

"Sure!" Dagna said, grinning. She half-turned towards one of her cabinets. "Hey, thanks for stopping by, Anders. You want some tea? We can catch up."

"I'd love some," Anders said, feeling lighter than he had in days.

Cloudreach was well underway, the days slowly getting longer and the temperatures warming. There was still a great deal of volatility -- one day could be clear yet cold, the next full of blustery winds and spits of rain -- and it was always cold at night, but the world was definitely moving towards summer.

During one afternoon of fine, clear weather, when all of the mages -- even the elders -- were outdoors enjoying the sunshine and breeze, Mardra abruptly suggested holding another party. Or rather, she amended, a festival; something to mark the occasion and make the best use of the fine weather.

Hamil objected, complaining that as long as the good weather held, all able-bodied mages should be working on their battle-training. Mardra tacked easily enough into the new wind, suggesting a festival of sports or physical activity, something which could combine training with fun.

Anders was amenable to the idea; the mages would have to go into the Deep Roads soon enough, and he was concerned at the lack of stamina on many of them. The more of them started exercising and increasing their stamina, the better, both for their overall health and for their future survival.
A quick round of brainstorming turned into an increasingly complex planning session that lasted much of the night, but by next morning the plans were all in place, temporary tents had been raised as stalls and ropes staking out shapes on the ground where the various events were to take place.

The largest flat area had been roped off to serve as a field for team play. A narrower corridor of firm, thick grass had been marked for sprints and other footraces, and a few smaller areas near the cliff walls for other events. A natural dip in the ground near the stream had been dug out slightly and allowed to fill with water, making a sticky mudpit -- the perfect arena for a friendly game of tug-of-war.

The weekly Avvar trading contingent showed up halfway through the morning, which was fortunate as they still lacked many of the needed supplies to play sports properly. From the Avvar they managed to acquire a sewed leather pigskin, a number of well-woven reeds that could be bent into hoops and tied with ribbons, and a net. The Avvar expressed great curiosity as to what these preparations were all for, and quickly found themselves drawn into the games and festivities themselves.

By noon the valley was full noise and commotion; happy shouts and laughter ringing out over the stones, piercing whistles marking the start and stop of each race, and even a small makeshift band (headed by Surana, of course) playing marching tunes. A harp, a drum, and an assortment of small wooden flutes -- all amplified and aided by Surana's music-loving wisps -- made a pleasant background melody.

The 'team sports' field quickly filled with a mix of mages and casteless, and the rather tame game of football that had originally been planned for that area quickly devolved into a game of "capture the Hurlock skull" -- a messy, stamping free-for-all with competitors of all races fighting over possession of the pigskin. The rope sidelines were soon kicked and scuffled into dust as the game spilled out to include rocky slopes and steep woodpiles as obstacles and high ground, and it took a coordinated effort to stop the game from spreading any further and disrupting the other events.

Hamil and his crew of would-be Templar fighters took the first turn at the footraces, robed mages pounding enthusiastically along the grass lanes to compete for the best time. The interested Avvar suggested making the races harder by adding relays or rock weights, an idea which Hamil enthusiastically adopted; the Avvar also suggested turning one of the rock faces into a wall-climbing contest, which at least provided a break for panting, out-of-breath mages.

While Hamil and his crew wore out their excessive energy, Anders directed an event he considered to be much better training: mages were divided into two teams standing on either side of a net strung between poles. A soft ball of fluttering rags wrapped around a hard stone core served as a mock 'fireball,' and the mages took turns forming shields over their hands and using the shields to bat the target back and forth over the net. If any mage touched the 'fireball' with unshielded skin, or else it reached the ground, then that mage was out and had to sit on the sidelines to watch.

The reed hoops he tossed into the air, with mages casting bolts of fire and ice through the hoops before they hit the ground to earn points. When interest in that began to flag, Anders organized teams and set a new challenge: a dozen hoops would be thrown in the air at once and a team of mages would have to work together to make sure that each target was hit at least once. If any hoops landed without having been 'killed,' the entire team earned no points for that round, pushing the mages to coordinate and work together to ensure the best dispersal of firepower.

At first, the older mages were rather inclined to sit on the stones away from all the action and either sniff disapprovingly or reminisce over their younger days, but Anders managed to persuade a few to join in; the hoop-shooting contest required only hand-eye coordination, after all, and the
shield-volley game was almost gentle compared to some others. He also managed to convince an older woman, short and plump and with a frizzy cloud of grey hair -- who also happened to be a lifelong force mage -- to join in the tug-of-war contest on a team entirely her own. The last time he looked, she was handily dragging her opposing team, a mix of study dwarves and Avvar hunters, face-first into the mud pit.

All this exuberant activity carried the risk of overheating or dehydration; Mardra made sure to set up a cool, quiet, shaded area where anyone who overtaxed themselves could rest, and also a drinks tent with cool icewater to keep the athletes going. Anders advocated for the addition of salty snacks as well -- too much sweating in the hot sun could leave them as short on salt as on water, and such an imbalance would make them sick.

A hundred mages, and almost the same number of dwarven workers and Avvar traders, kept the refreshments table hopping; Mardra was kept busy, directing her assistants to conjure water and pour carafes and arrange snacks. Anders watched from the far side of the tent as Hamil kept her company -- got underfoot, rather, as the harried mage tried to work. Hamil was gesturing enthusiastically as he described his victories in the foot-racing contests, but a look at Mardra's face would have told anyone -- well, anyone who was not a self-absorbed teenage boy -- that this tactic was the wrong one for the audience.

After several more tactfully worded dismissals went unheeded, Mardra finally sent Hamil off with a sharp word to fetch more water from the stream; he slunk out of the tent looking crushed, and Anders stood aside to let him pass. For some reason, the young man shot him a fulminating glare as he passed him by, and shoved his shoulder through Anders' personal space just a little closer than had been necessary. Anders stared after him, eyebrows raised. Now, what had that been about?

If Hamil seemed frustrated, that was understandable. His crush on the older Perendale mage was obvious to everyone in the encampment, but so far his suit was going nowhere. Maybe Anders could help smooth things for him, put a good word in Mardra's ear. "Anything I can do to help?" Anders inquired as he made his way into the tent. The key to getting on Mardra's good side, he'd learned long ago, was to make yourself of practical use.

Mardra let out a breath, looking harried as she glanced from one table to another. "Over here, this sandwich plate," she directed, shoving a large empty platter into Anders' hands. "We've got bread, meat, and cheese that we can use to make sandwiches. People will be coming in for lunch soon."

"Got it." He slid into place at the table beside Mardra, and quickly picked up the rhythm of matching bread, meat and cheese, pinning them together with wood slivers and stacking them in pyramids on the table. Glancing sideways, he saw Mardra frowning down at her work, and cleared his throat.

His apology, and her acceptance of it had smoothed over his mistake, but things were still strained between them -- perhaps because he still wouldn't accept the authority she wanted him to. He didn't think he was capable of it, but this wasn't about him, today. It was about Mardra. Mardra was lovely, and worked tirelessly to make things better for mages. She deserved someone, Anders decided. She deserved not to be alone.

"Sooo…" Anders said, drawing out the sound. "Hamil, huh?"

"He's a pest," Mardra said. "That's hardly new."

"You know," Anders said, glancing over at her. "You may not have realized this, but he's kind of… sweet on you."
Mardra rolled her eyes. "Yes, because I'm blind, deaf and dumb," she said dryly. "He's only been dogging my heels, making puppy eyes at me since we first met on the road to Orzammar!"


They worked in silence for a few more moments, and then Anders cleared his throat.

"You know, uh… You're not in the Tower any more," Anders said. "You don't have to… be alone. If you're interested in somebody, and they're interested in you… you can go for it. Just look at Neria and Jowan. Happily married, and with a kid on the way! And nobody's going to try to take that from them -- not Templars, Chantry sisters or anyone else."

Mardra sighed. "Anders, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but seriously, stop trying to matchmake me and Hamil," she said. "Even if he weren't a hotheaded fool, even if he weren't ten years younger than me, there's the little factor that I'd have to be attracted to men. Which I'm not."

"Oh… Oh! Sorry, I didn't realize," Anders said, feeling his skin heat with embarrassment. "You, ah, prefer women, then?"

Mardra frowned stormily down at the worktable. "I don't prefer anyone."

"You… have equal preference for both?" Anders ventured, confused. But no, she had said she wasn't attracted to men...

She let out another sigh. "I don't prefer anyone, Anders. I never have."

Mardra stopped, bracing her arms against the edge of the table as she stared out into the distance.

"Back at the Tower… when all my peers were off doing foolish things," she said in a low voice. "Sneaking off into corners, passing notes under the desk… risking their necks and their magic for a few illicit moments alone. I thought it was bloody stupid, the whole mess of it. How could it possibly be worth it, for a little bit of pleasure that you could just as easily give to yourself?"

Anders opened his mouth to comment that if she really thought self-pleasure was as much fun as having a partner, that obviously meant she just hadn't met the right partner. Something stopped him before the words could emerge; he had a nagging feeling that she wouldn't appreciate the joke.

"It took a long time… years… before I realized that other people had needs that I didn't," Mardra went on. "And even longer before I realized that their needs were just as valid, too. What Jowan and Surana have… I'm never going to have that, Anders. I don't know that I even want children, but even if I did, I'd never chain a man to a partner who could never give him what he needed."

"That's not fair," Anders said, feeling a wave of protest rising in him at Mardra's stark proclamation. "You shouldn't be alone."

Mardra shrugged. "I'm used to it," she said. "As a Circle mage, it's not like marriage or children was on the map for me anyway. Nothing's changed."

But it should have changed, Anders thought.

They worked in silence for a moment more. Anders stole a nibble of one of the tiny sandwiches, and Mardra, stealing a sideways glance at him, picked the perfect moment to add in a dry voice: "Besides, half the mages out there already think you and I are fucking."

Anders choked on his canapé, and barely managed to avoid putting the toothpick through the roof.
of his mouth. "Are you serious?" he demanded between coughs.

"Of course." Mardra topped a stack of sandwiches, making a perfect pyramid, and shifted the platter aside. "You're a man, I'm a woman, and we spend more than five minutes in each other's company. The rumors are to be expected. There's also rumors that you're fucking Surana, and the Queen of Orzammar to boot."

Well. That explained the stink-eye from Hamil, anyway. "These rumors have a pretty exaggerated idea of my stamina," Anders muttered, not quite sure what else to say.

Mardra rolled her eyes. "Grey Wardens have all sorts of sto --" She broke off, mid-word, as a clamor of excitement started up over by the entrance to the tunnels.

Muttering something under her breath, Mardra set the platter back down and pushed her way out from under the canopy, craning her neck to see what was causing the fuss. Anders followed her, jockeying for space as she was too tall for him to see over her head.

"Someone came up from the Orzammar tunnel -- Maker, is that someone new?" Mardra said with surprise. "I don't recognize the clothes…"

"Definitely not apostate chic," Anders agreed, staring at the newcomer, a tall dark-haired man in what looked like immaculate Circle Tower robes. What was really surprising was that everyone had been up in the valley for the sports festival; no one had been left behind at Brosca manor to escort newcomers up through the city. Which meant that the newcomer had made his way up entirely on his own, and none of the city guards had stood in his way. He was also alone, which was a first; all of the other mages that had come to Refuge, save Anders himself, had travelled in pairs or groups for safety. "What Tower d'you suppose he hails from? Antiva, maybe? Rivain? He looks kind of ---"

Anders broke off when he looked over at Mardra; she'd gone stock still, standing rigidly straight on her tiptoes as she stared at the newcomer. Before Anders could ask what was wrong, Mardra had already caught up to the strange man, and flung herself into his arms. The two of them spun in a circle, Mardra laughing, and as they came to a stop she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him in tight. She said something that Anders couldn't hear, too far away, and he pushed his way through the crowd after her, trying to keep up.

"You could have written!" Mardra exclaimed, whapping the man on his sunburst-embossed collar with an open hand. "I've been asking all over for you! Maker, I can't believe you're here!"

"I'm sorry, Mardy," the man -- Daros -- said, his voice smooth and conciliatory. "As soon as I confirmed that you were here, I came as quickly as I could. The letter wouldn't have traveled much faster than I could."

"I can't believe you made it!" Mardra exclaimed, and -- yes, those were tears, leaking from the corners of her eyes even as she grinned from ear to ear. "I can't believe you came!"

"Of course I did," Daros said, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. The two siblings really did look
remarkably similar, Anders thought, comparing them side by side; the same shape of eyes and nose, although Daros had ironically gotten a more delicate cast of the same mold than his sister. His hair was lighter than hers, wriggly instead of straight, and his skin was dusted with freckles of a darker brown.

"I came as soon as I heard," Daros continued. "To be sure, I would never leave you in such a terrible place, full of traitors and maleficars."

For a moment, the day seemed to hold its breath.

"What?" Mardra said at last, pulling back slightly, her smile twisting. "What are you talking about?"

"It's all right, sister. I'll keep you safe," Daros told her earnestly, clutching one of her hands between both of his. "We can leave as soon as you're ready. Let's go back to the Circle, Mardy. Let's go back where we belong."

ANDERS: ΦΨΩ

Years remaining: 3

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since I introduced a new major player to the scene! Please welcome Daros Amell, readers. If you don't hate his guts by the end of the next chapter, then I'm not doing my job right.
Portrait of Daros Amell by Lissy Raine.
Motivations

Chapter Summary

Daros arrives, and almost immediately starts causing trouble. Mardra is reluctant to be parted from him.

Chapter Notes

Note: The epigraph this chapter is from a Circle mage's perspective on Wynne, and I feel I have to disclaim that this is not what *I* think of Wynne; the comics made it clear that her affair with Greagoir and motherhood to Rhys did her no favors. But I also think it's the sort of gossip the Circle would make nasty, malicious meat of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Enchanter Wynne spoke to the Conclave today opposing the separation vote. Again. Don't know why she bothers keeping the A by her name; she's never been anything but a Loyalist stooge. Two decades she's been on the Council and consistently voted for inaction every time.

There she goes again, preaching about self-discipline and the rights and privileges that accrue to mages who follow the rules and give service to the Circle. Sorry, old biddy, but we all know how you got your current rank. There aren't enough Knight-Commanders in the Circle for all of us to sleep our way to rights and privileges like you did.

--from the notes of a Circle mage attending Enchanter Wynne's address to the Conclave

"Listen, Mardy, I understand," Daros was saying, with an earnest and pitying expression on his handsome face. "When the agitators at your your tower rioted, you feared for your life and fled. I understand how you would be drawn to any place that seemed to offer safety, even one that was full of turncoats and heretics."

"No -- no, you don't understand," Mardra interrupted. "I left Perendale on purpose. I heard of this place and I wanted to come here. I -- "
Daros kept on talking over her as though she had not spoken. "But there's nothing to be afraid of any more," he assured her, smiling gently as he took her hand. "I'm sure they will understand, when you return of your own volition, that you were just temporarily overwhelmed and lost your senses."

"What?" Mardra scowled, attempting to pull her hand free. "I have no intention of going back. Why would I?"

"We can leave at once," Daros declared. "Gather your things together, anything you don't want to lose..."

"Daros, stop," Mardra said. He ignored her. The happiness that had been on her face when she'd first seen her brother was fading rapidly into a worrisome kind of blankness, a closed-off attitude of face and body language.

"...that we can easily carry, of course; we'll need to travel light, so any heavy furniture or clothes will have to be left behind," he said, though where he imagined Mardra had stashed wardrobes of finery on her flight from the Circle Anders couldn't imagine. "But don't worry, you can get more when we return to civilization."

"Daros, listen to me --"

"Fortunately there's a templar outpost stationed at Gherlain's Pass," Daros continued blithely. "So once we get that far they can escort us the rest of the way in safety."

"Daros --"

The mention of templars alarmed Anders enough to push forward, though he had initially been reluctant to interfere in what should have been a private family reunion. He stepped forward, the crowd of interested mages making way for him, and scowled at the interloper. "Shouldn't you wait for her to say YES before you make all these plans?" he demanded, the growl in his voice making several people jump. "Or did you plan to just drag her off against her will? Like a Templar?"

Two dark gazes turned on him; Mardra looked grateful for the interruption, while Daros glowered. "Of course she wants to return to the Circle!" he snapped. "That's where she belongs, where we all belong. The Circles protect us, they provide for us, they keep us safe."

"Hessarian's bloody hands they do!" Anders exploded. "The Circles are prisons, slow-moving death camps. Mages won't be safe in Thedas until the last of them is torn down."

Daros started to retort hotly, then stopped himself. He looked Anders up and down, seeming to see him for the first time; then his eyes narrowed in recognition and he took a step back. "So you're him. The Butcher of Kirkwall." His lip curled in disgust. "I suppose I should expect such violent anti-Circle rhetoric from the madman who slaughtered innocent people and ravaged a holy sanctuary in his insane quest for mage power. Have you managed to sway all these turncoats to your deranged vision? Well, I won't let you drag my sister down with you!"

Still glaring at Anders, Daros reached out to put his arm around Mardra's shoulders -- a somewhat laughable show of protectiveness in the first place given that she stood over him by several inches. Nevertheless, it was a noble gesture -- that was somewhat tarnished when she shrugged his arm away and took a step back, yanking her hand forcefully out of his grasp. She took several steps away from him and stood with her arms crossed over her chest. Daros stared after her in utter astonishment, mouth agape, hand still hanging in midair for a moment as though it had not yet realized that it was empty.
"I will not apologize for what I have done," Anders said, aware of a hundred eyes on him as he spoke. They felt like a physical weight on his shoulders, but he pushed himself to stand straight despite it. "It was a terrible but necessary act to see the end of the corrupt Circle system, without which mages will never be free."

Daros looked around, and seemed to realize for the first time that they had an audience -- most of Refuge had been topside for the day of games, and most of them were now crowding around to see the drama play out. Not that most of them would admit to crowding, of course -- they had long since mastered the art of 'drifting casually at the fringes of earshot pretending to mind their own business,' even when there were no bookshelves or workstations to pretend to be attending to. Despite the pretense of disinterest, the combined weight of their attention was as focused as a lightning strike.

"Free?" Daros laughed derisively, tossing his head back to broadcast to the entire crowd. "Mages, free? How absurd! Mages don't need to be freed from the Circles! The Circles are for our own benefit!"

"They benefit the Chantry, not us," Anders snapped. "What better way to keep the populace ignorant and in fear of mages but by keeping us locked away, where they never see or know us?"

"Don't let the historical revisionists fool you. The Circles were created by the mages, as a place of safety and study," Daros explained kindly. "You all know as well as I that a young, untrained mage is a danger to everyone around them -- including themselves. They must have training, for the good of all."

"And why should that training come with lifelong imprisonment?" Anders challenged. "Of course mages need training; but they do not need to be ripped from their family home to do so, nor held in the Tower after the training is complete. Why should a Harrowed mage not be free to return to their home and family, or else go where they will?"

Daros ignored him as easily as he had ignored his sister, a few minutes ago. "A mage is a loaded crossbow, a pile of tinder waiting for the spark," he addressed the crowd. "A maleficar can do more damage than any normal man, and will continue to do so until a Templar stops them. Even a well-intentioned mage can cause untold harm just by accident! Of course, for the safety and well-being of innocent people. Far better for them to be kept apart, behind walls where they will be safe from harming others and safe from harm."

"Except for harm done to them by Templars! Are mages not 'innocent people,' in your reckoning?" Anders was growing increasingly outraged, as Daros continued to refuse to engage him or respond to his arguments.

Daros shook his head, giving a soft sad sigh as though mourning the loss of common sense in the world. "And why should Templars harm a mage, unless that mage has crossed the line into the unforgiveable?" he said logically. "We should not be opposing the Templars, but aiding them when it comes to rooting out blood magic and abominations in our midst. We, those who have been born mages, have a duty to the world, to its people, and to the Chantry -- to shield them from the harm that magic causes, whether that harm comes in the form of Darkspawn, or of ourselves."

Anders felt like he was about to burst, and give Daros a taste of what a real abomination's magic could be, when another voice cut into the one-sided debate. "These are all very fine points," a melodic female voice called from the other side of the crowd.

He looked over to see the crowd parting to let Surana through; she was still carrying a harm under her arm, and her face was calm and unreadable, so it would take someone far more familiar with
her moods to recognize the very deep, hard anger being reflected in her eyes. "And yet, you have overlooked one very crucial truth."

Daros was clearly taken aback by the appearance of Surana; he actually took a half-step back and leaned away, his color flushing a lighter shade as his eyes widened. For a moment Anders was confused -- Surana, unlike Jowan, was not a blood mage, not that such things would have been immediately visible anyway, so why…?

Then it hit him: Daros had just come from a lifetime in the Circle. It was unlikely that he had spent time with, or even seen, a woman this visibly pregnant. Surana was four months along, and the swell of her stomach was obvious and unmistakable even through the multi-tiered layers of her old Circle robes and newer fur-lined finery.

"And what is that, pray tell?" Daros shot back, clearly shaken from his lecture. Surana gave a very slight smile.

"All of the reasons you've given apply just as well to this place, Refuge, as they do to the Circle," Surana pointed out logically. "Mages can receive training from their own, we are safely apart from those who might fear us, and we are using our powers in opposition to the Blight and service of the Maker. What, then, does the Circle claim to have that we do not have here?"

A faint murmur of agreement went up around the crowd, and Daros looked visibly put out for a moment before he smoothed his pleasant features into a calm blankness. "Templars, of course," he said. "We mages need Templars, to protect us from our own magic -- our own weaknesses, our own follies. If some foolish or malicious mage unleashes a demon upon the Tower, then who will protect those young mages you are so worried for from its depredations? What if not the courage of the Templars will stand between --"

"Nug shit!" a shout from the side broke into Daros' soliloquy, and all heads turned to see Hamil, marching up from the sports field and shoving past the other mages to get into range. He was so incandescently furious that Anders half expected the tips of his hair to burst into a wreath of flame. "That is nug fucking shit! Spare me your preaching about the fucking courage of the blight-ridden Templars!

"I was there, do you understand me? I was in the Calenhad Circle when it fell, when Uldred staged his coup, when the Tower was overrun by demons and abominations. I was there, and do you know how your precious Templars responded? They. Ran. Away."

Hamil punctuated his speech with swift, sharp gestures for emphasis, each one leaving a faint blur in the air behind him. "They ran through the apprentice's quarters and through the door and then do you know what they did? They blocked it behind them! They locked us in, with the demons, with the abominations, and they cowered behind that door while the demons rampaged in the upper levels! If it wasn't for Senior Enchanter Wynne, I would have been killed and all the other apprentices with me -- a mage.

"It was a mage who found the Litany of Adralla to oppose Uldred's blood magic, it was a mage who protected us, it was a mage who fought to the top of the Tower at the Hero of Ferelden's side while the Templars cowered behind the door! And once the biggest danger was over -- defeated -- then they came out with swords at the ready in order to massacre every survivor left behind. Don't talk to me about the great Templars, because when we needed them most they ran and hid and did nothing!"

Hamil did not bother to modulate his voice, and his tirade rolled out and rang over the entire valley. Anders shifted his weight, half worried that Hamil was letting his unbridled fury override his self-
control -- but through the whole speech Hamil managed to keep ahold of himself. He hadn't known that Hamil was a survivor of Kinloch Hold; although, yes, he would just have been about the right age for it…

Daros sputtered, taken aback by the passion and venom of Hamil's speech. "Well… well… yes," he said, before rallying. "But who was it who put you in that danger in the first place? Uldred -- a mage. Perhaps the Templars didn't react to the threat in the best way they could have, but it was a mage who threatened in the first place.

He turned back to appeal to the crowd, putting Hamil at the fringe of his attention. "Don't you see this is just proof that it is mages, not templars, who are the greatest threat to us?" he appealed. "We are our own greatest enemies, and any one of us can slip -- lose control -- and fall pretty to the demons at any time. Everyone one of us is just one loss of control away from becoming an abomination. What if that happens here, with no templars to counter them? Then what will you do?"

Anders was uneasily aware that most of the population of Refuge was still not aware of him and Justice. But even so -- he couldn't allow Daros to sow his seeds of self-doubt, of paranoia and despair. "It won't happen here," he declared, his voice ringing out with unshakeable certainty. "It is fear and pain, mortal fear and pain, that drives a mage to the arms of demons -- it is being driven to a corner with no way out. It is that very despair that the Templars and the Circle force upon a mage. Outside that prison, free of the fear of the Templars -- of death, of Tranquility -- there will be no abominations."

"But what if…" Daros started, but Anders cut him off.

"It does not need to happen," he said firmly. "It will not need to happen. No mage here will ever need to feel such fear, such desperation."

Daros opened his mouth, a sneer on his lips. Before he could launch into whatever argument he was preparing, however, Mardra moved.

She'd spent the entire conversation standing still, one hand over her mouth, her gaze moving between Daros and the others as they argued. Now she took a step forward and reached out to put her hand on Daros' shoulder, gripping him and pulling him back slightly. "Daros…" she said. "You must have had a long journey to get here. I'm sure you're tired. Why don't we find you a place to rest, and something to eat, and then we can pick up this discussion… later?"

Half a dozen incredulous stares intersected on Mardra, but she avoided all their eyes, including Anders'. "What?" Hamil demanded, disbelief lacing his voice. "You're going to let him stay? A Circle stooge like him?"

"Refuge accepts all mages, don't we?" Mardra said, shooting a pointed look at Surana. "Even the ones with... philosophies we disagree with? It's right in our Charter."

She was right; they'd specifically stated their intent to welcome any and all mages to Refuge who were not active maleficarum. And a loyalty to the Chantry was not, however violently they disagreed, an actual crime. Surana gave a small shrug. "I think a better question is, does Daros even want to stay?" she said, her voice dry. "I wouldn't think he would be comfortable in such a hive of turncoats, agitators and maleficars."

"Of course I'm --" Daros started to respond hotly. He looked at Anders, then Surana, then Mardra, and seemed to come to some conclusion. "Of course, Mardy. Whatever you say. I'm sure that after a little time to consider things… you'll come to your senses."
"I'm sure of it too," Mardra agreed, and with a pull on his shoulder she led him away.

Over his shoulder Daros shot Anders one last, hateful glare. His thoughts were easy to read as a book: he considered Anders and the others to have poisoned his sister's mind against him, and intended to put all his persuasion into convincing her to leave with him.

Mardra, though -- surely Mardra realized what a bad idea this was. What was she thinking?

Anders found Mardra down in Orzammar later, after Daros had been settled in one of the few finished rooms in the Tower. Anders would have preferred to reserve those for the elderly or sick, but of course Daros had demanded the finest of everything they had to offer and Mardra, for some reason, had given it to him.

She was in her office at the Brosca manor, writing intently at her desk, when Anders came into the room. "Mardra, what were you --" he began.

"Don't say it!" Mardra warned him, voice taut, but he forged on anyway.

"-- thinking, asking him to stay?" Anders said. He made a broad gesture in the direction of the Tower from here. "He doesn't want to be here. Hamil doesn't want him here. I don't want him here, either!"

"He's my brother, Anders!" Mardra snapped. "The entire reason I left the Circle was to find my family. You suggested when I first arrived here that this would be the best place to reunite. Well, now it's happening! Besides," she huffed, crossing her arms and glaring at him. "He's a mage. I thought we were welcoming all mages here."

"He's a Loyalist! A Chantry cheerleader," Anders exclaimed. "He opposes everything we stand for, and will work to destroy everything we've built!"

"It's not his fault," Mardra protested.

"Not his fault?" Anders demanded.

"He's just.. you know how the Circle is." Mardra picked nervously at the edge of her desk, gilding over stone surface. "You know how hard they work to indoctrinate and brainwash every mage. For Daros, they succeeded. But he can learn better, I know it. If he stays here for a while... he'll see the good work we're doing, and he'll realize this is the better way. He just needs time."

Somehow, Anders doubted it. Of course Mardra would think the best of Daros; he was her brother. But Anders saw something else in the man -- conviction, iron-sharp and just as unyielding. He recognized it in Daros as he recognized it in his own mirror. This was not a man who would be easily dissuaded, or content to sit back and have the world be shaped around him. He could be as much of a danger to them as a pack of darkspawn, or a whole platoon of Templars.

But of course, he couldn't say any of that to Daros' sister.

Anders groaned. "How can any mage accept that propaganda?" he demanded, leaning against the
wall and thumping his head gently against it. "How can any mage actually live in a Circle for twenty years and come away spouting that same pigshit about them being sanctuaries of protection and learning?"

"The Circle isn't the same for every mage, Anders," Mardra said quietly. "I know your experience was bad, and I know that's common. And none of us are free. But for those mages who come from noble families, like we did... it's like an entirely different world from the common folk. Maybe less so in Ferelden, but in Orlais especially, in Nevarra... even if you are legally barred from claiming your title, everybody knows.

"You can get letters, packages -- some families pay the Circle a hefty extra fee to make sure you're treated properly, and you can bet the First Enchanters and Knight Commanders know it. And to the noble community, you're a sensation, a curiosity. When noblemen and gentry decide to invite a mage to their salons, they don't actually want to mix with the peasants -- it's always the noble-born mages that get those invitations. That's the Circle that Daros knows. He's has always been part of that protected class, that privileged class. He doesn't know any better."

"And you do?" Anders frowned at Mardra. "That sounds like it came from personal experience."

Mardra glanced down. "It did," she said quietly.

"Anla said that you spent most of your time in the Circles planning parties. Parties for bored nobles?" Anders said, a little more sharply than he'd meant to. "So, you know all about the noble-born Circle life. Why aren't you out there with Daros playing Circle cheerleader? Circles life is best life, up with the Chantry, and all that?"

"Why indeed?" Mardra said softly, raising her head to gaze off into the middle distance. "I wonder. Yes, I was privileged. I was, in many ways, blessed. I was sent to a Circle which was rich, which had political sway in the city where it was based. I came from a noble family, and in Nevarra as in Orlais good family is all that matters -- even for a mage. I was given many advantages, many favors. I was treated with courtesy by the Templars -- most of the time," she said, her lip curling back as though from a bitter taste. "I suspect it helped that I was an ugly teenager. It certainly could have been worse."

Anders felt a strong surge of objection to that -- both to the contention that Mardra was ugly, and to the idea that as far as the rapists in the Order were concerned, that that really mattered. But he bit his tongue, not wanting to interrupt Mardra.

"I was permitted to study whatever I wanted," she continued. "I was given all the time I needed for my Harrowing. Afterwards I was allowed out of my cage from time to time in order to attend parties and put on shows for the nobles of Perendale. I was so privileged, I even got to exchange letters with my mother!" She raised her hands in a mockery of prayer, a sarcastic bite to her voice that quickly died. "My mother..."

Mardra was silent for a moment, then she continued quietly. "My mother, Revka Amell, had five children. All mages," she emphasized. "She saw them taken away by the Chantry, one after another until she had nothing left. When the Chantry took my brother Daylen, it was as though -- as though someone had cut off one of her limbs. And they did it again and again and again."

"Her own children might as well have been dead to her -- except that you can mourn the dead, and she wasn't even allowed that. Can you imagine what that would do to someone?" she demanded, raising her eyes to meet Anders' challengingly. "I don't have to! I don't have to imagine it because I watched it happen. I watched her through her letters, through the years, gradually crumble into nothing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it!"
Mardra stood up, beginning to pace restlessly around the small desk. "When they took the twins away my mother sent a letter begging me to do something -- begging me, as though there was anything I could do! As though I had any power, as though I was anything more than another prisoner! My mother's elegant, refined handwriting degenerated into a childish scrawl on water-stained paper. I tried -- I tried to encourage her, to support her. I went to the First Enchanter and begged leave to go visit my mother, to comfort her, or at least let her visit me."

She let the outcome of that appeal hang in the air; there was no need to say whether the request had been granted or denied. The answer was obvious.

"By the time little Astrida..." Mardra's voice died, and she shook her head, water standing heavy in her eyes. "I think she was already numb, by then. There was nothing left in her. My father... my father took Astrida to the Chantry himself, and then disappeared. I can't..." She stuttered, drew a long breath for that. "I shouldn't even blame him, but I do. I got one more letter from my mother after that, telling me not to worry about her, and... And then nothing. Nothing ever again."

She ran down, looking into nothing, tears trickling down from her eyes. She was quiet for so long that Anders had to ask, like prodding a crooked limb to determine the severity of the break; "What happened to her?" he ventured. It could be nothing good; he'd known Leandra in Kirkwall for more than three years and she'd never once spoken of her cousin.

"They put her in an asylum." Mardra let out a bitter laugh. "Like all noble families do with relatives that are an 'embarrassment' to the family name. How much of the embarrassment was her madness, and how much was having given birth to five mages? She... she died there, not long after. After my grandfather's death, and the family fortune ran out... I always wondered if it was just a natural death, or..."

She ran out again, and this time Anders didn't press her. This time, she shook herself awake after a few moments of it.

"I watched the Circle destroy my family, destroy my parents' marriage, and destroy my mother," she said, wiping tears from her tall cheeks with a corner of her sleeve. "And for what? For what? In the name of safety, of protection? Protection for whom? What protection did they offer to Revka Amell? So yes Anders, I would see the Circles burn, if I could. I would see them all torn done stone by stone. I would rather no woman ever had to suffer what my mother did, ever again."

"You want to know why I oppose the Circle? That's why. The Circle destroyed my family. It drove my mother insane. It probably..." Her voice wavered, chin trembling. "It most likely murdered Daylen. I will not let it kill the rest of my siblings as well. I refuse to lose any more family."

Anders had to clear his throat. "Does Daros know?" he said quietly. "About your mother, I mean. If he knew..."

"He knows." Mardra closed her eyes, looking weary. "When I heard of her death, I got permission to send letters to all of my siblings. I only received one reply, from Astrida; she was distraught, and she... she blamed us for Mother's death. Not the Circle. She blamed herself, for daring to be born a mage. Daros hasn't said anything about it, but I think... I think he feels the same."

"I'm sorry," Anders said. It felt weak, a paltry offering, but it was all he had.

Mardra shook her head. "But Anders," she said, and her voice grew stronger again, more like the businesslike women he'd come to know. "Don't you see, if we let this divide us, let it turn us against ourselves, that's how the Chantry wins? It would be just like the fraternities back in the Circle, constantly squabbling for position with each other and turning all their strength inwards.
We cannot let other mages be our enemy, not even Loyalists. We must find a way to work together for the future, or else there may be no future."

"I guess you're right," Anders said. He knew she was; but he also know it wasn't going to be as easy as she thought. Someone like Daros wasn't just misguided; he was as committed to destroying their future as Anders was to building it.

He realized now that Mardra wouldn't let Daros go. If they drove him out, Mardra would follow. And he wouldn't leave of his own accord, not while his sister remained here. He would insist on staying, and they would have to let him. And they had no way of stopping him from whatever trouble or sabotage he had planned.

This, Anders thought grimly, is going to be a problem.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Consider this chapter 'Cabinet Battle #1.'

I confess I found the first scene difficult to write (which is why this week's chapter is late.) It's very difficult to get in the headspace of a pro-Chantry/pro-Circle character well enough to write them convincingly, but if I was going to include that point of view at all I had to do it justice. Thankfully, the next few chapters don't focus on Daros -- though you can bet he'll be back again, later. This was something that they were always going to have to deal with.

And now the bad news: This was the last of my pre-written chapters. :( (Actually, technically the last of my fully written chapters was a couple of chapters ago, and I was running on cliff's notes this far. Now I'm at the end of my detailed outline and am winging it. It's possible, by which I mean likely, that the chapters will slow down as a result. I'll do my best to keep to the one-a-week schedule, but, well... no promises.
Misdirected

Chapter Summary

To avoid the newcomer at Refuge, Anders spends more of his time down in Orzammar. Between healing in Dust Town and healing the Queen, he's got plenty there to keep him occupied.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Discussion of pregnancy, childbirth and infanticide in this chapter.

By order of Divine Justinia, the dissolution of the Conclave of Magi by the Lord Seeker Lambert is hereby overruled. The Conclave shall be permitted to assemble, there to discuss and cast votes on any question they deem pertinent.

Loyalty, Lord Seeker, cannot be assured by an iron gauntlet. Let the mages speak. They have always before affirmed their loyalty to the people of Thedas and to the White Chantry. Allow them the chance to do so once more. I am certain that the Grand Enchanter will see reason in this.

--from the desk of the Divine, Grand Cathedral, Val Royeaux.

Life at Refuge went on with only a few hiccups in the routine; the casteless continued work on the Tower, the mages continued to gather and craft and train, and Anders continued to work the circuit between Refuge and Orzammar. From the gossip down in the city, the mobilization of the army was making good progress; Bhelen was beginning to make pointed comments to Anders about when the mages of Refuge would be ready to serve.

So far Anders had put off the question each time it came up -- despite the sporadic training exercises and the more determined quasi-military drilling led by Hamil, he wasn't sure he'd consider any of the mages ready to go on an extended sojourn to the Deep Roads just yet. Not only that, so far the only mage who'd actually volunteered was Jowan -- and while his opinion of the man had improved considerably, he wasn't actually sure how he would handle going out on a Deep Roads patrol.

Mages continued to arrive in a steady trickle, in groups of twos and threes -- Daros was still the
only one who had turned up alone. He continued to hold himself aloof from the rest of the community, commandeering a room in the unfinished Tower for his own use, but there was precious little to do in the valley but spend time with the others. He spurned the Avvar, rejected the casteless and turned up his nose at going down into the dwarven city, but he seemed willing enough to show up at the construction site and hand out lectures to any mage willing to give him the time of day.

To Anders' surprise -- and no little irritation -- there were more than a few who did. Perhaps it could be put down to the fact that there was precious little other entertainment other than trading gossip about Mardra Amell's brother and turning up to see him in person. Anders had to admit, Daros had charisma; he was handsome, well-preserved from his protected indoor life, and had a polished and engaging way of speaking. He was an excellent orator -- it was just his choice of subject that was so maddening.

Working anywhere in the valley it was hard to ignore the sight and sound of Daros Amell, giving one of his condescending lectures about the duties of mages to the citizens of Thedas and the litany of evils that magic had inflicted on the world. It took a continuous effort of will not to be drawn into debate into him, which would inevitably turn into an argument, which most often turned into a screaming match. Daros, annoyingly enough, always managed to keep his cool, a slightly superior demeanor of logical and indifferent objectivity.

The only way to avoid Daros was to avoid the valley entirely, so Anders spent more and more time down in Orzammar. There was certainly plenty to do; helping with the mages' craft stalls in the bazaar, visits to Natya's family, checkups on Queen Moira's progress, liaisons with the army laying out plans for integrating mages into their battle tactics and, of course, healing in Dust Town.

His work in Dust Town recently had another layer added on to it. In the wake of the Queen's unexpected pregnancy, Anders and Moira had worked out a discreet method of fulfilling his bargain. He agreed to start seeing select women among the deshyrs who had need of his service, but only -- and this was the condition he set -- if they came to him, not the other way around. He wanted to make it clear that he was not a servant they could summon or dismiss at their pleasure -- and the location he set for their meetings was in Dust Town.

Moira had been surprised, but had weighed the decision with measuring calculation before approving it. Anders did not doubt that the noble women had many objections to being forced to enter the poorest, ugliest part of town for their treatment, but he had little sympathy for their disgruntlement. Only one, the very real concern of physical safety, moved him: he went to Gershen, the old dwarf in the slums who had spent a lifetime making connections and drawing favors, and worked out an arrangement.

Every time one of Anders' noble patients crossed into Dust Town a squad of Gershen's people would shadow them, making sure that no harm came to them on their way to Anders' clinic and back again. The ladies had been told they would not need money -- and all of the dusters had been told that they would not have money, to present the least possible temptation. Anders had put out the word around Dust Town that if a single one of his patients were harmed, he -- and his healing services -- would leave Dust Town and never return.

It wasn't kind, Anders admitted. But if a lifetime of struggling with the Circle had taught him anything, it was that oppression flourished in a system where the victims were kept safely and tidily out of sight. Only if the populace had the chance to see -- were made to see -- the dreadful conditions in which their fellows were kept would they begin to understand the need for change. They had to see, they had to know.
No doubt some of the noble women who now walked the filthy streets of Dust Town for the help that only Anders could give them felt nothing more than horror, disgust and revulsion. But some of them, surely, must also feel pity.

Dust Town was better than it had been. In many places the buildings had been repaired, or in some places rebuilt from the ground up; trash had been cleared from some of the streets, filth cleaned from around some of the homes. The casteless were a little less hungry, a little more lively, a little more healthy. More common goods were beginning to appear in circulation, bought with the coin from the construction workers and passing around from household to household.

Yet it was still a lean, dirty, hard-worn slum of a town, and the new flush of vigor that the Tower construction jobs had brought did not extend to every house. There were still many who went hungry, short of food or necessary supplies -- and Anders, while he tried his best to cover the gaps that the jobs left, could not help everyone.

On one of his circuits through Dust Town he had stopped again at the apartment of Shara, the duster girl who Anders had first met in the aftermath of her terrible childbirth. Unusually, her brother was also in attendance -- he had just come down from the valley from a long shift on the construction of the Tower, so the two of them were in the same place for a change.

"How's she been, Healer?" Cosh asked, hovering close to Anders' elbow as he ran a light rejuvenation spell over his sister.

"Well, her color's looking good," Anders said as he let the spell dissipate. "And I'd say she's stabilized at a good weight." It felt a little strange to talk to Cosh over his sister's head as though she were a child or an invalid; but as she still refused to respond to him, he was left with few other options. "Most of all what she needed -- and still needs -- is steady food, reliable shelter, and time. All of which you have provided for her."

Cosh frowned; he had a face that seemed made for frowning, eyes and nose and cheeks all with a downward slant that his black bushy mustache only emphasized. "Yes, but, will she be able to have any more babies? How soon?"

"I… don't know," Anders said, startled. It wasn't a question he would normally have discussed with a patient's sibling, caretaker or not, but he shouldn't have been surprised; for the strange sub-economy of the noble hunters, a woman's fertility was her money-making capacity. Cosh's interest, while invasive and grossly inappropriate in other settings, was… at least understandable.

But that really only scratched the surface of Anders' unease. Despite treating Shara's injuries, he couldn't say that any part of her was happy at the fate of her last child. He'd learned in Kirkwall, years ago, that it was not only fruitless but counterproductive to judge his patients' lifestyles and choices; if they received condemnation from him most of them would simply not come back. Since they couldn't get treatment elsewhere…

He'd learned to keep his opinions to himself and not make judgments. He knew that the situation the siblings were in was not their fault, and that they were only acting according to the pressures and pulls of the society they lived in. He felt a great deal of compassion for Shara, and wanted to
help her however he could, but he wasn't sure that compassion extended to putting another infant at risk in her care. And if the next one was female, too? What then? "I wouldn't recommend that she try."

Cosh huffed. "Well, how are we gonna get out of here, if she can't have a deshyr's baby?" he complained.

Anders started a sharp retort, then bit his tongue. "The construction job seems to be doing well for you two," he said instead.

"Yeah, for now." Cosh's frown deepened. "But that won't last forever, will it? An' then what?"

That was a question Anders had tried not to think about too deeply. It was possible that by then, there would be other contracts the mages could extend, or that Bhelen and Moira would come up with other outreach programs. But much of that would be outside of his control, so he could hardly make concrete promises. "I'm sure something else will come along. I wouldn't rely on your sister's fertility, though; it's possible she may never be able to have more children."

"Then what good are you?"

The words startled Anders; he didn't recognize the voice. "Say what?"

It was Shara that had spoken -- the first time he'd ever heard her speak. She hadn't moved from her chair, but turned her head to glare at him, eyes glinting like sullen coals. Her voice was higher, lighter than he would have guessed, given her dark coloration and heavy, listless demeanor. Light and airy, and now so potently drenched with bitterness that it could have been poison "What good are you? Coming around with your fancy clothes and your creepy magics, lording it over other folk like you know what's best for them."

"Shara --" Cosh stepped forward, hands waving as though to push the words back in her mouth, but she ignored him.

"What use are you? Where were you when I could have used you?" she shouted, pushing herself to her feet. "Where was your tower, where were your jobs, where was your money when we was starving? Where were you when I made myself a whore to hope? Where were you when she was ripping her way out of me, when I needed you, when I needed you?"

She lunged for him, hands balled into fists, and Anders was too startled to duck; the first punch had more force behind it than he would have expected a girl her size could have. Not enough to injure, but startling in its pain.

Cosh intercepted her before she could follow up that blow with others. "Now! Now you come around and say everything's better!" she screamed over her brother's shoulders. "Now everyone says the deshyr bitches all got magic in their bellies, so's he don't need me anymore! I've lost everything, everything, everything! I hate you! I hate you!"

Anders rocked back, stunned, as Shara continued to struggle. She landed punches on his shoulders, his chest, the side of his head, but he grimly hung on. "I hate you!" she raved, unclear now whether it was directed at Anders, her brother, or just the world. "I hate you! I hate... I hate... I hate... me..."

The shouts broke down into sobs, and her fists uncurled to clutch desperately at her brother's shoulder as she cried. It was an ugly, desolate sound, each breath rattling into her lungs before being released as an anguished wail. Anders stood there, feeling stupid and helpless. All his instincts said to move to comfort her, but he clearly was not a person that she wanted to receive
comfort from.

Cosh met Anders' eyes over his sister's shoulder, an apologetic expression on his drooping face. "Sorry about this, Healer," he murmured. "Maybe... maybe it's better if you don't come around any more."

Anders nodded carefully, taking a step back. "Maybe you're right," he murmured. He backed away, moving carefully, and gathered his medical bag back together.

Stepping out of the dirty apartment into the sooty, poorly-lit alleys of Dust Town, Anders blew out a sigh. The wailing continued unabated behind him, blending with the sounds of half-a-dozen other voices crying distantly in the dark, and Anders couldn't find it in himself to be angry.

It wasn't personal. He'd seen this from patients before, or more frequently, from their families. The anger was powerful and real, and it was easier to direct it at the healer in front of them than at the real cause of the grief, which might be too distant or too dangerous or just too abstract to go after directly. It had very little to do with him, really; he was just the closest, and safest, target.

He knew it. But just like her punches, the angry words and vile venom she'd thrown at him still hurt all out of proportion to its strength.

After the upsetting interlude in Dust Town, Anders was glad his next appointment was in the palace. He would never be fully comfortable in such opulent settings -- and there was still part of him that chafed constantly at the ostentatious display of wealth -- but it was nevertheless a relief to be in a place that was clean. Where the walls were solid against drafts, free of leaks or stains, where clean water and clean cloth would be available at his call.

And after facing the wreckage that was the casteless girl, it was quietly a balm to Anders to see another one of his patients doing so well. Unlike Shara, who had lingered and stagnated in her suffering, Moira was the picture of vivacious growth. She, at least, was progressing -- her pregnancy was definitely progressing.

Progressing a little too much, Anders privately worried. Moira should have been no more than three months along at this point, but already she looked as though she were near the end of her second term. Dwarven pregnancies were approximately the same length as human ones, weren't they? Elvhen pregnancies tended to run a little long -- or, well, human ones were comparatively quick -- but he couldn't recall dwarven ones being shorter.

Anders couldn't remember ever reading about this in the Tower -- his healing texts had had little to say about dwarven medicine other than warning against trying to use magic on the naturally-resistant stonefolk. But he had treated Gytha, the stonemason in Lowtown during her pregnancy, and that had run about the same course as any of his human patients.

It was concerning. But since she seemed to be doing so well otherwise, he kept his concern to himself. "Good evening, Your Majesty," he said. Evening was not really a dwarven concept, but at this point in the cycle -- with most of the workers heading home to seek their beds -- it seemed appropriate. He glanced around, seeking out a familiar vibrant blond silhouette, but didn't find it. Another one of Moira's handmaiden-bodyguards made herself discreet in the corner -- the Queen
would never be left alone with him -- but not one Anders recognized. "No Hildegard today?"

Moira returned his greeting with a regal nod. "She is conducting some errands on my behalf," the Queen explained.

The word 'errands' was said very precisely, as though dropping an invisible box around it. Anders frowned. "Errands?"

"Of a diplomatic nature," Moira clarified, which didn't actually make it any more clear. A small smile played around her lips.

"Really? She didn't strike me as the diplomatic type," Anders said skeptically. "More the… hit things till they stop moving type."

The handmaiden stifled a laugh. Moira's smile grew more vulpine. "In the proper setting, that is sometimes the type of diplomacy that is needed," she said. "Let us say that there is a certain House that suffered a great political overreach in the last Assembly. Let us also say, without naming names --"

In the corner, the handmaiden stifled a cough that sounded very much like "IVO!" This time, Moira glared at her. "-- yes, thank you, Franne, the very picture of discretion -- that this unnamed party, suffering from this setback, now seeks to recoup its influence through underhanded methods." She waved her ring-decked hand expansively. "Bribery, extortion, sabotage… all the regular type of things.

"And dear Hilde is the perfect person to put a stop to it." Her smile softened, warmed, and then she returned her focus to the present. "Not all the politics of Orzammar are conducted in the Assembly, Warden. Some of it takes place in the back alleys."

Anders nodded. That squared with a lot of what Natya had told him, although her point of view had been very different, duster as she had been. He'd heard all about her misadventures when fighting for the throne for Bhelen, but then royal successions were fraught times for everyone involved. No surprise that was more the rule than the exception in the dwarven city.

"But enough of this talk," Moira said, brushing it aside briskly. "Let us proceed."

She began to undo the sashes that held her heavy outer robes in place, her movements brisk and efficient; by this time she was well familiar with the routine. Anders obligingly moved on his own part of the dance, setting his satchel on the low table provided and pulling out a few potions and a notebook.

He took a quick moment to glance over his notes, scribbled shorthand probably illegible to anyone but himself. "Have there been any changes in the past cycle?" he asked.

Moira faltered, her arms tensing up as her hands gripped a jeweled belt tightly. "I… I believe so," she said. "I was hoping you could tell me… in the past few days I have begun to feel the quickening."

Anders nodded, keeping his voice carefully encouraging. "It's about the right time for it. This isn't unusual."

"No, but…” Moira frowned. "I would swear that I felt movement in more than one place. My doctors tell me that I must be imagining it, but I swear I am not. It is very distinct!" she said all in a rush, as though fearing that Anders would override her. She looked up at him. "I did some research, and there are tales in the old archives about… babies who were born with two in a womb. It is a
very old legend, but…"

"Oh, yes. That's not all that uncommon among humans, actually," Anders said. He hadn't realized that dwarves had no concept of multiple births -- but then, given their increasing difficulties with conception and birth in general, perhaps it wasn't so surprising. "I had a good friend in Kirkwall whose brother and sister were twins. And I helped with another delivery of twins from a Lowtown family while I was there." Come to think of it, weren't Mardra's brothers also twins? He vaguely remembered her saying that. If so, it must be something that ran in the Amell bloodline. Along with magic.

"Really?" Moira exclaimed. "Twins, you humans call them. So you have some experience… Is there any way to do an examination and see?"

"I can try," Anders said. "If you're starting to detect movement, your pregnancy might be advanced enough for me to tell more."

Moira lay back on the couch, and Anders took a few minutes to do his routine exam first. Her vital signs were all within normal range, and a careful palpation of her abdomen didn't reveal any problems, unusual size aside. Twins, he thought, could certainly explain how she had seemed to advance so quickly…

The next part of the exam would be a little more difficult. Any trained medic could do an external examination, but to see inside the body was a technique restricted only to spirit healers. He called upon a wisp, pulling it from the Fade with the ease of long practice; took a minute to form a clear mental pattern of what he needed the spirit to do and impose it on the mindless little thing, and then carefully induced it into Moira's body.

The results came back almost immediately.

Anders stood stock-still, locked into an unnatural position half-bent over the couch. For a moment he couldn't breathe, couldn't even blink, his eyes were so wide. No, surely not…

He ran the spell once again, just to be sure. The second iteration gave him more clarifying detail, but that just cemented the results. Anders made himself breathe again, carefully keeping his expression and body language normal as he communed with the wisp.

Not careful enough, or else Moira was simply too good at reading subtleties; she had picked up on his sudden shock. "What is happening, Warden Healer?" she asked, a touch of nervousness in her voice. "Are there… twins, as you say?"

Anders straightened up, calling his wisp back and banishing it. He cleared his throat. "Well," he said. "Okay, so. So no, you aren't having twins."

"Oh." Moira's expression became closed, wary; Anders wasn't sure if that was disappointment, or fear for what the alternatives might be.

Either way, it was wrong to leave her in suspense. "You're having triplets," he said.

"What?"
After the startling revelation in Moira's chambers, Anders found himself seeking a drink with something approaching desperation. He could not escape the conclusion that it had been the interference of his magic that had led to this outcome, and while it was not bad exactly, it had still been an entirely unintended consequence. Losing control of his magic -- even indirectly -- was a deeply unnerving experience for him.

The 'Last Dwarf Standing' was a tavern in the slightly seedier part of Orzammar's Commons. Not quite up (or down) to Dust Town standards, it nevertheless served a distinctly rougher clientele than the Paragon's Fountain -- most of the patrons had at least one weapon handle peeking out from over the shoulder or behind the hip, sometimes more.

Anders actually had the name first from Oghren, way back during their days as Wardens together. Several of Oghren's more lively drinking stories started there, though they tended to get less coherent and more vulgar the longer the evening went on. When he'd heard about the place while on a nearby healing route, he'd decided to drop in for a bite, and the food was good enough that he soon made it a regular stop on his way back from Dust Town.

Their bronto blood pudding and mushroom pie was filling enough even for Anders' appetite, and the prices were decent. He'd been in the middle of a second helping when a cheerful voice hailed him. After a few moment Anders placed the vaguely-familiar voice and name as Donal Haver, the chatty city guard who'd made efforts to befriend Anders in the past.

Anders' track record with municipal guardsmen was spotty at best, but it never hurt to try to cultivate a friendship. He'd invited Donal to his table and his food, and in return Donal had ordered several rounds of the local beer. Anders had agreed to be friendly, even though he hadn't actually felt the effects of alcohol since joining with Justice.

Tonight, though, the tavern lights were getting a bit haloed and blurry, and Anders realized with astonishment that he was starting to feel fuzzy at the edges. Dwarven ale must contain some vicious additives, he thought, eyeing the half-full mug with trepidation and thinking back to Oghren's infamously dire flasks of liquor.

Their table had accumulated a few more of Donal's guardsmen friends -- he was a friendly sort of fellow, it seemed -- all warrior types who were extremely interested in the details of Anders' first Proving. The sight of a human drinking dwarven ale was a source of much hilarity to them, and there was no lack of volunteers to pay for his next round.

Despite his exhaustion, Anders found himself drawn in -- first to a friendly round of carom, which he lost, and then to an arm-wrestling match at the table, which he also lost. The arm-wrestling, at least, he could have won if he'd drawn on Justice; but given that nothing more was at stake than some good-natured ribbing, it would have been unjust to cheat.

"Aaand another one rusted through!" one of Donal's guard friends hooted as Anders' knuckles brushed the tabletop. There was a good deal of cheering and pounding of weapon hilts, the clamor nearly overwhelming, and a few coins changed hands with a minimum of grumbling.

One of the guardsmen -- they all seemed to be men, for some reason, which didn't square with Anders' experience of dwarven warriors in the quantity of Natya -- sat down heavily on the bench next to Anders as he flexed his aching wrist. "Y'know, you lot… you magey types… you're all right," he said, alcohol slurring his accent to something barely comprehensible. "You're not so bad. Can't believe those sun-worshippers up on the surface spend all their time shitting their smalls about you lot. What are they so scared of?"
Despite the too-familiar presence in his personal space, Anders was touched by the sentiment. "Control. Not having it. That's what they're scared of," he tried to explain. "It's all about trying to control us, y'see? The templars like to say, they like to say that magic is a weapon. Which it is... I mean it is, but... but never mind that now." He waved that debate away with his non-aching hand. There were so many more things you could do with magic than blow things up, but that was all people ever saw. He was going to fix that. Or, well, he was going to try.

"Thing is, you can't turn it off. Not long term." Not except with Tranquility, which was enough like a murder that it didn't really count. Anders brooded on the long history of mostly-failed efforts to contain and control mage powers, both Chantry headed and not. "Magic is like a weapon you can never put down."

"Well, I guess," the dwarf said, sounding more bewildered than convinced. "But why would anyone ever want to put down their weapon?"

_Warriors_, Anders thought.

"This axe, see," his seatmate continued, unshipping it from his hip with surprising ease despite his state of drunkenness. "This... this is my family's axe. The axe of my ancestors. If I put it down I'd be... I'd be... that'd be bad. That's dishonor.

"So I say, fuck em!" the dwarf concluded, pounding the axe of his ancestors butt-first against the stained stone table. "Poncy piss-britching types. They can pry my axe out of my cold rotting hands!"

"I'll drink to that," Anders agreed, and raised his tankard. This would be his last one; he really had to turn in soon. "Fuck the templars!"

"FUCK 'EM!" the other warriors shouted, raising their own tankards in enthusiastic toast. Anders heard a few confused echoes of "Fuck the Spawn!" and "Fuck the deshyrs!" in the back, indicating that not everyone was entirely sure who they were meant to be fucking, but he appreciated the solidarity nonetheless.

Anders stepped out into the street behind the Last Dwarf Standing and inhaled deeply. The air in Orzammar was never what he would consider 'fresh' or 'outdoorsy,' but it was leagues more clear and cool than the air he'd left behind in the tavern. He smelled cool stone and the faint distant tang of the forges that drove Orzammar's economy, never far away in this underground labyrinth.

Cooler, fresher air, the relative quiet and dark of the streets helped lessen the dizzying cloud that the dwarven ale had left in his head. It was a potent sensation, if only because it had been so long since he'd experienced it; ever since his joining with Justice, beer might as well have been water to them. Dwarven beer, it seemed, was made of sterner stuff.

He'd forgotten how very tired it made him feel. Or perhaps that was new; the last time he'd drunk to excess, after all, he'd still been young. Staying up all night to drink and play with the whores of the Pearl and still waking up early enough to jump out the window when the Templars came
knocking at dawn. Maker, had he ever truly been so young?

It was strange, Anders thought as he set out along the street, the narrow stone alleyways that were the fastest route back to Brosca manor and a bed. He no longer hated the man his younger self had been. He'd spent so long despising himself, his callow and carefree attitude and refusal to fight even for himself, let alone for others.

Now... now, he felt that he had a little more perspective. That young Anders had been as much a product of the Circle as any of the other mages he worked to save -- conditioned for years against caring for anyone other than himself. Trained all his life to believe that the only good he could do for the world was to disappear from it. Even after two decades and seven escape attempts, he'd in many ways still been a child -- a man didn't become a man until he came to an understanding of responsibilities greater than himself.

Lost in his thoughts, vision still blurring from the alcohol, Anders mostly let his feet carry him towards Brosca Manor out of habit. He had long since lost the fear of lurkers in dark alleys; in this place, as in Darktown, the slinkers had more reason to protect him than harass him. And he knew, besides, that he was far more dangerous a predator than any two-bit Coterie thug or desperate thief could ever be.

So it took him completely by surprise when a flicker out of the corner of his eye turned into motion, a faint high-pitched whistle before something struck the side of his neck in a sudden, sharp pain. The blow sent him off-balance, stumbling on legs more rubbery than it should have been, as he reached up a hand to grope at the site of the sudden injury. His hands brushed fletching, cold metal tubes, and then clenched in a spasm. What in the Blight --

"Is it working, or ain't it?" a voice called out from somewhere to his side -- he turned towards it only to see the swift movement of shadows away. "He's still moving!"

"It had better work -- cost a bloody fortune to import it," a second voice grated, and this voice rang a faint bell, it was familiar, but he couldn't place it…

The fire died, leaving his fingertips cold and numb. A wave of coldness flooded him, centering on his neck but washing out through his body with every beat of his suddenly-furious heart. He knew the sensation, knew it, his connection to the Fade melting away as churning sickness began to curdle in his stomach. Magebane! How here, how now, in this city that had no Templars, no mages, no need for control --

"It's working!" a third voice replied answered from further away, a nervous snap to it. "It's quick, not instant. Just give it a moment. And stay out of his reach!"

But it wasn't magebane that racked tremors through his body, his limbs seizing and stiffening even as he whirled around, searching for the source of the attack. There had been something else in that dart, something that hardened his blood like stone and left him stiff as a statue, paralyzed and helpless. Deep mushroom, maybe -- laced with felandaris -- but who --?

Instinctively he tried to call magic to heal himself, but his mana was elusive, slipping away from his grasp. Panic surged through him, colder than the poison, and the stone walls seemed to jump in on him, pinning him in place and slowly crushing him between them. He wheezed for breath. His
legs cramped, and he stumbled, barely catching himself on his knees.

"It's about time," the second voice said from closer to hand. Something hit him from behind, a blow that took him the rest of the way to the ground; he couldn't get his unresponsive limbs up in time, locked as tight as a spider's web, and his face smashed painfully against the stone. Another punch to the back of his head, hair catching in the greaves of a mailed fist; then the same gauntlet locked in his hair and painfully dragged his cramping neck around.

"Remember me, Warden?" his attacker hissed, and punched him again; Anders felt pain bloom through his face as his jaw cracked. "Did you forget about me? I didn't forget you. The one who humiliated me in the Proving, cost me my House name and my contract, made me the laughingstock of Orzammar!"

Anders tried to speak, but his jaw was clamped, spasming; only a gurgle came out. Pyrag punched him again, his face twisted in a gloating sneer. "But I have a new House now! I have new contracts… although I would have done this one for free."

The disgraced gladiator swung his weapon high; the light glinted red-orange off the blade, hot like a Templar's brand. "House Vollney sends its regards," Pyrag spat, and the descending blade was the last thing Anders saw before he blacked out.

~tbc...
Beyond lay the phylactery chamber: great glittering pillars reaching up to the very roof of the tower, each holding hundreds of red vials -- the blood of every mage in the White Spire and many more besides. The chamber pulsed with its dark energy.

Wynne studied the nearest pillar. She reached out with a hand, running her fingers along the glass vials. Slowly her expression hardened. There was rage there, a towering anger that grew stronger by the minute.

Wynne looked over at Shale. "Tear it down," she said. "Tear it all down."

-- "Asunder"

Fire lit in his heart, seared out along his veins in a roaring tide of light. The dark twisting poison in his bloodstream vanished in a heartbeat, and his eyes snapped open to the rising wisps of smoke from his skin.

Pyrag’s arm came down, the dagger gripped tight in his fist. His hand snapped up as fast as thought and blocked; the very tip of the dagger just barely cut a line in his skin. He did not feel it.

"What the rotting --" Pyrag started to say. The dwarf tried to pull the dagger back for another thrust, but no; he had no intention of releasing the weapon. He tightened his grip: the metal scales armoring Pyrag's wrist began to buckle under his fingers, and Pyrag shouted and cursed as he struggled to pull away.

Instead he pulled him down and forward, sending the burly dwarf flailing for balance. His dagger hand stretched across his chest and off to his left side, hampering his movements. He had no weapon in his own hands, but he needed none; his hands were his weapons, the sharp white edges of light as flensing as any steel. His hand came up --

Pyrag arched back, screaming, stumbling back now that he had been freed from the iron grip. He sat up, throwing aside the scale-mail and gauntleted arm that still clutched the dagger in its orphaned fist. The arm bounced twice across the stone floor and then rolled to a stop, blood flowing dark and swift from its severed end.
He stood up. Pyrag staggered back, teeth clenched, face puckered and purpling with pain and fury. Curses dripped steadily from his lips as blood dripped from the stump of the severed arm, the edges still curling and wisping with smoke.

There were two accomplices, he could clearly see them in the shadows. One dropped a blowgun -- he saw it roll upon the stone -- as she fumbled for another weapon; the second, more wisely, turned and fled towards the street.

The first thug charged him with a wordless yell, rusty sword held aloft. He ripped it out of her hands, throwing it aside to spin and spark on the stone, and followed through with a blow that ripped into her ribcage with a corona of flames. She died with hardly a scream, the strangled sound overpowered by the hissing and popping of flesh and bone disintegrating in the unearthly fire.

The corpse fell to the side, and he took another step towards Pyrag.

"You have killed the honored and elderly for your own profit and pride," he said as he walked forward, each implacable step taking him closer to the writhing wreck that was Pyrag, formerly of House Haver. "You have taken money to murder and poison, for your own spite and injured ego! For these crimes, death is the only repayment."

"Spawn take you!" Pyrag raged as he approached, spittle flying from his lips. His remaining hand scrambled at his hip to draw another weapon, too driven by pain or hate or fury or malice to attempt to flee. "What in the blighted pits are you?"

He lunged, and Pyrag moved too slowly to avoid him; his light-wreathed hands caught at Pyrag's neck, sinking through the leather-protected joints of the armor to find the throat beneath.

"I am Justice," Justice told him, in the moment before he ripped. Pyrag screamed, trailing to a gurgle as those implacable hands cut off his air -- then his bloodflow -- and then his head.

It had been years since the world had seemed so clear. In the heart of this roaring tempest, colors and shadows leached away to deep black and jagged white. Movement came to him in flashes, forms and figures lit up like a bonfire with their own malignant intent against the shadows of this dark underworld.

Joining with Anders all those years ago had done much to advance his understanding of the world, the mortals in it, and the strange and disjointed societies they built. He had come to understand that the world was built to privilege a few while subjugating many, and that those so impoverished were forced to do unpleasant things merely to survive. He came to understand that the greater burdens of justice stood on those who had power and abused it than on those who had to struggle in the face of great burdens. He did not always like it, but he had learned to see the structures of power behind inequitable laws and arbitrary enforcement, to have understanding and compassion for those forced into violence or deceit by the straits of their circumstance.

But there were limits to understanding, to compassion, and this was far beyond the pale. Those who murdered, not in self-defense, but for calculation. Those who took money not out of desperation, but greed. Those who did not even approach their enemies in battle but instead followed the way of ambush, treachery and poison. They had delivered their own sentences, and brought on them their own fates.

Anders might have chosen otherwise. But Anders was not here. He was Justice, and he would repay this iniquity with well-deserved death.

Shouts of alarm began to raise from the alleys around him as he stood there, flames popping and
blood hissing. Pyrag was dead, but his rage was not quenched. Instead his anger grew with every heartbeat, every rhythmic rise and fall of the fire that followed his breath.

They had not come here for this. They had come to Orzammar to help -- to do good, not only for the mages but for the dwarves themselves. They had harmed no one, and yet there were those among the city that sought to silence them simply because the changes they hoped to bring to the lower classes threatened the unchallenged supremacy of those above. Unlike Pyrag, who at least had suffered a humiliating defeat at his hands, he had *never* done harm to House Vollney. And they had tried to have him killed. They thought they could simply *erase him*, remove him from the world like an irritation.

They would learn otherwise.

Justice turned and followed the third man through the warren of alleyways in the lower city. The fleeing thug had a head start, but Justice could see the brand of his crimes upon him. He would not get far.

---

Alarm claxons beat distantly in the city as Justice emerged from the dark caverns and strode towards the entrance of the Diamond Quarter, beyond whose gates lay the manor houses for all the high deshyrs families of Orzammar. He was coated along one side with ash and char and liberally spattered along the other with blood, and he carried Pyrag's severed head in one hand by its thick tuft of ruddy hair. Occasional drops of blood still leaked from the mangled neck to spot the beautifully polished paving stones.

The gates were closed. Justice smashed them open with barely a thought, sending sparks flying as the metal twisted and groaned under the force. He strode forward, burning eyes sweeping over the rows of houses in search of his quarry. He had not been to this part of the city before -- it was the opposite side of the great cavern from Brosca Manor, the far end of a broad crescent of grand houses and manors that orbited the central palace.

Some had nameplates incised with dwarven runes, but most did not; after all, the only people who had business here were supposed to already know. House Vollney, a comparatively small but ancient façade on the second terrace, did not have such a nameplate; but the trail of malevolent intention leading from them to Pyrag Haver lead right back to their door. He strode off in their direction, stepping over the twisted remains of the gate as he went.

Shouts and footsteps alerted him to the presence of others. In the high market behind him no one had challenged him, simply because all of the merchants and straggling shoppers had found it more prudent to simply get out of his way -- yet pursuit was catching up to him all the same. A whistle sounded and a half-dozen dwarves in heavy armor, carrying halberds, appeared in the street ahead of him to form a phalanx.

Justice did not stop, did not slow down; fury and conviction carried him forward with unstoppable momentum. He swept his free arm ahead of him and a wave of invisible force slammed out along its path, barreling the guardsmen aside. Most of them were pushed aside, losing their footing in the face of the invisible hurricane; Justice swept forward, and the last guardsman to try to lay hands on him was smacked brutally aside, flying a short distance to slam into a nearby wall before
staggering to his knees. He kept going.

Justice stopped before House Vollney at last; the doors were closed tight and all the windows sealed shut. Not a sight nor sound of any of the inhabitants leaked past the dark and solid façade, but they were there, he knew they were there.

"HOUSE VOLLNEY SENDS ITS REGARDS!" Justice shouted, his voice echoing against the stone walls and amplifying to a cacophony. "HOUSE VOLLNEY SENDS MURDERERS AND ASSASSINS! I RETURN YOUR REGARDS, HOUSE VOLLNEY!"

He flung the severed head to the paving stones on the doorstep of House Vollney. The bloodied head rolled a short distance before coming to a stop, face-up to reveal the congealed and discolored features of Pyrag Haver staring blankly at the cavern roof. There was no response from within, but Justice could almost feel the cringe of dismay from those within the house.

Justice paced back and forth on the doorstep, seething fury growing with every step. How dare they hide in their homes like cowards. "I SEEK REPAYMENT OF THE BLOOD YOU HAVE BOUGHT WITH GOLD!" he roared. "COME OUT AND FACE ME, MURDERERS! COME AND FACE JUSTICE!"

Still no answer. Justice took a few steps back, looking up the brooding stone wall that faced him. It would not be impossible, he thought, for fire and fury to make short work of it. He could tear out the stones from the wall until the façade crumbled, giving way to the chambers and corridors within. Once there, the inhabitants of House Vollney would have nowhere further to run from him.

More yelling, more running from behind him. He would soon be surrounded unless he took the initiative to move forward. The guards sought only to do their duties -- Justice understood that -- but if those duties stood in the way of delivering righteous repayment to a criminal, that could not be allowed.

He raised his hand, fire flaring about it, and --

"Houd vast!" a new voice shouted, familiar and strange all at once. Justice found himself frozen, arm upraised, and wheeled about in astonishment to see who had come up behind him.

It was Mardra Amell, their steady right hand and lieutenant in Refuge, standing alone on the street behind him with her hand upraised. Runes of light wreathed and smoldered from her palm and they drew Justice's attention like a beacon, whispered commands for him to come closer, listen, obey. "Mardra?" Justice said.

From the labored pace of her breathing, the unsteady tremble in her legs as she took a step forward, it was clear that Mardra had run all the way here. Her arms swept upwards, leaving a trail of violet light in their place that formed an intricate-looking glyph. "Staa ned, ande!" she called out, and threw her hand forward as though pushing something ahead of it. "Ikke skad!"

Though Justice had never heard the words in his life -- nor Anders' -- he somehow understood their meaning, incised with firm clarity in his mind. She was asking -- no, commanding -- for him to stand down. It was difficult to resist, although less difficult than it would have been had he still been in the Fade, a spirit with no flesh to insulate him. "Why do you seek to stop me?" he demanded. "These corrupt men have used their wealth to hire poisoners and assassins, to stifle our dream of a free mage city in the horning. They are cowards and murderers, and they must be stopped before they harm another mage!"
"By you?" Mardra challenged, returning to the Common tongue. "They must be stopped by you? By murdering them in return?"

Justice drew back a step, stung. "I am he that they attempted to murder. I am the one who has been wronged; I have the right to redress my assailant!" he said. He gestured to the severed head of Pyrag, still lying discarded on the floor. "The hirelings, the tools by which Vollney attempted to inflict murder, are already dead. Now I seek their master, he who gave the word, and who shares their guilt. Would you let these crimes go unanswered?"

Mardra drew a deep breath, still trying to steady her breathing after her run. "Of course not," she said.

Justice nodded in satisfaction. "Then I shall --" he started to say, but Mardra interrupted him.

"But there is no need for justice to be served at this very moment, in this very place, by your hand," she said persuasively. "If you are Justice, then you surely must understand that there is more than one kind of reparations. Not all crimes are equal, not all injustices require death as punishment.

"The assassin's crime was of blood and murder, and he has been repaid with the same. Vollney's crime was one of money and dishonor, so let his forfeit be paid in fines and disgrace. Justice will be done, but you must step aside to let it happen."

For a long moment Justice stared at her, flames still crackling about him. Her words were not, he had to admit, entirely without merit. Coming from another source, he might have dismissed them -- but Mardra had always showed a prodigious command of the law, and knew the local dwarven legal code better than anyone else in Refuge. If she said it was so, it was so.

But it was more than reason that stayed his hand. He could tell, from the slight quiver in her arms and the glitter in her eyes as she faced him, that she was terrified of him. She stood her ground and spoke calmly despite her fear, but his appearance and willingness to do murder was frightening to her. As it no doubt had been to all the peoples of Orzammar that he had passed or thrown from his path on his rampage here, frightening in his remorseless determination to wreak vengeance.

This was not what she wanted. And, he began to admit as his anger slowly cooled, this was not what he wanted either. "Very well," he said at last.

She let out a huge breath -- had she been holding her breath all that time? -- and dropped her hand. The wreath of sigils that she had cast flickered out, and she called a light to her hand. It was compelling, that light; it was beautiful. It brought back to the world not color, for she and her clothes and the stones about them were all rendered in shades of grey, but nuance and gradation. "Good," she said. "Now come. We have to take this somewhere else before the guards arrive. Folj mig… folj med mig, hastig…"

Beckoning him with the iridescent flames, she starting leading him away from the gates of the Vollney house, half-turned so that she was nearly walking backwards as she kept him in her sights. He followed after, not paying great attention to where they were going; the whispering fire tended to capture his attention unless he made a great effort to focus elsewhere.

They ended up in a small, plain square room off the Diamond Quarter, not somewhere he had been before. There were a few low benches and a table pushed to the corner of the room, so perhaps it was some kind of storage room. Mardra stepped to the doorway behind him and spoke quietly for a few minutes with someone outside; when she had finished she shut the door firmly and began calling up more of the light-borne glyph words.
Justice watched her work for a moment before he felt compelled to let her know: "There is no need to maintain that ward. It does not bind me," he said. Mardra froze and looked over at him, eyes wide. "I followed you because I trust you. I know you to be a good woman, a just woman."

"Oh... good," Mardra said, sounding flustered. After a moment she let the fiery words disperse, and sat tentatively, stiffly on the bench opposite him. "That's good. Listen, um... who or -- or should I say, what are you?"

"I am Justice," he declared. He frowned. "Anders... Anders has not told you of me."

Mardra shook her head. "No."

"But you do not seem entirely surprised," he observed, eyeing the flickers of magic that still danced around her hands. "You came prepared, with glyphs and words meant for spirits."

"No, I wasn't." Mardra sighed. "I didn't know for certain, but... I heard rumors. Stories. Most of them sounded like straight-up fictions -- the sort of propaganda you'd expect to hear the Chantry come up with about a man who blew up a Chantry. That you were crazy, feral, a blood mage, an abomination, every variant you could think of."

"When I met you in person, you seemed... like none of that, so I dismissed the rumors. But... sometimes I wondered." She bit her lower lip. "There were times when you spoke, especially when you got in a mood, that you sound... not entirely of this world. And sometimes I thought that no one who was completely human could possibly be so relentless, so driven. Or maybe that was just something I told myself to make me feel better that I couldn't keep up," she added, a hint of self-deprecation in her tone.

Justice did not want for her to feel that way. He had no love for Sloth, but Mardra had always been a diligent partner. "Never that," he told her seriously. "The road that Anders and I have walked together has been a long and hard one. Together we can do more, be more, but there has been great cost. I would never expect or ask another mage to do the same."

"So Anders..." Mardra peered at him, a frown on her own stern face. "Anders is still there? You haven't... replaced him?"

He shook his head. "No. Anders and I are one. And two." It had always been difficult for them to explain, to put it to words, but of this he was certain. "I have always been here."

Mardra sat back for a moment, her expression neutral as she took this in. She sighed. "Honestly?" she said. "This explains a lot."

"I do not normally seek to take control so violently -- or at all," Justice said. He felt the need to explain himself, or at least try. "But when we were attacked in the lower city, the assassins wielded magebane. Poisons. Anders was rendered helpless in a very short time. There seemed to be no other choice. I would just as soon not have been in such a dire situation again."

"Again?" Mardra seized shrewdly on that word. "So this has happened before?"

It would be easier to show than to explain. Justice reached up and began to undo the clasps on his jacket, shrugging off the outer layer of brigandine and tugging open the laces of his tunic. Mardra made a strange noise, her face flushing as she began to edge away from him on the bench, but she stilled again as the front of Anders' chest was revealed.

Time had done much to reduce the livid, shocking appearance of the scar, but there was still no mistaking what it was. The twisted, gaping wound centered on his chest, covering his heart and
piercing both lungs, was dark -- Justice's light did not shine from the knotted scar tissue -- but it pooled around the edges, outlining the size and severity of the wound.

"Yes," Justice said.

"Maker preserve us..." Mardra sounded faint, leaning forward in fascination. Her eyes were wide, her color pallid, as she took in the extent of the damage.

"He does not," Justice replied, "in my experience. I slew the man who held this sword, but that did not undo the damage."

Mardra looked sick; her skin had a pale greenish tinge and she looked like she might faint. He could see it flickering in her eyes, how did you survive this? and the slight doubt that went with it. "Do not --" Justice said, then cut himself off. Years in the mortal world had told him that it was fruitless, even counterproductive, to command people to feel or not feel a certain way.

"Do not what?" Mardra looked up, meeting his eyes. They were blown, the pupils wide, but Justice could still make out the delineation between the darkness of the pupil and the deep reddish-brown color that surrounded it.

"I beg that you do not fear me," Justice finished instead. "I would never intentionally hurt you, or any mage. You have been abused enough."

"Not like this." Mardra gave a shudder. "Not all of us..."

"Every one." Justice touched the tips of his fingers to the center of the scar; he could feel nothing of it. "This was a betrayal. Not only a betrayal by the Wardens, but of the promise that a mage who serves well enough, long enough, can be allowed a normal life. This was proof that no matter how honorable and harmless, a mage can never be allowed by the Templars to go his own way.

"Indeed, the more valued and valorous, the more dangerous, for that puts the lie to their assertion that only a Templar can ever make a mage safe. I... he..." The distinction between them was beginning to blur in his mind, as he called on memories not solely his. "Anders sought only to live his life on his own terms and for the sake of their doctrine, their control, their pride, they could never allow him that freedom. They could never let him go, lest he prove a living example of their own hypocrisy."

"You must hate the Templars very much," Mardra said softly.

Justice considered the question for a moment. "Yes," he said at last. "But also no. It is true that they have done great evil, and it is at their hands that mages suffer. And yet they are pawns, as we are. If a master orders an atrocity and his servant carries it out, who is guilty, the master or the servant? To blame the Templars would allow the true source of the corruption to go unaddressed."

"I... I see," Mardra murmured. She shook her head ruefully. "I think I understand you a lot better, now. Both of you. The two of you."

And she no longer sat with the tension of a hunted animal, ready to flee on a spring. "I am glad of that," he said. "Of all the mages we have gathered, and friends we have made, it would be your regard I would be most distressed to lose."

"What, mine?" Mardra said, taken aback.

"Yes," Justice said.
She opened her mouth, but no words came in reply; she swallowed and said nothing. The two of them sat in silence for a moment. Justice was beginning to feel increasingly cold, as the last of the flames of righteous anger died.

"What you said earlier," he said finally. "That Vollney would face another kind of justice. Was that true? Or did you only say that to calm me down, so that I would not hurt anyone?"

Mardra hesitated, then sighed. "I will do my best to make it true," she said. "I'll lean on Bhelen as best I can. Vollney will not get away with this."

"Thank you," Justice said.

Time ticked on. Several times over the course of the next hour voices sounded at the door, and Mardra would go over to open it a crack and speak in a low voice to whomever was outside. Sometimes she and the unseen speaker would argue furiously before she shut the door firmly again. But this time, the hurried knock and breathless voice on the other side of the door was one Justice recognized.

This time Mardra opened the door wide, allowing Surana to step briskly into the room. "I came as fast as I could when I heard," she said, her cheeks flush, visibly out of breath as she held one hand under her growing abdomen.

"Oh, Neria!" Mardra said, heartfelt relief in her voice. They exchanged a quick hug, and then the blonde elf turned to Justice. There was no surprise or reaction in her expression or manner when she took him in, so either Mardra had managed to get a message to her about what had happened, or she had somehow already known.

Surana walked over to stand in front of the bench, frowning thoughtfully down at Justice. He had not bothered to refasten his shirt, not feeling the cold, to which she reacted only with a slight raise of her delicate eyebrows. "Tell me," she said. "What exactly happened?"

"We were attacked by assassins in the lower city, and struck by poisons," Justice said readily. Anders had no reason to distrust Surana, and so he did not either. "Anders identified the substances as a combination of magebane and deathroot, as well as a paralytic, Felandaris he believed."

"He could identify that, in such a state?!" Mardra exclaimed, before modifying her statement. "I mean… you could?"

"Its effects are very distinctive," Justice said. "Anders was incapacitated, and I -- took over the situation. The main assassin, Pyrag Haver, identified their patron as being House Vollney, so I came to confront them for their crimes and demand redress."

"How long ago was this?" Surana asked.

"Less than one dwarven hour, I believe," he said. "I am not always certain of the passage of time in this realm."

Surana shook her head. "If it was felandaris and magebane, you definitely shouldn't be up and
around yet."

"I have the ability to purge poisons from the blood. This I did to protect us," Justice pointed out. He hesitated, uncharacteristically uncertain."However… I still cannot hear Anders. In most other situations where I was called on for emergency action, Anders regained consciousness immediately after the danger was past. I am worried for him."

Surana's face softened, and she gave him a sympathetic nod. "It sounds like it might be the magebane causing that. Even spirit energy can't dispel or affect it. Fortunately, we have another healer, one who specializes in blood cleansing."

Justice frowned. "You speak of the blood mage? Your husband?"

"Yes." Surana sounded more than a little defensive. "Whatever your opinion on blood magic, he is good at what he does. Now is not the time to be picky about your treatment options."

Justice considered the question for a few moments, trying to determine what his own opinion on blood magic was. It was not always easy to untangle his own feelings from Anders', and Anders' thoughts and hurts on the matter were tangled enough -- years of tales and lectures and whispers feeding into his head about good magic and evil magic, the need to excoriate sinful acts in order to prove himself a good mage, a loyal mage, a worthy mage. Justice did not share those years of painful memories but he did have years enough of witnessing evil deeds by blood mages pushed past all bounds of understanding and compassion into unforgivable evil. Yet he had also been there for Surana's impassioned defense of blood magic as a tool, there to see Jowan and Merrill's collaboration to find new and better ways to bring magic to serve the world. And he found that, for himself, there were no lingering feelings of anger or resentment at all.

"Very well," he said.

Surana was never easy to read, and even less so for Justice by himself, but he thought she seemed surprised by his lack of resistance. She didn't argue the point, however, instead giving them both another nod. "I'll be right back," she said, and stepped out the door.

A few seconds later the door opened again and Jowan walked in, Surana a few steps behind. Justice looked up and Jowan stopped short, eyes widening as he took in the vision before him. Although Justice had calmed from his initial enraged state, he still leaked blue light here and there from his skin, from his eyes, and from the terrible scar that still sat exposed on his chest.

Justice frowned more deeply. "Nope," Jowan declared and turned around to go right back out again.

Surana stopped him, poking him sharply in the ribs and hissing a few whispered words that Justice could not hear. After a moment he relented and came fully inside, a sheepish expression on his face that could not fully cover up the underlying anxiety. "I, ah," he said, reaching for Anders' arm and then hesitating. "I need to cut you a little bit, in order to get at your blood. Is that okay?"

He couldn't say he was pleased, but it was what must be done. "I accept," Justice said, and held his arm out towards Jowan. "You have my gratitude."

Jowan worked in silence for a long time, Mardra hovering by his other side. He felt it when the magebane began to go, burned and cleansed out of his blood by the power of Jowan's manipulations. And they felt it when the world began to shift, the sharp black-and-white light and shadows beginning to slowly regain their color. The certainty faded, and Justice relinquished it gladly.
"Maker," Anders moaned, closing his eyes and tipping his head back to rest against the cold stone wall. "The morning-after headache is not worth it."

Mardra squeezed his hand. Anders opened his eyes and looked down at it in astonishment. How had she come to be holding that? "Back to yourself now?" she asked.

Anders shrugged irritably. "I'm always myself," he said, "even when I'm Justice. But yes."

It wasn't entirely true, but it was close enough. More than anything else he didn't want the others to see Justice as an invader, a possessor, an interloper the way most abominations were. At least... at least, from the way they looked at him, he hadn't lost them yet as friends.

"We need to think how we're going to handle this," Surana said, as another tap on the door called Mardra to step away to answer it. Anders felt the warmth of her hand go, and felt a faint pang as it faded.

He grimaced. "I'd wish we could not say anything about it at all," he said, "but I suppose it's a little late to try to keep it secret."

"I'd say it is," a familiar voice said from the doorway. It was followed by a familiar figure -- a dark-haired, heady-jawed dwarf with a square beard and a heavy paunched, dressed in sober and expensive clothes in Aeducan colors.

Anders leapt to his feet, knocking Jowan a few stumbling steps away. "Steward Gavorn!" he exclaimed.

"Warden Enchanter." Gavorn looked at Anders, stern and forbidding. "The king sent me to remind you, Anders, of the discussion you and he had over demons running amuck. Specifically, the part where he tasked you to keep it out of the streets of Orzammar."

"I didn't want -- I never meant for --" Anders swallowed down excuses, protestations. There was no excuse for this lack of control. "...was anyone hurt?" he asked humbly.

"You mean aside from the three assassins you left in pieces down in the old causeway?" Gavorn said dryly. "Fortunately, no. The municipal Guard got away with a few scratches and a broken bone or two. And that's why Refuge's charter will be kept intact."

Anders sagged with relief. Far more than any consequences for himself, he had feared that his own actions would bring disaster down on those he had sworn to protect -- again.

"What of House Vollney?" Mardra interrupted, leaning forward with great interest. "Are they going to face any penalties for attempted murder, or are they just going to get away with this?"

Anders shot her a grateful look, feeling a surge of glowing warmth inside. "That hasn't been decided yet," Gavorn said with a shrug. "I can tell you, though, that Vollney aren't exactly the gem in the vein as far as Bhelen's concerned; he's been looking for a way to cut them down to size for months.

"This sort of dirty backdoor business goes on all the time and everyone knows it, but as long as they keep it behind closed doors there's never any proof. Your actions, Warden Anders, have blown those doors pretty wide open. So I'm pretty sure they'll get what's coming to them." Gavorn turned back to Anders, his expression stern. "However, no matter how much provocation your actions might have had -- His Majesty thinks it would be for the best if you vacate Orzammar for a time. The Tower is advanced enough that you can move your flag upstairs."
So, banishment. Or perhaps house arrest. Politely worded, but he recognized the sound of an ultimatum when he heard it. Anders forced himself to nod in acceptance. "For how long?" he asked, trying to keep down a nervous quaver. "Forever, or a few months, or…?"

Gavorn shook his head. "That hasn't been decided yet either," he said. Seeing Anders expression, he hastened to add a few comforting words. "Probably not 'forever.' If nothing else, you still have a Deep Roads turn to serve."

"Of course," Anders said, managing to keep his voice even. "Thank you, Steward." He managed to produce a little bow.

Gavorn gave him a respectful nod in return, and left. Once he was gone, the whole room seemed to relax, a palpable release of tension. "Well, that's one boot off our necks," Surana said. "Now, we only have to worry about how all the others will react."

Anders shot her a questioning look. "All the other -- oh."

He swallowed. Of course, the other mages of Refuge hadn't known about Justice -- not unless they'd heard the same rumors as Mardra, anyway. It wasn't that he'd intended to keep it a secret forever, he just -- it had never seemed to be the right time. There had never seemed to be a way to reveal the truth, not without destroying their confidence in him, their feelings of safety in this place.

And now the choice had been taken out of his hands in the worst possible way.

"Right, well." Anders did his best to square his shoulders against the great weight that seemed to be pressing down on them. "Let's go face the music."

~tbc....

Chapter End Notes

Mardra is speaking... well, in real-world terms it's mangled Swedish, since I had already established that in 'A Spirit Out of Fade' as the language reserved by the Avvar peoples for speaking with spirits.

In this context, however, she's speaking Old Nevarran; specifically the symbols and phrases that those trained in the Mortalitasi tradition use for commanding and binding spirits in corpses. It doesn't really work on Justice here because the body he's in is still alive, unlike most of the bodies the Mortalitasi work with.

The amazing thepioden did a commission relating to this scene! I have been sitting on it for so long and I finally get to show it.
Moving day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(A sheet of paper recovered from the Conclave chamber in the aftermath.)

Record of Conclave vote on the question of independence, Molioris 11, 10:40 AM. Helisma Derington, Tranquil, acting as scribe.

The Conclave now calls for votes from the Circle Towers on the question of succession from the Chantry: that the Circle Towers should be independent, under mage leadership only, with no oversight from Chantry-selected officials. A yea vote will indicate approval of independence, and a nay vote will indicate no change.

Each Tower's vote will be cast by its Grand Enchanter or, if they are not present, by their selected delegates. This vote will be considered final and binding.

Hossberg, Anderfels - Abstain. No representative from Hossberg is present.

Ferelden, Jainen - Yea

Hasmal, Free Marches - Yea

Ansburg, Free Marches - Yea

Cumberland, Nevarra

Ghislain, Orlais - Yea

Montsimmard, Orlais - Nay

White Spire, Orlais - Yea

Antiv

- (The line interrupts with an undirected scratch of ink and the rest of the paper is blank except for a splatter of blood.)

Despite the finality of Bhelen's pronouncement, Anders was not kicked out of Orzammar like an unwelcome cat being booted to the doorstep. At least, not immediately. He was given a chance to return to Brosca Manor, with an hour's grace period to wash, get a quick bite of food, and pack his meager belongings into his traveling pack.
But the respite ended too quickly, and Anders found himself climbing the stairs to the mage's valley with a heart as heavy as the stone around him. Things could have been worse -- they definitely could have been worse -- and it wasn't as though he would never see Brosca manor again; still, it couldn't help but feel like one of the many times he'd been dragged back to Kinloch Hold by the Templars.

Nor did it help the similarity when he stepped out into the sunlight -- well, daylight at any rate; it was overcast and gloomy on the surface, the sun not yet having risen high enough to burn off the late spring fog. Arrayed in the clearing around the tunnel entrance, like a tribunal awaiting its offender. The hour's delay while he made his way up there had been more than long enough, it seemed, for word to spread, and he was doubly grateful he'd been given the chance to wash off the blood.

Some of them, no doubt, were there just out of curiosity -- gossip still being the primary pastime of Circle mages -- but other faces bore fearful or accusatory expressions. Anders recognized Hamil's would-be Templar hunters, the Starkhaven mages, and a dozen others in the crowd… Ertha stood with them, and the sight of her made Anders surprised and a little sad, but he supposed it couldn't be helped. And front and center in the passel was Daros Amell. Anders swallowed a groan. If there were three people in the world he less wanted to see after the day he'd had, he couldn't name them.

He didn't want to do this. But it had to be done -- the truth would always have come out, sooner or later. In Kirkwall, he'd let it slip to Hawke almost the first day; in Refuge, he'd kept it secret much longer. But he never would have been able to keep it forever, and as much as he disliked the confrontation that was to come, he was not ashamed.

He drew on that inner conviction -- and a little bit on the brazen young man who once danced before the world and drank up any attention at all, because even scorn and censure was better than nothing at all -- and took the last step forward. "Something to say?" he challenged to the world at large, but he kept his eyes on Daros.

"So," Daros said, then paused dramatically. If he weren't in such a bad mood Anders would have laughed at how theatrical he was being. But the next words left him not feeling so jolly. "The truth comes out at last. It's confirmed, what we all suspected, what the Chantry criers knew all along -- you aren't just mad, or power-hungry, or a fool. You aren't even just a murderer and a heretic.

You're demon-ridden. A monster in every truest sense of the word."

Anders felt the hot, angry words rush to his mouth; thought them, let them pass away without saying them. Truth was truth, and there was no disputing it; hyperbolic lie was a fiction that could not be argued with. "I am bound to a spirit of Justice," he said instead, keeping his tone even. "We seek justice for the mages in this world. He is no demon, and neither am I."

"If your 'spirit' is so noble and good, why did you feel the need to lie?" Daros riposted. "Whatever tales you choose to tell yourself -- you're nothing but a garden-variety abomination. So far gone in your own corruption that you can't even see it any more. All your grand talk of reform, freedom and independence -- and in the end nothing but a demon's puppet. How ironic."

"That's not true, Daros," Mardra said indignantly. Daros rounded on her, his face showing the fury that he had barely leashed in triumphant denouncement towards Anders.

"Isn't it?" he said savagely. "Isn't it? Tell me what part of what I said was wrong! He didn't murder a grand cleric? He's not seeking to tear down the order of a thousand years? He's not an abomination?"

Mardra dropped her gaze, staring at the dust and gravel of the path, and Anders couldn't find it him
himself -- either self -- to blame her. She never argued openly with Daros. However much she
disagreed with him, she wouldn't fight.

"Anders is no abomination!" a voice from behind him called indignantly, and Jowan pushed his
way to the front of the crowd. Anders shot Jowan a startled look, astonished by the unexpected
defense. "He's come so far, he's done all this to save us from the Chantry and the Templars! His
spirit doesn't control him, they're partners! Like... like a fisherman and a fisherman's boat! Two
different pieces, but they both work together to bring in fish!"

Despite the clumsiness of the metaphor -- did he have to compare Anders' part of this to an
inanimate vessel? -- it was a sincere and earnest defense, and his initial surprise made Anders feel
twice the heel for it. Given his own vocal and frequent disapproval of Jowan's blood magic in the
eyearly days of Refuge, he hadn't expected such gallant support from the other man. Jowan could
easily have rubbed his nose in it -- called him on the carpet for his own hypocrisy -- and the fact
that he hadn't, had instead backed Anders up wholeheartedly against just such condemnation, made
him feel even worse than anything else Jowan could have said.

"More like they work together to drag you both out into deep water to drown," Daros said coldly,
and raised his voice in a half-turn to address the gathered crowd. "Have your eyes been opened yet?
This... creature cares nothing for you! Nothing he does is for your greater good! We should leave
now, all of us, before he drags us down in corruption with him!"

"Hey!" A new voice barged into the conversation, literally barged; Hamil shoved forward through
the crowd and got in Daros' space. He was shorter than the Amell sibling, but the spring and
summer of training had paid off; he was more heavily muscled than when he had first arrived at
Refuge, skin browner from the sun, hard-edged and hard boned. And angry. "Maybe we shouldn't
be listening to what Chantry bootlickers tell us to do. Maybe if that's what it takes to stand up
to our Templar oppressors for a change, we need more of us to take on these spirits!"

Daros leaned back, although he refused to yield a step. "You can't be serious!" he said, voice
dripping with disdain.

"Why not?" one of Hamil's friends -- Marco, Anders thought he recognized him from the
confrontation over Omel's arrival. The boy gestured towards him. "Look at him! He's been an
abomination all this time and he looks just fine. He must be really strong! We need someone that
strong to lead us."

"Strong?" Daros spun the word with scorn. "A druffalo is strong too, but I wouldn't want it
deciding my finances!"

This set off a hubbub of argument, with those standing behind Daros calling out support of him and
those with Hamil shouting angrily in reply. Before the scene could break down into a fistfight,
Surana stepped forward.

"Look, let's set aside the rhetoric and look at this logically," the elf said in her calm, soft-voiced
way. For all she seemed to speak quietly, Anders couldn't help but notice, no one in the crowd
seemed to have any trouble hearing her, and he suspected more work with wisps. "If we let
ourselves be bound by centuries-old habit and prejudice, then we aren't reacting to the world as it
really is.

"Regardless of what Anders is, look at all he's accomplished. Look at the place that he's built!" She
threw her arm out towards the scenery before them, and heads turned automatically to follow the
motion, the half-built Tower framed against the green and black of the valley. "Look the freedom
and safety you have. Do you really want to throw all this away for the sake of obsolete Chantry
"I don't want to go back to the Circle," Anla said, a tremble in her voice. "I don't want to go back to the Templars!"

"I don't either," spoke up another man. His blunt chin and large ears made his face distinctive, and Anders recalled his name -- Danum -- as the mage who'd made the most objections to the presence of the Tranquil at Refuge. "But I also don't want to be led by a demon-ridden crazy man! Why doesn't the abomination take himself off, and someone else lead instead?"

"Like who? Daros?" Hamil nearly spat the name. "He wants to destroy this place, not lead it!"

"Anyone but him!" Danum gestured wildly at Anders, nearly clocking the mage next to him with a flying elbow. She scowled and edged away as he blustered, "We can't have a maleficar as First Enchanter!"

"I never claimed to be First Enchanter or anything like that," Anders replied. "You all are free men; you don't need a leader."

Daros scoffed. His lips drew back from his teeth in a false smile, and his eyes narrowed as he folded his arms to glare down his nose at Anders. "That's your story? Truly?" he said, acid disbelief dripping from each word. "What a pitiful display of false humility from a tyrant!"

"Perhaps we should at least consider it?" Ertha spoke out unexpectedly. The older mage took a step forward, putting her closer to the center of the ring. She glanced around. "There are plenty of capable mages here, aren't they? Maybe someone with experience as an officer in their home Tower should lead. Anders wouldn't even have to leave, he just wouldn't be in charge."

"The last thing we need is more of the Chantry-loving fraternities that kept us in shackles for a thousand years!" Hamil objected.

"It's not possible." Surana spoke again, and the attention of the crowd shifted back onto her with envious ease. "The Charter was drafted by King Bhelen and Anders. All of the promises that Orzammar has made were made to him. There's no changing that now."

"Val Royeaux will never recognize your legitimacy while the Grand Cleric's murderer is in charge," Daros objected. "Whatever your feelings on the White Chantry, they are the power in Southern Thedas. Unless you plan to set up a new Tevinter?"

"Of course not," Surana said, her voice growing edged. Of all the people Daros could have used the Tevinter comparison on, an elf was probably not the best choice. "We're in Orzammar now; Orzammar's legitimacy is the only one that matters."

"So you plan to never again leave this valley?" Daros raised both hands, as if encompassing the narrow stone edges of the mountain ridges. "For all you rail against the Circles being 'prisons,' you willingly shut yourself in another one?" "If you throw your lot in with him you will be outlaws for the rest of your lives, however short and miserable those are while fighting in the Deep Roads for someone else's war. The abomination has sold you as cannon fodder to the dwarven king! This mad scheme of fighting in the Deep Roads is a suicide mission. Far better to go back to the Circles where, for all their admitted faults, you at least will not be eaten by the darkspawn!"

General chaos erupted in the crowd. Anders heard shouted arguments from one camp and bawled refutations from another. Jowan bravely announced to the crowd that he was more than ready to
serve his term in the Deep Roads, darkspawn or no, but he was completely ignored and drowned out by the sound of Anla sobbing that she didn't want to be eaten by an ogre and Hamil yelling at the top of his lungs that he'd rather fight a hundred ogres than ever step foot in a Tower again.

Something had to be done. Anders had wanted to let the argument run their course, but things were escalating; Danum had gotten in Hamil's face and was jabbing him in the chest with a forefinger while his jutting chin nearly brushed Hamil's forehead. The younger mage responded by shoving the older mage in his chest, sending him stumbling backwards to trip over a loose stone and sprawl on the path. On the other side of the crowd, smoke was beginning to rise as sparks of lightning and flickers of flame danced between Marco and another of Daros' supporters. Daros himself stood with his hands tucked in his sleeves, looking down on the whole fracas with an expression of disdainful superiority.

"Enough!" Anders yelled, and the milling crowd ground to a halt almost immediately. All eyes turned towards him, and Anders hoped he wasn't leaking blue fire. Again.

"I did not bring all of you here just to indenture you into the service of another tyrant," Anders said in the sudden quiet. There was a deep roughness in his voice he couldn't quite even out, but at least it made them listen. "No mage who is afraid or unable to go in the Deep Roads will be forced. No one."

He'd expected another outburst of accusations or complaints, but instead silence reigned. It was broken at last by Menehi, one of the elder Starkhaven mages, whose partner Anders had healed from the disastrous fallout of Jowan's blood magic research.

"That sounds like a promise," Menehi said, gruff and serious. He looked around the little clearing. "And so far Anders has kept his promises. All of the things he's said he would provide, he has provided, he's healed our wounds and he's given us refuge. What have you done, Daros? What do you have to offer but empty words and promises you can't guarantee?"

For the first time since it had begun, Daros looked flummoxed. He opened his mouth, but no argument came out; he had no answer to that challenge.

"We're done here," Surana said. Back straight, she turned and marched down the path towards the Tower, and Anders had at least enough sense of timing to follow her.

That was one thing Surana got right; mages could argue and bicker and debate until the sun fell out of the sky, and it would accomplish nothing. The winner on the ground would be the one to stop talking and do something, and that was what Anders meant to do.

Now that the first floor of the new Tower had been completed, a room in it could be set aside for Anders. He would have objected -- he was hardier, more enduring than many of the other mages who could use the shelter more, and the years on the run had accustomed him to living rough -- but there was actually enough space on the bottom floor to shelter all of those who needed it. Many of the mages were still choosing to camp out; the Tower was still rather barren and lacking in creature comforts, and the season was fine enough to make it bearable. Come fall, colder weather and falling snow would drive them all indoors -- but by then, the next few floors should be ready.
Anders walked through the blunt stone hallways with his pack in hand, feeling unaccustomedly small. He could see in the first-floor plan some of the same lack of imagination that had nixed the idea of a round Tower to begin with. The ceilings seemed strangely, eerily high overhead -- twelve feet, Anders estimated. One would have had to spend enough time in dwarven buildings to see the connection; a typical dwarven ceiling was six feet high, and the builders of the Tower had simply taken that number and doubled it.

The Tower as a whole was a rectangle, nearly but not quite square, which had been cut in half on both axes to divide into quarters. Wide hallways ran along each axis, ending in broad double doors on each Tower face. Flanking each of the doors was a blocky, square stairwell leading upwards to a second story that, as of yet, didn't exist. Starting from that most basic of divisions, the builders had merely had to keep cutting their measurements by half, then half again.

One of the quarters had been left alone, a broad echoing open space that could be used for an assembly or a ballroom or a training salle, anything they could think of for it. The next quarter over was the same amount of space but divided in half, yielding two long rectangular rooms and a hallway between them. Anders had gotten the idea that of the rooms had been claimed as a kitchen, and the other marked for an infirmary. He should go investigate that, when he had the time.

The third section was cut in half both ways, producing four square rooms separated by hallways, and the fourth and final quarter had been divided into eight even smaller rooms opening onto even narrower corridors. Anders' new room was one of the four smaller ones, providentially located along an outside wall; the interior rooms had no windows at all. The window was south-facing, perfectly square and blocky and located exactly six feet from the floor.

Left alone in his new quarters, Anders stared around the room. It was still a little gritty from the construction, but perfectly livable; someone had even brought up some of the furniture from Brosca manor. A bed -- actually, on investigation, two dwarven beds turned side by side with one mattress laid over it -- a chest of drawers, a desk, a small table, two chairs.

All this for one person. Anders estimated the whole space was almost as large as his clinic had been in Kirkwall, if a bit differently shaped. And without the holes looking out over the sea cliff, of course.

Anders walked over to the chest of drawers and set his ragged bag down on top of it. It clanked slightly.

After a few minutes, he opened the pack and took out the mess kit Mardra had given him. He walked over to the table and set it down in the center, then stepped back and stared around some more.

He sat down in one of the chairs, which creaked at the abrupt sag of his weight. Andraste's commode, what was he supposed to do with all this space? He'd lived in larger places in the past, of course -- the Warden barracks, the Circle dormitories. But those were all spaces he'd been expected to share. Never all his own.

Even as a child in his parents' home in the Anderfels, and later Ferelden, he'd never had a room all his own. He'd slept in a truckle bed in the same room as his parents -- or, later in his childhood when the weather was good, when he was beginning to want a young man's privacy and space of his own, in the hayloft of the barn.

In the years since then, of course, he'd slept in many haylofts; dozens and dozens of haylofts and empty stalls and shed corners and cupolas and yards and sometimes, if he was very very lucky, in inn rooms shared with half a dozen strangers to a bed. And cells, of course. He'd spent too many
nights in cells.

But this would be the first night he'd spent in a room of his own. Not even…

Even when he'd moved in with Hawke, he'd moved in with Hawke, and there hadn't been a room set aside for his own use. He'd lived in Hawke's estate for nearly three years, in that awful time while the storm built up the break and the Underground fell apart around them, Anders afraid that he would hurt every time he only meant to help. Despite the black state he'd been sunk in, it had in lodging terms been the best years of his life; he might not have had a room of his own but he'd shared the finest rooms in the city with one of the city's finest men.

Thoughts of Hawke had been hovering all day, in the corner of his mind as unwilling as he'd been to turn and look at them. It had been hard not to contrast the mages' closed-minded rejection with Hawke's easy, unhesitating acceptance.

Even with being introduced to Justice in the worst possible circumstances, even seeing them at their worst, Hawke had always accepted him. Them. Garrett hadn't always understood the strange duality of his existence, how they were one and two and one at the same time, but he couldn't blame Hawke for that; much of the time he hadn't understood it himself. It had been an evolution, a work in progress, for most of the time he'd spent in Kirkwall.

And Hawke had been a good part of that evolution. Hawke had always been there, had always been there when Anders needed him; a steady hand, a sympathetic ear, a friendly joke to pull him out when the darkness got too thick around them. Towards the end there hadn't been many jokes, not for anyone, but that wasn't Hawke's fault either.

He was crying again, Anders realized. Thinking of Hawke brought it on in a warm, crowding rush. But this wasn't the agonizing, gutting hollowness of his first night in Orzammar, nor the raging tempest that had threatened to burst him from the seams that night at the party. It was an easy and gentle rain, one which fell without sound.

And like the rain, in time, it passed. Anders sat forward in the chair and leaned his elbows on the table, wiping his eyes and trying to inhale through his stuffed-up nose. It was time he stopped floundering, stopped wallowing in his grief over Hawke. It was over, past. Hawke had been good to him, but what they'd had together was no more; he'd hurt Hawke with his deceits, and Hawke had hurt him in return, and --

Anders slammed his open palm down on the table with a crack sharp enough to make himself flinch. "Could you stop hounding and let me deal with this at my own pace?" he snapped, his voice echoing in the empty chamber. "I'm not on a blighted time limit to get over him! There's not a Maker-damned deadline here. I loved him, I still love him, and I'm allowed that, damn it!"

A discordant twinge of dissatisfaction, hurt and disapproval. Anders felt moved to add, "And you're in no position to get on my back about pining, you know, when you're here mooning over Hawke's cousin. Bit of the pot and the kettle, Mister it-would-be-your-regard-I-would-be-most-distressed-to-lose."

What?

The shock that ran through him was almost physical, like the snap that jumped to your hand from a metal surface after playing with storm magic. It ran up his hand and arm into his heart, and made him jump, and --

He'd lost focus for a moment. Anders looked around, on edge and uneasy. He'd never even
considered his -- *his* attitude towards Mardra in such a way before. It wasn't even possible, was it? Justice was a spirit, and spirits didn't do these things -- at least not in the way that mortals did. Or maybe the fact that they didn't do them the same *way* that mortals did was why --

*What?*

He jumped again, his hands twitching on the surface of the stone table. Time had slipped away from him for a minute, and that shouldn't have happened. He -- they -- were losing focus, and that wasn't good.

He was too confused, disoriented. They needed to refocus, to concentrate on something that would bring them back into the same rhythm. Anders rose from the table, feeling light-headed and unbalanced even though his movements were rock-steady. A few quick, sure steps across the room, on feet that seemed almost too numb to feel --

Another chair at the desk, a finely crafted piece of furniture that Varric would not have disdained; it had been put up on stone blocks to render it the right height for a human. Anders steadied as he ran his hands over the desktop, found ink and pens in all the right cubbies and sheets of blank paper under a wooden cover. He could have wept with joy at the sight, humbled as always by the consideration his friends had shown in even these small things. *Paper,* a rarity in Orzammar, here without even his asking. Bless Mardra, she thought of *everything*…

No. Best not to think of that now. Anders fed the pen with ink, pulled a blank sheet over to him, then paused, rehearsing their thoughts.

They didn't need another manifesto. Not now, and not here; the first one was still out there, doing its work. *Had* done its work here; the mages of this valley had listened, had risen up and taken their freedom in their hands. What was needed now was not a litany of wrongs and atrocities past and present, but a path forward to the future.

What was needed was a new manifesto, one that could *show* the world all the good that mages could do, once they were free and safe in themselves. There were plenty of examples here already -- Surana's wonderful wisp-borne music, his own healing techniques, a dozen new tricks discovered over the last ten years. All of his discoveries on the dwarven women's infertility problem. Andraste's knickers, there was even a mage out there in the valley that had figured out a spell to turn sand into glass, and what could *that* be worth?

It was a whole new horizon. He put his pen to paper, and began to write.

---

~tbc...~

Chapter End Notes
Not *directly* associated with this chapter, but this seems as fair a time as any: the wonderful Kirkwallgirl did a commission of Neria Surana in this story! Demonstrating the latest in Apostate Chic and Baby Bump, with flower crown and harp as this year's must-have accessories!
Mundane

Chapter Summary

Life continues, in Refuge and outside of it. The mages receive some unexpected news from the White Spire.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is almost entirely fluff and filler; it moves a few plotlines along, which is all it needed to do, but nothing really important happens until the end.

I know this is a bit off-schedule, but I'm going to be moving this weekend and don't know when I'll have access to the internet (or the free time to write anything) in the near future. Wish me luck, and I'll write again when I can!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is my most solemn duty and regret to inform you of the terrible events that took place in the Conclave at the White Spire four nights past. No doubt the fires of rumor have sped before our coming, but I find it doubtful that even they have managed to encompass the sheer enormity of events.

Following the events surrounding the findings of Senior Enchanter Rhys regarding the peculiar state of the tranquil Pharamond, the Council had assembled to await an announcement concluding this most tumultuous arrangements. With the Senior Enchanters all placed together by the Maker's providence at this critical moment in history, we made the decision to call the question of independence, as we had been granted specific dispensation by the Most Holy, Divine Justinia, to exercise according to our rights.

It was at this time that upon our chamber entered most forcefully the Lord Seeker Lambert, in accompaniment of a dozen of his most loyal and least disciplined men-at-arms, to proclaim the Council adjourned, a movement far out of scope of his authority. He put forth a most transparently false charge of murder, a ruse through which every mage present at the Conclave immediate saw for the falsity it was, a mere excuse to disrupt our proceedings while avoiding the dispensation granted to us by the Divine. He denounced the Senior Enchanters present as maleficars and traitors to the White Chantry, and in doing so he did lay his hand upon the hilt of his sword...

--A letter from Grand Enchanter Fiona, openly addressed to every Southern Circle.
"How are you holding up?" Jowan asked him a week later.

Anders hesitated before answering, partly to get over the weirdness of having Jowan be the one to approach him to offer sympathy -- their working relationship had improved greatly in the past month, away from the prickly _detante_ that had defined most of his relationships in Kirkwall towards something more like friendship, but even so, it felt weird. And also, in no small part, to try to figure out his own feelings and form a coherent response.

It had been a long week since he'd been semi-banished from Orzammar -- longer for the mixed atmosphere that had attended his increased presence in Refuge. He was no stranger to getting the cold shoulder from others, even from other mages. But where normally he would cope by burying himself in his work, his workload had instead been cut in half. He found himself, for the first time since arriving at Orzammar, with not enough to fill the hours of the day.

"Well enough, I guess," he said at last. "More than anything, I regret having to leave my work in Dust Town. The Queen has her own physicians to attend her -- the best in the kingdom -- but who do they have? There are few enough in Orzammar who care for the fate of the casteless. Without me…"

He trailed off. Jowan offered hesitantly, "You know, if it would help… I could go down to Dust Town sometimes and… and see what I could do. At least until the time comes to go off into the Deep Roads, anyway."

"You?" The word came out more disbelieving than Anders had planned, and Jowan flushed. Anders quickly amended, "I mean, it's a nice thought, Jowan, thanks… but really, what could you do?"

"I can do a lot with blood healing," Jowan said quietly. "More than you would think."

"I can do a lot with blood healing," Jowan said quietly. "More than you would think."

Anders scoffed. "They don't need blood magic tricks, Jowan, they need _healing_," he said.

"I healed you, didn't I?" Jowan shot back.

And that… was a point. Anders frowned, turning the idea over in his mind. "What exactly can you heal, with blood magic?" he said.

"Oh, all sorts of things," Jowan said eagerly, leaning forward. "Any kind of poisons in the blood, like the other night. Infections in the blood… and not just that, actually anywhere the blood goes. So most places. A lot of different kinds of heart conditions, circulation disorders. And I mean -- I can't _fix_ a wound with blood magic, but I can keep it from bleeding, and keep it clean after its' been stitched up."

"And what about the rest?" Anders demanded. "The sorts of broken bones and rotting teeth and busted brains that are a fact of life every day in Dust Town? What can you do for those?"

"I can always carry healing potions," Jowan pointed out, "and wrap bandages and set splints just like anyone else. It's still _something_, Anders, and you were worried about them having nothing."

"You're right," Anders relented with a sigh. "I don't -- I appreciate the offer, Jowan. Honestly, I do. I just wish we had more healers at Refuge -- regular healers, that is."

"We do have some," Jowan pointed out. "Daros is one, actually."
"What?" Anders demanded, incredulous. "That git? You must be joking!"

"No, I'm not. I heard one of the other mages from Markham say it," Jowan said. "He's no spirit healer but he is an accomplished Creation mage. You'd never have guessed it from how he acts, would you?"

Anders shook his head in disbelief. "Not at all," he says. "To be a healer requires you to care for the people you're trying to heal. I haven't yet seen any sign that Daros is interested in helping anyone besides himself."

"I don't think that's true," Jowan said diffidently. "He's... I mean, I know the two of you don't agree, but I think he is trying to do what he thinks is best for the mages. He just has different... priorities than you."

"You're defending him?" Anders stared at the other man. "Jowan, he hates you! Just last night he called you a 'blood-twisting maleficar' in front of a crowd of twenty mages!"

"I know, but," Jowan looked down, fiddling with the spoon in his hands. "I'm used to that. A lot of people think that, whether they say it to my face or not. If I only spoke well of people who approved of me and what I do, then I wouldn't have a good word to say about almost anyone."

Including you. Anders caught the implication, even if Jowan was too nice to say it. And when had he started thinking of Jowan as nice? He shook his head as if to clear it. "Well, there's no good reason to defend Daros to me."

"He's been in Refuge for weeks now and I haven't yet seen him lift a finger to do his share of the work," Anders fumed. "Instead he spends half his time preaching his Circle gospel to every mage who's unhappy with the food or doesn't like camping out on the ground. It's a load of nug shit, if you ask me, but he's talented speaker. Good voice, smooth delivery, and a pretty face on top of it -- people can't help but listen to him, no matter how much poison is hidden in the flowery words."

"He doesn't spend all his time talking about the Circle," Jowan objected. "Ria says she's seen him spend more and more time walking around in the valley, exploring the woods around the Tower. Maybe he's finally starting to like this place, starting to get used to the idea of living here."

"Or maybe he's looking for the best place to plant the bomb!"

Jowan gave him a piercing look. "Really?" he said. "Don't you think that's a little... I mean don't think you might be..."

"Projecting?" Anders said sourly. "All right. Probably not. I know that's not how Daros thinks. But I can't think of any good reasons for him to be prancing around in the woods, talking to birds and chipmunks like some kind of fairy-tale prince."

Jowan coughed apologetically. "You know, Anders," he said. "With the way you talk about Daros... going on all the time about how charismatic and good-looking you think he is... people might get the wrong idea."

"What idea?" Anders said. "He's a pain in my ass!"

"Well, like that," Jowan said with an embarrassed chuckle. "It sort of feels like there's... a chemistry between you. You always get so passionate when you talk about Daros. And he is pretty good-looking, after all."

Anders stared at Jowan, outraged denials crowding in his head. But of course, a hot denial would
just make Jowan more convinced of Anders' 'passion.' "No," he finally choked out. "Just… no. There is no love-hate relationship here. It is entirely hate-hate. He despises everything I stand for, and the feeling is mutual."

"If you say so," Jowan said, although he immediately spoiled the effect by adding, "But of course he is the cousin of the Champion of Kirkwall, so some people are saying, you know, that you maybe have a thing --"

Anders groaned, putting his head in his hands. "For the love of Andraste, just stop," he implored. Grinning, Jowan did. Anders began to wonder if the blood mage was doing this just to torment him.
There was a growing discontentment at Refuge. Anders might have been out of the circle for more than ten years, but he still possessed a Circle Mage's sensitivity to the tenor of the room. It wasn't clear what had changed, but something had; there was a growing restlessness, an unformed anxiety, a sense among the gathered mages that this holiday wasn't fun anymore.

Personally Anders was inclined to blame the change on Daros Amell's arrival, with his preaching of the luxuries they'd left behind in the Circle and the dire fates that would await them when the Chantry -- inevitably -- caught up with them. But he was also fair-minded enough (or at least, Justice made him be fair-minded enough) to know that he could not blame Daros alone for the anxieties, and removing him wouldn't put the spirit back in the lamp (so to speak.)

It was troubling enough that he brought it up to Mardra, despite their own continuing strain over the subject of Daros. He didn't mention her brother directly, and neither did she; Mardra agreed with his assessment of the growing unhappiness at Refuge, but was at a loss for how to address it.

"Perhaps another party? A festival of some kind, like the sports festival?" Mardra suggested, although her tone wasn't very hopeful.

Anders frowned, and suppressed the urge to snap at her. "I think that would only be a surface remedy at best," he said. "The unease will continue until we find a way to address the underlying cause."

"Like the prospect of being massacred either by the Templars in an Exalted March, or by the Darkspawn in the Deep Roads?" Mardra said sardonically. "I don't think either of those things are in our power to address."
He sighed. "Maybe not, but they're within their power, if they'd only realize it," he said. "They're more than strong enough to handle the Deep Roads. They just lack confidence."

Mardra shook her head, but didn't argue; he almost wished she would. If she would argue with him, he could find logical points to disagree; it was harder to fight against generalized doubt.

"They need to have faith in their own abilities. They need more resources at their command, so that they don't feel so helpless." Anders paused to consider. "What was it we were discussing months ago, about making certain that the mages get paid for the crafts they create? What happened to that idea?"

"That? Oh." Mardra grimaced, rubbing her temple as if to ward off a headache. "Technically, we are doing that -- but the crafters are supposed to come to the office to pick up their pay, and most of them don't. I think they just forget -- they simply aren't used to the idea of being paid."

"Let's focus on that then," Anders suggested. "Maybe we need to bring it to them, instead of making them come to us -- at least until they're more used to the idea of receiving money."

Mardra's face screwed up like she was going to argue, and then let out a long sigh. "Oh, all right, we'll try it," she said.

The source of Mardra's aggravation became plain the moment they tried to put the plan into action; chasing down the mages to give them their pay turned out to be much more difficult than Anders had anticipated. The problem was that they didn't really have -- and Anders didn't really want -- a system in place to track where the mages were at all times. In terms of allowing them privacy and freedom of movement -- good. In terms of actually trying to coordinate anything -- terrible.

"This is a mess," Mardra huffed as they hiked across the grounds in front of the Tower.

"They're earning for themselves now," Anders said hopefully. "This can only be a good thing."

Mardra shook her head, scowling. "Maybe in the long run," she said. "But in terms of keeping track of supplies that come in and goods that go out, it's a disaster. Also, half these people don't have the slightest idea what to do with money! They spend it in the same day, on frivolous purchases -- or else they stick it under a pillow and don't spend it at all, or else they pay half a sovereign for a glass trinket worth two silver!"

"Maybe we need classes on budgeting and money management?" Anders suggested, half-joking but with a serious note behind it. Mardra groaned.

"I'll add it to the list of topics we need to find tutors for," she said. "But we don't need classes, we need someone to actually manage the funds for the colony. We need a financier."

"Can't you do it?" Anders asked, and Mardra gave him an exasperated glare.

"Sure, I could -- Sure! I could do that! On top of being the steward and the administrator and managing personnel and project timelines and correspondence, I could take on another full-time job, certainly! No trouble at all!"
"All right, I'm sorry," Anders said, raising his hands placatingly. "I know how hard you work, Mardra. I don't mean to take advantage of that."

Mardra continued to glare, visibly swallowing her next few words, before she relaxed. "Apology accepted," she said. "And I suppose that if there's no one else, I can continue to do it… for now. But as the settlement grows, so will our budgetary requirements, and eventually we'll have to get a dedicated person for the job. Maybe more than one."

"I'll keep an eye out," Anders promised.

They worked their way around Refuge, handing out packets of coin to each of the mages who had contributed crafting supplies… and Anders had to admit, this did eat up a lot of time. The circuit spiraled inwards from the grounds around the Tower into the Tower itself, Mardra intending to return to her office after the rounds were done.

Omelas had been one of those to move into the available rooms in the first floor Tower. Jury, Anders was given to understand, had elected to remain outside. He looked around the room a little unhappily. Of course it was all new construction, plain and undecorated, and most of the mages still had little to nothing in the way of possessions of their own -- yet most of the little dormitory rooms had acquired fresh flowers or bright squares of fabric on the beds, to relieve the drabness somewhat. Omelas had not done any such decoration; everything in his room was standard-issue, plain and spare.

Mardra stepped into the room, small purse in hand. "Omelas?" she said.

He looked up from what he was doing; copying documents, it looked like, from an older sheet to a newer one. He had small, neat handwriting. "Yes?" he said.

She held up the purse. "Here's the profits from runes you made that sold in the bazaar in the last cycle," she said. "Sorry for the delay - yours got mixed in with another runecrafter's and we didn't have time to sort it out until today."

"It is no trouble, Mistress Amell," Omelas replied, and got up from the desk to take the purse from Mardra's hand.

Instead of opening the pouch to count it right away, the Tranquil man set it down for a moment on the desk in his room. He carefully tidied away the paper sheets he was working on, then reached under the desk to open a deep drawer and pull out a large book. Another cabinet revealed a heavy box that jangled a bit when moved, which he carefully set on the desktop, the edges perfectly square with the edges of the desk.

As Anders watched he flipped open the book -- also perfectly aligned with the edges of the desk -- and paged forward through it until he reached a half-filled page. He opened the box -- it had no lock, just a secure latch -- and Anders' eyes widened as he caught sight of the rows and rows of coins stowed away within. Copper, silver, bronze… each was stacked up neatly in its own compartment, and seemed to be separated by currency type as well; Anders caught sight of the Empress' face on a row of Orlesian pennies, and another compartment seemed to be entirely of Ferelden bits.

He lingered, fascinated, as Omelas meticulously counted over the coins already in the strongbox. He made a note of the value of each in a box in the ledger, coming to a sum at the end of each row. Only once that count was finished did he turn to the pouch of coins Mardra had brought him; carefully emptying them out on the surface and sorting them quickly by type and value.
With lips moving on words too soft to hear Omelas tallied up the value of the new currency, marking it studiously in the ledger, before sorting and packing each coin neatly away in the box. Once he was finished he did a final count of the new total, running it down in a row parallel to the one he'd made independently; only when the two totals matched exactly did he seem satisfied. He made a small mark next to the final tally, closed the ledger, closed the strongbox, and tucked it carefully away.

At last Anders found his voice. "Maker, that's a lot of writing!" he exclaimed. "All that for just a handful of bits?"

Mardra was staring, too; apparently this was the first time she'd seen the Tranquil man go through this ritual. "I had no idea you were so meticulous, Omelas," she said, sounding almost awed.

"It is important to keep track of funding, both incoming and outgoing," Omelas explained, sounding as though this were the most obvious fact in the world. "By taking a total before you add the new funds, you can ensure there has been no loss since the last check. Duplicate entries ensure that no counting errors will get through."

"But don't you get tired of it?" Anders asked. "You're just going to have to count it over and over again every time you add new money. And then over again for the second column. It must take forever! I'd put myself to sleep trying to keep up with that."

"It is…" Omelas looked down at the closed ledger, momentarily at a loss for words. He seemed to be struggling to articulate what was on his mind. "I have no more pressing duties to occupy my time. It is… to count each coin, and put them away in their proper place… it is like… meditation. There is a kind of peace in it. And to come to the end of the ledger and see that it matches perfectly, it is… that is a satisfaction."

That was as close as Anders had ever heard a Tranquil come to saying that they enjoyed doing something. And Omelas had apparently put together this entire multi-step process of his own volition, simply for the keeping of his own very meager personal funds. How much more could he do with the vastly more complex income and outgo of all the financial needs of Refuge?

Anders looked over at Mardra, and saw the same thoughts written on her face as must be on his own. "Well," he said. "I think we've found our treasurer."

Life at Refuge, despite being on the surface, was still in many ways governed by the pulse of the Orzammar day-cycle. The dwarven builders came and went in shifts that lasted a day and two nights, a day's down-time between, and then another night and day. Those mages who wished to seek out dwarven scholars and craftsmen in the city -- Surana and her bard friends, or Mardra attending the Shaperate -- had to time their visits so as not to turn up in the middle of the dwarven "night." Supplies turned up once every four days, at the start of each cycle. And with it tended to come the mail.

A number of mages had contacts and correspondence outside of Refuge. Some, now that they were away from the Circle, had even managed to write letters to their old hometowns and receive responses. Surana conducted who-knew-what business with the Orzammar bards -- whether they
were running a secret spy ring or simply exchanging sheet music was equally a mystery to Anders. But most of the letters that came and went through the dwarven courier system were addressed to Mardra Amell.

Mardra had contacts at Circles all over southern Thedas, even a few pen-pals in the Tevinter Imperium. Many of them had gone silent in the past few months, as her acquaintances either left the Circles or had their correspondence restricted by the Templars in the Circles that remained. But her network endured impressive; it also contained what Anders suspected was half the Mage Collective in Ferelden and Orlais as well as a dozen or more non-mage noble families in Nevarra.

Half a dozen mages had gathered near the entrance to the tunnel to await the mail; the Orzammar dwarves preferred not to go into the open if they could possibly avoid it. Today's courier, a well-dressed dwarf in Aeducan colors, turned over a thick stack of paper to Mardra, a few other letters and small parcels for other mages who were awaiting correspondence. Unusually for an agent of the Crown he wore no armor, but a heavy coat over a tabard with a brimmed hat to top it. He had a flowing mustache and a neatly trimmed beard, and seemed unaffected by the bright blue sky overhead. Clearly he was a dwarf who was used to the surface; one of Bhelen's agents in his business with other kingdoms, perhaps.

Anders lingered nearby; he didn't expect any letters but the news Mardra received was always worth hearing. Unexpectedly, the courier caught Anders' eye and with a discreet crook of his finger motioned him over.

With a feeling of foreboding, Anders followed him to a clear and quiet space over by the wall. "Er… can I help you with something?" he asked warily.

"King Bhelen has received some disturbing rumors," the courier said. His voice was quiet, pitched not to carry, but there was an ominous undertone that sent a chill down Anders' spine. "That you have been telling newly arrived mages at Refuge that the contracted year of service in the Deep Roads is not required. Can you explain this, Warden Enchanter?"

Anders took a deep breath, taking a moment to sort out his thoughts and the argument of his reply. Truthfully, he'd been expecting something like this. "Not every mage at refuge will be capable of serving in the Deep Roads, but other mages will make up for that time," he said. "The King and I discussed this before, during the negotiation of the Charter."

"Nevertheless," the courier murmured. "His Majesty wishes to remind you of the obligations of your contract, and that of every mage who accepted the terms of shelter at Orzammar. The year of service is not optional."

"Bhelen will have his mages when the time comes," Anders snapped. "Why is this even an issue now, anyway? I thought the army wasn't ready yet."

"Not yet. But preparations for the campaign proceed apace." The heavy greatcoat moved in a shrug. "When the army begins to move, the king wants to be sure the mages are ready to do their part. His Majesty has invested a great deal of money in this side-project. He wishes to ensure that his investment will pay out."

Anders struggled to keep his voice down, despite the anger that was creeping into it. "I told you, the mages will be ready when the time comes. I'm handling it. I don't need him micromanaging us!"

For a moment he regretted his words; pissing off Bhelen, even by proxy, was the last thing they needed right now. But the dwarf looked unperturbed. "Just so long as you remember that you
accepted responsibility for this contract," he said coolly. "King Bhelen looks to you to control and
direct these mages. And he will also be looking to you if the project should fail."


"Reminders only." The courier moved his hand in a salute, accompanied by a shallow bow. A
gesture of respect, but still with that very slight overtone of menace. How did he do that? "Stone
keep you, Warden Enchanter."

"Maker, I hope not," Anders sighed as the courier strolled away. The last thing he wanted was for
the Deep Roads to keep him a moment longer than he had to.

Blight. How was he going to stave of Bhelen on one hand while assuaging the fears of the nervous
mages on the other? Anders shook his head. He needed to step up their training, get a few of the
bolder mages on practice runs in the Deep Roads. If a few went, and returned safely with confident
stories of success, then they could embolden the others. But who could take on this duty? Jowan
was willing to go, but held little respect among the other mages. Hamil was fierce enough, but
uninterested in anything that wasn't fighting Templars. Daros... ha. Surana was out of the question,
he couldn't spare Mardra...

He put the problem aside to work on later as he walked over to rejoin the others. Mardra was
always a quick reader, and had gone through half her stack of mail while Anders argued with the
courier. She pulled the next letter to the top of the stack; it was a tattered, rough piece of parchment
that was not wax-sealed, only folded; the address was a messy scrawl that he couldn't read from
here. Mardra opened the letter, began scanning down the contents -- and went stock-still, a grey
tinge overtaking her face as the blood drained from it.

"Mardra?" Anders said, quickly closing the gap. Mardra's eyes were wide, and she moved her hand
to cover her mouth as she read. "What is it? What's the news?"

Without a word, she turned the first page of the letter over to him as she continued on through the
rest of it. He snatched it from her hand and began reading mid-paragraph, barely making a note of
the address at the top. It was from Grand Enchanter Fiona, the leader of the White Spire Conclave.

"... Seeker Lambert denounced the Senior Enchanters present as malefics and traitors to the
White Chantry," the letter read, "and in doing so he did lay his hand upon the hilt of his sword,
making clear his intentions to cut short our assembly and silence our voices in the most bloody and
brutal of manners.

"Even then the standoff might have had a peaceful resolution, but for one poor soul who stepped
towards the Templars, pleading surrender. In a show of unfathomable brutality, the Templar cut
her down in her tracks, and the Council chamber erupted into a chaos never before seen by that
venerated institution..."

Fiona went on to describe the melee in lurid terms; about half the mages had tried to flee, while the
other half (and Anders was astonished that it had been that many) stood and fought. Several of the
Senior Enchanters had been killed in the battle, and the rest arrested and thrown into dungeon cells
the likes of which Anders remembered all too well.

Unexpectedly, rescue arrived within hours; a small team had snuck into the dungeons of the White
Spire, freed the surviving Enchanters, and destroyed the phylactery chamber. The rescuers had
been led by Anders' old spirit healer instructor, Enchanter Wynne; an agent of the Chantry
underworld who went by Sister Nightingale; and an old companion of the Commander's during the
Fifth Blight. In truth, that last addition surprised him the least; a sentient golem wandering around
smashing open prison doors seemed more likely to him, if she'd been a friend of Brosca's, than the idea that the Chantry would intervene on behalf of mages or that Wynne would ever do anything remotely subversive.

However such an unlikely friendship had come about, they proved effective; they'd escaped the Spire to rendezvous with the other survivors in an old mine to the south of Val Royeaux. There Fiona, as the senior surviving Enchanter and apparently the only one with any notion of how to effectively mobilize forces, had rallied the others.

"...shall not provide our exact destination, in the case that this missive finds itself into the hands of the enemy; but let it be known that we, the last of the Council of Magi, are making our way west to safety with all due haste, there to regroup and reconsider our prospects. In this dark midnight of our time, they seem grim indeed, and yet I believe I see dawn's faint light upon the horizon.

For while we stand shaken, starved and beaten, bearing great wounds in our souls from the brutal murders of our brothers and sisters -- nevertheless, tonight we stand free. It is as free men and women that we now march, free of the bondage of centuries which we have endured and I send this letter as a call -- a call to all our brethren, whether you yet remain in the Towers or not, who would join us in our liberation."

He came up from the letter, blinking in the bright sunlight, and was almost surprised to see the same people and places in front of him; it felt as though the world had moved on its axis in the last few minutes.

"What does it say?" Anla wanted to know, reaching for the letter; Anders handed it off to her, and Surana and her husband both bent to read it over her shoulders. A buzz of conversation was starting to generate through the crowd, murmurs of disbelief and excitement and trepidation.

"The White Spire has fallen," Surana said flatly. The noise of the crowd dropped off in a moment of astonishment, then rose in volume and excitement. "The First Enchanters that were gathered for the Conclave are killed or fled. The surviving mages have taken to the countryside to the north, with the Grand Enchanter, Fiona, leading them."

"Don't you realize what this means?" Anders said, excitement rising in his bones.

"Half of the Senior Enchanters are dead!" Mardra exclaimed, still caught in shock and grief over the violence the letter portrayed.

"I know," Anders said, trying not to let himself be impatient. Of course he cared, it wasn't that he didn't care -- but mages had been dying in this war for years. This was novel only in that it normally didn't reach as high as the privileged, insulated Senior Enchanters. "And the Templars will pay for what they've done. But this -- this goes beyond one more dirty deed hidden behind Tower walls. This is momentous, do you see?"

"What we have is no longer one isolated Tower fighting back against annulment, or individual mages making a break for their freedom," he continued, looking around to see most of Refuge gathered there. "What we have is no longer the younger mages fighting while the officers still try to pretend that all is business as usual. This is a sea-change among the magi of southern Thedas. Our mentors, our leaders and elders have joined us in open rebellion. We are now, all of us, free men. The Circle has broken."
On the topic of the Tranquil cure:

In Asunder, it was stated that Rhys and Evangeline spread the news of the cure for Tranquility to every Circle before they returned to the White Spire.

I am choosing to alter that chronology in this setting, in part because it conflicts slightly with the events surrounding Tranquility and the Seekers in DAI. In DAI, no mention is ever made of a cure for Tranquility before Cassandra's personal quest with the Seekers, not even by people -- Vivienne, Fiona, or a mage Trev -- who ought to have received the notification from Rhys. Not even when discussing the Tranquil with Minaeve or Helena or Avexis or others (you can discuss it theoretically, but by that point in the timeline it should be far more than theoretical.) It also pretty badly undermines the seriousness of the "we have an obligation to let this be known so that Tranquil can be helped" debate you can have with Cassandra afterwards -- to keep the Seeker's secrets or to give people needed help even if it discredits the Seekers in the process -- if the information is already widely known and disseminated.

A few readers have made comments looking forward to the Tranquil cure being brought to Refuge. That certainly will happen, in time, as the news spreads -- but it's not likely to happen in this story. The purpose of introducing Omelas and his arc was that I felt that as a mage community Refuge needed to find a place for the Tranquil, *as they are,* instead of having them be magically (how else?) cured.
Meeting

Chapter Summary

The mages of Refuge gather to decide what to do in the face of the new Rebellion news. An unexpected guest comes to Refuge.

"And just where," a tart voice interrupted his concentration, "do you think you're going?"

Anders looked up from the table with a start, hands buried to the forearms in the bags he'd been packing. His head had been so swimming with thoughts that he hadn't heard anyone approach; Mardra and Surana stood in the doorway to his room, Surana frowning like a thunderhead, Mardra hovering.

"What?" he said. In all truthfulness, he hadn't given it any explicit thought. He'd been so full of excitements, hopes and fears and determination, that had carried him in a cloud back into the Tower and into his own room, pulling out his old traveling gear in the familiar old pattern once again. Trash… trash… keep, trash… keep…

Mardra vented an aggravated sigh. "Didn't I tell you?" she addressed Surana. "I told you he was going to want to go. I said!"

"Yes, you did," Surana said, keeping her focus level and her eyes on Anders. She moved forward into the room, pulled the rickety chair away from the table and sat down on it, arms crossed above her belly. "Not that I would have taken that bet for a copper. Anders, what are you doing?"

"Fiona and her people will need help!" Anders said impatiently. "They're traveling on foot through a strange country, with Templars in pursuit; most of them have never been outside the Tower in their adult lives. They can't count on charity from the people whose lands they pass through -- few strangers will help even one fleeing apostate, let alone a small army of them! They can't have more than a few days' worth supplies, if they were even able to grab that much. They need help -- they need…"

"I know," Surana cut into his rant smoothly. "They need a lot of things that we -- that's all of Refuge we, not just we-three -- can provide. But that still leaves the question, Anders, where do you think you're going?"

Anders blinked. "I…"

Mardra added, less kindly, "Did you think you could fit a three-day supply caravan in your backpack?"

"No, I --" He broke off, ran his hands through his hair in harried frustration. "I didn't plan to go alone."

Surana shook her head. "You shouldn't plan to go at all."
"What?!" Anders exclaimed. "But they'll need -- I'm a healer, healers are always needed, some of them are probably hurt, they --"

"-- have healers of their own," Mardra interrupted. "Anders, we need you here. You can't go running off the moment a new crusade catches your interest!"

"This isn't a new crusade. This is the same old crusade," Anders said. Indignation surged up in him and this time, for the first time in months, he didn't try to fight it. "I swore that I would see the mages freed, that I would bring justice to my people. I will not abandon that oath now."

Surana seemed unphased by the sudden emergence of Justice, or at least her expression didn't change. Mardra looked faintly alarmed, but she replied readily enough. "I wouldn't ask you to abandon it. But you were right, it is the same fight here as there. And your part of it has to be here."

Justice faded back, and Anders found himself suddenly uncertain. "But--"

"Anders," Surana said quietly. "When I argued for you to stay on as leader of Refuge -- when I told everyone in the crowd about how vital and irreplaceable are -- did you think I was doing that to flatter your ego?"

Anders flushed, and swallowed back whatever retort was about to let fly. "No, I didn't... no."

Surana continued, "We need you here. No one else can fill the role you fill. If you leave, this entire project will collapse. And then who will muster supplies for Fiona and her refugees? Where will they fall back to if their fight against the Templars turns to disaster? What will become of the mages who have poured everything they have into their lives here?"

Anders sat back, staring at his half-filled knapsack. Running away again, apostate? "You're right," he admitted at last. "It's just... I feel responsible. This rebellion was my goal, my fault, my..."

"Your fault? Hardly," Mardra snorted. "You weren't the one who goaded Lambert into a killing rage. You didn't tell Fiona to call the vote, or even force the other Enchanters to elect a Libertarian as Grand Enchanter in the first place. There were nine hundred years of circumstance building to this moment. You may have provided the spark that lit the pyre, but others are feeding the flames now."

Surana put in clinically, "You also have to consider what the ramifications would be if Fiona and her refugees were known to associate with the Butcher of Kirkwall. Out from behind Orzammar's protection, you'd be a much more tempting target to those who still hold a grudge over the Grand Cleric's death. Is that really something you want to bring down on Fiona and her people?"

"No. No, of course not," Anders said. "You're right, as always."

A small smile touched Surana's face. "I am pretty much always right." Mardra rolled her eyes, but did not contest it.

"But we still need to do something to help." Anders said, reluctantly abandoning his travel plans to think forward, to think on alternatives. "To send help. If not me, then who...?"

"I think there are plenty of people who would be willing to go," Mardra said. "Maker knows -- half of Refuge!"

"Hamil, for one," Surana murmured.
Mardra groaned. "Andraste spare Fiona that."

"I don't think there will be any lack of enthusiasm," Surana continued. "We are all of us here -- well, almost all --" a quick sideways look at Mardra -- "because we believe in our own right to live freely. But gathering the resources will be a challenge. Transporting them more so. If we can gain the aid of King Bhelen --"

"He might provide transport, but I doubt he'll be willing to commit any people," Mardra shot that idea down. "This will be up to us."

"You're right, it is," Anders said. He came to a decision. "Earlier you said that this is something that we, all of Refuge, need to do. It's time for action."

The girls eyed him warily. "…What sort of action?" Mardra ventured.

"Mardra, some time ago you had proposed a form of representative governance at Refuge -- like a Conclave of mages," he said. "I think it's time we started to implement that system.

"What? Now?" Mardra said, visibly startled. "But it's not ready yet -- we would have to list a slate of candidates, and hold elections --"

Anders made an impatient gesture. "Just a skeleton form of it for now, then. Gather everyone -- well, everyone who's interested in participating -- in the grand room of the Tower. I want to hear everyone's ideas, and then we'll vote."

"And what if the vote is deadlocked?" Surana said. "More fraternity bickering of the kind that paralyzed the Conclave for centuries with infighting?"

Anders sighed. "I hope it won't come to that," he said. "The old fraternities aren't here, for the most part -- maybe we'll be able to just… come to a decision?"

The words echoed hollowly, like the hope they were. Mardra and Neria exchanged a long, tense look. Anders looked between the two of them in increasing confusion.

At last Neria broke the deadlock. "I'll do it," she announced. "I'll mediate the debate, and preside over the voting, and announce the results."

"Thank you," Anders said sincerely. "I know it's not a small thing to ask…"

"It isn't," Neria shrugged, "but it's important for the future of our community. Better not to leave it on someone who might just walk away later."

That last was accompanied by a pointed look at Mardra, who avoided her gaze. Neria rose and sailed out of the room as gracefully as a tall ship, leaving Anders floundering in confusion.

"What was that supposed to mean?" he asked, but Mardra had already left the room with quick steps that echoed down the corridor.

They gathered together in the grand room on the first floor of the Tower, the wide square space so
empty and echoing that even fifty mages gathering there at once wasn't enough to make it feel crowded. Bedrolls belonging to the mages that bunked there had been pushed aside, or appropriated as seating; Mardra had arranged for a speaking platform to be set up at the inner edge of the room, with a large desk offset to the side.

Only about half the population of Refuge was here today; Anders wasn't sure whether or not to be disappointed about that. On one hand, this was an important matter and he wanted everyone to be involved; that so many mages should be so indifferent to the fate of the Rebellion was a bad sign, for him. On the other hand, this meeting was likely to be chaotic and tedious enough with just the size it was.

The crowd quieted when Anders stepped up on the dais; there were a few confused murmurs when he sat down at the edge of it without speaking. Surana stood up from behind the desk and began to speak; as before, although her voice was quiet, her wisps ensured that it could be heard in every corner of the room.

"The first council of Refuge will now come to order, Warden Enchanter Anders presiding," Surana said. "The topic for discussion today will be the response of Refuge, and its residents, to the events of the White Spire and its aftermath. You should all have been briefed as to the details of those, but if you need the details, copies of the Grand Enchanter's letter are being passed around." A sudden flurry of activity among the crowd, as several people went on the hunt for the promised documents.

Surana waited for attention to return to the front, and went on. "We will now take recommended proposals of action. Anyone may come to the platform to speak if they have a course of action to propose --"

Several dozen mages jumped to their feet, calling out for the floor. Surana eyed them without favor and added, "To ensure efficiency in the hearings, only those speakers who have to offer a concrete proposal, different from those already proposed, will be heard. Those who wish to offer opinions on proposals already stated, or on the general state of the proceedings, will not be heard at this time."

Most of the mages sat back down. Anders wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Surana went on. "When all interested parties have spoken, we will review the proposals and hold a vote. Every mage who has signed the Refuge charter will be permitted to cast one vote, and the proposal thus selected will be put into action. Any questions?"

There were a few, mostly detail-oriented minds asking about the legalistic minutiae, or people who obviously had not been paying attention to either the news or to Surana's speak requesting rehashes of the obvious. Anders tried not to let his attention wander, and was uncomfortably put in mind of how terrible he had always been at Circle politics. This, he reminded himself, was also part of freedom.

Unsurprisingly, the first person to push their way through the crowd up to the platform was Hamil.

"Now is the time," Hamil began almost before he'd finished mounting the platform, turning to address the audience of mages. His eyes shone with an inner fire, an incendiary eagerness. "The first blow has been struck. Blast it, the first blow was struck years ago! Surely you can all see now that we're at war, we have been at war, and now the clouds have been swept away so that everyone can see it. Now's our chance to deal some real damage!

"We need to get out there, every mage who can wield a spell, and hit the Templars on their own
turf. It's too late to be shy about it -- every Templar still living is a threat to every mage, so our goal has to be to reduce that number as much as we can. All of us -- all of us need to be part of this! No more cowering behind stone walls and dwarven skirts! All of us need to do our part to thin their numbers, and Fiona is leading the way!"

Anders rubbed the bridge of his nose with the tips of his fingers, trying not to let his headache be too obvious. Truth be told, there were times in the last six years when he would have given his left arm for the mages he'd been shepherding to show half the fighting spirit of Hamil. For the willingness to fight for what you believed, for what you needed and what you ought by right to have if not for the unjustness of the system that was arrayed against you.

What worried him was not Hamil's enthusiasm, even an enthusiasm for violence. It was more how… myopic his focus was. For all his eagerness to fight, he didn't seem any too clear on what he was fighting for, except the fight itself.

"All battle-capable mages of Refuge to leave Orzammar in order to fight the Templars," Surana said in a flat voice. "Your proposal is recorded. You may sit down. Next?"

Hamil sat down, visibly fuming; he was close enough to the front for Anders to hear the muttered "But there doesn't need to be another proposal!" Anders resolved to keep an eye on Hamil as the council unfolded.

The next person to shoulder their way to the front was Danum, nose as bulbous and jaw as out-thrusting as ever, and he had to set his own jaw to keep from saying something rude as the mage puffed and preened to have the spotlight.

"I think it's just typical -- I think it's just typical of these Orlesian mages," Danum began, "that they do something like this, making a grand gesture and then expecting everyone else to do the heavy lifting to follow through. For years this Fiona has been sitting around in her ivory tower doing nothing, now suddenly she has a problem and she cries like a little baby for help! Does Fiona not realize that we have problems of our own? We all have problems of our own, but we here at Refuge managed to solve our problems for ourselves, not relying on others to break their backs bending over backwards to -- "

"One moment," Surana said, and somehow her level-voiced statement managed to cut through all of Danum's bluster like a scythe. "Danum, it was specified at the start of this speaking period that we were taking concrete proposals of action on this situation, not general comment. Do you actually have something useful to contribute?"

"Oh, u-uh," Danum stuttered. "Yes, well… no, nothing. I mean, nothing is my proposal. We should do nothing. That harpy Fiona got herself into this mess; she can get herself out of it. We shouldn't waste our supplies and effort bailing her out. That's all."

He sat down again, visibly deflated.

Other speakers came up to the front, one by one, to give their proposals. Most of them were variations on suggestions already made -- like the proposal for all Refuge mages to go and join Fiona's army, but without the specific intention to kill Templars -- or impossible to execute, such as the suggestion that they should in some vague unspecified way force the dwarves to take care of things for them.

Anders gritted his teeth again when Daros rose to take the platform, and delivered a practiced, cadenced, five-minute speech -- complete with specific policy details -- on how they should use Bhelen and the Assembly as neutral third-party emissaries to offer to negotiate a settlement
between the rebel mages and the Chantry at Val Royeaux, with the aim of peacefully de-escalating the conflict and returning the rebels safely to the Circle.

It was all very smooth and rational-sounding, but as Daros sat down with a satisfied smile lingering around the corners of his mouth, Anders wondered why he hadn't gone even further. Why had Daros not taken the opportunity to further press his agenda of dissolving Refuge and sending all the mages there back to the Circle, as well? Was he finally, as Jowan had suggested, coming around?

His attention was taken to the front as another speaker stood up at the platform; this one was the elderly mage Ertha, who gave him a nod before launching into her proposal. "Bringing Fiona and her mages here would completely overload our existing resources," she said, "even if they agreed to join a community led by a -- troubled person. Furthermore not everyone at Refuge can, or even wants to, join her rebel army. But I agree that we have obligations towards our fellow mages.

"My recommendation is that we send a delegation of mages -- volunteers -- with supplies and survival equipment, to rendezvous with Fiona's band and ask her what sort of aid she and her people would want from us. We should not try too hard anticipate their needs or intentions in advance, when we can co-ordinate with them directly. That is all."

She sat down again, tottering a bit as she stepped off the platform, and Anders could have kissed her, despite that 'troubled person' remark.

A few more proposals were voiced, and then there was a long pause as everyone waited for another speaker to stand up. When none did -- mostly because, Anders thought, every possible combination of actions had already been covered -- Surana took over again. "Anyone else?" she said. "Very well. The hearings are closed; we will now vote. The votes will be cast by secret ballot, collected and tallied at this station, and the results announced once a count had been made."

This had great potential for further chaos, Anders thought, but it actually went remarkably smoothly; every mage there was at least familiar with the voting practice from the Tower, even if not all the bodies present had actually participated in such a council session. For the next hour mages huddled fierce, consulted in murmurs, scribbled on scraps of paper and jumped up to deliver them to the front of the room. They filed past the table, dropping their ballots as they did, and Neria sorted them into meticulous piles. The 'fight' pile and the 'send a delegation' pile grew the fastest, although Anders couldn't help but be dismayed by how many votes went to Daros' plan to return the rebels to the Circle and Danum's non-plan to do nothing at all.

As the last votes were turned in, counted and sorted, tension began to grow in the chamber. The 'fight' and 'delegation' options had the most votes; the size of their piles looked exactly the same. Surana counted the votes meticulously, noted the totals on her scrap of parchment, then went back and counted them again.

At length she looked up. "We have a tie," she announced. "The proposal submitted by Hamil, to fight the Templars, and by Ertha, to send a delegation of mages to Fiona's camp, have an equal number of votes, at nineteen votes each."

A groan seemed to pass through the hall, and Hamil jumped eagerly to his feet. Surana held up a hand, forestalling him. "In the event of a tie, the deciding vote falls on the presiding Enchanter," she said. "The decision is yours, Anders. How should we proceed."

"Blast." Anders winced, chewing on the side of his thumb. He hadn't wanted to be the one to tell them what to do… but someone had to break the deadlock, and between the two courses of action there was really only one thing to do. He sighed.
Anders stood up on the platform. "The decision has come to me," he said. "We will outfit a
delegation from Refuge with as many vital supplies as we can muster, and send them north."

"What?" Hamil cried, slamming his hands on the desk. His palms flared with a burst of fire,
sending a short wave of heat and the smell of singed wood throughout the hall. "No!"

Anders ignored the outburst. "On their return, we will convene again to decide the next step," he said. "This council is adjourned."

Clamor filled the hall, but on the whole, Anders thought they sounded more relieved and excited
than disgruntled. Mages congregated into knots -- except Hamil, who stormed out alone -- and
slowly began to exit the great hall. A number of mages crowded up to Anders, already volunteering
themselves to be part of the delegation.

Afterwards, Anders went up to Surana, tidying up the desk of the mess of papers. He made idle
chitchat as he kept an eye on the mages slowly filing out of the hall, until they had a moment
relatively alone among the crowd.

"Were the votes really a tie?" Anders said, pitching his voice low.

Surana looked up at him with her usual calm, inscrutable expression. She spread her hand and fire
leapt from it, burning the pile of paper to a mass of feathery grey ash. "A few votes either way," she
admitted. "It was hardly an overwhelming consensus. It was more important for you to show
leadership."

He'd already suspected it, so it didn't come as a surprise; still, the dishonesty grated on him. His
shoulders hunched, but he knew that making a fuss and calling the vote into question would just
spread more chaos and bad feeling. "Some leader I am, if I'm just a hollow figurine propped up by
you," he said, gritting his teeth.

Surana shrugged. "You'd be surprised how much of leading consists of putting on a good show,"
she said. "They need to know that someone is in charge. That's the most important thing right
now."

Anders shook his head, but left the hall without arguing further.

The next several days were spent in a frenzy of preparation; a delegation had to be selected, then
outfitted. There were more volunteers than there were spaces on the party, so some volunteers had
to be gently -- or not so gently -- turned away. Hamil, unsurprisingly, volunteered himself; Anders
could already foresee that any party with him in it would be dragged into battle with the first
Templar patrol they encountered, whether the rest of the group was ready, or willing, or not. He
turned Hamil firmly away, which resulted in another vociferous argument and a scorched patch of
stone on the Circle walls.

Finding enough food, camping, and healing supplies -- not just for the delegates, but for Fiona's
army -- was a struggle. In the end they had to wait for the next group of Avvar to come by the
trading post and buy out their entire stock, which sparked a great deal of curiosity among the
hunters. After telling the whole story, several of the younger Avvar expressed the enthusiastic wish
to travel along and see the mage rebels for themselves.
After some waffling -- and hasty consultation with Amund the Sky-Watcher -- Anders agreed. It couldn't hurt their odds for some more experienced wildermen to come along, he figured. At last they were all on their way -- ten mages and two Avvar hunters disappearing into the Orzammar tunnel, where he could not follow.

With the delegation gone, the valley was quiet. In terms of sheer numbers it shouldn't have made a difference: with only a dozen mages gone, there were still almost a hundred people in the valley, not counting the Casteless workers still chipping steadily away at the second story of the tower.

But the atmosphere was subdued. Even the dwarves spoke with hushed voices around the mages, practically tip-toeing around them in the general aura of anxiety. Refuge had been a, well, refuge to the mages there -- a sanctum of healing and salvation. It had granted them a sense of safety and security from the outside world. In many ways Anders counted that as a good thing -- it was a security they had sorely needed -- but it had also let them feel disconnected from the struggles of the mages still in the world outside.

Now that bubble of isolation had been pierced. Some of their own were out there, risking capture and death to make contact with Fiona's mages. And who knew what that contact would bring? If Fiona and her people decided to all return with them, it would focus angry attention on their refuge that might test the limits of the protection Bhelen was willing to extend to them. If Fiona were to demand that they all join in on the fight against the Templars… no one quite knew what would happen next.

Tensions were high. Anders did his best to keep up a daily routine, but most of his friends were preoccupied. Mardra seemed cool and distant; Surana seemed more heavily fatigued by her pregnancy than ever before, and Jowan half-distracted with worry for her. Anla was more affected by the general air of anxiety than most, working herself into a half-frenzy at times. At least Daros was not seizing the opportunity to start up his preaching again, a small mercy.

Hamil was furious at Anders' refusal to let him lead the delegation of mages, and his anger did not cool with the passing days. He spent morning and afternoon in the scorched ravine that served as a training salle, venting his feelings in jets and blasts of flame, with the occasional thunderclap.

"He's kind of scaring me," Anla admitted, sitting on Anders' table and swinging her legs over the edge. "Can't you make him stop?"

If only it were that simple, Anders thought with a sigh. "Hamil's got a lot of feelings to work out," was what he said instead. "I've been a teenage boy, and… I mean, you can't fully expect them to be rational. Everything you feel at that stage is just… amplified." For Anders, that had mostly been 'horny' over 'angry,' but he'd experienced enough bursts of seething temper to be able to sympathize with what Hamil was going through. "He's taking them out in his training, and that's probably the best way he can express them."

Anla wrinkled her nose in doubt, scrunching up the freckles across her high-bridged nose. "I don't know," she said. "He trains so much but he never gets any less angry. With all that practice, it's more like he's training to be angry all the time."

Anders frowned, rubbing the lower half of his face. That was an aspect he hadn't thought of. What if anger was not a wellspring that could be drained, like mana, but a habit that could be reinforced, like athletic training…? "I'll talk to him," he decided, pushing his chair back from the table.

No sooner had he taken a few steps out of the Tower, however, than a new commotion caught his eye; a crowd had gathered at the edge of the clearing, making an excited hubbub. Surely the delegation hadn't returned already? Anders frowned and started forward.
The crowd parted to let a figure charge through it, staggering slightly as he made his way across the clear ground. It was Sheran, the frail older mage who'd been injured by Jowan's phylactery experiments. His husband had gone with the delegation, but Sheran had stayed behind. "TEMPLARS!" he shrieked. "TEMPLARRRRS IN THE VALLEY!"

Shouts of consternation, and a few screams, started to work their way from the crowd behind him. Sheran staggered to a stop in front of Anders, puffing like a bellows, his skin an unhealthy shade of purple.

"Thought you'd want to know," he said, and collapsed.

*Oh, blight me...*

The only thought in Anders' head was to get a higher viewpoint; he wasn't even sure how he did it until he found his arms pulling the rest of him over the edge of the Tower's second story, the roof of the first story decorated by scaffolding as the second story progressed. Dwarven workers exclaimed in surprise, but Anders paid them no mind, instead wheeling around to face the edge and stare downhill through the valley to the edge of his vision.

And there it was. Straggling among the trees, climbing laboriously up the steep ravine, was a party of figures in winking silver plate. The lead one carried a banner before him, embossed with the symbol of the Sword of Mercy.

~tbc...
The others were waiting on the ground when Anders let himself down, somewhat more slowly than the ascent with the aid of a scaffolding ladder made for much smaller people. "Well?" Jury asked as he descended. "Is it true?"

"I saw them," Anders said grimly. "There's not a lot of them, but they're there. Plate armor, Sword of Mercy crest. Maybe half a dozen -- I didn't see anyone behind them yet."

Chattering and dismay broke out among the crowd of mages. "What are they doing here?" Anla demanded, wringing her hands. "Ow did they get in here?! This place was supposed to be safe!"

The fear in her voice pierced Anders like a knife. "There are passes through the mountains up to the valley -- the Avvar use them," Anders said. "Too steep and twisty for a large force, but a small enough group could make it through…"

"Yes, but how did they find those passes?" Jury demanded. "How did they know where to go?"

"I told them," a new voice pierced the hubbub.

The talking ground to a stop as the mages turned, almost at one, to stare disbelievingly at Daros Amell. He stood at the edge of the crowd, neatly turned out in his Circle robes with the sunburst insignia displayed proudly on the breast. He had his hands tucked into his robes, and his chin lifted proudly.

"You… did… WHAT?!" Mardra sputtered, and Anders couldn't help but note that her tolerance for her sibling's antics might finally have found its outer limits.

"I told them where to go, because I told them to come here," Daros repeated.

Anders turned towards Daros, and he didn't know what expression was on his face, but it made even the smug and unflappable Amell pale and take a tiny step back. "You brought Templars?" he said softly, a sound like a tiger's growl underpinning his voice. "Templars, here? Into our refuge, our sanctuary?"

"Yes!" Daros rallied, lifting his chin even higher. "I wrote to the Chantry in Redcliffe and arranged for an envoy to be sent to open negotiations."

"Negotiations?" Anla wailed. "They're going to kill us!"
"They're going to try," Hamil said with a growl. "All year we've been training, just for this -- now I'm glad I didn't go with the delegation, if it means I get the chance to defend our home against Templar scum!"

"They're not here to attack us!" Daros scorned. "Honestly, you're so overdramatic. They're here to talk, look at that truce flag."

Anders shook his head. "Why would you do this?" he demanded.

"Because someone had to!" Daros shouted. He flung up his hands, in a gesture so reminiscent of his sister that it made Anders' stomach twist. "Because somebody had to be the adult in the room, since the rest of you are all too mad to do it! I did the work, I took the necessary steps to begin negotiations, to end this senseless conflict before anyone else gets hurt, to find a compromise that we all can live with. I'll save you all from yourselves, if I have to!"

For once, Anders found himself rendered speechless -- a mixture of rage, disbelief, and an overwhelming urge to grab Daros and start smacking his head against the floor as though it could physically shake these delusions loose.

None of the others shared his dumbfounded silence; cries of dismay and shouts of anger had started up again in the crowd, and Hamil physically threw himself at Daros and had to be restrained by two of his friends while his hands spit sparks of red fury. For once even Daros' closest supporters had nothing to say, shocked into silence by this treason -- yet through it all Daros stood proud and unapologetic, certain in his own lonely vision of rightness.

"We don't have time for this now," Anders said when he regained his voice. "Those Templars will be up here in a few minutes."

"I will --" Daros started to say, but Anders cut him off.

"You will be dealt with later," he said. Daros met his eyes, and for once he had nothing to say in argument. "Now get out of my sight."

Daros took a few steps backwards. One of his friends -- Anders didn't recognize the woman -- grabbed his elbow and started pulling him away, hissing urgent whispers and shooting fearful glances at the murderous look on Hamil's face. Daros kept looking down the valley, reluctant and crestfallen, until he was pulled around a corner of the Tower and out of sight.

"He's right, we don't have much time," Hamil said, shaking himself sullenly out of Marco's hold. "But they're going to have to cross the open bar to get up here. If we can get into position in the trees above them, we'll have an open field of fire before any of them can hit back --"

Anders shook his head. "No," he said. "No fighting. At least not yet. I'm going down to talk with them."

"Talk?" Hamil said, outraged. "With Templars? What could they possibly have to say that would be worth hearing?!"

"That's what I'll find out by talking to them," Anders said.

"Do you want anyone else to come with you?" Jowan said tentatively. "For backup, just in case things turn ugly?"

Anders gave a strained, stiff smile in response, remembering the taste of blood in his mouth and cracking char on his hands. "If things turn ugly, I won't need backup."

Though really it wasn't so
much himself he needed to worry about; the other mages needed to do something to make themselves feel safe.

He amended this: "Still it might not be a bad idea to dig yourselves into the hillside along the path, just to keep anyone from breaking up towards the Tower. As for him…" Anders paused for a moment, considering Hamil. He did not at all trust the young man not to sneak down after him and rain fire from above. "Sit on him. Put him to sleep, if you have to."

Anders found himself filled with mixed, confused feelings as he started towards his meeting with the Templars. On one hand, there weren't enough of them to pose a real danger -- he'd seen no sign of a following force, though they could be camped further down the mountain out of sight. If that were the case, then obliterating the scouting force was likely only to buy them more trouble. Not that they would be without resources even in that case; King Bhelen was unlikely to welcome an invading army on his mountain.

It was the psychological impact more than any immediate physical danger that had Anders worried; most of the mages were responding to the presence of Templars with a terror all out of proportion to the actual threat. They had been safe here, without Templars; now the fear had come to them.

Yet at the same time, it had been inevitable that something like this would happen sooner or later. Refuge had never been a secret -- Anders had advertised it, and his own presence, to all southern Thedas. Orzammar's protection was strong, but not absolute. Sooner or later, the rest of the world would find them here; sooner or later, they would have to deal with that. Anders had never intended for the mages to live their lives in hiding and fear.

For most of them the fear was too ingrained; it would never go away, not fully. But if Anders could show the mages that the Templars could not hurt them -- that they could come, and be rebuffed, and the mages still find themselves safe…

He didn't mean to start a fight with these Templars. But if they did, he would finish it.

There was hardly time for him to duck back into the Tower to grab his staff from where it rested in a corner. Around Refuge, doing mostly healing work if he did any magic at all, it wasn't necessary -- but Anders would be damned to the Void before he faced a platoon of Templars without a staff at his side.

Fortunately the intruders didn't know the terrain, and wasted time blundering around in the ravines before they found a way up to the valley. Anders did, and he was able to take a shortcut through the woods and plant himself on the path, just where the meandering old Avvar goat-paths transformed into something more resembling a road. So he was already there, standing squarely in the road with his staff grounded in the dust beside him, when the Templars came clanking over the last ridge.

They were not all Templars, he realized as they came closer -- of the six figures laboring up the path one was not in silver plate but in a dustier version of Daros Amell's Circle robes. A moment of clear sunlight illuminated him, and Anders recognized the mage -- First Enchanter Irving, of
Calenhad Circle. Which would make the man with the Knight-Commander's badge beside him…

yes, Anders recognized that bulky, imposing silhouette. Knight-Commander Greagoir. Maybe a
little smaller than he remembered him but then, it had been almost ten years.

The party came to a halt when they saw him, clustering together for a moment, before the Knight-
Commander's sharp hand signal moved them forward. Anders tensed, palm twitching as he
watched them move closer, but although their body language was hostile and wary, none of them
had yet drawn their swords.

Just as the templars entered shouting range Anders shifted his weight back, took the end of his
staff, and dragged it across the dust of the path. Fire flared briefly from the tip of the wood and
faded just as quickly, scorching a black line in the dirt. The line ran neatly from one side of the
road to another, and Anders settled back on his heels on the far side of it.

At the first sign of magic the Templars had jumped, two of them going for their swords and two
more making half-aborted gestures that Anders recognized far too well -- but the swords still didn't
leave their sheathes, and Anders leaned back comfortably.

The Templar contingent slowed as they came within speaking distance, and Anders took that as his
cue. "Halt," he said, and the leader pulled up to a stop just short of the line.

"What is this?" the lead Templar demanded, gesturing at the line in the road. The voice confirmed
it; Greagoir it was.

"This is as far as you go," Anders replied.

"Why do you bar our way?" Greagoir said suspiciously. "Stand aside!"

"This valley is ours, deeded to us by the King of Orzammar," Anders pointed out with a false,
teeth-baring smile. "You are trespassing."

Irving spoke up from his place slightly behind Greagoir's elbow. "There is no need to posture and
make threats," he said. "We come under a banner of peace -- to talk."

"If you have come to talk, then we can talk here, with me on this side of the line and you on that
side." Anders let the smile drop from his face. "But any Templar who steps past this line will die."

A satisfyingly daunted silence followed that line, and the Templar who had been edging forward
actually took a step back. Greagoir turned to glower at him, then squared his shoulder and turned
back to Anders. "We were invited here by a mage called Daros Amell," he said, an oblique
acceptance of Anders' terms.

"Well, Daros is here and you can speak with him if you want," Anders said pleasantly. "And if he
wants to leave with you, I wouldn't stop him. But as Daros has not signed the charter for this
community, he holds no stake and no authority. So if you want to talk to Daros about how he styles
his hair, feel free. But if you want to talk about the future of the mages in this community, you'll
talk to me."

Greagoir scoffed. "On what authority?"

"My authority," Anders said, his voice edged with iron. "I speak for the mages."

More now than ever, that phrase made him wince internally; the mages couldn't all even agree on
which direction the sun came up, let alone on him as a leader. Could he claim to be speaking for
them, when what he said was not what they would have said? But Surana and Mardra were right in
this: whatever internal debate went on among themselves, there had to be just one voice in the end. And since there was no one else Anders would trust with the voice of the mage community, then it would just have to be him.

There was some dissatisfied shuffling among the Templar ranks, and Irving and Greagoir fell to a hasty low-voiced argument. At the end of it, though, Greagoir took a step forward -- putting him up to the line, but not across it -- and took his helmet off, placing it under his arm with an almost ceremonious motion.

He looked older, Anders observed, but then he supposed they all did. There was still strength and power in those muscles, and the grey steel in his eyes was flintier and less forgiving than Anders remembered it. He spared a brief moment to wonder at what the past few months had looked like from Greagoir's perspective: half his mages breaking out, one of the first major defections from the Circles after Kirkwall itself. It couldn't have been fun for him, but Anders wasn't about to waste any tears on a Templar.

"Very well," the Knight-Commander said brusquely. "These are our terms.

"The Chantry, and the Divine in her mercy, seek an end to the violence and chaos that has overtaken southern Thedas. She wishes a return to peace and safety throughout the lands, so that those souls which are in the Chantry's care will no longer be threatened by turmoil. To that end, she is willing even to overlook grievous trespasses…"

Anders listened with growing annoyance, but little surprise, as Greagoir's pontification went on; there was a great deal of empty rhetoric praising 'peace' and 'order,' as well as a fair sprinkling of vague, passive-voice 'mistakes were made' concerning the conduct of the Templars themselves. As grating as the persistent self-congratulation and blame-dodging was, however, he waited impatiently for Greagoir to get to the point of his pitch.

"…judges that the mages staying at this so-called 'Refuge' have shown sufficient civic spirit, and willingness to listen to reason, to extend an offer," Greagoir continued, and Anders' wandering attention returned. "All crimes of apostasy will be forgiven, and even other crimes committed in misguided pursuit of freedom will be pardoned; the Orzammar Tower will be officially recognized as a legitimate Circle Tower by the Chantry, a charter issued, and all residents will be permitted to remain in residence."

Anders rocked back on his heels, taken aback. He'd never expected this; never expected that Daros' plans for 'negotiation' could be anything more than empty posturing on the Templars' side. "Are you serious?" he demanded, pleasure and disbelief in his voice.

Greagoir gave him a stern glower for interrupting. "In return," he said, "the mages will submit themselves once more to the authority of the Chantry, and allow the addition of whatever safeguards are deemed necessary by the Templar Order to bring the Circle Tower back up to standard."

And there… was the catch. The tentative hope that had begun to ignite in Anders chest was instantly snuffed, buried under an avalanche of disgust. He might have known.

"In this way," Greagoir was finishing up his pitch, "we hope to restore peace and safety to Andrastean lands, restore the authority and good name of the Circle, while also addressing the -- misguided, but sincerely felt -- resentments of the mages towards their situation."

Anders couldn't help it; he threw back his head and began to laugh. The absurdity of the entire situation was just too much: to at least have come to a place where the Templars felt the power of
the mages keenly enough to negotiate with them as equals, only to be offered… this.

His reaction did not please the Templars; Irving looked taken aback, and Greagoir deeply offended. He didn't particularly care. "That's it? That's your offer?" Anders exclaimed. "'Come back to the Circle and we'll pretend this never happened?'"

"It would be better for all concerned, yes," Greagoir said stiffly.

"It would be better for you, you mean," Anders shot back. "You, who let the mages of Calenhad slip through your fingers! It would certainly be better for the Chantry if we just lay docilely down under your yoke again. But for us? What can you offer us that we have not already made for ourselves?"

"Peace," Greagoir snapped. "An end to this senseless conflict, and an amnesty for all. Pardons for those crimes they have committed."

"Amnesty, pardon -- those are for guilty men." Anders brushed this empty platitude aside. "Wanting to live free is no crime, and they need no amnesty."

"The law of the Chantry would disagree," Greagoir said sternly.

"Then the law of the Chantry is wrong," Anders said.

Greagoir glowered at him. "Even a pardon for you, as if that weren't gift enough," he said. "If you cared at all about the welfare of the mages in that valley behind you, and not your own lust for power, you would take this generous offer."

It was clear enough what was driving this. The protection of King Bhelen meant that the Chantry could no longer apply its preferred method of control, mustering armies to march about until resistance was obliterated. But at the same time, the mere continued existence of Refuge was a festering thorn in the side of the Chantry's authority. That they had defied the Chantry in the most blatant of ways and remained free and unmolested was bad enough. Worse, merely the existence of a free mage community threatened to put the lie to the Chantry's insistence that they alone could control and manage magic. Every day that Refuge lasted, defying dark predictions of demon infestations and Tevinter-style tyranny, was another small chip in the Chantry's authority.

With all the other problems the Chantry faced -- more Towers rebelling every day, the creeping influence of the Qunari, the ever-present threat of Tevinter, and civil war brewing in Orlais -- it was no wonder that Val Royeaux heartily wished the problem of Refuge would just disappear. What they could not win by force, they were now apparently willing to try to buy through diplomacy: if the mages would not return to the Circle, then the Circle could be brought to them. The status quo restored, everything exactly as it was before; everything the mages had fought and built and striven for thrown away, and they thought themselves immeasurably generous.

"Generous? To trade nothing for something?" Anders laughed again. "You know you wouldn't be standing here, mouthing peace and pretending dignity, if you had a leg to stand on. If you had the force of Templars to march in here and burn us to the ground, you would."

"Nonsense," Greagoir protested, even as a few of his templars looked a little wistful at the thought. "I always endeavor to find a peaceful --"

Anders cut him off. "And who would be the Templar Knight-Commander for this new Circle Tower? You?" he said derisively. "Fancy to make yourself 'Greagoir Two-Towers,' do you?"

It was easy to see from that question who in the expedition had studied their History of the Order,
Greagoir and Irving both flinched, as did the one other grey-haired Templar; the younger three all looked confused, not recognizing the reference.

Commander Henrik Aldren, more popularly known as “Two-Towers Henry,” had been a Templar from the Exalted age who had the dubious distinction of being the only Knight-Commander ever to preside over not one, but two Circle Tower annulments.

Aldren had been the Knight-Commander of the Ghislain Circle during its annulment. After the Seeker investigation had completed, concluding that Knight-Commander Aldren had carried out his duties in an exemplary fashion, Aldren was transferred to the Free Marches -- as a gesture of compassion, that he would not be forced to relive the traumatic memories of carrying out the Rite every day of his service.

Reinstated as Knight-Captain at Hasmal, he proved equally popular among the Templars there and quickly rose in confidence. When the sitting Knight-Commander passed away, Aldren was promoted as his replacement by nearly universal consensus.

Two years after Aldren was named Knight-Commander, the Hasmal Circle was also annulled.

Further investigation into Aldren himself, for the first time, revealed that he had been a member of the Order of the Pure Land, a sect of Andrasteanism which was only not considered a cult by virtue of not, technically, deviating from Andrastean theology. The Order of the Pure Land believed that magic itself was the sin that kept the Maker away from the world… and that he would not return until every mage on Thedas was dead.

Aldren was discharged from the Templar Order by command of the Divine, though no charges were ever brought due to his still-high popularity within the Order. No more was said about Ghislain or Hasmal; but the next year the Divine quietly issued an edict that hereafter, any Knight-Commander who presided over an Annulment would be automatically moved into retirement status at the end of it, effectively ending their career.

This was followed by a drastic drop-off in the rate of Annulments, not seeing another one for the next century and a half until the cleansing of Perendale. The edict was rescinded in the late Storm Age as being “an undue burden upon the office of Knight-Commander,” after which the incidence of Annulments began to creep up once more.

"I remember you, Greagoir," Anders said coldly. "You, who boasted your willingness to lay down the lives of every mage in your Tower! I wouldn't entrust a live rat to your care, let alone another mage. It is because I care for the welfare of these mages that I will never let you -- or any Templar -- have power over them again."

"You're in no position to be making demands and ultimatums, apostate," Greagoir said darkly. "With the crimes hanging over your head, do you truly dare to reject the Chantry's mercy?"

"Oh, and now come the threats." Anders rolled his eyes. "Really, Greagoir? You think I'm afraid of you?"

"We outnumber you six to one," Greagoir pointed out. "Every one of my Templars has trained to put down maleficars. It would be unwise for you to test that training."

"Oh yes, I've heard that song before," Anders bit out. " -- Let me see. There was Ser Rylock and her gang back in Amaranthine; and then later, Ser Rolan tried the same trick, bigger gang, same results."
He rubbed the stubble on his chin, pretending thoughtful recollection. "Then that time I encountered Ser Theodore outside of Highever -- and then in Kirkwall there was Ser Gamet, Ser Karras, Ser Ethel... Ser Alrik and his cronies, of course -- who will always hold a special place in my heart as one of the best things I've ever done for the world -- "

All right, maybe it wasn't entirely honest to pretend that these had all been his own sole accomplishments. For most of them he'd either been traveling with powerful friends -- Natya, and later on Hawke -- or had been lucky enough to face only one Templar at a time. Templars did always prefer to gang up on mages if they could, though, so if he implied worse odds than there actually were, they were free to fill in the details by themselves.

"Plus the ones whose names I didn't catch at the time, or after, such as that stately gentleman in Gwaren with the gaudy shield. Or that team of Crows that I encountered outside of Hercinia -- I must say, your Order's habit of hiring paid assassins to go after malefics so that you don't have to risk yourselves doesn't really reflect well on you. If you can't even manage that, what else are you bloody well good for?"

"How dare you -- " Greagoir started to speak, fury plain on his face, but Anders cut him off with a dismissive gesture.

"Face it, Knight-Commander, you don't have enough bodies here to even slow me down," he said with a sneer. "Blight, I doubt you have enough templars left in Ferelden to take the likes of me."

That was pure swagger, an outrageous boast, but it hit home; the templars shrank back, looking uneasy, and even Greagoir wilted a bit. "Interesting. Why did they come here with such a reduced force, anyway? If they could get six bodies up the ravine, why not sixty?"

"He's a monster," one Templar muttered, while another cried, "Ser, he's bluffing! We can take him now!"

It was not Greagoir who responded but Irving, stepping forward and raising one hand in that unsettlingly familiar all-eyes-on-me-students gesture Anders remembered from the tower. "Let's not be hasty," he said. "Whatever unnatural creature he's made of himself, he still appears to have his reason."

"I knew Anders in the Circle at Calenhad hold, a mere stripling apprentice under our protection. He has the same impertinence now that he did as a boy of twelve." Irving turned towards Anders, a look of sorrow and pity on his wrinkled features. "What have you done to yourself, my lad?"

"Don't you 'my lad' me, Irving," Anders spat. "You were no father to me."

Irving shook his head sorrowfully. "I always tried my best to protect you, my boy," he said. "For all of you apprentices, but I went especially easy on you --"

"Your 'best' was a quisling's bargain!" Anders said. "Don't try to pull the fatherly mentor card here -- it won't work with me. I'm not like your other charges, Irving. I have known a family's love, and a friend's care, and I do not mistake a lessening of brutality for either of those things."

"You had such potential to be a great mage," Irving said sadly. "I always knew that you could do great things…"

"I rather think I have," Anders said dryly.

"But instead you wasted your education, first with those ridiculous escape attempts, and later with this… nonsense," Irving frowned disapprovingly at him.
"Do you think I care any longer what you think of me, Irving?" Anders said impatiently. "I know, by the way. I know that you lured young mages into trusting you -- into accepting you as a figure of authority -- and then fed them books on blood magic, just to have an excuse to kill them when they accepted. They trusted you, Irving! And you betrayed that trust -- just as you betrayed every mage under your care with such a cruel deception."

The Templars escorting Irving looked taken aback, and looked on the old man askance; Greagoir did not shift expression at all. "Who told you this?" Irving said.

"Does it matter?" Anders said.

"It was Jowan, wasn't it?" Irving shook his head sadly. "That fool of a boy never could manage to stay out of trouble; he destroyed one thing after another that he touched."

"With all the destruction and chaos he caused in the world," Greagoir added severely, "It would have been better for him to accept my judgment ten years ago. At least then he wouldn't have had a chance to hurt people."

"Oh, please," Anders said bitterly. "As though you care about anybody being hurt. How many people have you killed with your own two hands, over all the years you've commanded a Tower? Over your whole life as a Templar?"

"None," Greagoir said coldly. "Only mages."

The utter callousness with which he spoke rendered Anders speechless for a moment, and Irving jumped in. "The goal of the Circle of Magi has always been to benefit the world, Anders," he said kindly. "That is not so much to ask, in exchange for a lifetime of food and shelter, and an education the likes of which you can get nowhere else on Thedas! If you had settled down, been less of a rebel, you would have seen that."

"Instead, you chose to incite a rebellion that has already taken countless lives, and caused untold damage," Greagoir picked up his part of the pitch. "Magic exists to serve man, how many times must you be told? Foul and corrupt are they who have turned it against His children --"

"I've heard the Chant before, thank you very much," Anders said acidly. "As though having it poured into my ears for nearly two decades at the Circle wasn't enough --"

"You hear, but you do not understand!" Greagoir talked over him, severe and unforgiving. "Those who bring harm without provocation --"

"We mages have suffered more than enough provocation --" Anders argued, defensive and wrong-footed in the face of this two-prong assault.

"Anders, Anders, are you still wallowing in your own self-inflicted misery?" Irving sighed, shaking his head sadly. "You've always been your own worst enemy. All of these terrible injuries you complain about, you brought on yourself, you know. You wouldn't have needed to be punished if you hadn't insisted on breaking the rules."

"Punished far too lightly, in my opinion," Greagoir muttered.

Anders reeled, shaking his head. He tried to reach for a response, to formulate an argument, but Irving had moved into the gap before Anders could find the words.

Irving continued. "I had hopes when you took up with that Karl that he would be a good influence on you, but you corrupted him instead," Irving went on reprovingly. "With your foolish notions and
seditious sentiments. It was because of your association that the poor man had to be sent away, you know; and if you hadn't persisted on writing letters to him even then, why, he would never have been made Tranquil --"

"Enough!" Strength and electricity rolled up from Anders' stomach, filling his mouth and setting his tongue afire. The actinic white certainty filled his vision again, and the nagging uncertainty and ugly doubts were brushed away like so much debris.

The templars cringed in the wash of blue light; a few of them fell back, while another jerked forward, his hand clenching in a familiar gesture. Justice felt the familiar crush of a Smite land on him, but he let it roll off him without outwards reaction. A part of him longed to strike back, to avenge the cowardly blow, but the way the Templar faltered and cried out when his weapon had no effect was almost as good.

He was not here to fight, except with words. "You have spent long enough uttering your distortions and perjury," he said. "I will have no more of it. This is not your place, and we are obliged to give you no audience.

"It is a cowardly enough act to kidnap a child from their parents," Justice continued, turning his disapproving glare on Irving. "And worse to keep them imprisoned against their will for all of their childhoods. You cannot then demand recompense for money spent feeding or clothing them; that was work you undertook willingly when you stole them from their homes. You are owed nothing.

"And as for you --" The flensing glare turned on Greagoir, who at least held his ground, though his face was pale and his jaw clenched. "You are afflicted with a vile delusion, a sickness of the spirit that perverts the very concept of right and wrong. A mage's life is worth no less than any other man's; they are equal in their rights to life, to freedom, and to justice. Any claim that there are lesser is false and iniquitous; any system, any argument, any religious based on that claim is rotten from its core, and owed no loyalty or obedience."

"Now begone!" Justice declaimed in a powerful voice, and struck the butt of his staff against the ground with a ringing noise.

"Now see here, Anders --" Irving tried to say, at the same time Greagoir roared, "I do not take orders from an abomination the likes of --"

"Begone!" Justice repeated, and he struck the staff again; this time the charred line on the path flared briefly into a wall of fire, and a sphere of invisible energy blasted outwards from him in all directions. The leading edge of it caught the Templars and Irving, and blew them backwards as easily as though their plate-clad weight was no more than dried leaves.

The blast died away, leaving the Templars in shaken heaps further down the path; Greagoir surged up, eyes blazing, but Irving grabbed his arm and whispered urgent hissing words in his ear. Justice watched them, cold and dispassionate, keeping them and the other four in his sights. He had taken care not to harm them, but if they attacked him, he would not hold back.

Prudence, it seemed, won the day; Greagoir released his hold on his weapon and climbed back to his feet. A few stiff gestures of command rallied the other templars to heel; with many uncertain glances backwards at the Tower, they began to retreat.

Anders watched them go, leaning more heavily on his staff as the fire returned to its banks. He felt
exhausted, but he couldn't resist just one more parting jab.

"You know..." Anders called out after them, his voice his own again. His throat was a little raspy and sore, but that would fade quickly. He saw Greagoir stiffen his shoulders, but refuse to turn around; Irving, however, was drawn in enough to turn around.

"If you hadn't sent Karl away," Anders said, "then I wouldn't have escaped again that last time. If you hadn't sent him to Kirkwall, I would never have had reason to go there. And then none of the rest of what followed, would ever have happened. So... good work on that, I guess."

Greagoir marched off, back stiff and head held high. Irving's shoulders slumped, and he hobbled after.

Anders went up the path towards Refuge more slowly than he had come down it, and not only because of the steepness of the slope; he was aching in every limb, as though he had actually engaged in a battle of blows and not just words.

Hamil met him halfway, cheeks red and breathing quickened from having run down to meet him. He stared with horror past Anders' shoulder, and Anders glanced backwards to see the Templar delegation disconsolately making their way back down the ravine.

"What are you doing?" Hamil shouted. "You can't just let them GO!"

Anders grimaced. "Let them run back to their masters with the news of their failure," he said, as other mages began to make their way down to join them. "That will send a clear message: We do not need them in this place, and we will not permit their incursion."

"Sending back their heads would send a clear message, too," Hamil said darkly.

"No." Anders shook his head. "Let them go in peace, if they go." He still wasn't letting out the possibility of Greagoir and his Templars circling back in the night, but he honestly didn't know what they would accomplish by doing so; still, best to start posting a watch.

"We have a clear shot!" Hamil said. "We outnumber them and they're on our territory. We could take them."

"We could, but it is not necessary," Anders emphasized the last word. "I laid down a line, and they have not crossed it."

Hamil stared at Anders as though he had grown another head. He spoke slowly, emphasizing each syllable as though Anders was somehow failing to speak his language. "They. Are. TEMP! LARS!"

"They are not our enemy," Anders said.

"What?" Hamil said disbelievingly. "Then who in the Void d'you think IS our enemy?!"

The Chantry. The Andrastean faith. The ignorance of the populace. The apathy of the populace. Nine hundred years of cultivated fear and hatred. The demons of the Fade that prey on us. The
magisters of Tevinter who would enslave us. The blight beneath our feet that still would, in a
heartbeat's negligence, swallow us all. All of these answers ran through Ander's head, but he didn't
speak the first one that leapt to the tip of his tongue, which was: Ourselves.

He shook his head again, and did not answer. "They're no danger to us now," he said instead. "I
won't hesitate to kill when necessary. But it isn't necessary."

"No danger to us, maybe," Hamil said. "We're safe here in this defensible hole, protected by the
King of Orzammar himself. What about the rest of us who are still out there somewhere?"

He stomped past Anders, and added over his shoulder as a parting shot, "Those templar scum are
going to go back out there, and they're going to kill defenseless mages who are just running for
shelter. And those deaths will be on your head, because you could have stopped it and you didn't."

Hamil stormed off. Anders rubbed his forehead, grimacing against the incipient headache, and
continued on up the path towards Refuge.

A few others met him on the path, approaching more cautiously than Hamil had. There was still no
sign of Daros, thank the Maker, because after that last exchange Anders didn't have it in him to
tangle with that asshole again.

"What happened at the end there?" Mardra said, looking past Anders at the retreating Templar
figures. "I saw -- I saw Justice make an appearance and we were sure a fight would break out, but
then they retreated instead…"

Anders shook his head. "It was fine," he said, although her concern warmed him. "We had it under
control."

"What did they want?" Jury wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing much," Anders said. The other mages looked at him, confused. "For us to surrender
our independence and autonomy and willingly walk back into the cell we spent so much time and
effort breaking out of, that's all."

He explained the Templars' offer, in rather less glowing and congratulatory terms than Greagoir
had. Most of the mages, he was pleased to see, looked as incredulous and outraged as he felt, but a
few faces showed increasing puzzlement.

"They offered amnesty?" Danum exclaimed. "And you didn't take it?"

"Amnesty for what? Amnesty for our freedom?" Anders said. "The fact that they bothered to
negotiate with us at all only shows that we're beyond them now. They have no power over us any
more. Unless we stupidly decide to give it back to them," he added, thinking darkly of Daros.

"Yes, well... but what about the future?" Danum said, wringing his hands together nervously. "So
long as the Mage-Templar war lasts, we'll be stuck in this valley, not able to leave for fear of the
Templars. It might as well be another Circle. Why not accept their offer?"

"Because it was contingent on them leaving a squadron full of Templars here to 'supervise' us!"
Anders said.

"Would that really be so bad?" Ertha put in quietly.

"Would that re -- " Anders repeated, then broke it off, staring at her in disbelief. "What?! Yes, of
course it would be that bad!"
"But this is our territory," Ertha argued. "We'd have the upper hand. We wouldn't let them get as bad as they did in the old Towers."

"It wouldn't start that way, perhaps. But it would end that way," Anders said. He added in frustration, "Why would you even want to have Templars around, controlling you, bossing you around?"

"Not for every day!" Danum exclaimed. "Just for, for... emergencies. Like when Jowan's experiment went wrong, or that elf girl lit a tree on fire because of a few night terrors. Or... what if there are demons?"

"We can handle demons," said Anders, who had been fighting demons -- one way or another -- since the moment he'd crossed paths with Natya Brosca in Amaranthine.

"Oh sure, we can, because we've all been Harrowed." Danum said. "But you say there won't be any more Harrowings. What if new people come to the Tower, or children, and they aren't strong enough to resist the demons?"

"I would," Surana said in a calm voice, "kill any templar who came within a hundred feet of my child."

She'd said it without any particular emotion; but nobody, looking at her face, saw any reason to doubt it.

The conversation stuttered for a moment, and Anders stepped into the gap. "If there are demons, we'll find a way to deal with them that doesn't involve templars," he said firmly. "Yes, we will eventually have younger mages here, and that's precisely why we can't allow the Templars a foothold! We can't just think of ourselves; we have to think of our children, a hundred years from now."

This argument would go on all day if he let it; he turned his back on Danum and went back to climbing the slope, Refuge in his sights. The others followed him, some slowly and reluctantly, but they followed. Danum brought up the rear, still muttering under his breath. "Why should you care?" he scoffed. "You don't even have children!"

Anders looked up the valley to Refuge; the tower surrounded by a field of smaller tents and buildings, figures small at that distance filling the space between them. A year ago, this valley had been empty; what would it look like ten years from now? A hundred? Someone had to think of these things, not just the next day or week or year. Someone had to think of the mages yet to come, of their rights and protections and the lives they would live even once he and the others were gone.

But I do, Anders thought to himself. I do.

~tbc...
Readers familiar with Asunder/the DAI timeline may wonder why the Templars are here, making offers, when the Templars break from the Chantry shortly after the mages rebel. There are basically two answers to that: the first is that since Fiona and her band have only been in the wilderness for a week or so, and I don't think Cole has even killed Lambert yet, they haven't dissolved the Nevarran accord just yet.

The second is that I think it's entirely reasonable to suggest that just as some mages remained loyal to the Chantry after the Rebellion officially started, the Templars would likewise have their own faction of Loyalists. Military order with a centralized command or not, they can't possibly all have agreed with the decision to break with the Chantry. But the fact that so many of them are about to may well be why the Templars sweat so much when Anders calls their bluff on not having the numbers to take out Refuge through a military campaign.
Minutes

Chapter Summary

Refuge deals with the problem of Daros Amell.

Day 14:
We were attacked last night in the dark. We had set sentries, but only singly; the Templars managed to overwhelm Dara and kill her in silence. The rest of the encampment was taken completely by surprise, including me.

We woke to chaos. Though there were fewer of the attackers than ourselves -- I do not believe more than two dozen in total -- few had any thoughts to attack, or for anything but to flee. Those who had the presence of mind to do so grabbed what was close to hand and fled; the rest simply bolted into the night. I rallied but a handful of our sturdiest mages to put the fight to our assailants, but we were overmatched.

Pavarnus bade me to leave with the rest, to lead the retreat lest the rest be loss; he assured me that he and the others would catch up to me later. I believe that he and I both knew, as I gathered up the last of the children and struck for an open path, that there would be no later.

As I write this missive the dawn is slowly bringing light to the sky, and we have recovered in a new fortification some five miles to the west. There is no sign of Templar pursuit yet, though I have redoubled the watch. Many of the apprentices are crying with hunger or with fear, and there is little I can do to address either. Most of the supplies were left behind at the night camp and so, we realized only once we regrouped, were all but two of the Tranquil. They could not run fast enough or perhaps, did not think to. I pray to the Maker that they were recaptured by the Templars, and not struck down where they stood.

There is little time to rest. We must press on.

-A page taken from Fiona's diary
The most urgent task was to watch and track the Templars as they retreated, to make certain that they did retreat, not circling around to try for a strike in the night or going to make contact with reinforcements beyond the mountains. But there was no sign of any further attack, and at the end of the third day the scouts all came back reporting that the Templars had passed out of the valley and not returned.

The next task was to put up scouts to warn against the Templars if they did return, and also more generally to keep an eye out for any strangers in the valley so that they would not be taken by surprise again. Several among Hamil's 'battle-training' group volunteered enthusiastically -- but while they might have practiced throwing fireballs with great force and precision, most of them had never been called on to keep any kind of sustained watch. Anders had -- on his travels with the Knight-Commander, and later Hawke -- so he was kept busy trying to instruct them on their new duties.

Once he was confident they could do the job without either falling asleep or wandering off their posts when they got bored, there was another unpleasant piece of business waiting back for him at Refuge: the fate of Daros Amell.

No one had been entirely sure at first what to do about him; they had no formal judicial system, nor really any concept of how to create one. The enforcement of punishments in the Tower had always been handled by the Templars, with the First Enchanter only occasionally being consulted. The only one among them who had even made a study of law and jurisprudence was, of course, Mardra Amell, and Daros was her brother.

In the end Mardra called a limited Conclave, a quorum for judgment. Members were selected as representatives from each of the Tower populations that had come to Refuge: Sheran from Starkhaven (and Kirkwall;) the older mage Ertha from Calenhad; one of Hamil's followers, Marco, from Markham; Mardra herself from Perendale; a few others that Anders didn't know well, from the other Free Marches and Orlais Circles.

Anders would have preferred to sit out the entire thing, but both Mardra and Sheran had insisted that he attend. "I don't represent any of the Towers," he protested. "Not for ten years. Kinloch Hold was the last, and Ertha's got that one covered."

"We still need a jury foreman," Sheran pointed out. "Who better for the job than a literal spirit of justice?"

As they gathered in one of the echoing Tower chambers, Surana also showed up and presented herself on the jury.

"What are you doing here?" Marco said crossly. "You weren't invited."

Surana met his eyes with a steady stare. "Your jury as it stands has no elves on it," she pointed out calmly. "I'm here to give the elves of Refuge a voice in its administration."

"This has nothing to do with the elves!" Sheran exclaimed.

"What Daros tried to do might have meant the destruction of Refuge itself, and would have had an effect on all its members -- including the elves," Surana said coolly. "I have as much right to be here as any of you."

"I have no objection," Mardra said, to Marco's evident surprise.

The other jury members looked at each other, somewhat uncertain. "Warden Enchanter?" Marco
appealed to Anders.

Anders opened his mouth to speak, then abruptly changed his mind when the memory of his own voice came back to him. *Do what you need to do for the elves,* he'd told Surana once, *and I'll back you.* "She's right," he said instead. "She can stay."

With Anders and Mardra both backing her, the other members of the Council seemed at a loss to come up with any other objections. And now Surana had set a precedent, Anders realized; no one would ever be able to argue, in years to come, that elves hadn't been a part of the process from the beginning.

The trial was just as unpleasant as Anders had anticipated, not made much better by the uncertainty with which the participants approached everything. Daros was brought in, escorted by two mages utterly unimpressed by his rhetoric, to speak in his defense.

Which he did, grandiloquently and at length; it was nothing Anders and the others had not heard before, and really the only thing notable about it was that it underscored how certain Daros was that he had been right all along, and had done nothing wrong.

At length, Daros' testimony was cut short -- he'd started to repeat himself -- and he was escorted back out of the chamber, expressing outrage all the way at having his audience taken away.

A glum silence fell over the chamber, most of the mages avoiding Mardra's eyes; no one seemed to want to be the first to speak. At length Ertha sighed and squared her shoulders, seeming to take a certain duty from being the eldest present. "So," she said. "What should we do with our little renegade?"

Marco cleared his throat uncomfortably. "We could… we could kill him," he offered.


"I'm not saying that like I want to!" Marco protected. "But... he made a deal with our enemies. He went behind all our backs to make a deal with our enemies. And he gave them information about how to find us. Isn't that treason?" He looked around the chamber. "Isn't that... how most people deal with treason? In Orlais, in Ferelden, in the Imperium?"

Anders spoke up next. "There are enough lethal dangers awaiting a mage in this world for us to add to them, and few enough free mages in the South," he said. "Like him or not, Daros Amell is our kinsman. What we do to him, we do to all of us. We'll need a better reason to start killing our brothers than 'that's what other people do.'"

The tension level in the room dropped noticeably after that declaration. Everyone relaxed a little; even Marco looked relieved.

"If not execution, then what?" Sheran asked. "How does the Circle deal with crimes of treason, traditionally?"

"That's a bit difficult to say," Mardra said. "Most cases of what are called treason in Circle records are against the Templars or the Chantry, which isn't applicable in this case for obvious reasons. Outside of that there are actually very few cases to choose from; the Circle has usually been an entity unto itself, interfacing only with the Templars, and isn't supposed to get involved in international conflicts.

"Which is not to say they never have." Mardra's voice steadied as she talked, relaxing somewhat with her attention on events and people long distant and dead. "During the Storm Age, Emperor
Freyan at one point conscripted the magi of Montsimmard in his campaign against Nevarra. One mage of Montsimmard, Elyot Eder, had family there; she defected to the Baron's encampment with information about Freyan's tactics. Freyan declared that an act of treason and had her hanged in effigy, but since his campaign ground to a halt in the Fields of Ghislain, Eder was never recaptured and the sentence never carried out.

She glanced down at her notes. "Outside of that, there isn't much; the magi have mostly only been used during the Blight or in the war against the Qunari, and no defections were recorded in either case."

Anders snorted. "They could hardly defect to the darkspawn," he said. Templars or no Templars, one look at a broodmother would send even Daros Amell fleeing in the other direction.

"You'd have to look to the Imperium for more cases," Mardra went on. "The Circles there often get involved in internecine warfare, there's quite a body of work. The most recent case was in 8:91 Blessed, when an altus of Carastes defected to the Vyrantium Circle with vital military secrets in exchange for a post there."

"What happened to him?" Marco wanted to know.

Mardra's lips tightened. "He was captured on the road to Neromen and brought back to the Carastes Tower, where he was tried and made Tranquil."

Every mage present winced. "We are definitely not making anyone Tranquil," Anders said, his voice brooking no argument.

"I should say that we ought not use Tevinter as a model, anyway," Ertha said.

"Nor the Circle," Anders said. "We did not fight our way free of the Circle only to immure ourselves in its traditions."

"Well, that doesn't leave many legal options," Mardra said. "We could look at the Orzammar model; aside from execution outright, the most common punishment for sedition is to be stripped of their Caste and banished to the Deep Roads. That happened just ten years ago to Duran Aeducan, who slew his elder brother Trian Aeducan and was banished for it. But we don't have castes in the first place, and banishment to the Deep Roads is just another form of death sentence."

Mardra looked around the chamber, her features stern and serious. "I think we will have to accept the fact that we cannot rely on the traditions of others to guide us. We are on new territory here. Whatever we do, it will set the precedent for the next crime committed in Refuge, and every one after it."

A daunted silence fell.

Anders was the first to stir himself. "Justice must be served," he said slowly. Every eye in the chamber turned to him. "Daros must pay for his crime. But requital is only a part of true justice. We must consider both the intentions of the criminal and the aftermath of the crime. If we only apply a law by rote, then justice is hollow.

"However misguided, Daros' intentions were for the welfare of the mage community. And despite the risk in which he placed us all, no mages have been hurt. Not every crime --" here he looked directly at Mardra, who met his gaze steadily, "-- requires corporal punishment. Other punishments will serve."

"Community service?" Mardra said hopefully.
Sheran frowned. "That seems a little lenient, considering the crime."

"I believe it would serve us more than a show of violence," Anders said. "Both the service itself, and to make a lesson to others that even crimes can be forgiven, if the criminal is willing to repent and work to make amends."

"And if he isn't willing?" Marco challenged.

"We have to consider the practicalities here," Surana said. It was the first time she'd spoken since the conclave had begun. "We don't have the space or the resources to spare to build a prison and guard it. We can't afford to keep people in this community who will not abide by our laws. Daros would have to agree to whatever sentence we place. If he will not abide by our verdict, then he must be either banished, or killed."

"But doesn't banishing him just move the problem elsewhere?" Ertha said. "Is it really responsible of us to turn criminals loose on the ordinary population because we can't handle them ourselves?"

"The Templars are still out there," Sheran said coldly. "If he turns maleficar, they'll take care of him."

"Then how is that different from killing him ourselves, except that more innocent bystanders get hurt in the process?" Ertha challenged. "Is it really worth it, just to keep our own hands clean?"

Another unhappy silence fell over the conclave.

"I would not ask another to do what I was not willing to do myself," Anders said at last. "But in this case, that need not be a concern. Daros is hardly a maleficar; if banished, he will no doubt return as a Loyalist to a Circle that would welcome him."

Heads nodded all around. "Then it seems that the final choice is left to Daros himself," Ertha said. "He will either agree to accept our terms of labor, or he will not. If he does, then he can return to the community, in time. If not, then he must leave forever."

"Very well," Surana said. "Shall we put it to a vote?"

This time, they did not bother with a secret ballot; hands were raised around the table. Somewhat to Anders' relief, the decision was unanimous; while a simple majority might have served, it was better not to have remaining divisive feelings. Maker knew, there would likely be strife enough in the rest of Refuge when the verdict got out; better to present a united front from the start.

Daros was brought back in, back straight as a board, chin high and nose in the air.

"Do your worst," he scorned. "Even if I die, I know that I will die for my beliefs. I've done what's right, even if none of you can see it, and history will revere my name!"

Maker, Anders hoped he hadn't sounded this pretentious in Kirkwall two years ago.

"Daros Amell, are you prepared to accept the judgment of this conclave?" Ertha said severely. Anders got flashbacks to Wynne.

"Never!" Daros said heately. "Kill me if you must, but I will never submit."

"We're not going to kill you," Ertha said in annoyance, shooting a dark look over at Marco. "But you have only two choices. Agree to abide by the judgment of the council -- to do the penance we require of you on behalf of the mages of this community -- or be banished from Refuge, now and
A wide grin split Daros' face. So different from the usual aloof, supercilious expression he wore -- for a moment he looked twenty years younger, like the mischievous boy Mardra remembered from her childhood. 'Ha!' he cackled. 'Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to hear those words? How thrilled I will be when we leave this miserable mudhole behind?'

"You could have left at any time," Anders growled, nettled.

"And let you win?" Daros scoffed. "I knew sooner or later you'd get too full of yourself to want a voice of reason around any longer. But even so, I wouldn't leave without what's most important to me."

He turned towards Mardra, the grin still on his face. "Hey, Mardy!" he called out. "Did you hear that? We're banished! Time to leave this place!"

Anders took a deep breath, trying to bottle the surge of fury that gripped him -- this was just what he had expected of Daros all along, that he would use their ultimatum as a lever to pry Mardra loose from Refuge! If that traitorous little Chantry lickspittle thought he could --

"No," Mardra said.

The word hung in the air for a moment, and both Anders and Daros stared in shock. The smug smile seemed to melt off Daros' face like heated wax, lumpy and uneven. "But -- you said before --"

"Yes, before!" Mardra snapped. "Before you decided to sell me, along with everyone else, to the nearest Templar to come along! Daros, how could you? How could you possibly think that I would follow you out of here, after you pulled a stunt like that?"

"But we were supposed to leave together, Mardy!" Daros appealed -- begged, nearly. "You said we would stay together, no matter what! Siblings should support each other, you said --"

"I told you not to call me that any more!" Mardra snapped, cutting Daros off mid-sentence. He stared in shock, jaw hanging open, and she took a deep, bracing breath.

"I've supported you and defended you long enough," Mardra said quietly. "Paid your way in the community without you having done a day's work, and Maker knows I saw little enough thanks for it! We're done, Daros. I'm done. You brought this on yourself, all of your own doing. If you leave now, I'm not going with you."

Daros sputtered, his face cycling through an indignant red to an unhealthy grey-green as he struggled with this ultimatum. Watching him, Anders could almost see the catastrophic crashing of his world and all his assumptions around him; he would be lying if he did not say that there was a perverse part of himself that enjoyed it.

"But…" Daros said in a small voice; he seemed at a loss for anything to follow it. "but…"

At last, after a long struggle, he turned back around. He seemed smaller, somehow, without all the puffed up pride. Anders realized, looking at them both now, that Daros was actually shorter than his sister.

He swallowed, and said in a meek voice, "I accept the judgment of the Council."

Nobody said anything, but an unspoken current of relief ran through the chamber, like a silent sigh.
Surana took over, picking up the parchment the others had drafted from the desk.

"For a period of time of one year, your craft work and other labor will not receive financial compensation," Surana read out. "Your projects will be assigned according to the needs of the community, not your own preferences. You will also not be able to participate in any community vote, or hold a role on the representative council, for the period of five years. After this time period is up, you will be re-evaluated, and if you have shown a genuine pentinence, return to the status of full membership within Refuge..."

Anders watched closely the variations of expressions passing across Daros' face as the sentence was read; shock, resentment, stubbornness, sudden calculation. If he had to guess, this was the first time Daros had ever considered himself taking part in Refuge's governance, and he hadn't been interested in doing so until he was told that he couldn't. Well, maybe it would give him something to work towards.

There was more; nearly an hour more of minutae and paperwork, various members of the jury signing or countersigning, Daros reluctantly affixing his own signature to the terms of his service. He also -- finally -- signed the Charter itself, although Anders had vetoed any suggestion of making additional Deep Roads terms part of the sentence. Daros would serve his one year, just like any of the rest of them, unless he chose to do more. No matter what, Anders thought, the Deep Roads must never become a punishment.

At last the conclave adjourned; Daros was escorted out, his belongings having been moved from the more comfortable rooms in the Tower to the less-attractive quarters in the outbuildings. Most of the mages broke into pairs or huddles of three, murmuring to one another; Mardra gathered up her notes, stuffing handfuls of paper into her satchel, and hurried for the door. Anders followed.

He caught up with her in the hallway outside her office. "Well," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "That went well."

She sighed. "It could have gone worse," she allowed.

"I just wanted to thank you -- for going through with this," he said more seriously. "I know this can't have been easy for you -- your own brother --"

Mardra made a throwing-away gesture, brushing off his words; confused, Anders short-circuited the apology. "Well, anyway, you did great work," he finished. "As always. Digging up those cases from Circle archives -- I'd never even heard of Elyot Eder --"

"It was local Perendale history, so she was somewhat infamous there," Mardra said. "I did a paper on her once."

Anders nodded. "It's important to have that perspective," he said. "That background. But I'll tell you, I nearly cheered out loud to hear you tell Daros that you wouldn't go with him, if he chose to defy the council and leave."

"Oh." Mardra's expression was closed, unreadable.

"I was just really relieved to hear you say that," Anders said with a sheepish laugh. "I was thinking… Well. Just from some of the things Neria was saying, I was worried -- worried that you were planning to leave."

"Actually…" Mardra said slowly.

Anders stopped and turned towards her. A sudden feeling of cold washed over him, like a draft on
the back of his neck. "Actually?" he repeated.

"I was considering it," Mardra admitted. "I still am. But if I do leave, it won't be because of Daros. I didn't want to put that kind of weapon in his hand to use against all of you, and I don't -- I don't want to be fought over, like two dogs with bone."

An awful feeling of dread and loneliness surged through him, stern to stomach. "But -- why?" he asked. "If not because of him, then why would you leave?"

"Because I still need to find my family!" Mardra exclaimed. "My brother and my little sister are still out there somewhere, with the mage rebellion getting more dangerous at every minute -- and Daylen! I still don't know what happened to him, I still don't know... I never meant to come here in the first place, I certainly never meant to stay this long --!"

"But..." Anders sputtered. "But we need you! Who will direct the building, and the pay schedules, and the work teams, and --"

"I'm not going to just take off," Mardra said. "I'll leave plenty of notes behind, explaining everything. I wouldn't even mind training a replacement, if anyone wants to volunteer."

"Yes, but a replacement wouldn't be you," Anders said -- nearly begged. "We need you."

"This place can run without me," Mardra said. She crossed her arms over her chest, shrugging as if against a chill, and turned to stare out the window at the end of the corridor. "It'll have to, sooner or later."

Anders knew, although he couldn't find the words to explain it, that it wasn't just a matter of the project timelines and the building layouts and the pay schedules. It was the fact that they even had timelines and layouts and schedules, because no one else trying to build Refuge from the ground up had even considered that they needed such things. There would be a hundred more things littering their path in the future, the gears and levers that it took to turn dream and intention into solid reality. There would be things they would need that they wouldn't even know they needed.

Mardra was what made the ideas work. Freedom, independence, brotherhood... the dream of government, of rule by law and consent instead of by force and fear, of a smooth and practiced civil society -- she made them work. Without her... Anders didn't know if they could make it happen. Didn't know if, like a keystone, Mardra occupied the one space at the crux of the arch without which everything would tumble down around their ears.

He wanted to blurt all this out, beg her to stay, rail at her for her selfishness in leaving. Tell her that they would all fail, all fall without her. But he knew he couldn't. He couldn't. Anders had sworn that every mage at Refuge would be free; they would not be constrained by force or fear. And that meant any kind of force, including unfair emotional blackmail or manipulation. He'd been pushed to such measures once, out of desperation, and it had cost him Hawke. He would not do that to Hawke's cousin, too.

"Well." Anders swallowed with a great effort. "If -- if that's what you feel you must do, then... then I wish you well, I suppose."

Mardra turned around quickly, a look of shock on her face. "What?" she said. "You're -- okay with this?"

"I..." Anders waivered on the edge of a lie. "It -- it won't be easy, but... your family is important to you, of course they are. You should -- you should do what you need to do. Even if it will make
things a little harder for us."

"Oh." Mardra's face crumpled slightly, brows knitting and lips twisting in consternation. She seemed to be struggling between conflicting emotions -- relief that Anders had acquiesced to her leaving so easily, and hurt that he could so easily let her go. "Well, well… thank you, I guess."

"You'd always be welcome to come back," Anders blurted out. "If you found your brother and sister, that is, and need a safe place. We'd always be open to you, and them."

"Of course," Mardra said, nodding quickly. "Although -- well -- we still don't know where to find Daylen, so it might not be…"

Anders nodded, mouth too dry for speech.

"Anyway, I haven't decided yet," Mardra said, half-talking to herself. "I'm just… I want to consider all my options. I do need to go at some point, I need to find them, but… I mean, I'm not going anywhere today."

"Right," Anders choked out. His throat hurt; so did his chest, and his head.

"I have to go," Mardra emphasized, and Anders wondered why she was repeating herself. "My siblings need me, and, and… this is just something I have to do. It's… it's what Mother would want."

"I understand," Anders said. He reached down through years of practice in hiding his emotions -- practice he hadn't had to put to use since joining with Justice -- to summon a smile. "All mages deserve to have family. It's something we've been denied by the Circle, by the Chantry, for too long."

She still looked torn, chewing on her lower lip, so Anders felt compelled to add "And to be honest, I wouldn't stop at Daros either."

That got her; a shocked look flashed across her face, followed by an unwilling burst of laughter. "That's mean," she scolded him, but her lips still tugged unwillingly in a smile.

"Yes, well." Further words failed him. Anders cleared his throat, wondering at the ache that clogged him, and gave a little shrug. The two of them stood there a moment longer, awkward and unsure; Mardra made a little gesture towards her office, mumbling something about getting back to her duties, and Anders let her go.

But he wondered, as he turned with a heavy heart to trudge back through the Tower towards his own quarters, why his chest felt so cold.

In the week after the Templar incursion and the trial of Daros Amell, life in Refuge slowly went back to normal. There was still an element of restlessness, of unease; even though Daros (thankfully) was no longer seizing any opportunity to preach the glories of the Circle to anyone who would listen, Anders was dismayed to see that the movement he'd started didn't end with him.
There were more than a few mages who were unhappy with Anders' decision to reject the Templars' conciliation offer, who felt either that a Templar presence was a price worth paying for peace and pardon, or else who genuinely wanted Templars around. They were still in the minority, but a lifetime of Circle and Chantry brainwashing -- about their own inherent dangerousness, untrustworthiness -- still had not released its hold. The Templars were unpopular, but they were at least familiar -- the familiarity of a childhood doll or security blanket that not everyone was willing to let go of yet.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Hamil managed to whip up his own followers into a frenzy for action; and now that Refuge had proved not to be as completely isolated and impregnable as they had thought, more and more of the mages were beginning to favor the idea of going out and taking the fight to the Templars, rather than waiting for the Templars to come to them.

Anders kept up the sentry rotation overlooking the valley, but firmly quashed any ideas of sending out raiding parties. The sentries proved their worth however, when a week and two days after the Templar incursion they reported back that another group of people were coming up the valley. Once again the valley was full of energy and chatter as a newcomer approached, promising a break from the day-to-day tedium of life in the isolated valley. This time, however, the atmosphere was eager and excited rather than full of dread and anger. The scouts they'd posted around the Valley, with good visibility on each of the approaches, had been instructed to use a rudimentary system of color-coded flares to signal whether the approaching newcomers were friend or foe: right now, the flashes of light and trails of smoke that hung above the valley paths were colored the green of a friend or ally.

Anders made as much haste getting out to meet them as he had with the intruding Templars; he was eager to hear news of the rebellion, of Fiona and her charges, and the other Towers. Strange that they'd come up through the valley passes, rather than up the tunnel from Orzammar; perhaps they'd allowed the two Avvar rangers to guide them.

The noise of the crowd was only increasing as Anders approached; over the edge of the hill he caught glimpses of familiar faces, familiar capes and hoods of the people who'd left with the delegation. They looked tired, even though they carried far lighter burdens when they'd left, and their expressions were travel-weary and strained.

A high-pitched voice pierced through the hubbub, demanding to know if they were there yet, and a weary adult voice murmuring an answer. Seized with a sudden trepidation Anders hurried forward, just as the crowd cleared the forest edge at last.

He recognized some of the dozen or so figures in travel-worn clothes, but not all; some of the familiar faces had been replaced with strangers, two with the sunburst brand of the Tranquil on their head, others crowned with frail wisps of white hair over age-wrinkled faces. The strangers mostly wore Circle robes still, with a few obviously-borrowed additions of sturdy leather boots or warm cloaks on top. And the whole lot of them, friends and strangers alike, were trailed by a whole gaggle of children.
"Oh, knickerweasels," Anders said reflexively.  

He stared out at the picture before them with some dismay. People were still straggling into the clearing, as the members of the party who had been strung out along the trail began to catch up. He caught sight of Menehi, and a few others who had left Refuge a few weeks before; but there were as many unfamiliar figures in shabby Circle robes as familiar ones. And children. 

There was at least one child for every adult member of the party, perhaps more -- they moved about so restlessly it was hard to make a tally of them. The smallest he saw was perhaps four years old, the oldest maybe twelve -- none of them had yet tipped over into puberty yet, he thought, and they all wore stained and shabby variations of apprentice robes. 

"Are we there yet?" one boy whined, the singsong sound of an oft-made complaint; the older man escorting him answered in a weary tone "Yes, we've arrived. We're at Refuge now."

The boy stared out over Refuge -- the half-constructed Tower, the cluster of smaller, bare buildings around it -- and made no hesitation in opining "This is it? This place sucks."

"I want to go back to the Circle!" another boy complained, from further back in the train.

"I want to go hooooooome!" a tiny girl wailed. Another burst into tears. As the rest of the delegation arrived, the children were beginning to pile up in the tears; no longer occupied with walking, the volume was beginning to grow.

"Oh knickerweasels," Anders repeated with fervor.

"Is that a bad word?" an interested voice piped up from his elbow; Anders turned to see a small boy had somehow snuck up on him. "What does it mean?"

"Warden Enchanter?" Menehi came forward through the crowd; he had a large bruise on the side of his face, and Anders thought that his salt-and-pepper hair had gone even more white in the last fortnight, but he otherwise looked well.

"Welcome back," Anders said, offering a heartfelt hand-clasp. "You… made contact with the rebels, I take it?" He surveyed the motley crowd with some dismay.
Menehi nodded. "Met them in the fields outside Montfort," he said. "They weren't hard to find. With that many people, they'd have a hard time hiding their presence even if they had any woods craft among them, which they didn't."

Anders surveyed the group. He didn't see the distinctive silhouette of Amund, with his white and blue-dyed headdress, nor the Avvar hunters who had accompanied them. "Run into any trouble?" he asked, eyeing the bruise on the side of his face and wondering if he should offer to heal it.

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Menehi said with a shrug. "The countryside is alive with Templar patrols; we dodged the ones we could, fought what we couldn't dodge. No casualties -- none of ours, anyway, we lost of one of the Tranquil coming back."

Anders sighed with weary grief. "Tell me," he said.

"We'll give you the whole story, but," Menehi said, glancing back over his shoulder. "This lot should get under cover first. And I'd like to take some time to freshen up, to…" He trailed off, and it took Anders a moment to fill in the gap: he wanted to see his husband, of course.

It had been so long since Anders had had someone waiting for him on a safe return that he'd forgotten what it was like. "Of course," he said, and forced a nod. "We'll meet in Mardra's office in the Tower in, let's say, an hour? In the meantime…"

Anders looked over the group of apprentices: some were crying, some arguing, some sitting down in the mud and refusing to move despite all the weary exhortations of their escort. "We'll have to think of something to do with them."

He stepped forward, dredging back through his memory to find those tedious, long-suppressed days of assistant teaching. Hot, stifling stone rooms thick with the stink of antiseptics; bored, rowdy apprentices who didn't care for any magic that didn't go bang; how had Wynne managed them? Ah, yes.

"All right, staffs in the air!" he yelled, raising his two extended forefingers above his head. None of the children had staffs, of course, but that wasn't the point; automatic reflex kicked in for half of the apprentices, who raised their hands likewise. "One-two-three, all eyes on me! Staffs in the air, everybody?"

A dozen pairs of eyes turn to fix on him with astonishment. There were a few stragglers; the crying girl had no attention for anything but her own upset, and a small elven boy still had his back to them all. But chasing after the last few would lose the attention of the ones he had, so he ran with it. "Is everybody hungry?" A chorus of emphatic yeses. "Thirsty? Tired? Follow me, and let's go do something about that."

An hour later Anders managed to make it to the briefing. The apprentices were in the infirmary for now, momentarily captivated by food and beds. He'd spent the time to go over them for injuries or sickness; the children hadn't been involved in any of the fighting, but that didn't mean they hadn't been the target of some of it. There had been scratches, bruises, sprains, one ugly burn, and an incipient cough starting among a few of them. He treated them as best he could and then left them to lunch, soup and sandwiches appropriated from the cooking tents from the adults' next meal.
Anders didn't think they'd mind.

Once Surana arrived, she took over minding the children and Anders could go across the hall to Mardra's office. She was seated at her table surrounded by maps and papers, with half a dozen other mages peering over her shoulder or perusing the maps.

"-- a great blessing, and the Ostwick mages particularly would never have gotten away if the pirate's ship had not offered them passage," Mardra was saying, and Anders looked up with great interest. "But her captain is not a mage, so her interest in helping mages can only be secondary at best; we can't always count on the Siren's Fury to be where we need to be, or go where we want her to go --"

"Are you Anders?" An unfamiliar elf came over to him, looked him up and down, and then nodded. He was blond, rather bedraggled after weeks spent in the wilderness, and his face lacked vallaslin; by the accent Anders judged him to have been alienage-born before being taken to the Tower. "I'm Grandin; I came from the Spire. Fiona included a letter for you especially."

"Oh?" Anders took the letter the blond elf held out; not sealed or even in an envelope, but folded over itself and battered from its journey. As Mardra and the others debated over population centers and routes, Anders opened the letter and began to read.

To "Warden Enchanter" Anders,

I would challenge any man of sound reason to overestimate my surprise when your missive first reached our camp. I confess that I had heard little good of you, or your deeds in Kirkwall prior to our most hasty departure from Val Royeaux. However given that all tongues which retold the tale of that dark day were of a Templar nature -- I had not been inclined to set very great store of them, and was willing to set aside my preconceptions and give audience to your delegation --

Fiona was a Circle politician all right, Anders thought with a quiet groan. He'd never known one that didn't write like this. The Grand Enchanter had been on the run in the wilderness for the last month; how had she found the paper and ink to write so volubly? How had she found the time?

He went back to the letter.

I confess I was greatly astonished by the news which your emissaries brought. To hear that there was already an established community of free Mages in southern Thedas -- one which even had gained the support of so powerful a patron as the King of Orzammar himself! My wonder and indeed my skepticism grew the longer I heard tales of this marvelous enclave, the more so when it was said who had proven the leader for it.

For your work in leading the mages of southern Thedas to safety and freedom I salute you, Warden Anders, though I cannot cease to wonder how you came to this audacious decision and contrived to carry it out. I take a suspicion, too, of this plan to trade service against the unholy Darkspawn for a protection which, by necessity, cannot protect against this very singular danger. As one who has met the Darkspawn in their teeth I cannot help but be very sensible of the risk posed in venturing to such depths; and yet I of all people would be the last to suggest that this was in any way a worse fate than to spend all our lives imprisoned in a state of gilded enslavement.

You have extended the offer of asylum to myself and my people should we need it; a refuge from the great struggle that our people face against the world. For myself I must decline, and so too most of those who follow our banner; our work in the wider world is not yet done. We have only yet begun the great struggle of rising up from our knees, throwing off our shackles, and standing tall amongst the nations of Thedas; if we are to say to the world "No more!" and prove that we will
indeed fight for our freedoms, we cannot abridge our own mission by fleeing to the first safety which presents itself.

If the nations of the world are ever to regard us with the respect due to all free persons, if the order of Templars and of the Holy Throne are ever to regard us as equals who can speak with our own voices, then we must first prove ourselves a force worthy of such regard. We must show them we will fight, and we must show them we can win, if we are ever to win a place at the great table of nations that decides the fate of multitudes. So, too, as a Warden yourself you must be cognizant of the danger of concentrating too greatly, in ways that limit your force's tactical flexibility and increases all to the danger of a single decisive enemy action. For that I cannot risk, and so for now, I and those who stand with me must stay at liberty.

Anders had to stop for a moment, standing with his eyes closed and the letter clutched tightly in his hand. In that instant he wished with all his heart that he could have been in Fiona's place, or at least at her side, doing what she did, leading their people to liberty…

But he had his own role to play in this pantomime, and it was no less important for being less glorious. He returned to the last few paragraphs.

I beg however that I may not seem ungracious; I am not insensible to the value of the aid you have sent us, and the sanctuary you offer. I am certain you will not object if I send to your protection the most vulnerable among us, those who are too young and too fragile to stand beside us in the fight to come. Those apprentices yet not in command of their magics, those too frail and elderly to bear the hardships we yet must face, and those Tranquil we have yet managed to preserve, I therefore commend to your care.

Of all the possible outcomes to their delegation to Fiona's army this was one he had not foreseen -- it made sense now, of course. Of course Fiona's refugees would have had children among them, and Tranquil; of course she would have taken the first possible opportunity to pack them off to safety. Whatever became of Fiona's army now, there was little question that the apprentices would be safer in Refuge than they could possibly be on the run, hunted by Templars and townsfolk alike.

And that meant they were his problem now.

Fiona's letter continued for a few more paragraphs -- ponderous eloquent sentences very prettily thanking him for the supplies and roundabouly asking for more, as much as they could spare -- but Anders' attention was drawn away by the word "Divine."

" -- issued a statement of condemnation yet?" Surana asked. "Any Grand Cleric can authorize an Annulment, but only the White Divine can call for an Exalted March."

"There has been no word from Val Royeaux, actually," Mardra put in.


"Perhaps not so surprising." Mardra pursed her lips. "From everything I've heard the new Divine, Justinia, is far more canny and politically active than her predecessor."

Anders grimaced. "That's not good news for us."

"It might be," Mardra said, and despite her brusque tone there was a tinge of hope underlying her words. "Justinia has been accused by some of her opponents of being too sympathetic to mages. She could prove an ally, or at least neutral."
Anders snorted. "I'll believe *that* when it snows in Antiva," he said rudely.

He still remembered that night in the Chantry three years ago, coming face to face with the Left Hand of the Divine over a cooling pile of mage bodies. He remembered how cold her voice, her expression as she talked about the concerns of the Divine over the Resolutionists, the possibility of an Exalted March on the city. Not a word said about Templar corruption, or the Knight-Commander's madness -- no, the Divine's sole and only concern had been making sure that no mages got away with the slightest bit of power, or freedom. Ever.

It was that night, more than any of Meredith's rantings, that had sealed Anders' convictions. A Divine who was prepared to raze an entire city to the ground rather than risk a few mages getting ambitions would gladly take the much easier route of an Annulment, the moment it was offered. Far better to sacrifice a few worthless robes than an entire city of innocents, wasn't it?

It always had been before. And it would be again. And again, and again.

From that moment on he had known: the mages at the Gallows were already doomed. A quick death sooner or a slow one later; there was no saving them. The only chance left was to make a stand that would rock the sky.

"Well, she'll have to make a statement sooner or later -- word just came in from Ansburg that they've cast their lot in with Fiona. With Ostwick, that's every Circle in the Free Marches as well as Ferelden," Grandin said.

"Is that all of them?" Hamil said eagerly. "Does that mean that every Tower has voted for independence?"

"Still nothing from Hossberg." Mardra frowned down at the table.

Anders grimaced. "I don't think we should hold our breath on Hossberg," he said. "The Warden headquarters are there, too. Whatever's happening there, it goes beyond local politics."

"Ferelden, Orlais, Nevarra -- the Circles have spoken," Hamil said. "And they cast their support to Fiona and her rebels."

"Not all of them," Grandin cautioned. "Of the twelve remaining, three voted nay -- and affirmed loyalty to the Accords and to the Chantry."

"Which three?" Anders demanded.


"Dairsmuid?" Anders repeated, astonished. "In Rivain? I thought the Rivaini had no use for the Chantry. Why are they lining up in white frocks?"

Grandin shrugged, bewildered. Mardra frowned down at the map. "Their statements don't give specific reasons why," she said, "but if I had to guess... the biggest reason is the Qunari."

"Well, any given Qunari certainly counts as a *big* reason," Anders quipped sarcastically, but got mostly blank and unamused stares in response. "How do you figure? What do the Qunari have to do with anything?"

"Rivain and Antiva are both in much closer proximity to Par Vollen than to Val Royeaux," Mardra replied. "And both Antiva City and Llomeryn have a fair Qunari presence -- both actual kossith, and viddathari converts. The Qunari have always disapproved of the way the Circles are run --"
"Well, so do we," Hamil replied, sounding confused.

"Wrong direction," Anders said briefly. "The Qunari think that the Circles are too lax. " He frowned, remembering a shadowed figure -- chained, blinded, collared, silenced -- trailing along helplessly in Hawke's wake. Remembered the roar of flames and the bizarre quiet of the crackling embers, as silent in death as he had been in life.

"Oh," Hamil said, daunted.

"So long as the Towers remained under Chantry control, they were off-limits to the Qunari," Mardra continued. "The Qun won't re-open a bloody war by staging a direct attack on Chantry property. But if the Towers were to declare independence… it would be akin to declaring open season."

"And so they choose to bow to our oppressors instead?" Anders muttered, but his heart wasn't in it. He'd seen the wrack and ruin of a Qunari raid from street level; he wouldn't wish it on any town. Mardra shot him a heated glare, her lips thin. "Chantry control has always been more lax, that far to the north," Surana put in. "From what they say, they retain more autonomy -- more freedom to move, to study as they will, even contact with their families. Conditions there just aren't as bad as they are in the Southern towers."

"In other words, they prefer the demon they know," Grandin said.

"How are we to convince the world that we deserve freedom and independence if we can't even agree to it among ourselves?" Anders, said, exasperated.

"You're not wrong," Grandin said placatingly. "Still… it's a lot to ask of the northern towers, to expose themselves to double jeopardy that way -- both the wrath of the Templars and the cruelty of the Qunari. If a few nice words to the Chantry could shield them from both, then… they're not wrong to take them."

"The Chantry's protection comes with too heavy a price," Anders said darkly. "No mage can ever truly be safe in a Circle."

"Yes, well, that's hardly new," Mardra said wearily. "But it's a risk they've chosen to bear."

---

In the end, they decided to start sending out small groups once again. Their goal this time was not to make contact with Fiona specifically, but to seek out mage refugees who might be trying to make their way to Refuge and encountering trouble on the road -- or off it.

Afterwards, Anders said in a low aside to Mardra: "You had a sibling in Dairsmuid, didn't you? Your sister?"

"Have," Mardra said. "She's still there, last letter I have from her… I've written her, invited her to join us here, but it's too far, the territory too uncertain. Astrida… she was never brave." She sighed. "I've can't say I haven't thought about going to her, if she won't come to me. But it's a three-month journey even if you can get a ship… it's a long way to go, if I don't intend to stay."

Anders nodded wordlessly. He didn't think it was a good idea -- what could Mardra do for the
cause of mages, all the way in distant Rivain? -- but it wasn't his place to dissuade her, and he
didn't trust himself to otherwise speak.

"Maybe it's selfish of me, to be glad," Mardra said in a low voice. "I know that if all the Towers
don't stand together, it'll hurt our chances in the long run. Still… I'm glad she's out of it."

Part of Anders couldn't help but feel that until they were all free, the safety of one particular mage
meant little. It was a small part, though; most of him, through and through, was glad for Mardra's
sake too.

Worry for mages still on the Outside -- trapped in the Towers, lost in the wilderness, harried by
Templars with Fiona's army -- was constant over the next few cycles, a cloud threatening to darken
every horizon. He had little time to think about it, however; he had little time to spare to worry
about much of anything at all, since the new children at Refuge took up almost every waking
hour.

It had been years since Anders had helped Wynne with the apprentice classes. He had forgotten
how exhausting children could be, how demanding they were of time and attention and energy.
Nor was he meeting these children in the context of a classroom, a morning or afternoon lesson set
with carefully structured boundaries of time and direction. He couldn't go away at the end of the
lesson, giving the apprentices back to the Tranquil caretakers at the end of the day.

The lack of structure proved more troublesome than he would ever have guessed. The apprentices
were used to having their days rigorously laid out for them, moving from lesson to lesson and room
to room under the censorious eye of their elders. Tower children had their own culture, of course,
snuck in around the rigidly defined schedules and endless rules, but nothing had prepared them for
this sudden, wide-open world devoid of lessons of any kind.

Farming children, like the ones Anders remembered from his own childhood, would have had no
problem filling their days in the wide-open summer of the valley. The children he had known back
in Kirkwall -- both the orphans, or the children of his patients -- were mostly just as independent.
But the apprentices had spent their childhoods in the Tower, and had no frame of reference -- no
way to cope -- with such an unbounded existence.

The first few days saw them recovering from their arduous cross-country trek, eating and resting
and recovering from their injuries and strains; after that, they ran wild. They went everywhere in
Refuge, underfoot and side-along to every one of the adults’ projects, making absolute pests of
themselves at every turn.

In total there were fourteen apprentices: eight of them boys, six girls. The eldest was no more than
twelve, the youngest (Anders estimated) no more than five. There were only two elves among the
lot, and if Surana perhaps singled the elven boys out for extra fussing, they certainly needed it no
less. The smaller one, Lap, seemed particularly traumatized; they'd gotten his name from the other
apprentices, since he hadn't spoken at all since his arrival.

The ex-apprentices upset experiments; interrupted meetings; ran out on the firing range during
practice; snitched food; wandered off with the precious few books Dagna had managed to amass
for their libraries; climbed into the construction site and got thrown out by the angry workers; spoiled an entire dinner's worth of soup by accident; and flooded one of the Tower rooms, all the while showering the adults around them with endless inane questions and no small a helping of insults and scorn.

Patience was quickly frayed, tempers flared; not a few mages dealt with the intrusion by simply barring the apprentices from of their presence. This might have worked in the Tower, but here it only compounded the problem; as they had less and less to occupy their time, and fewer watchful eyes to curb their behavior, the apprentices grew more and more fractious.

It was not only the combination of boredom and unexpected liberty that drove the kids to act out, Anders came to realize. He spent time with each of them -- first to check them over for injury or illness, then as one of the only adults who could manage their wild behavior -- and as he came to get to know them, he began to understand that they were each struggling to cope with the catastrophe that had upended their world.

Perhaps worse than the children who complained loudly and constantly about the inadequacies of their new surroundings -- Refuge was too hot, it was too cold, it was boring, the food was awful, there were bugs in their clothes, the adults were all stupid -- were the children who never complained at all.

Every one of the children had been through the collapse of their world once before, orphaned and kidnapped in the same day when taken to the Circle. Now they had suffered a similar upset of all they had known, punctuated by the violence of the massacre at the White Spire -- they'd seen their teachers, their mentors and friends murdered before their eyes. None of them were unmarked by it, although they showed it in a multitude of different ways, many of them odd and indirect.

There was one apprentice who spoke with a crippling stutter; another who spoke no Common, only an obscure dialect of Nevarra; the younger elven boy did not speak at all. One of the human girls, Revah, mumbled the Chant under her breath in a near-hypnotic manner whenever she was nervous, which was always. Carrowyn, the noble-born son of a minor Ferelden bann, still bore a great and bitter resentment for the magic that had ripped him from what he still considered his birthright and lashed out with verbal abuse to everyone within hearing range. He had the unconstraint of a child matched with the vocabulary of a Templar, and was deeply unpleasant to be around -- which isolation, of course, only deepened his resentment.

Beety was terrified of the dark and screamed a spell into being that lit up the whole Tower with a blinding light when she awoke from a nightmare, invariably rousting every adult mage out of slumber. Collette still wet her bed every night despite being far past the age where that should have been an issue, waking up the caretakers every night to labor over changing her linens.

The older elven boy, Olin, displayed an unhealthy fascination with flames that had already started one uncontrolled fire in the woods. Astie, the youngest girl, had the unfortunate tendency to coat everything within a meter's range of her with solid ice when she sneezed -- and she had a lingering cold that Anders could not cure, for all his spirit magic.

Theria was sweet and biddable enough until someone got angry or raised their voice in her presence; then she vanished to hide in some distant nook or chamber, not coming out (not even for meals) until dragged bodily from her hiding place. This became a near-daily occurrence as tempers began to rise in Refuge, costing Anders hours each day to search for her.

Meeda, a bright young black-haired girl, at least showed a strong fighting spirit; she attached herself to Hamil's regiment and insisted on watching the fighters train. This at least kept her entertained until one day Marco, to whom she had developed a particular attachment, was called
away on other duties. When told that she would not see him that day Meeda had calmly walked
over to the crafting area -- and begun methodically smashing potion bottles and worktables onto
the ground until restrained bodily, screaming abuse as she did. That was the first outburst, but not the
last, and her welcome among the adults of Refuge quickly grew cold.

That welcome was cold enough even for the children who were less blatantly destructive. Of the
adult population, only Anders and a few others -- including Surana -- had ever worked with
apprentices at all; none had been full-time caretakers. Most of the rest of the mages had hardly
encountered the youngest apprentices in passing, and certainly never had to deal with them for
extended periods of time. The adults had no idea how to deal with children, and no particular
inclination to try; these apprentices might have been fellow magefolk, but they were not their
children, not little brothers and sisters or even younger cousins. Their interest in young mages was
academic at best, wearing away quickly with the difficult reality.

Surana tried her best, but not all of the children were willing to accept her as a surrogate parent, and
she was not herself well -- the second trimester of pregnancy was proving much harder on her than
the first, and she bore deepening circles under her eyes and hollow cheeks with every sleepless
night and day she could not keep down food. Anders too did all he could, but there was only one of
him and fourteen of the children, and there were never enough hours in the day.

He spent time with each of the children, going over them carefully to try to discern if there was
anything he could do for them -- the bed-wetting girl and the mute boy, particularly, he looked
long and deep for any sign of deep-laid infection or old scarring injury that might be a cause. But
aside from a few more recent scrapes and bruises quickly healed, there was nothing for him to do.
The children didn't need healing magic; they needed stability, and time.

The first few days were tense and turbulent. The next few days were worse. Anders had hoped that
with time, the children would acclimate into the adults' routine. Instead, they completely disrupted
it, and the adult mages responded with irritability at best and hostility at worst.

It all came to a head near sunset on the tenth day, when the dwarven courier reappeared. It was the
same neatly dressed messenger, with the Aeducan badge of office pinned on one shoulder, who'd
delivered to Anders the veiled warning once before. This time, instead of seeking Anders out, he
drew out a large notebook and walked slowly and meaningfully around Refuge, stopping to make a
pointed note at each of the children.

Anders caught up to him after about twenty minutes of this. "Is there something -- sorry, I didn't
catch your name," he said, trying to catch his breath and his wits in the same moment.

"Ah, Warden Enchanter," the man drawled in a lazy voice, turning to face Anders with a lack of
surprise. "Of course, we got interrupted last time. Throne-speaker Fermin, at your service. And the
King's," he added meaningfully.

"Right, that's great," Anders said, his wind starting to come back to him. He'd run over from the
training-field, trying to keep Erran -- who always wanted to be involved in everybody's business --
from being accidentally stepped on, when Anla had warned him that the courier had returned.
"What are you doing here today?"

"His Majesty received word," Fermin said, pitching his voice to carry across the entire open field to
the listening ears of every mage there, "that a number of additional personages had come to stay at
the mage refuge, and yet not entered their name into the Shaperate."

"We sent down a note," Anders said, perplexed. "I vouched for them. They haven't needed to go
into the city yet."
"Yes, but the individuals in question *themselves* have not yet come to register their presence, and mark their guarantee of service." Fermin tapped his book meaningfully. "If the mages will not come to the Shaperate, then the Shapers must come to the mages, Warden Enchanter."

"But --" Anders looked at him in disbelief. "You want them to sign up for a year of service? They're *children!* They can't possibly be expected to go into the Deep Roads to fight! Some of them can't even spell their own names yet!"

"And yet." The emissary was unmoved. "If they are to receive shelter from the Crown, then they must pay service to the Crown. One year per every mage at Refuge; that was the agreement that you specified with the King. Unless, of course, there is someone else who wishes to serve their years *for* them?"

Anders opened his mouth, then closed it, dumbstruck. "That was the condition you insisted on, was it not?" Fermin added nastily. "From my understanding, was this not precisely why that amendment was indicated? Very well, then; the King takes you now at your word. If the new mages will not sign for service, then someone else must sign for them. Now."

"What?" Anders demanded, still unable to believe it. "Are you out of your mind? They can't --"

"Or," the dwarf added implacably, "they must leave."

This, Anders realized with a sudden sinking sensation, was Bhelen's idea of retaliation for putting him off for so long. Kings were not accustomed to being brushed aside, and however affable and laid-back an image Bhelen projected, Anders had injured his pride when he told him to cool his heels.

"Fine." Anders drew in a breath. "I just -- fine. Come back tomorrow, and we'll have people to take the children's years. Come back and --"

"I will wait here," Fermin interrupted him, a slightly malicious look on his face. He pulled out a small, hand-held timekeeping device and flicked open the cover. "For one hour."

*Blight.*

Anders continued to mouth expletives under his breath, silently, all the while tearing through Refuge on a panicked hunt for -- "Mardra!" he exclaimed, nearly running headlong into her coming back into the Tower. "Oh, thank the Maker. There's a problem --"


"No, not that kind of --" Anders was distracted. " -- Ants are on the same scale of emergency as templars and darkspawn?"

"Clearly you've never encountered a Nevarran fire ant swarm on the march," Mardra informed him. "Everyone should have a contingency plan, just in case. You were in such a frenzy, I just assumed someone was attacking?"

"No, no," Anders said, and made an effort to settle down his manner so that he wouldn't start a panic. "It's -- Bhelen sent up a messenger from the city, about the kids. We need to call a meeting of all the mages."

"Everyone?" Mardra said in some dismay. "Well -- if I draft the announcement tonight, we can probably get everyone in place by noon tomorrow --"
"No, not tomorrow," Anders interrupted her. "Now. Right now."

"Now?"

"Yes, as soon as possible," Anders said. "Can you do it? And don't bring the apprentices."

"You -- I -- argh!" Mardra let out a near-shriek of frustration, tearing at her hair, before she whirled and ran off in the opposite direction.

Anders counted minutes in his head. Mardra had worked miracles; she'd managed to fill the Tower's great hall in under an hour (fortunately, dwarven hours were longer than surfacer ones, but it would still be a close thing.) Not everyone had made it -- the foraging parties hadn't come back in time, nor the scouts who were still keeping watch, and of course the mages who had been delegated to patrolling the mountainside looking for refugees to bring in wouldn't be there. Still, there was a respectable showing.

He stepped up on the dais, feeling the weight of two hundred eyes on him, and tried to summon a smile. "I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here tonight," he joked, then took a deep breath and got down to business.

"This was always something we would have had to deal with sooner or later," he concluded, after relating the sudden appearance of the dwarven emissary and their ultimatum. "I'd hoped to have more flexibility -- to have time to sort out apprenticeships and mentors, settle into a more reliable routine. But since we don't have that flexibility and we don't have that time, then we need to deal with it now. We'll need fourteen people who can take on the Deep Roads years for the apprentices, until they're old enough to serve on their own. Anyone?"

A profound silence rang around the hall, broken after a few moments by a little shuffling and throat-clearing.

"I'm sorry, Anders," Surana said quietly, the first one to break the silence. "I would offer what I could, but --"

She broke off there, but Anders understood; her pregnancy was already taking a toll on Surana's health, and after the baby was born she would be even less at liberty to go fight anywhere. Jowan was ineligible for similar reasons; he was already going to serve Surana's year as well as the baby's, and his own; it would be cruel to put any more on him. "Maker, no," Anders said immediately. "Don't concern yourself with it."

Ertha cleared her throat delicately. Aside from Anders and Surana, she had been the one with the most experience with Tower children, and the most helpful in trying to wrangle them. "I, too, must decline," she said. "I am willing enough to serve on my own behalf, but I count my remaining years sparingly. I have not enough left to me to give another away."

"Fine," Anders said, through gritted teeth. Beside her was Menehi and Sheran; the same problem of age, in addition to the injury that Sheran had never fully recovered from. The next one to their left was Mardra -- who looked on with wide, worried eyes and chapped lips -- but why ask her? Mardra was going to be leaving soon, not even serving her own year, let alone anyone else's. Next was…
Of all the mages at Refuge, of course, the most courageous and charitable among them were not in this room at all, being out on the long patrol looking for others they could help. He looked around the room, at a sea of faces who alternately avoided his eyes guiltily or met them defiantly, and made a decision.

"We'll do this the fairest way; drawing lots," he said. He pulled a piece of scrap paper over from the desk and scribbled his name at the top, then began tearing it into strips. "Those who are over a certain age or have health problems can be excused. But those who are young and healthy, which is most of the rest of you, I want to see your names on the paper. Winifred, Hamil, Vanni, Danum --" he began to read off the names of the first row, from left to right.

"I refuse," Danum said loudly. The murmur of the room came to a sudden halt, astonished.

"What," Anders said.

"I said I refuse!" Danum jutted his chin out stubbornly. "One year of mucking around in the Deep Roads is bad enough -- now you want to add on more? For a bunch of snot-nosed brats who are already more trouble than they're worth?"

Another voice called out from the crowd. "When we signed this charter of yours, there was nothing in there about having more years forced on us!" and several additional voices chimed in support.

Anders tried with difficulty to keep his temper. "Look, I know this isn't ideal," he said. "But the kids need help, they need us to do this for them. None of them are remotely capable of handling themselves in the Deep Roads; if someone can't be found to take their years for now, then they'll be forced to leave!"

"So?" Danum said.

Anders stopped to stare at him; sheer disbelief kept him from erupting with the first furious retort that came to his lips. Of course the Deep Roads service wasn't fun, but surely they must understand -- raising children wasn't about doing what was fun, it was about doing what was necessary. It was taking on the responsibility to care for a person that couldn't yet care for themselves, and doing everything -- everything, no matter how disgusting or difficult or dangerous -- to keep them safe.

It was about kindness, compassion and generosity. It was about caring enough about the future to look past the needs of today. It was about doing what was right. It was just.

"They have nowhere else to go," he said at last, striving to keep his voice level. "None of them have any homes to go back to; they couldn't return to the Tower even if they wanted to, and to return them to the middle of a war zone --"

"Well, and so?" Danum said, though he looked a little more uncomfortable. He shrugged his bulky shoulders. "Frankly, they're making enough extra work for it just as it is. And they're contributing nothing! I say that they're becoming more trouble than they're worth, and maybe they should leave."

A mutter of agreement went around the conclave, the strongest from those who'd had work disrupted or destroyed by the apprentices' antics.

"More trouble than they're worth?" Anders' temper snapped. "Their worth is the future of this community -- of all our futures! Does that mean nothing to you -- are you actually so blind, so lazy, that you can't look beyond your own skin?"

"Look," another mage called out from the back row -- a woman, Anders didn't recognize the voice.
"It would be one thing if they were *our* children. Maker knows, I'd move heaven and earth for a child of *mine*. But they're not, we didn't ask for them to come here, and as far as I'm concerned they're not our problem."

Another susurration of agreement. Anders stood on the dais before the crowd, so furious he was almost blind with it, and tried to control the fire that wanted to roar past his lips the moment he opened his mouth.

More voices were breaking onto the floor; Surana was arguing with the woman from the back row, three other mages had gathered around Danum in a knot of solidarity and were taking on all comers. Some of the mages were in agreement with Danum, others thought he had gone too far in proposing that the apprentices be thrown out of Refuge -- yet no one was making a move to volunteer.

"*Fine,*" Anders said, and stepped down from the dais; every argument in the room came to a dead halt, every eye turned to look at him with shock as he strode for the doorway. A faint smell of scorching wood followed in his wake, though he didn't see anything burning.

He nearly ran headlong into Fermin at the doorway; the dwarf had been lingering by the chamber exit, waiting for some conclusion. He turned to Anders with an unpleasant smile. "Well," he said. "Have we come to an agreement, then? Who can I tell the King will be fighting on behalf of these young apprentices?"

"I will," Anders said.

"What?" Mardra cried behind him, and Fermin frowned.

"Excuse me?" he said. "I am speaking of the entire group of newcomers, of course --"

"So am I," Anders said. "I will take their years. All of them."

"Anders, no!" he heard Surana say behind him, but what other choice was there? She couldn't do it, they couldn't do it, so he must. He always did what must be done.

Fermin's frown had deepened. Somewhere past the anger, the feelings of betrayal and fury for their selfishness, their short-sightedness, Anders knew that this was not what Bhelen had been aiming for. He wanted more mages, not more Anders; this outcome would not satisfy him in the slightest. At the moment, however, Anders couldn't give a flying fuck what Bhelen wanted.

"The apprentices, of course -- while they were the largest group of newcomers, they were hardly the only ones," Fermin tried to press the point. "There were also three adults -- I believe they are Tranquil? -- who have not signed the Charter, either --"

"Them too," Anders said. "I'll take their years too. All of them."

"Anders, what are you doing?" Mardra hissed, grabbing his shoulder; Anders ignored her attempts to pull him away, and kept his gaze steadily on Fermin.

The dwarf looked deeply dissatisfied, but Anders *had* answered his requirements; he slowly made the requisite notations in his book, assigning symbols to each of the apprentice and Tranquil mages and tallying them up under Anders' name. Anders signed it, hands shaking only a little now with rage. "Very well," Fermin said once he was done, voice dripping with disapproval. "I shall bring this tally back to His Majesty, and we will see what he has to say about this…"

He stood in place and watched the courier go, disappearing down the dark tunnel leading to
Orzammar with his new orders. And continued to stand there, unmoving, as the meeting behind
him broke up and mages began to trickle out through the door. They looked at him agog, standing
like a statue in the middle of the path, before they averted their eyes and hurried away.

The only one willing to talk to him directly was Mardra; she, of course, stormed up to him with a
dark expression and slapped him on the shoulder. "I can't believe you!" she exclaimed.

"What part of it?" Anders said.

"The part where you just let them walk right over you!" She gestured wildly back towards the
grand hall. "Anders, what were you thinking? You should have put your foot down! There was
never a better time for it than now! They challenged your authority -- blatantly, openly -- and you
just gave them what they wanted? Why should they ever listen to you again, then?"

"What else could I have done, Mardra?" Anders said tiredly. The rush of righteous rage that had
propelled him out of the hall was fading now, leaving him exhausted and empty.

"You could have shown some leadership!" she said. "Told them they could either suck it up and do
the work that the colony requires, or else leave!"

He shook his head. "They were right about one thing," he said. "The Charter only requires one year
of service per mage. If I tried to extend that requirement now, after the fact -- it would be dishonest.
If I tried to --"

"The Charter doesn't say anything about cooking or cleaning duties or crafting for the colony
stores, either, but if they don't do that --" Mardra began furiously.

"It's not just a matter of work!" Anders raised his voice to interrupt her. "I'm not just asking for a
few chores, I'm asking them to risk their lives. If they're unwilling, then I can't force them -- I can't
do that, Mardra. I can't force mages into mortal danger if they don't want to go. That isn't freedom;
that's fear. I won't become another Chantry. No venture founded on principles of coercion and fear
can hope for anything better in its future."

"Seventeen years, Anders!" The words felt like a slap in the face, and Anders flinched. "That's
seventeen years that you'll be gone, thanks to this one stunt! What kind of future do you expect us
to even have, with you gone for so long? What if you never come back, what if you die down
there? Without you, this whole thing falls apart, you know that! Is it worth it? Is it really worth it,
just so you can die a martyr on your own little hill of principles?"

That stung, he stirred enough energy to strike back at her. "Well, as you won't be here either way,"
he snapped, "I don't see why you even care."

Two spots of high color blazed in her cheeks, from fury or mortification Anders couldn't discern.
"Oh!" she said, and then apparently bereft of words, just repeated "Oh!" again before she turned
and stalked off into the night.

He felt ashamed almost immediately. Mardra did care, he knew that. Cared for Refuge, even cared
for him; it was petty and wrong to suggest otherwise. There was little enough care among the
mages, for anything other than their own selves…

The warming rage was all gone, now. Anders rubbed his throbbing head, trying to stir some useful thought or action against the stifling pain, but no new ideas or magic fixes presented themselves.

Leadership, they kept saying. Mardra, Surana, Bardien -- they all urged him to stand up and lead the others. As though it was that easy. If he could not inspire by words, or even by example, then what else was there?

I'm so tired.

With no better answer, Anders turned and trudged towards his own bed.

---

Years Remaining: 20

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all the people on Tumblr who threw ideas at me for the various magelets. They'll continue to be around, although they won't have a huge amount of facetime devoted to them, for the most part.

One of the anecdotes of the kids making trouble was based off a story by a teacher friend of mine; when a favored teacher didn't show up for class one day, the girl started destroying everything in reach, upending desks, throwing supplies, etc. One of the other teachers attempted to talk her down with "You know what you're doing is wrong, right?" and she calmly replied "Yeah" and kept on destroying things.
The group of mages who had volunteered to venture down the mountains looking for refugees or threats -- the Far Patrol, as they were beginning to be called -- had returned after only a week's absence. According to their reports they had crept down to Redcliffe, the nearest settlement of any size, to get a feel for the atmosphere and hopefully make contact with the Mage Collective.

Worryingly, there'd been no sign of the Collective at their usual drops and hideouts; no marks of a struggle or battle, but also no sign of where they'd gone. They might have packed up and gone to join Fiona, or gone somewhere else entirely -- there was just no way to know.

They'd stayed in town long enough to listen in some local gossip, stop by the Chanter's board, and then return. Redcliffe was reportedly crawling with Templars, though fortunately the patrol had by now switched out their Circle robes entirely for more travel-practical clothes and left their staves in a cache outside the city.

It was a disappointment, but they'd brought back information as a consolation... including, somewhat to Anders' grim amusement, a stack of Wanted posters. In a rare moment between crises, three of them -- Anders, Mardra, and a recent Ferelden arrival from Jainen named Varence -- were passing time looking through them.

"Here's one of Fiona," Anders reported, holding it up from the stack. He looked it over critically. "It says dead or alive; nice of them to allow the possibility of 'alive,' I suppose…"

"Here's one of you," Mardra said, pulling out another. Her bushy brows went up, and her lips formed a faint whistle. "Quite the reward for proof of your death."

She passed the stack of paper over to him. "That's how you know you've really pissed off the powers that be, when you start hearing people calling for your head," Anders informed her loftily. He scanned down the posted, frowning faintly. Given name 'unknown,' alias Anders, magic school Spirit Healing/Elemental, known weapons… "This doesn't look anything like me," he complained.

"Well, they have the generals at least -- see, human, male, so and so tall, blond hair," Varence said. He'd been an apostate before he joined them, and fairly accomplished in the wilderness, so he'd been a natural pick for the Far Patrols.

"That describes half the men of the Anderfels! Look at this -- my nose doesn't look anything like that." He pointed out the offending appendage -- sure his nose was big, but it wasn't craggy. "They must have cribbed this one off the Howe family portraits."

"The Howes?" Mardra sounded surprised.
"A noble family from Ferelden. Bit of a nasty fall from grace ten years ago."

"I know who the Howes are," Mardra said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm just wondering how you know them, at least well enough to make an informed judgment about their noses."

"I knew one of their scions," Anders told her loftily. "You meet all sorts in the Wardens, even mysterious lost heirs of…"

His voice trailed off. He'd pulled out the next page in the stack, and a too-familiar face stared back up at him. "Oh," he said in a very different tone.

Mardra looked over to see what had in his hands, and made a little movement like she had just restrained herself from lunging across the table to grab it away from him. "Oh-!"

"It's Hawke," Anders said shakily. "But why? Why Hawke? He's the bloody Champion of Kirkwall, not some -- some common criminal --"

"Weren't you just saying that wanted posters were the mark of success?" Varence sounded amused, blight him.

"Well yes, but --" Anders continued to scan down the wanted poster, taking in the details. "Wanted for aiding fugitives... Fomenting discontent... theft of Chantry property... murder of a Templar... impersonation of a Chantry sister?!!"

"Oh yeah, the Champion has been at work for months now all along the coast of the Amaranthine sea, helping mages escape and foiling Templars," Varence said enthusiastically. "He even helped me!"

"What?" Anders exclaimed. "I hadn't heard this!"

"It was on the road from Jainen, see," Varence began, flipping over a spare piece of paper to sketch a stylized map. "The break-out wasn't too well-planned, see, and most of us had scattered into the wilderness. Just our luck that we were the ones the Templars decided to follow.

"We had a day's head start to begin with but the Templars had narrowed it down to a few hours -- they could move faster than we could, see. The rain was pouring down and we had taken shelter in an abandoned barn, trying to work ourselves up to fight, when up walks the Champion. He had a few others with him, not mages, I don't know who they were, and a big ruddy dog. He asked us if we wanted a little help out.

That was Hawke -- right down to the dog, although Anders itched unbearably to know who the mysterious companions were. Who was tagging along behind Hawke nowadays? Isabela was still on her ship in the Amaranthine ocean; Varric and Aveline wouldn't have left Kirkwall. That left Merrill and Fenris, but Anders couldn't imagine Fenris having lent himself to helping a pack of escaped Circle mages. But then again -- not like he hadn't before. Anders knew perfectly well how it was hard for anyone to say no to Hawke when he was bound and determined to mix himself in…

"Well, see, we figured we had nothing to lose," Varence continued. "And if you can't trust the Champion of Kirkwall to do right by you then who can you trust? So we went along with it, even when the first thing he told us to do was to get out of our clothes so we could swap with his people.

"We spent the rest of the day laying low in a cave up on the hillside with the dog while the Champion and his crew, all dressed in our old Circle robes, see, dawdled on the road. The Templars on their horses ran them down within an hour, but they still thought they were chasing
mages!" Varence chortled, retelling it. "They lit off with all the Silence and Cleanses they could muster -- we could feel it all the way up where we were -- and then ran right into melee range, see, to try to get the drop on us. And then the Champion brings out his big old war knives, and, well, that's all she wrote."

Anders shook his head in disbelief. "Nobody told me," he said.

"Well --" Mardra started, and Anders pointed an accusing finger her way. "You didn't tell me!"

"Because the last time his name was mentioned in your presence, you nearly had a nervous breakdown!" Mardra threw up her hands in exasperation. "So yes, I filtered out mention of him from the incoming reports. I thought I was being considerate."

Anders vividly remembered the incident -- the first party Mardra had thrown at Refuge, the restaurant in Orzammar and the disaster that had been the dwarven bard's ballad. Anders could hardly remember any more why the song had made him so upset, although he remembered with agonizing clarity just how it had felt. He could see how the event would have made an impression on Mardra, and resolved her to avoid a repeat.

And now…

It didn't hurt. That was where most of the surprise was coming from; to think of Hawke again, and have it not hurt. The aching, wrenching, soul-emptying pain that had consumed him after Kirkwall, overwhelming him each time he thought of their last meeting, had passed. So, too, had the irrational anger that had gnawed away at him for months, repressed and buried until he could stifle it no more. It didn't hurt.

He could think of Hawke now and remember the good times, the jokes and laughter and long wending conversations, the fights and trials and adventures. Maker, the adventures! Following Hawke had been frequently unpleasant, often terrifying, but never boring, and Hawke had always found a way to reach out a hand to those that polite society would rather have trod underfoot. As he still was doing, even now.

It seemed somehow right to him that Hawke would go on to help mage refugees across the country, throwing all his cunning and skill and power into their defense. While he frittered away his time and breath trying to babysit apprentices and placate politicians and appease factional tantrums there was Hawke, having daring adventures and exciting battles as always. It just went to show, as always, that Hawke was the hero of a grand epic tale wherever he went; while he, Anders, was the sort of figure who ended up an unpleasant footnote in the more boring and scholarly type of history. But he couldn't really begrudge Hawke that; who would want to read about him, after all, when they could read instead about the Champion of Kirkwall?

"Um..." a tentative voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked up from the poster with a start, blinking eyes that he was still surprised to find dry, to see the other mages staring at him. Valence had a confused, worried look on his face. "Anders? Is something wrong?"

"Me?" His face felt strange, and he realized that he'd been smiling. "No, no. I'm fine."

Mardra had been watching him too, but she didn't look confused at all. If Anders had to describe her expression -- her eyes, so like Hawke's -- he would say she looked wistful.

A knock sounded on the office door, and the expression was gone in an instant as she rearranged her expression to that of brisk efficiency. "Come in," she called, and Anla peeked around the edge of the door.
"Madame Amell?" she said hesitantly, and bobbed her head at Anders. "Enchanteur Anders? I… I… there's been a problem…"

She wasn't just hesitant, Anders realized; the girl was on the verge of tears. Had some of the other mages been tormenting her -- for her age, her race? A thunderous frown began to form at the thought, but he managed to rein it back; surely then she would have gone to Surana for comfort instead… unless Surana was unwell. Perhaps that was the problem…?

"What is it, Anla?" Mardra said, foregoing the mystery in favor of the direct approach.

"Well… I…" Anla came into the room and stood in front of the table, her hands twisting nervously. "I put the empty vials in the storeroom on Tuesday evening and everything was there then, I swear it was, and I didn't… I didn't know what to do, but then I thought I ought to come and tell you…"

"Tell us what?" Anders prompted, impatient, when Anla trailed off into a miserable silence.

To his surprise and mortification, the girl did burst into tears. "I didn't do it!" she sobbed, as Anders stared in shock and Mardra sent him a look of reproach. "I didn't take them, I swear!"

Half of their store of crafts, bound for the Orzammar market, was gone.

There had been no lock on the cabinet where the goods were kept. Why would there have been? The potions, medicines and poultices, runescrolls and runeslates, embroidered clothwork and embossed leathers, had been made by all of them; contributed by each of them for the good of the colony. The goods were to be sold in the Commons or the Hightown Bazaar, with each crafter to receive a commission for their work and the rest going into the general fund. But sometime between last night and this morning, half a hundred items had vanished.

The theft wasn't random, Anders thought grimly as he studied the gaping empty spaces. Whoever had taken the goods had gone for the smaller, portable, and most valuable items; things that could be easily carried and sold for a larger profit elsewhere.

News of the theft had spread throughout Refuge, and already people were squabbling over who was responsible. The most naïve, hopeful souls were innocently asking if there might have been some mixup, if the goods had been misplaced somewhere or perhaps already sold, and the sale not recorded. The next-most innocent mages were wondering aloud how the thief could have gotten into Refuge from outside, over the mountains and past the screen of sentries.

Some were inclined to blame the Avvar "savages," grumbling that the proximity of the barbarians to the tower was just asking for war-painted freaks to raid them in the night. Others speculated dwarves -- perhaps some of the merchants whose import business they were undercutting had made a move to eliminate the competition; perhaps some of the casteless workers had stumbled on the cabinet and been unable to resist the temptation; perhaps this was some arcane punishment from Bhelen, sending spies and agents to rob them. (These last few ideas, Anders had to admit, were not completely outside the realm of possibility.)

Most of the mages, however, immediately took the opportunity to blame the theft on whoever else
in Refuge they had a dislike for. "Isn't it obvious?" Danum said, his loud voice braying above the rest of the squabble. "The elf girl admitted herself that she was the last one to visit the storage cabinet. And now the goods are gone! Do we really need to look any farther for the sneak-thief?"

Anla, whom Mardra had only just been able to calm, burst into tears all over again. Surana, looking drawn and pale but all the more murderous for it, leveled a venomous glare at Danum. "That suggestion is just what I'd expect from you," she said. "Why, by the Creators, would she immediately run and report her own theft to Refuge's highest authority?"

Danum waved that consideration aside. "A cunning scheme to try to deflect suspicion --"

"Or maybe you're the thief, and trying to cover up your misdeeds by riling up anti-elven sentiment to divert attention away from you!" Surana snapped. Danum seemed to swell even further, sputtering with outrage.

"If you ask me, maybe we should search everyone's rooms," an older woman announced. "We'll find the thief quickly enough that way. Let's start with the room of that Tranquil; who better to sneak around the Tower without being noticed?"

"Or we should start with that Templar suckup," Hamil put in bitterly. "I bet you he's still looking for any way to sabotage --"

Mardra rounded on him furiously. "Daros has been nothing but well-behaved --"

"Enough," Anders said. He hadn't shouted, but conversation died out in a running current through the crowd around him. He looked around to find the attention of all the mages on him, and shook his head.

"There are a hundred possible suspects," he said. "We will investigate as many avenues as necessary, but we will base our investigation on evidence, not wild speculation."

That settled the crowd, though there was still a bit of grumbling resentment from particularly devoted speculators. Anders looked over the crowd, counting heads, and then sighed.

"Jowan, Mardra, Varence," he said, picking three people he thought he could rely on out of the crowd. "First things first, I want you to take a headcount. Is there anyone missing?"

It turned out not to be much of a mystery. Four mages were gone with all their personal belongings, three from Ghislain and one an apostate from the Free Marches. No one had known them very well -- or at least, no one wanted to admit to knowing them well -- but they had been heard in the mess tents complaining about the conditions at Refuge. Too much work, terrible food, inadequate housing, troublesome kids -- it was not a stretch of the imagination that they had decided to go, and apparently to help themselves on the way out the door.

Several mages urged Anders to take a force and go after them; he agreed, though privately he was more upset about the stolen goods than the desertions. He was no tyrant; he could not force mages to stay if they wished to go. But they had no right to steal the wealth of others to ease their way.
He went with half of the Far Patrol and combed the mountainside as far down as the Crossroads, to no avail. The deserters had a day and a half head start on them, and had managed to avoid leaving any too-obvious signs of their passage. In the end they were forced to return to Refuge empty-handed.

They did not receive a hero's welcome. The atmosphere in Refuge had grown cold, the easy air of trust and camaraderie spoiled by the breach of trust. There were two more, smaller thefts from the goods cabinet before they managed to get a lock installed, and then squabbles broke out over who ought to have copies of the key.

The discontent manifested itself all up and down Refuge -- from small ways, like more and more people refusing to clean up after themselves in common areas, to bigger and more immediately problematic ways. Crafting mages, feeling that they were being taken advantage of, began demanding larger shares of the sales from their work. The level of treasury funds began to dip, and along with it the availability of luxuries and improvements to Refuge. Anders was only glad that the casteless workers were being paid by Bhelen, not by Refuge, so they would not end up being shorted for their work.

Factionalism in Refuge increased. Mages began to withdraw more into small cliques and groups, giving cold shoulders to the others. Spats and grudges spawned and grew with depressing speed. The children were affected by it too; the little progress they'd begun to make, in adjusting to Refuge and feeling safe and secure there, deteriorated back into bad habits.

Anders had been in environments like this before -- Calenhad Circle just before its last escape, before Uldred's rebellion and the subsequent attempted Annullment. Darktown, in the days shortly before another turf war broke out between Kirkwall's many gangs. So when violence finally did break out it wasn't so much of a surprise to him, although he didn't see the target of the violence coming.

He was always on the alert for signs of trouble now; he heard the crash, the shouting, and was on his way even before one of the mages panted up, panting and pale-faced, to tell him there'd been trouble and they needed a healer.

Sounds of commotion led him to the dormitory quarter of the Tower, where Omelas had a room at the end of the row. Mages clustered in the hallway and around the door, but Anders managed to elbow through the throng enough to get a view.

The room beyond was crowded with bodies; he recognized Marco and another elven mage bodily restraining Hamil against one of the walls. Against the other sagged Omelas, his face a bloody mask. A few more mages hovered, nervous, their hands sparking ice or fire but not sure which way to turn it.

"What in Andraste's bloody undergarments is going on here?" Anders exclaimed, and the action froze. The mages holding Hamil adopted the wide-eyed look of a deer looking down a hunter's torch. Anders swung his attention over to Omelas first. "Omelas, are you hurt?"

"Not severely, Warden Enchanter," Omelas said in his remote way. "But I believe my nose is broken."

Anders cursed and bent to healing the Tranquil. He had to be careful not to let Justice too close to the surface, lest he inadvertently trigger the cure that Omelas had firmly refused; it was hard, when he was struggling with his own anger. "Who did this to you?"

Omelas waited until the healing was finished, and he was able to wipe his nose free of the
collected blood, before he answered. "Hamil did, Warden Enchanter," he said, voice free of accusation, merely stating a fact. "He wanted access to the treasury funds. He had not been authorized to make withdrawals. I refused."

"That money belongs to all of us!" Hamil shouted from the other side of the room; Marco hastily tried to clap a hand over his mouth, but he shook it off. "You've got no right --"

"I think I get the picture," Anders said grimly. He checked his work again, but Omelas had been right, the injury wasn't extensive. Like most head and facial wounds, they bled out of proportion to their source. He rose from the bed and turned to face the knot of mages struggling on the other side. "I'll handle this."

Hamil's two helpers melted away as Anders approached; Hamil shook them off and stood straight, glowering at Anders defiantly, but he at least had the good sense not to struggle as Anders seized his upper arm and marched him out into the corridor.

"What in the Maker's name?" Mardra exclaimed, attracted from her own office to the continuing noise. She spotted Anders, leading Hamil. "What is going on here?"

"Hamil here got it into his head to attack Omelas," Anders replied.

"That's a lie! I didn't attack him!" Hamil yelled, and flinched slightly at the look of disbelief that half a dozen mages turned on him. "I just -- I just hit him once. A few times."

"You hit a Tranquil?" one of the mages in the crowd demanded, astonished and outraged. "You hit a Tranquil?"

"You dung-brained goat herder!" Jury yelled, struggling his way through the crowd; the normally mild-mannered mage's face was dark with fury. "You bloody coward, why'd you attack Omel? Why? What'd he ever do to you?!"

Anders hastily interposed himself, before an all-out mage battle could erupt. "Jury," he said, pulling the young man's attention back to him. "Go stay with Omelas. Make sure he's all right."

Grudgingly, Jury let himself be directed. The crowd in the corridor was beginning to thin out now that it appeared that nothing was going to catch fire, and now that official people were here to hand out official punishments. Mardra approached, shaking her head in disbelief. "Fistfights between mages and Tranquil!" she exclaimed. "Hamil, what the fuck?"

Hamil hunched his shoulders, glowering at the floor. Anders sighed. "Look, that's not helpful right now," he said. "I'll deal with this, all right?"

Mardra yielded, though reluctant. Anders watched her retreat back towards her office, then manhandled Hamil into a nearby Tower room that was empty. Once the two of them were alone, he released his hold on the younger mage's arm and pulled him roughly around so that they were face to face. "Hamil, what the fuck?" he demanded.

Hamil jerked his arm free of Anders' grasp and leaned away as far as he could in the narrow space. "Enough with the attitude," he said, leaving Anders to gape in disbelief at the sheer chutzpah. "This isn't the Tower; you aren't my mentor, and I'm not some snot-nosed apprentice. Don't act like you have the right to dress me down in front of everybody."

"If you're going around attacking people, you'd bloody better well believe I have the right!" Anders snarled. "Do you want to find yourself scrubbing potatoes beside Daros Amell? Or banished from Refuge completely?"
The challenge hung taut in the air. After a long moment Hamil dropped his gaze, and muttered something grudging. Anders decided to take it as admission of his authority. "What in the Void were you thinking, attacking Omelas? For money, was that it? Because he wouldn't give you money?"

"I don't want it for myself!" Hamil flared. "I don't care about money. We need it to equip our troops!"

Anders clutched at the fraying remnants of his patience. "What troops?"

"Our fighters!" Hamil's head rose proudly. "Boots and armor, staffs and amulets, everything they need to be equipped in battle --"

"In battle in the Deep Roads?" Anders interrupted.

"What? No!" Hamil scoffed. "In battle against the Templars, of course!"

"We're not going into battle against Templars any time soon," Anders said flatly. When Hamil looked ready to mutiny, he added, "If you want to fight Templars so badly, there's a place for you at Fiona's back, with her army."

"Oh, yeah, I bet you'd love that!" Hamil said, inflating even further with outrage. "You just want to get rid of me, so that I'm not standing in your way with Mardra!"

"What?" Where in the Void had mention of Mardra come from?

"Don't think I haven't seen you sniffing around her!" Hamil jabbed a finger into his chest, which Anders contemptuously knocked away. "You want me gone! If I was gone, you'd have no competition for her love! Well, you can just go to the Void first!"

"I don't have competition for her now," Anders muttered.

It was a cheap shot, a moment of snide self-indulgence he regretted a moment later when Hamil, predictably, reacted with hot anger. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means she's not a thing to fight over! Maker's breath!" Harried, Anders ran his hands through his hair. He was torn. On one hand he had no intention of setting himself up as a romantic rival to this angry pup -- not over a woman that he had no romantic interest in, nor she in him. On the other, the last thing he wanted to do was encourage Hamil to continue harassing his friend. "She's not yours, she doesn't belong to you or to anyone else but herself. She's got problems of her own and the last thing she needs is some horny young bull posturing and putting his neck up!"

"You don't know anything about her and me," Hamil said angrily. "Mardra came to me at the darkest point in the war. We were destined to be. And she would have realized it months ago, if not for you standing in the way!"

"Is that how you think it is?" Anders said in disbelief. Flames, he hadn't realized how far gone Hamil was in his self-serving fantasies -- how much he'd rewritten the world inside his own head to be as he thought it ought to be, himself the grand courageous rebel, pretty girl at his side and glorious destiny just out of reach. In his own head he was the Chosen One, and anyone who disagreed with him or didn't play along with their appointed role was the enemy. "Do you want me to get Mardra in here, right now, and you can tell her that? That you think she's your destined bride --"

"No!" Hamil cried, suddenly panicked. Uncertainty played over his face for a moment, before he
managed to muster back his bravado. "She... she doesn't know what she wants."

And as long as he avoided asking her directly, he wouldn't be definitively rejected. Anders remembered that logic all too well. "I think she knows what she doesn't want," he said. "And I think you know too, or you wouldn't be afraid to ask."

For a moment he thought he was getting through, but Hamil rallied. "What is it with you?" he accused. "Why are you so set on tearing me down, blocking me at every turn? Are you jealous of me, is that it? Because I have the balls to do what you won't? I'm the only one in this place who's willing to fight the war that needs to be fought. The rest of you are all cowards! You're the biggest coward of all, because you have the strength to fight the Templars and you turn away! You're against me, everyone is against me --"

"Don't try my patience, boy!" Anders snarled, his own temper pushed to the limit by the outrageous insults. Hamil jumped back a step, startled, although once the first reaction was past he stood his ground. "I've fought more Templars than you've likely met in your life. So far the only ones you've managed to fight are other mages."

"Omelas is not --" Hamil started to protest.

Anders cut him off with an icy glare, and Hamil's next words froze in his throat. "Don't you dare say he's not a mage," Anders said in a low voice.

Hamil shuffled a little. "He's not hurt, that's all I was gonna say," he muttered. "It's not like I threw a fireball at him, I just punched him a little."

"A little?" Anders shook his head in disbelief. "You shouldn't have punched him at all!"

"I didn't mean to," Hamil said. "He wouldn't listen to me, and he just kept repeating that the money had been entrusted for the common good, as though I didn't know that, as though I was stupid --"

"You are acting pretty stupid," Anders said cuttingly.

"He was talking down to me! Treating me like a kid! Just like you are."

"And that's a reason to turn on one of your own kind?" Anders paused, waiting for an answer, but Hamil only stuttered. "You think mages are the enemy now?"

"No! I just --" Hamil was floundering now, the anger almost all sapped away in favor of uncertainty, an almost bewildered distress. "I just got so angry, I couldn't see straight --"

Anders thought back to Hamil's steady escalation over the past few months -- training, as Anla had said, to be angry. "You have to be the master of your own emotions," he tried. "If you let them master you instead, then you'll open yourself up to a mistake that you can never get away from."

"What? Demons?" Hamil scoffed. "The great boogeyman that keeps us all in line? You of all people are the last one who should be telling us to be scared of making contact with the spirits!"

Anders felt the sting of that -- it wasn't entirely unjust -- but he remembered Merrill saying the same thing, and he remembered what he'd told her then. "I am exactly the person who should be telling you that," he growled. "He was my friend, and he only wanted to help me, and it still almost destroyed us both! If he had been one fraction less selfless, I would never have survived!"

For a shaky moment, he suddenly wasn't sure who the he was in that sentence -- Anders, speaking of Justice? Justice, speaking of Anders? It almost didn't matter. They had both meant so well, and
it had almost gone so very wrong.

Hamil was staring at him, face slack was surprise. Anders tried one more time -- made a great effort to connect, to make himself understood. "Hamil, listen," he said quietly. "I'm not your enemy. No one here is your enemy. You have to recognize that, and you have to control yourself.

"I remember what it's like to be seventeen -- to feel so much that you think you're going to burst out of your skin and set the sky on fire with it. But it will pass. These feelings belong to you -- you don't belong to them. We must restrain ourselves, because no one else will! Because we still have an obligation to the world to keep ourselves safe. And if we aren't going to allow other people to surround us with walls and safeguards and shackles, then that means the responsibility is on us! Being free -- being your own man -- means that you have to control yourself, because nobody else will."

For a long moment Hamil just looked at him, a muscle in his jaw working as he swallowed. Then he stood up and walked to the door; Anders' hand hovered in mid-air, almost ready to grab his arm and pull him back, but then dropped.

Hamil reached the door, and spoke one last time over his shoulder. "You sound just like the Templars," he said, and walked out.

Years Remaining: 20

~tbc...
Moment of Truth

Chapter Summary

Tensions in Refuge come to a head, and Anders as usual steps into the gap. Mardra makes a decision.

In the days that followed Hamil's unprovoked attack on the Tranquil, Anders made several attempts to talk to him again. It was difficult to find chances in the first place, as Anders was kept on the run near-constantly putting out one fire after another. Sometimes literally, in a community full of mages with increasingly frayed tempers.

On the occasions where Anders did manage to pin Hamil down, the younger man rejected his attempts at advice -- loudly and scornfully. It was clear that Hamil had come to view Anders as the enemy, whether on the question of the rebellion or over Mardra -- or both.

Hamil's teenage ego was hardly Anders' primary concern. Surana was having increasing trouble with her pregnancy; she'd lost weight almost down to where she was before it had started, and over the last few days she'd begun passing blood. Anders -- and Jowan, to his credit -- did everything they could think of to try to help her, but even to a spirit healer and a blood mage the cause of the trouble was unclear, murky. The most they could do was to try to strengthen her system -- and the baby's -- and hope that the problem would work itself out.

Anders couldn't help but think that the baby's mixed parentage was, at the least, not helping matters -- elf-human halfbloods were not unknown, but that didn't mean that they didn't come with complications. Although he never said anything of his suspicions around Jowan, he didn't think he needed to -- the other mage went around in a near-agony of distraction and self-flagellation.

With Surana confined to bed and Anders distracted, the apprentices were left to run nearly wild again. Anders had given up trying to keep them occupied, and had only the attention to spare to haul each one grimly out of whatever trouble he or she had gotten into this time, with an adult mage hot and angry on their heels.

It was near noon -- the day already grown stiflingly hot -- and Anders was down at the trading post, trying to smooth over an argument between the crafters and the Avvar traders. Some of the last batch of potions had been bad, and a stranger among the trading delegation was bound and determined to track down the mage who had brewed it and challenge them to a duel. Anders was trying to explain that in the first place, there was no way to tell who precisely had made that one specific bottle, and in the second place, he wasn't going to allow them to stab whoever it was with a deer shank anyway, when a crack and dull roaring rumble split the air.

He looked up at the sky first, seeking clouds; the summer heat spawned thunderstorms enough. But the sky was blue from horizon to horizon, thick with haze; a moment later he felt a shiver through his boots as a shockwave passed under them, and he understood what had happened.

Not thunder. Earthquake. The kind that was far too small and localized to be natural. "Oh, blight," he muttered, and hastily excused himself from the meeting.
As he hurried back up the slope towards Refuge he was relieved to see the Tower still standing -- prematurely relieved, as it happened. The sound of raised and angry voices guided him the rest of the way.

There had been a cluster of sheds downslope from the Tower, once used to store building materials and now converted into temporary quarters for some of the overflow who could not fit in the Tower itself. The buildings were now all in disarray -- collapsed, drunkenly askew on their bearings, or tipped over the edge of a crater that had opened itself up at the center of the chaos. He hardly needed the angry mages, the hysterically crying Astie or the silent, sullen, white-faced Meeda to tell him the rest of the story.

"Accidents happen," Ertha was saying as Anders approached. "Clearly the girl has some affinity for the Primal tree --"

"Easy for you to say!" the other's voice rose high and furious over the calming platitudes. He recognized her, vaguely, as the woman who'd spoken up in the Council about the apprentices not being their children. "Where are we supposed to sleep?"

"It's Ferventis!" a younger man retorted, irate. "Sleep outside. It's not like you're going to freeze to death in the night."

"Oh, so I have to wake up with bugs in my hair and rats fighting over my shoes, while the little brats who destroyed the buildings get to sleep safe and snug in the Tower?"

"What happened here?" Anders said, catching his breath as he finally caught up to the group. Three different people immediately tried to tell him three different versions; a child's panicked Nothing happened! It wasn't my fault! I didn't do it! versus two adults with more or less levels of acrimony and anger.

"She's a gifted Primal mage," Ertha concluded, while the woman snapped, "She's a menace!"

Anders surveyed the damage. Honestly, it wasn't as bad as it looked; the shelters had come apart because they were fragile, temporary things to begin with, but they'd mostly just broken down into their component parts. "These can probably be rebuilt, in a day or two," he said. "It will mean taking some of the workers off the second story Tower, though."

"What's the point of putting them up somewhere else, if she's just going to knock them down again?" the young man complained. "I'd rather the Tower get done faster, if you ask me."

"Nobody did ask you," the woman said rudely, and the two glowered at each other. "That girl --"

"She needs a mentor," Ertha said placatingly. "Someone proficient --"

"No, she needs a templar!" the woman said scathingly.

Most likely, she had not intended to shout; it might have been coincidence that the last few words rang out in a sudden, profound silence in that corner of Refuge. Or perhaps that word had a special weight that rang out above all others in the vicinity; either way, it echoed along the river valley. The young man looked aghast, Ertha winced.

Astie burst into fresh tears. The woman looked a little shocked, a little uncomfortable by the sudden focus on her. Anders turned towards her slowly. "No apprentice ever needs to be afflicted with the attention of a Templar," he said, his voice measured, the anger carefully controlled.

"You don't need to make it sound like I suggested we take her out back and drown her in a sack!"
"Of course they are!" the young man said heatedly. "After they attacked the Conclave --"

"I'm just saying, they have their role to play!" she exclaimed. "When magic goes out of control, when a mage… loses control, that's when we need Templars. Before the forest burns down from some silly fool who lost control of a fireball --" she glared venomously at Marco, who was hurrying towards the group. " -- or before some stupid child manages to knock over the whole Tower with her wild and careless --"

"I should have guessed this would come from you, Rannie," Marco said with great disgust, joining in the debate. They were attracting attention from all over now; half the mages who had been engaged in outdoors activities were drifting their way, and heads were beginning to poke out of the Tower, likely a delayed reaction to the earthquake that had been felt even there. "A little Chantry suck-up like Daros --"

"I'm not like him!" the woman -- Rannie -- was quick to retort. "I'm not saying we should all go lie down and let the Chantry walk all over us again. I'm just saying, if we're going to have around a bunch of unrestrained apprentices, who are clearly incapable of the kind of discipline and self-control --"

"If you're so worried about the younger apprentices' lack of control," Anders broke in angrily, "you could always try to help them learn some, instead of taking out your temper on an eight-year-old girl!"

"She's not entirely wrong, however," Ertha said unexpectedly. Several pairs of eyes turned to stare at her, and she gave a slight shrug. "I'm just saying, Anders, that it was perhaps not wise of you to refuse the offer made by the Calenhad Knight-Commander."

"You mean Knight-Commander Greagoir? The guy who once tried to annul the Calenhad Circle?" Marco demanded incredulously. "You want to put yourself under his sword?"

"Of course not," Ertha said. "But the Templars have unmatched abilities in regulating and neutralizing magical overflow. And are trained to react to all kinds of situations. It would not be a bad idea to have a few of them around just in case of… emergencies."

To Anders' horror, a murmur of agreement went around the crowd that had gathered. Not all of the mages agreed -- less than half -- but it was a disturbing number, all the same. The murmurs went with troubled expressions, flashes of guilt or fear as they turned their faces away; a lifetime of Chantry conditioning to see themselves as dangerous, volatile, needing to be controlled, needing to be suppressed, for the safety of everyone around them. For the safety of people -- if not mages.

"This is not an emergency," he said firmly, raising his voice over the undercurrent. "This barely counts as a misadventure. No one was hurt, and the damage inflicted was hardly --"

"I can't believe you cowards!" An all too-familiar voice broke on the scene, and Anders groaned as he turned to see Hamil approaching -- his hair nearly bristling around him in a cloud of indignation. "One little spell gone wrong and you're pissing your boots, wanting to run back to the Templars that want to destroy us all? Well, go on then! Run back to your towers and leave freedom to the rest of us! Maybe the Templars will slaughter you this time, and you'll say thanks!"

"Why should I leave, when I'm not the one who's the problem?" Rannie retorted. "Send the kids back to the Circle, where they can't make any more trouble! It's not like the Templars are going to
decide they're secret revolutionaries, are they?"

This set off another round of shouting: people who agreed with Hamil, people who agreed with Rannie, people who didn't agree with Rannie but thought Hamil had been too harsh and should soften his language, people who didn't agree with Hamil but thought that he was under no obligation to tone down his rhetoric to spare anyone's feelings. The crowd was rapidly fracturing along the by-now familiar factional lines, people clustering around their own little cliques and others getting drawn in as the argument grew more heated.

"All right!" Anders called, momentarily winning out over the other voices. "This isn't getting anywhere. There will be no Templars at Refuge, now or ever. And we are not going to send the apprentices anywhere."

"So you're doing nothing?" a voice shouted from the back of the crowd. Anders glared in their direction, but couldn't catch anyone's eye.

"I'm going to get a team of dwarves," he said, "to help clean up this mess and get the shelters back up as quickly as possible. You can stay here and argue with each other, if you think that will get more accomplished."

It took longer than he'd expected to track down the construction foreman. In the end he had to pin down Ceran, the duster dwarf whose daughter he'd healed earlier in the year, to lead him around the construction site. "The foreman?" said the craggy-faced dwarf. "Eh, last saw him in the Tower. Round the offices." He waved back over his shoulder, and Anders thanked him and continued on.

The infirmary and kitchen areas were empty; Anders turned a corner towards Mardra's office, and stopped dead. Mardra was in her office, as was the foreman -- and so was Bhelen's errand boy Fermin.

All three faces swung towards him. The foreman muttered some excuse, touched his forelock, and left hurriedly. Anders looked from Mardra -- her hands fluttering, an anxious look on her face -- to the courier. "Can I help you?" he asked warily.

"Warden-Enchanter Anders," Fermin said in a cold voice, with a perfunctory bow. "I bring a message from His Majesty, King Bhelen."

"Which is?" Anders said.

"The message, and I quote," Fermin took a breath. "'By the blood of the Paragons, boy, what do you think you're doing?'"

Anders winced at the thundering words. "By any chance, this have something to do with apprentices?" he asked, going for a joke which fell badly flat.

"With them, and with a dozen other snubs to your duty since your arrival," Fermin said, returning to his usual cold tone. "When Bhelen extended his offer of sanctuary to you, it was with the understanding that you would provide him with an army of mages. A hundred mages for one year, that was the deal -- not one mage for a hundred years! We do not need more of you. We've already
seen as much of your help as we need to, and frankly, you are not enough."

"He'll get what I promised," Anders said stubbornly. "He just needs to wait a little longer."

"His Majesty is not accustomed to waiting for others to deliver what has been promised," Fermin snapped. With an effort, he seemed to compose himself. He picked up a sheet of paper still creased from its journey, and unfolded it flat on Mardra's desk. She turned it by a quarter to look it over. "The armies of Orzammar are nearly ready to move," he informed them. "They will be leaving from their staging area outside of the Prescene Gate into the Deep Roads in twenty cycles."

"That's still plenty of time --" Anders started, but Fermin overrode him.

"The vanguard force must be ready to move in two," he said "You will be there, Warden Enchanter, with no less than ten combat-capable mages. And when the main force departs on schedule, they will have ninety more."

He stood up and away from the desk, dusting his hands together. "If you cannot deliver on this, then His Majesty is prepared to pull the plug on the entire project."

"I didn't realize Bhelen Aeducan was the type to go back on his word," Anders said icily.

"King Bhelen Aeducan is the type not to throw good metal after dross," Fermin shot back. "Which are you?"

Anders bit back an acid retort in the name of diplomacy, but that left him without much to say in its place. Fermin swept out of the office. "Ten surfacer days," he shot back over his shoulder. "That's the final word."

Once he was gone, Mardra let out a huge sigh. "That's it, isn't it?" she asked. "We have to get the mages combat-ready."

"Will we have the supplies to equip them?" Anders asked her. "What with the goods we sent off to Fiona, and the thefts…"

"I don't know. Maybe." Mardra bit her lip. "It depends on how much the army quartermasters will be supplying. We can probably count on them for basics -- food, water -- but for mage-specific supplies, for human-sized uniform and armor… I don't know. I'll see what we have, what we need. But, Anders -- are we even going to have one hundred mages to send?"

He wasn't even sure they'd have ten. "We'll have them," Anders said, trying to project confidence. But his chest felt hollow.

Anders' steps dragged as he walked back out into Refuge, as though his feet were lead-heavy. Ten days. Maker, what were they going to do?

He could scrounge up ten mages. He was certain he could do that. Himself -- surely he himself counted as one, right? -- Grandin, Varence, Menehi, Ertha… Jowan? He'd been eager enough to get his Deep Roads year over with, but -- that was before Surana had gotten so sick. If both Jowan and
Anders left her, right when she needed them the most, then…

He wrenched his thoughts away from the dire paths they wanted to go down. That was six. He could find four more -- he was certain of that. Ten mages in a week's time that could be done.

But a hundred? When he wouldn't even be there for it, to scrounge and argue and convince and inspire and even bargain -- He tried not to begrudge the time spent in the Deep Roads, but Andraste's tears, they were barely holding together as it was. What if a disaster struck while he was gone? Who would look after the apprentices? What if the Templars reappeared? What if…

He couldn't think about this now.

He became dully aware of a noise ahead of him, a sort of roaring that filled and frothed around the edges of the valley. He made his steps quicken as he went down the path -- now what? There couldn't be another disaster already, could there?

Not another, he realized as he rounded a bend and saw the people gathering on the riverbank. The same one. He'd left the mages arguing behind him, while he was drawn off into the meeting with the dwarven courier, and they were arguing still. The crowd had only grown in his absence, and the the air hung heavy over the bank with the clotted tension of anger and fear.

Most of Refuge was there, he realized with a quick headcount and multiplication. There were too many of them to fit on the bank any more, so instead they'd ranged on both sides of the little river, shouting back and forth. Lightning crackled in the crowd -- real lightning, in subtle little sparks and jolts that leapt from one mage to the next in little knots that they didn't even seem to notice.

"The abomination only wants to use you as cannon fodder!" Danum shouted. "Stay and be slaughtered if you like -- we're going back to the only place in Thedas which is safe for people like us. And that's the Circles!"

"You want to run back to a prison? March back to the slaughterhouse like good little sheep?" Hamil jeered back across the river. He was surrounded by Marco and the other usual suspects -- the ones who were always on edge to fight the Templars. As well as Menehi and Sheran, the two older mages who had been with refuge since near the beginning. They weren't standing quite in solidarity with Hamil's crowd, but they were close by, listening intently.

"Well, you can run back into your cages if you want to -- I'm done with prisons!" Hamil threw out his arm, encompassing the sweep of the mountains around them. "This place is no better than all the rest, a pretty gilded cage that makes promises it can't keep. While you hide, we're going to fight! And we'll free the southern kingdoms of the Templar threat, once and for all!"

"Not all of us are so ready to throw our lives away in senseless combat," Ertha said coldly. "We seek peace, not bloodshed."

"You'll find no peace in the Towers," Menehi said, equally icy. "What makes you think they'll even take you back, instead of cutting you down on the road as you approach?"
"There are still a few Circle Towers that are loyal," a familiar voice called out; the crowd parted to reveal Daros Amell lingering on the fringes. The nearest mages drew aside as if in distaste, not wanting to be near him, but he ignored their disdain. "We could still return to Montsimmard, or Dairsmuid, and be welcomed there by our kin."

"To return to the same conditions that we fought to escape in the first place --" one mage started, and Danum waved away the contention dismissively. "Bah! That was an anomaly. You saw how reasonable the Calenhad Knight-Commander was willing to be, to mages who show willingness to cooperate. I'm sure that we can negotiate a more favorable settlement --"

"And by 'negotiate' you mean selling the victories the rebels have fought for, to use as coin in your bargaining!" Hamil accused. He swept his burning scowl out over the rest of the crowd. "Cowards - just like the rest! You'd happily sit around, doing nothing, disavowing those of us with the courage to fight, while still happy to reap the benefits of the freedoms we fight for!"

More shouting and arguments broke out in the crowd; Anders caught at least one hex out of the corner of his eye, thought he didn't see either the caster or the target. "Enough of this!" he exclaimed, striding forward. "Stand down, before you start a riot and get people killed."

That attracted the ire of both Hamil and Danum in his direction. "Seems to me that you're the one trying to get people killed, abomination," Danum spat in his direction. "I won't stand for it any more. Everyone! Come with me back to the Circle, where we'll be safe -- safe from the Darkspawn, and safe from other mages who can't control their own power!"

"Fuck your safety," Hamil cried out, just as passionately. "And fuck your service, too! There's only one place to be for any mage who isn't a coward, and that's on the front lines -- fighting for the right to be free!"

"No, I don't want to!" a young woman cried out. "I don't want to return to the Circles, and I absolutely don't want to fight in your blasted rebellion! I came here because I heard it was a place I could be safe and out of the fighting! I just want to live a quiet life, and not have to hurt anyone, but I don't want to be forced into fighting Darkspawn in the Maker-forsaken Deep Roads!"

Anders knew her. The young mage's name was Pia and she was one of those who had come to him at Refuge for treatment. As a child in her home village, before being taken to the Circle, she'd been one of those struck by the seizing fever. She'd survived it, but it left her with a weakness, partial paralysis, in her legs below the knee. She could walk, most days, and better with regular healing treatments, but not far. Not on a military march for miles on a stone road, not without a constant infusion of healing magic.

Maybe for some of the others -- most of the others -- it was merely a matter of not wanting to bother, not wanting to be put out of their comfortable routine or endure the inarguable hardship of slogging along with a military campaign. But for Pia -- and a few others like her -- the fear of being dragged beyond the limits of their body and stranded in deadly danger was real. And it was that fear more than anything else that moved him to say what he did next.

"No one will be forced," he said.

All heads turned towards him. A voice from the back of the voice called out -- frightened, angry -- "Yeah, sure, if we're okay with being turfed out and served up to Templars, then fine!"

"No one will be forced," Anders said, louder over the increasing volume of the crowd muttering. "This is not a prison, it is not a Circle, and you are not conscripts. This is a place of shelter, a refuge from those who would torment mages. All are welcome here, and no one will be forced."
The muttering dropped a note -- more uncertain, less angry. "But that dwarf said that the mages have an obligation…" Pia started to say. Anders shook his head.

"For all mages together, not any one individual," he said. "The runes can be transferred. Any mage can choose to take another mage's year of service."

"Yeah, well, who's gonna have to take over for the ones who are too weak or scared?" Marco said derisively.

Anders saw Mardra in the crowd, shaking her head urgently and making an 'abort, abort' gesture. But he'd gone too far now to stop now.

"I will," Anders said. "I will take them all."

Perhaps it was a mistake, Anders thought, as the crowd swirled in a new agitation. He knew Mardra would say so; knew Bhelen would say so. He saw her face, an expression of almost furious exasperation, before it was swirled away by the crowd. But he could not see any other way. Refuge was on the verge of splitting apart at the seams, mages fleeing back into deadly danger in every direction. For the sake of his people, Refuge had to continue. And for the sake of Refuge, he would do what was necessary. What no one else would, or could, do.

He hardly even felt it, as the mages began to come forward, settling by well-drilled habit into an orderly queue. He stretched out his hand and the mages dropped their rune-engraved metal plates into it, one by one. The weight in his palm, the sharp edges pressing against his skin -- he hardly felt them.

He didn't bother to count them. If he was being honest with himself, somewhere beyond the numb haze, he wasn't sure it mattered. Thirty years, Natya had told him; he'd already lived ten, and already pledged twenty. In all likelihood, he would be in the Deep Roads until he died, in true Warden fashion. What was a few extra decades on top of that?

By the time the last of the mages had passed in front of him, pressing their tokens on him -- then hurrying away, avoiding his eyes -- the rest of the crowd had melted away. Hamil had stormed off, trailed by his closest lieutenants; without him, the crowd that had grown around him milled around uncertainly. When no one else seemed inclined to step forward, urging a departure, they gradually dispersed back among the buildings.

A few might leave -- Hamil still might, he thought, and he wouldn't cry if Danum and his cronies decided to slink off during the night. But the danger of a mass exodus, fracturing Refuge along its fault lines, seemed to be past. For the moment.

Mardra didn't come to find him, afterwards. He went to find her instead -- found her in her room in the Tower, fussing with her endless rounds of notebooks…

No -- not fussing, he realized with a sinking sensation. Packing.

"Mardra?" he said. His voice echoed in the stone room, making him feel very small. The rest of his question went unsaid.
"You heard what Fermin said." Mardra answered it anyway, not turning around to face him. "Bhelen is on the verge of voiding our contract if more mages don't answer for duty and you just - - you just --"

She whirled around to face him, frustration writ clear on her face. "What do you think he's going to do when word of this gets back to him, Anders?" she exclaimed.

"I don't know," Anders admitted.

"Now that they know that they don't have to serve, why should any mage ever volunteer?" She began to pace, back and forth over the bare stone floor. "Even the ones who aren't scared of the Deep Roads are going to feel like they're being taken advantage of, like they're paying in more and not getting anything in return! Why should they risk themselves when others refuse?"

Anders shook his head. "I won't found a community in force and fear, Mardra," he said. "I can't. If they're coerced, if they're browbeaten into a danger that paralyzes them -- that will poison the spirit of the village for years to come."

"In what years to come? At this rate the community won't even be here in a year! It won't even be here in a week! I -- Andraste give me strength! I -- I can't. I just can't do this any more." She ran down abruptly, turning and putting her hands on the table, leaning against it. "I tried, Maker knows I tried. I put my blood, sweat and tears into trying to make this project work."

Anders felt a surge of resentment. "You think you're the only one?" he said.

"No." She shook her head. "But I'm not the one who refuses to compromise. I'm not the one who will ride his principles down into ruin."

"I…" He sighed. "I can't do otherwise, Mardra. I can't be other than I am."

Her face softened -- but not enough. "I know," she said. "I know, but I can't stay here to watch it fail."

"You're leaving, then?" he said hollowly.

"I should have left weeks ago," Mardra muttered. She avoided his eyes. "Daros wants to go to Rivain, to join Astrida. Me -- I want to find Damien first. He's more at risk than she is, right now. There's been some rumors that he's with the rebels -- not with Fiona's army, but another group, based near Denerim."

"So you're going be with the rebels?" Anders suppressed a twist of anxiety, of fear for her sake. It wasn't his place. It wasn't his right to tell her what to do, or where to go. It wasn't his right -- "It will be harder for them, without the support coming from Refuge."

"I'm going to find my family," she stressed. "It was what I meant to do in the first place. I should never have let myself get sidetracked by all this… I should never have let myself be distracted. By this, by you." A wave of her hand encompassed all of Refuge.

She inhaled deeply, then made a visible effort to straighten her shoulders. "I have to remember what I was trying to do in the first place. I have to be where I was meant to be."

She picked up her satchel and began to walk towards the door. Anders stood to the side, feeling hollow and lost. He couldn't stop her. He couldn't beg her to stay. He couldn't manipulate her, blackmail her, he couldn't, he couldn't make her stay --
The world suddenly inverted itself. "Mardra," he called out, his voice taking on a new resonance. "Wait."

She turned quickly, startled by the change in his voice and demeanor. Her eyes widened, taking in the light that seeped from every edge of skin. "Justice?!" she exclaimed.

"Wait," Justice repeated. He did not move towards her, but extended his hand towards her in supplication. "Listen, please, to what I have to say."

After a long moment of consideration, waiting on a knife's edge, she set her bag back on the ground. He took it as encouragement, and began to speak. "It was never my intention to come here, to the mortal world," he started. "I was brought through on an accident, one that turned my world upside down.

"In the Fade, my focus was clear, my aims small. I encountered a group of mortal souls trapped in the fabric of the Fade by the designs of a demon of Pride, and I sought to end her domination, as was just. In the process, the Veil was torn, and I was ripped from my home into the mortal world and forced into the body of a dead man."

"Maker," Mardra said softly. "That must have been so hard for you…"

"It was not easy, no." Justice was encouraged by her show of sympathy. Mardra was a good woman; she surely could not fail to respond to his plea. "And at first, all I wanted was a return to my home, to the world that I had known. I felt frustrated that the battles in the Fade, which had once occupied all my time, were going unfought. I begged the favor of the Warden Commander, the Hero of Ferelden, to return me to my rightful world. And she did try. But such magics were not her expertise, and no way back could be found. My stay in the mortal world ran on, and on.

"And gradually I came to realize what I had been blind to before, all the joys and incredible beauties of this mortal world." His voice gentled, even without his intending it, remembering. "All the small miracles that you take for granted. Virtues and triumphs which can be found even in pain, in struggle, and in loss. I came to take notice of the injustices of this world, far more complex and overwhelming than the small battles and victories of my first home.

"By the time Anders joined with me, I knew that I would never go home. In truth, I no longer wished to. I still miss the Fade; I still long for the familiar world I once knew. But this world has become my home now, and this fight has become my fight. In seeking to free the mages, to undo the great injustice that convulses your world, I have learned more. I have done more. I have become more, and I would not trade back this learning, this growing, for anything."

Over the course of this speech, Mardra had moved to sit against the edge of the desk, listening carefully. Her hands were clasped in front of her, a small frown playing about her lips. "What are you saying, Justice?" she asked.

"That sometimes our true purpose, our fate, can be found off of the path that we make for ourselves," he replied. "The world is so much bigger than us, than our plans and our intentions. When we interact with others, when we make ourselves a part of their lives, we become more. And our plans and intentions change. Mine did, and so may yours, if you wish it."

"Do you wish it?" she asked, her voice low.

"I do," Justice said readily, despite a last lingering half-hearted protest tugging at his throat. "This is the truth, Mardra. I wish for you to stay. I wish to be near you. I wish to keep on building what we have begun, to make the world anew. I believe that the two of us together can create something
magnificent. I believe that together we can do more, that we can be more. I wish to continue this work… with you."

He finished speaking and held out his hand, palm upraised, entreating her.

Mardra bowed her head and was silent for a long moment. Just as Justice was beginning to grow restless, she gave a little half-laugh. "Maker," she said. "You sure do know how to make a girl feel valued."

"You have great value," Justice protested. "I would not lie about such a thing. I do not lie."

"I know," Mardra said with a sigh. "All right," she said, and reached out to take his hand.

A surge of happiness nearly lifted Justice off his feet. "You will stay, then?" he said anxiously. "You will help me build Refuge into something great?"

Mardra nodded. "I'll try, at least," she said. "It's not like I have the key to fix everything, you know. All those problems are still there. We still have to figure out a way to keep Bhelen off our back, to convince the mages to get their heads out of the sand and get to work, to send help to the Rebellion without bankrupting ourselves in the process, to find a way to manage and mentor those children, to…"

"It was never going to be easy," Justice interrupted her, taking hold of her hand with exquisite care. "But we will persevere. We will find a way."

In that moment, none of the obstacles before them seemed insurmountable. No matter what troubles they faced, what future calamities lurked waiting for them in the future… they would find a way.

---

**Years Remaining: 47**

~tbc...
Meltdown

Chapter Summary

Bad news from Dairsmuid leads to a bad night, and a worse morning. The tide has finally turned.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but I wanted to finish this chapter out rather than cutting it in a cliffhanger. There will be one more chapter after this to tie up most of the loose ends, and then the end of the Act.

Official tissue warning for this chapter.

When we heard of the injustices against our fellow mages at the White Spire, the Circle of Magi in Val Royeaux, I feared what was to come. Our Circle at Dairsmuid is small and isolated; it exists largely as a façade to appease the Chantry. We sent word to Val Royeaux to affirm our loyalty, in hopes that that would appease them again.

The Chantry sent Seekers across the bay from Ayesleigh to investigate. They found us mixing freely with our families, training female mages in the traditions of the seers, and denounced us as apostates. Perhaps they thought we were spineless robes who could be intimidated with a little bloodshed. Before I was first enchanter, I was the daughter of Captain Revaud, of the Felicisima Armada. I know how to plan a battle.

They brought with them a small army of templars. We fought. And we might have won. But they invoked the Right of Annulment, with all the unrelenting brutality that allowed. It is their right to put screaming apprentices to the sword, burn our "tainted" libraries, crush irreplaceable artifacts under their heels, tear down the very walls of our home. No mage has the right to disagree.

We of the Dairsmuid Circle wait now, behind barricades. I have sent word to our
He'd been mediating a dispute over latrines when the messenger came in. That was a detail he'd always remember, somehow; that he'd been arguing over something so incredibly petty and banal.

Digging and maintaining the latrines was never a popular chore; that was true of any outfit. It was unsurprising that the group currently on rotation had fallen behind, leading to a build-up of offensive sights and smells. An increasing number of mages had eschewed the latrines entirely in favor of doing their business in the woods around the valley, or in the stream, which was starting to cause problems to everything downstream of it. Anders was in the middle of weighing his (rather forceful) medical opinion on why the latrines could not be stationed directly on the river to save time, when Grandin came up.

"Enchanter Anders?" he said, and Anders couldn't deny a feeling of relief at a distraction from the unpleasant chore. Grandin glanced around. "Do you know where Madame Amell could be found? She wasn't in her office."

"Last I heard she was going to the crafting workshops to talk to some of the runesmiths," Anders replied. The intention had been to try to talk the crafters down from claiming a larger portion of the commissions, and also to try to feel out who might be persuadable to leave shortly for the Deep Roads.

They'd heard nothing more from Bhelen since Anders had picked up his last round of years, somewhat to his surprise. But perhaps it wasn't so unexpected: Bhelen had given his ultimatum already. If they couldn't find a way to fill their end of the bargain, then he'd carry out his promise, or threat, to cancel the entire Refuge project. "Why do you ask?" Anders wanted to know.

"I need to speak with her," Grandin said. "Some news has just come in -- for that matter, do you know where Daros Amell might be?"

"Daros?" Anders suppressed a twinge of dislike at the word. "He ought to be down by the kitchens, scrubbing pots, at this time of day. Mardra would know for sure."

Grandin nodded, a shadow troubling his face. "I'll need to talk to him, as well," he said.

Whatever his news was, he was apparently in no hurry to divulge it in public, and Anders began to feel his interest piqued. "What's up?"

The blond elf grimaced. "You should probably hear it, too," he said. "I'll be in Amell's office in fifteen minutes. See you there." He hurried off, leaving Anders to stare after him, and turn his attention only with difficulty to conclude the dispute about the latrines.
Fifteen minutes later found Anders in Mardra's office with her, Daros Amell, Grandin, and one other mage -- an older, slightly plump man named Solly with warm brown skin and tight curls going steel-grey where they still clung to his scalp. Anders knew him only vaguely; knew that he had been transferred to Markham from Dairsmuid several decades ago, and come to Refuge after the Libertarian uprising there.

"All right, Grandin," Anders said once the door to the office had shut. "What's this all about?"

Now that the moment to deliver his news had come, Grandin looked more unhappy than ever. "A message just came in from theMage Collective in Highever," he began. "The Chantry cruiser put in their for resupply on their way to Val Royeaux, and they intercepted the news there."

"What message?" Mardra wanted to know. "I hadn't heard about this yet."

"On their way to Val Royeaux from where?" Anders asked at the same time.

"From Rialto Bay." Grandin took a deep breath. "I regret to say... the Dairsmuid Circle has been annulled."

It took a moment to sink in. Mardra's voice shattered the silence, a near-shriek in her rising tone. "WHAT?!"

"That's impossible," Daros said disbelievingly. "They were loyal!"

"I'm afraid so." Grandin grimaced. "Right now we only have very sketchy news. The cruiser traveled faster than any word would overland. At the moment, we have only the Templar's side of the story, but it seems there was resistance --"

"Thank the Maker for that!" Anders broke in angrily.

Grandin shook his head and went on talking. "...It's possible that the Templar report is skewed or incomplete, but from what they're saying --" he hesitated, looking from Mardra to Daros, and then took the plunge. "-- there were no survivors."

"No," Mardra said, her voice quaking. "Astrida... no!"

"There must be some mistake!" Daros' voice rose over his sister's keening wail, laced with an unmistakable undertone of hysteria. "The Chantry would have no reason to annul a loyal Circle! Are you sure -- are you sure this came from Dairsmuid? Not from Ostwick, or, or -- "

"I'm sorry," Grandin interrupted him. "There is no mistake."

"Why would they do this?" Solly demanded. His warm brown skin had gone leaden, stark grey around the eyes and lips. "Why?!"

"According to the report..." Grandin dragged out the words reluctantly. "The Dairsmuid mages were caught practicing foul heresies... consorting with spirits, worshipping false idols and witches, flouting Chantry law."
"But... we've always done that!" Solly shook his head in disbelief. "That's how it is in Rivain, respect for the Natural Order and the wise women. That's been going on for centuries, why would they suddenly start caring about it now?"

"They don't. It's just an excuse," Anders said savagely. He stood and began to pace furiously, the anger seething, boiling, seeking some release. "Most of the Circle mages have fled, placed themselves out of reach of the Templars. The Rivaini mages were the only ones left to vent their rage on. Loyalty or no loyalty, they were just itching for an reason." They would avenge this atrocity, track down the Templars responsible and drag them to justice, destroy them, burn them --

"No! This can't be right. They were loyal!" Daros insisted, still fixated on his denial. "There must have been some -- some attack by rebel forces, that provoked it --"

Bad enough for him to repeat his denial in the face of all common sense; worse for him to try to twist it, lay the blame anywhere except where it belonged. Anders lunged over to Daros and grabbed him by the lapel, twisting the fabric in his fist. "What is it going to take to make you see that your loyalty means nothing to them?" he shouted. "You can never be loyal enough! You can never be submissive enough! No matter what you do, you can never make yourself anything but another filthy robe to them, and your life will always, always be disposable!"

"That's not --" Daros flailed, off-balance in more ways than one. "But they can't -- they couldn't --"

The argument was interrupted by a hoarse cry. It started low, then rose into a sobbing moan, the sound so filled with grief and agony that it nearly crushed them both to hear. "No... no... how could they?" Mardra cried, rocking back and forth with her hands clenched in her hair. "She was just a baby! Astrida... my baby sister... how could they?"

Anders stiffened, then let go his grip of Daros' robe, his fury turning to ashes in his mouth. He was a little shocked by how strong the anger had been, how near he had come to unleashing it on a wholly inappropriate target -- on another mage, no matter how irritating, something he'd sworn he would never do again after Ella. It would make him no better than the Templars, and it wouldn't help Mardra now. It wouldn't help any of the Dairsmuid mages now.

Hesitantly, moving as though in a dream, Daros went to his sister's side. He dropped to his knees beside his chair as his arms went around her; she unclenched her fists long enough to transfer her grip to him and buried her face in his shoulder, her voice rising and falling in that keening wail. "They killed her," she sobbed. "Astrida, they killed her. Why? They killed her…"

"Monsters!" Solly sputtered, shaking with helpless rage and grief. "Filthy monsters. May the spirits take them!"

The three mages -- the Dairsmuid expatriate, the two relatives -- moved together for mutual comfort, reaching out to each other for support. Anders hesitated on the edge of it, feeling a deep sorrow like the draw of a gravity well that sought to pull him in. But he could not give in to grief just yet. That was for those who had lost family, had lost friends. For him, there were still duties to attend to.

"I'm so sorry," he said in a low voice, and then he turned away and went out the door, leaving them to sorrow together.
Surana was waiting just outside the door, Grandin beside her. Whether the elven man had gone to fetch her, or she'd heard the rumors herself Anders didn't know, but he was relieved to see her. She took in his expression, and her attitude turned grave in response.

"What's happened?" she asked, glancing at the door.

Anders and Grandin shared a look. "Dairsmuid Circle has been annulled," Grandin said heavily. "No survivors are reported."

"Oh, Creators," Surana said feelingly, bringing her hand to her lips. She glanced past him to the door. "Poor Mardra. Is she all right?"

Anders shook his head, then added reluctantly, "But she's with her brother now, and I think that's what she needs the most."

"What can we do?" Grandin asked him.

He sighed. "The rest of Refuge will have to be told," he said. "Maybe not all in one crowd, but quickly, before rumors begin to spread and make it even worse in the telling."

Grandin nodded. "I think I can manage that," he said.

Surana frowned, as something occurred to her. "What about the children?"

"The children?" Anders repeated blankly. "What about them?"

"The thought of an entire Tower being slaughtered by Templars is enough to give any adult mage nightmares," Surana said bluntly. "But the children? They'll be seeing Templars in every shadow, every corner. If any of them can get to sleep tonight, there's sure to be nightmares, maybe worse."

Anders realized what she meant at once. A mage in a nightmare was not just a nightmare; it was an invitation to uncontrolled spells at best, an incursion of demons through the Veil at worst. "I'll take them to one of the rooms in the Tower and stay with them tonight," he said, and Surana nodded. A thought occurred to him, and he added to Grandin: "Oh. Maybe wait to start spreading the news until I can find Theria. If she hides herself again I'll never find her."

"Right," Grandin said, and went off about his task. Surana turned towards the room and sighed, straightening her shoulders against a great weight that seemed to pull them down. Anders felt it, too, dragging his steps as though each one were made through deep sucking mud.

It took Anders longer than he expected to round up the apprentices. After locating Theria and the other two youngest, he'd attempted to take them back to the Tower to wait while he located the others, but they insisted on staying with him. One apprentice clinging to each hand, another dogging his steps, he searched throughout the settlement for the others while the news swept through the adults like a scythe.

The relationships between different Towers were often complex, fraught with rivalries and rifts of
cultural separations. Every Tower had its own particular ways, tinted through the lens of the
countries they were based in and the peculiar notions of the Knight-Commanders who ran them.

Still, there was a bond that stretched from Tower to Tower, channels between them that ran deep.
Mages were frequently exchanged among the Towers; there were few who reached the rank of
Enchanter without having cycled through at least a few of them, working on joint research projects
or making friends among the others. There was a connection between Circles that surpassed the
usual politics and prejudices of their nations; the mages thought little of the war between Ferelden
or Orlais, or the resentment of the Imperial occupation of Nevarra, or the trade conflicts between
the Free Marches and the princes of Antiva. To be a mage was to be a stateless person, belonging
to only one nation: the brotherhood of magi.

News of an Annulment always hit hard, and shook the fellow Towers to their foundation. Even
near-misses were enough to strike a body-blow. The attempted annulment of Calenhad Circle had
sparked an uprising at Starkhaven, ten years ago; the annulment at Kirkwall had pushed the rest of
the Circles to the very brink of war. Every mage felt the shock, the pain of loss, the grief in the
knowledge of what had befallen their brothers and sisters in Rivain. Even if no others in Refuge
had been born there, even if none besides the Amell siblings had kin there, they all felt the deaths
profoundly.

The children already knew. He hadn't told them, but they already knew. Several were weeping
openly, others white-faced and silent. Little Revah repeated the chant endlessly, incoherently,
while Beety was crying so hard she had to be carried, unable to walk. Georgie looked up at him as
he managed with effort to herd them into the Tower and asked, in a calm and innocent voice, "Are
the Templars going to kill us?"

Anders paused for a minute, then dropped the heavy bar against the door and turned around. "No,"
he said. "There are no Templars here. You're safe."

"Dairsmuid was supposed to be safe!" Carrowyn objected hotly. "Everybody said so! And the
Templars went there and killed them all!"

This set off another round of moaning and crying among the apprentices. Anders raised his hands
and his voice. "Hush!" he commanded, and somewhat unexpectedly, they obeyed.

He hunkered down on one knee, getting at eye-level with the children, and looked around the circle
at the ring of ash-pale, frightened faces. "No Circle is ever completely safe," he told them. "But
this isn't a Circle. And anyone who wants to hurt you, will have to get past me first."

To his astonishment, they seemed to believe him.

It was a long night and Anders did not sleep, although the apprentices did -- eventually, too
exhausted by their fear and crying to stay awake any longer. In the dark of midnight the room felt
strange, luminal -- he kept the lamps low so as not to wake the children, and the shadows stretched
and shifted in the corners the light did not reach.

At intervals Anders found himself seized with the sudden urge to patrol the space, and so he did,
his hands crackling just faintly with an edge of blue light; and the shadows seemed to retreat, and
the children who had begun whimpering faintly in their dreams fell quiet.

He stood at the room's only window, looking south out of the Tower across the rest of Refuge
below. He couldn't see much at this angle, the thick window offering only a limited slice of view,
but he caught sight of flickering yellow flames moving in a solemn procession across the valley
floor, figures silhouetted across the darkness. A little further off, just out of sight from the window,
he could see intermittent, repeated flares of light -- not directly, but reflected off some smooth surface enough to radiate upwards.

He wondered what it was, wondered how all the mages were getting through the night. But his duty kept him here, and so he remained.

The night crept onwards, and he watched out the window as the horizon gradually lightened towards dawn. The ridge loomed high in the east, delaying the sunrise, but the sky was beginning to give off a wan light of its own when a quiet knock came at the door.

Anders went to the door and opened it a crack, widening the gap when he saw who was on the other side. "Mardra," he said, keeping his voice low in deference to the still-sleeping children.

"Anders," she replied. Her voice was thick and stuffy as though she had a cold, and the clear marks of tear-tracks striped her cheekbones, but she seemed as composed as anyone could hope to be. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." He moved aside to let her in, and silently pointed out an un-occupied bed that she could perch on. It was low to the ground, child-size (or dwarf size) and she clasped her hands around her knees. She looked more exhausted than he'd ever seen her.

"Any news?" he asked quietly. He couldn't quite bring himself to ask: any good news?

"A little," Mardra answered, at the same subdued volume. "We got in touch with one of my contacts in Llomerynn. First Enchanter Rivella sent out a message to anyone they could reach... not asking for help, it was too late for help, but so the truth could be known." She took a slow breath. "A squad of Templars was sent to Dairsmuid from Ayesleigh by the Grand Cleric there, to 'affirm the loyalty' of the Dairsmuid mages. As a show of good faith, they let them inside..."

"And their faith was betrayed," Anders said, keeping his anger low, contained.

Mardra nodded. "Yes..." She let out the breath, took another, more ragged, and pressed against her right eye with the heel of her hand. "Yes. They didn't go quietly, at least. Rivella... she was the daughter of a Navy captain before she went to the Circle, and she understood something of fighting. She managed to escape from the first wave, rallied the survivors, barricaded themselves inside the Towers."

Between her, and Fiona; Anders reflected that the best hope of the magi seemed to lie with its fighting women. Those whom the Templars all too often overlooked, who rose to positions of leadership with the strength and the willingness to do something with it.

"They were making plan to evacuate the apprentices, even if... even if no one else," Mardra said. Her voice wavered. "But the Knight-Captain had reinforcements waiting outside, deployed all around the Tower..."

"They intended this from the beginning," Anders realized, his blood running cold. They wouldn't have needed to bring such a force of reinforcements unless they'd intended from the start to annul the Tower, whatever they found there. Rebel sympathizers, heretical practices, forbidden studies -- they'd have found something.
"They lost two score Templars in the assault -- nearly half their complement," Mardra said. There was a vicious, vengeful satisfaction in her voice that Anders had rarely heard from her, which faded in the next moment. "But… no one got out."

And if she'd held out any hope for her sister, that would have quenched it. "I'm sorry," Anders said softly. What else was there to say? "I'm so sorry."

Mardra nodded silently, avoiding his eyes. She stared off into the shadows in the corner of the room. "I keep thinking..." she said lowly. "What if I'd gone to Dairsmuid, like I planned? Could I have made a difference?"

"One more mage against a near-hundred Templars?" Anders asked gently, and shook his head. "You know you couldn't have."

"But maybe I could have gotten Astrida out before it happened, at least." Mardra bit her lip. "She'd still be alive, if only I hadn't dithered..."

"You told me that you invited her to come here, but she wouldn't leave the Tower," Anders said. "She thought she'd be safer in the Tower, and so did you. We all did."

"Except you," Mardra said sharply. She looked up, met his gaze squarely. "You said no Circle would ever be safe. Did you -- know this was coming?"

The note in her voice was odd, half-fearful and half-hoping. She was asking, Anders realized, if his bond with Justice -- with the Fade -- had given him any hint of presentiment. "No," he said regretfully. "Except generally -- that no mage is ever completely safe so long as the walls of the Circles stand. I swear, if I'd had any idea..."

"That wasn't fair of me." Mardra looked back down at her clasped hands. "I'm sorry."

"Every hour, I'm plagued with a new set of what-ifs," he confessed. "What if I had gone with my original plan, to go to the Towers directly and incite them to rise up? What if I'd accepted Hamil's proposal to take the mages of Refuge and lead them as an army? Maybe I could have changed things. Or maybe not. Maybe they wouldn't have listened to me any better than they did the first time."

In truth, it was something they ought to have seen coming. Anders had studied the history of the Circles, especially of the Annulments. In a thousand years the Chantry had seen seventeen Circle Tower annulments, an average of one every fifty years. Yet the frequency had crept up over time, accelerating into their latest Age; in the last decade alone they'd seen three. They all should have known, and yet Anders felt absolutely no desire to play I-told-you-so now. "It's a kind of hubris, I think -- fantasizing that I would have had the power to change history."

"You have, you know." Mardra let out a dry, humorless chuckle. "You set the spark that started the fire. All of this change, has been because of you."

In this place, at this time, it didn't sound like a compliment. "I'm sorry," Anders said, for what it was worth.

Mardra bit her lip again, her hands rubbing over each other, clasped across her knees. "I keep thinking of Astrida..." she began, then shook her head. "The truth is, I barely knew her. We exchanged letters, a handful of times, but I was taken to the Tower when I was seven -- Astrida was only two. She was walking, but only barely. She was my only sister but we grew up half a world apart, as strangers. All I remember about her is that she had curly hair, she was shy, and she loved
pretty dresses. She loved purple, and everything she wore or slept on had to be purple.”

The tears began to fall again, silent streams of salt down their well-worn tracks in her face. "Did she still love purple, when she got older? Did she hate the Circle robes, did they let her dye them purple, did they let her be pretty?" Her voice cracked. "I never knew. Now I'll never know."

Before Anders could find a reply, a noise from the window caught his attention. He looked up, frowning, then stood to go over to the window and look out. He could see nothing from here, not even with the growing light outside... but there it came again. A voice, a shout -- or a scream.

The kids were beginning to stir, heads popping up from the beds around the rooms. Someone began to cry, and Anders swore under his breath.

"Anders?" Mardra said uneasily.

"Can you stay and watch over them?" Anders asked. He picked up his staff as he went to the door, cracking it open far enough to peer into the hallway, frowning. Nothing in the hallway, but he could hear the shouting echo faintly down the stone corridor.

"Of course," Mardra said. Anders nodded at her, then went out and pulled the door shut behind him.

The noise seemed to be coming from the west side entrance. Anders started in that direction, the open double-doors casting a square of slowly growing light into the hallway. Anla sat at one of the benches near the door, a book open on her lap, looking towards the doorway with a confused frown on her face. "What's 'appening?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said, striding down the hallway. Before he could reach the door, he nearly ran into another body running headlong the other way.

It was Rannie, out of breath and wild-eyed, her hair half-coming out of its braids. "What's going on?" he asked her even as two other mages came pelting up behind her, head-down, heading for the shelter of the Tower. A shifting breeze carried a waft of warm air to him, sharp with the smell of charred wood.

"He's gone crazy!" Rannie blurted, and Anders felt his blood run cold. "He's -- he's gone over the edge, he's got a demon! He'll kill us all!"

"Who?" Anders demanded, starting towards the door. The other mages scattered in every direction, desperately seeking cover, even as the light in the doorway turned blood red. The breeze whipped to a sudden gust, carrying stinging particles of cinder and ash on a hot wind that tore at the skin.

Anders skidded to a halt, finding himself face to face with Hamil.

But not Hamil only. He recognized the other mage's silhouette, powerful with a long summer's season of training, sinew and muscle straining now against the bounds of clothing, of skin. Arms too long, hands too long and fingers ending in sharp claws that glittered with obsidian glass. Recognized him by his hair, blown back now by a constant outpouring wreath of smoke, that choked and suffocated all it rolled across. And he could just barely recognize his face, cracked and flaking black char across a dull cherry-red glow that waxed and waned with every heavy, rasping breath. The eyes, glowing now with the heat of a furnace, golem eyes in the deep black pits of Hamil's face.

"What have you done, Hamil?" Anders exclaimed.
The creature that had once been a mage let out a breathy chuckle, a foul cloud of sulfur rolling past pointed, glass-edged teeth. "What have I done?" the creature repeated, every word quaking with roiling violence. "What have you done? What did you do while the Templars were murdering the people of Dairsmuid? While you sat in indolence and comfort, and hundreds of people died!"

His voice rose to a shout on the last word, and a ring of power exploded outwards from his body. Anders lost his footing, shoved back by the sheer force of the blow; as he struggled to right himself he heard the screams of the other mages rising up from around the space.

With a whumph like the noise of a fireball landing, a sheet of orange-tinged flame sprang into existence across the doorway. Even from this distance, the heat scorched him, the ends of his hair curling and blackening in the head. Anders heard soft reports from behind him and to the side, and risked a glance over his shoulder. He cursed as he saw similar barriers blocking the exits to the south and east -- all of them, he was willing to bet. They were trapped inside.

"Hamil, what are you doing?" he shouted, fighting his way back to his feet. "The apprentices are in here! The children!"

"Then they'll die," Hamil replied, an unearthly calm in his voice despite the crackling fire that crawled under his skin. "Just as the children of Dairsmuid died, while you stood by and let it happen. You had the power to stop it, and you didn't! And now, I have the power."

The terrified screaming of the other mages devolved into sobbing. "He'll kill everybody! He'll kill everybody!" Rannie shrieked, not very helpfully. "Oh, Maker, where are the Templars? Where are the Templars?"

"Hamil!" Anders shouted, pushing forward against the force of Hamil's magic. "You don't want this! These people are mages, like us! You don't want to hurt them!"

"Yes I do," Hamil said, still with that eerie serenity. "Traitors and cowards, all of you! You deserve to burn. You'll all burn."

He raised his arms, and fire shot out of him in a blinding corona. Anders pulled his magic about him in a tight arcane shield, as strong as he could make it -- even so, he felt the flames curling around his skin. Focus narrowed, color faded, and the world seemed to simplify: this before him was no longer a fellow mage. It was a demon, and it threatened them all.

Patches of black char seemed to move and crawl over Hamil's skin, shifting uneasily over slugging currents of molten fire beneath. Anders could see Hamil's bones blackening in the force of the fire, and he knew that there would be nothing human left when the fire went out. This was no benign spirit seeking symbiosis; this was not even a greedy parasite, reaching out to make a place in a world it didn't belong to. This was a creature of destruction and death.

With a wordless shout he raised his weapon before him and charged. Sheets of fire flashed over him, rolling off his shield and away. Even his shield was not strong enough -- he still felt the skin on his arms begin to peel back from the force of it, and he pushed healing through his limbs even as he pushed his way through the flames.

Hamil was in the center of the storm, and he broke through the force of into a bubble of near-calm, the eye of the hurricane. He struck out with his staff, and thank the Maker for its enchantments of arcane and ice, which kept it from shattering on the spot. He landed a solid, side-sweeping blow, but Hamil barely seemed to notice; his flesh darkened at the point of impact, the magma under his ribs creeping back for a moment, but it didn't seem to slow him down.
The abomination turned towards him, mouth open in laughter, revealing glowing embers where the teeth should have been. Anger surged in him in response, and he lashed out with one blue-sheathed fist, a punch to the face encased in a gauntlet pulled from the Fade.

Cruel laughter transmuted into a scream of fury, and the abomination lashed out at him with razor-sharp claws that trailed liquid flame. Anders blocked the overhand swipe with his staff, and felt sweat -- or was that blood? -- either way it sizzled as it trickled out of his hair into his face, and he could not spare a hand to wipe it away.

The next clash spun them both around, and through a gap in the curtain of flames Anders caught sight of Anla still curled in a ball in the corner. There was the vague silhouette of Rannie behind them, cowering in the doorway as though it would provide any protection. The third mage was at least trying to do something useful, feebly channeling a Winter's Grasp that was having no effect whatsoever on the flames that steadily encroached his corner. Didn't he realize that he needed to -- "Dispel!" he yelled at them. "Dispel, all of you!"

Rannie started, hands coming away from her face as she stared at him blankly. "W-what?" she stammered.

"The flames are demonic! Frost magic won't work!" He blocked another slash from the abomination, one which took a chunk out of his staff. He needed room to work, to back up and get the thing at range, but he couldn't with so much fire cluttering up the room. "Dispel them, blight you, dispel!"

There was no time for further cheerleading, as the abomination came at him with a banshee scream, furnace-flames bellowing out from its open mouth and too many claws on each hand. He parried furiously, with staff and shield-wrapped hands, but it wasn't enough; claws dug into his shoulder and ripped deep gashes that cauterized instantly in the burning air. The pain shot up and down his arm, but he blocked it; there was no time for such things. A flurry of blows rained down on him one after another as the abomination lunged at him, shrieking.

And then there was a sudden coolness and open space at his back, and Anders was able to retreat a few steps and interpose his staff between them. He glanced behind him and saw that the man and the woman had heeded his instructions. The two of them were on their feet now, shakily going through the motions of the dispel that every apprentice -- regardless of their specialty school -- was taught before they were allowed out of their introductory Spirit classes.

Where the magical dispel took effect, the flames vanished -- but the area of effect they could manage was only a pool around them, and the flames still covered most of the room. "Get to the door!" he called to them. "If you can clear it, then get help! Get more -- cast all together -- "

Agony flared up his thigh as a blob of liquid -- burning, seething, it looked like a gob of the same molten substance that flowed under the demon's skin -- splattered on his leg. He slammed down a counterspell on the area, felt the burning sensation sputter out. But there was no more time to coordinate the defense; Hamil demanded all his attention now.

A tight, focused mind blast forced the creature back a few paces, giving him room to move once more. He sent a quick healing spell down to the injury, feeling strength and relief flow through the limbs, but it was too difficult to concentrate on healing and battle at the same time. Defeat the demon, and all else would come after. Defeat the demon, and then --

He couldn't think about what would come after.

Stroke by stroke, step by step, he forced the demon back. The clear space in the stone room opened
up as the fire melted away; more and more mages had joined in the efforts, working together in synchrony as they dispelled the demonic flames. The demon howled in rage as they forced it back, its flames shrinking back and damping down into itself as the cordon of negating magic tightened around it. The black skin broke, bubbling with blood as Anders landed one blow after another, and he began to see the red of it again now.

"Hamil," he said, trying one last time to reach the mage within the conflagration. "Hamil! Listen to me!"

No voice answered him, just the howl of pure demonic energy. Anders gritted his teeth, gripped his chipped and charred staff in hands that throbbed with swollen burns. *So be it.*

He'd killed abominations before, in Amaranthine, in Kirkwall. He'd killed Thrask's daughter Olivia when she gave in to despair, killed Evangeline in a stone-roofed cavern not unlike this one, and those were only the ones whose names he'd known. Too many in Kirkwall, the poisoned Veil swirling about every mage like blood, fogging their thoughts and leading them down with oily whispers and foundation-deep corruption. He'd killed mages, when they'd gone too far to retain any trace left of their humanity, and sometimes even when they hadn't.

He'd killed mages before, and he'd sworn he never would again. But he had also sworn an oath to protect the people of Refuge -- the mages, the apprentices, even the workers whose lives would be so much rubble in the path of this horror. And in the end, it wasn't even a choice.

Calling on all the force of his magic, Anders channeled it into his staff. He held it like a spear, memories of battles he'd never fought guiding his stance, and charged.

The tip of the staff caught Hamil in the chest, throwing him back against the scorched and blasted wall. The staff wasn't bladed -- the tip wasn't even particularly sharp -- but the force behind it was enough to drive the enchanted length of wood through the abomination's chest and ground itself into the wall on the other side.

The abomination shrieked, a sound far outside the voice of any human being. Its chest burst open, the jagged black bands of the ribs crumbling to reveal a heart of fire. Instinctively, Anders threw up all his remaining magic in the strongest shield he could, right before the explosion centering on the tip of his staff blew out that section of the wall.

For a moment he was deafened and blinded by the force of the explosion, all the demon's power detonating in an enclosed space; the stone wall hadn't survived the onslaught, but had still managed to reflect much of it back in his face. He stood there, blinking slowly as he tried to bring his facilities back under control.

There was light on his face, more than there should have been -- natural daylight, not magelight or demonic fire. Sunlight streamed in through a gap in the wall, as ragged-edged as though some monstrous creature had taken a bite from it. Human-sized figures scurried in the open space on the other side, but his eyes were watering too hard to take them in.

Sound returned slowly; the crackling of the few fires that had caught in the Tower furnishings, the *whoosh* of Winter's Grasp as the other mages tried to containing it. And a high-pitched, constant noise, sawing just at the edge of his hearing…

Someone was screaming. Shrieks of pure terror, over and over without surcease. Anders turned abruptly, seeking the source of the noise.

Curl in a corner of the room on the opposite side from the sudden breach was Anla; she had been
trapped by the walls of flame, and cowered against the wall while the demon promised them all to roast them alive, a slow and agonizing death. She huddled with her arms wrapped around her head, eyes squeezed closed tightly enough for tears to leak past the lids, and screamed on every staggered breath. Even now that the demon was gone and the danger past, she couldn't seem to break out of her paralysis of fear.

No --

The Tower still seethed with the remnants of demonic energy, the demon's passage and the prodigious amounts of magical energy that had clashed here setting the Veil to trembling. Justice crackled close under his skin, running so high in him that he could almost see it: a second world, double-layered on the first, swirling with green currents and dark eddies.

Such a darkness had coalesced around Anla, a curve of shadow that mirrored her tight fetal clutch; as she screamed and screamed it reached into her through her mouth, through her eyes, through her breath. With mounting horror Anders watched it flow into her, saw the first manifestations begin to break through her skin: a second set of eyes offset to her temples, a pair of mandibles beginning to grow through the sides of her mouth. Phantom limbs stretched up to curl over her shoulders, as though a great insect were creeping up her back.

He reacted without thinking. Energy pooled in his hands, glinting and crackling with a strange hue, and he launched it towards the stricken girl with all the strength he had left in him. He recognized the flavor of it, familiar but strange -- arcane and spirit, somehow combined into one.

It struck the budding Fear demon with the force of a flying boulder; the slender elven girl was flung back against the wall, striking the stone with enough force to knock her out cold. The demon shrieked in surprise and outrage; the manifestations shriveled and vanished like cobwebs under a flame, and the darkness dispersed.

Someone behind him muttered an awed oath. Anders turned around, nerves stretched tight, to see that an entire crowd of mages had gathered on the slope leading down from the Castle. They peered in through the new Tower egress at the scene of death and destruction, huddling together and nudging each other nervously; at once wanting to crane their necks to goggle at the spectacle, and afraid to get too close.

"Maker preserve us," someone muttered; he couldn't clearly see who. "You… killed it!"

Anders stepped up onto the ruins of the wall, framed by the ragged edges of stone and with the Fade-warped air behind him. His breath still labored, coming down from the frantic battle, and he was at once giddy and furious with their timid spectatoring.

"We need no Templars!" he shouted, and his voice carried out over half the valley. "We have never needed Templars! Our lives, our deaths, shall be in no hands but our own!"

And with that, he turned his back on them and stepped down off the pile.

During the interlude when he'd been staring out over the crowd, Surana had arrived on the scene. She ignored the still-simmering puddles of flame, ignored the twisted remnants of what had once been Hamil, and knelt over by the wall where Anla had fallen. As Anders watched, she reached out and carefully pulled the girl into her arms.

He approached, feeling more himself with every step; he found himself shocked, almost horrified by what he'd done, how he'd responded to the demonic presence preying on Anla. She still breathed, at least; he could see her chest rise and fall within Surana's arms.
Surana looked up at him. "You attacked her," she said. Her voice was almost calm.

"I had to," Anders said, his voice full of regret.

Surana nodded slowly; however little she wanted to, she clearly understood. She looked down at Anla's still form. "Is she...?"

Anders followed her gaze reluctantly. "Yes. It was Fear," he said. Justice's presence subsided within him, taking his near-second-sight with it -- but he could still see it if he looked, the unclean aura of darkness that roiled uneasily in her small frame. "It took her. It is in her now."

Surana said nothing; she pulled Anla a little closer to her, rocking her slightly. Her face was calm, stoic, but tears began to pour from her eyes.

"Neria... listen," Anders said urgently, willing that emotionless look off her face. "This doesn't have to be the end. The demon is quiescent, stable, for now. There are ways... there are ways to fix this. To help her, to get the demon out of her."

That stirred her; Surana looked up, her eyes widening. "How?"

"There are... there are ways." He groped through his sometimes confused and conflicting memories, trying to find the threads. "The Hero of Ferelden knew a way, she did it once, I know. A ritual... some kind of ritual to enter the Fade, and fight the demon on its own turf, drive it out. The boy survived, he's alive and free today."

"I believe I heard about that," a nearby voice said unexpectedly. Anders looked up, startled, to see Ertha standing nearby. She hadn't been in the Tower during the attack; she must have come in afterwards. The older woman cocked her head to the side quizzically. "Connor Eamon, correct?"

"Yes, that was it!" Anders said eagerly. "Arl Eamon's son, I remember now."

Ertha nodded. "The Hero came to Kinloch Hold to request aid," she said. "I wasn't present for the ritual, of course, but we all heard about it. It can be done. But it requires a massive amount of lyrium."

"We live on top of blighted Orzammar!" Anders exclaimed. "Lyrium production capital of the bloody South! If we need lyrium, we can get lyrium."

Ertha looked dubious, disapproving; a look she'd probably cribbed from Wynne, in their time stuck in the same Circle. "But that much lyrium would cost a fortune. Is it worth it, for one elf girl?"

Anders stared at her incredulously. "Worth it to save a child's life?" he repeated, his voice rising in volume. "Yes, it bloody is! We aren't the Templars. We don't kill children just because it's easier, or cheaper!"

"There might be another way," another voice chimed in. Grandin joined the small circle, looking wide-eyed at the fallen elven girl. "I've heard the Dalish have rituals for going into the Fade..."

How in the Maker's name had he forgotten about that? Of course; because it hadn't been him who went on that particular adventure. "Right! They do, I've been on one," he said emphatically. "See, the point is, we have options. We don't have to leave people behind just because the Chantry says they're irredeemable."

Having a task in front of him, something that had to be done right away, steadied his mind somewhat. He oversaw moving the girl to a quiet, isolated room in the back of the Tower, settling
her into a bed with a spell that would ensure she (and the demon) would remain asleep for a good
twelve hours. Surana would not be parted from her, even when he tentatively tried to suggest the
dangers that might attend if the demon roused before she did. She didn't even look his way; it was
like she didn't even hear him at all.

Eventually Jowan arrived, and volunteered to stand a post just inside the door of the room; he could
be trusted to look after his wife, Anders knew, and he at least had experience with demons before.
He ceded the post with some reluctance, and went back to his own room, promising to write to
Merrill in Kirkwall immediately for news of the Dalish ritual.

He sat at his desk, staring at the blank page before him, and his mind felt as blank and useless and
wordless as the paper, as the full realization of the day bore down on him.

He'd killed another mage. Killed him, Hamil, a mage just like him -- the one thing he'd sworn
never to do, after he had come so close with Ella. Here, in the very heart of Refuge, the one place
that should have been safe -- that mages should be able to find shelter from all the dangers of the
world -- and he'd killed him.

He wouldn't call it a mercy, or try to tell himself that Hamil had been beyond saving, or that he'd
been dead from the moment he invited demonic fire into his very bones. That was for the Templars
and the Chantry to do, to disguise murder as mercy. He'd killed him. When the time had come to
strike the final blow, he hadn't even hesitated.

That Hamil had been trying to kill him at the time -- had been bent on murdering everyone within
his grasp, even the apprentices, did not lessen the guilt. Because he should never have let it get that
far. He should have found a way to pull Hamil back from the brink, to talk him down -- there had
been so many warnings along the way, so very many signs that he hadn't seen, hadn't heeded in
time.

And now Hamil was dead.

Oh, Maker, how could any of them believe in him now? A mage's blood, their blood, was on his
hands. He'd sworn they'd be safe here, and they weren't. He'd promised they'd have nothing to fear.
He hadn't seen the signs because he had refused to believe that it was possible, that a mage would
turn to demons even in the absence of desperation, of fear for their own life. He'd promised that no
mage would need to fear becoming an abomination, and it had happened anyway. Twice.

Now a boy was dead, and a girl hovered in danger of her very life, because he'd failed. Why would
anyone put their trust in him ever again? What reason would any of them have to stay here, if he
could not guarantee their safety, couldn't even guarantee their lives? They would leave, they would
leave, and he couldn't even blame them -- he wouldn't be surprised if some of them had left
already, if he woke up in the morning to find the valley deserted --

He realized with a start that he was hyperventilating; each short, shallow breath put a strain on his
chest, the ribs that had cracked under the blows from the abomination. He'd barely even felt it at
the time. He tried to heal it now, but the magic seemed to slip from between his fumbling fingers,
slithering away into a growing cloud of darkness --

Breathe. Slowly. He tried to force himself to breathe. Tried to reign in his spinning thoughts, to
calm himself and focus, but it was like trying to lift yourself off the ground by force of sheer will
alone.

If only Hawke were here.
He rose to his feet abruptly, leaving the letter on his desk unwritten -- but even as he turned towards the door, he shied away. He ought to go out there, to get to work on cleaning up, to try to calm the mages' fears -- but no, he couldn't face them, not with the blood of one of their own on his hands; he couldn't bear to see the accusation in their faces, the disappointment, the betrayal. Not again, not again --

Breathe. Slowly.

He paced in circles, instead, agitated thoughts spinning like a whirlpool in his mind. What could he do? What could be done? The other mages wouldn't listen to him after he'd killed one of their own -- not that they ever really had, but even less than before. The others... the others couldn't help him. Mandra had just been bereaved by the loss of her sister, and her old friend; Surana was consumed by fear for her foster-daughter. Jowan needed to be there for his wife. He couldn't ask more of them, not now.

He needed to write this bloody letter, that was what he needed to do. If Anla was to have any hope of surviving this she needed treatment fast; the quicker the letter got out, on its way across the Amaranthine Ocean to Kirkwall, the quicker she could write a reply and they could get started. Assuming he could find someone to carry the letter; considering how furious Bhelen was with him at this time, and oh Maker, what if all the mages left? Bhelen would make good on his threats, and all of Refuge would be lost, turned out into the teeth of a bloody war and with the fury of a cheated dwarven king at their backs. The only one left would be him, bound by the contracts he'd signed to serve in the Deep Roads until all his years ran out.

Forty-seven years. Breathe…

A sharp pain in his scalp brought him to his senses, and he realized he was pulling at his hair. With difficulty, he unclenched his hands and brought them down to his sides, drawing deep, careful breaths. His hands were grimy, sticky with blood and coated with char. He went to a basin and summoned water, going through the motions with an automatic habit that only twenty years of healing could really ingrain.

He was in shock, he realized in a burst of clarity. Though he wondered why: he'd fought worse demons than Hamil before, at Hawke's side or Natya's, and come out the other side unbothered. Why it should hit him now, worse than any before… why should this be different? Because this was his own making, his own responsibility?

A few of Bardien's words floated back to him through the haze: *All that separates a leader from an ordinary man is making the hard decisions, and being willing to live with the consequences.*

Well, he thought. He'd certainly had practice enough in living with the consequences.

The future yawned before him, a blackness that would be too easy to fall into. He'd write that letter, he decided. As for the rest, he'd start picking up the pieces later.

---

It was near evening before Anders emerged again, late afternoon on the day that had begun with that terrible dawn. It had taken him that long to write the letter, discarding multiple drafts -- he had to convey the urgency and need to Merrill, without admitting in a letter that could be traced back to
them what exactly had befallen the girl. He thought he might have slept in there a bit, or at least there were half-hour gaps that time had seemed to jump past. He hadn't slept at all the night before, since the news had come in from Dairsmuid -- no one had.

But the letter was done, and Anders had gotten hold of himself at least a little bit, when he stepped out into the public eye once more. He went looking for Grandin, in the hopes that the worldly mage could perhaps use some of his contacts to deliver the letter to Kirkwall and he wouldn't need to bother Bhelen with it at all.

He checked on Anla on his way out, to let Surana know that the letter was being sent, but the situation didn't seem to have changed at all since he'd left them. Jowan had found a chair somewhere, and sat by the door instead of standing; other than that their positions were unchanged. Anla was still asleep, and Surana was still entirely focused on her. She had no harp or lute in her hands, but she sang soft words in elvish as Anders lingered, feeling stupid and helpless, in the doorway.

Elgara vallas, da'len
Melava somniar
Mala tara aravas
Ara ma'desen melar

The words meant nothing to him, but he recognized the tune as the same one she'd played for Anla when she first came to the Tower -- the one she and Anla had known different words for, the one he'd written to Merrill about the first time. He hoped that, asleep as she was, Anla heard.

As he neared the space in the Tower hall where he'd fought Hamil, his steps slowed. He didn't really want to relive that fight so soon. Yet there was a buzz of movement around the room, figures -- both short and tall -- clambering in and out of the hole that had been blown in the wall.

He approached the activity with some trepidation, but his heart lightened somewhat on seeing that the patch of floor where Hamil had died had already been cleared. There was no sign of his body -- what had been left of it -- which meant that someone had taken the initiative to clean up a bit.

"Warden Anders!" one of the short figures called out, and Anders recognized Rona, the young mother who had come up to work on the Tower with her family. She climbed over the lip of the hole in the wall and doffed her brimmed hat, beaming up at him. "Good to see yer all right, after fightin' that demon."

"Yes, I'm all right," Anders said, touched despite the pain the reminder brought. He looked around. "What's going on?"

"Oh, well, this hole will have to be fixed, right?" Rona glanced over her shoulder. "And these mages all volunteered to help. They've been right handy, I gotta say: moving big chunks of stone through the air with no hands, like soap bubbles! We'll have some scaffolding down before the end of the night; by next cycle, if they keep up the help, you won't hardly know it was there."

Anders looked over at the mages in astonishment; this was the first time, since Refuge had been founded, that any mages had offered to lend their magic to help the dwarves in their work. He recognized a few of them; the plump grey-haired older lady who'd won the tug-of-war competition was sitting on a stump, lifting blocks where directed, and a teenage elven boy who'd used to run with Hamil's crowd now looked down at the dust rather than meet his gaze.

He approached the elven boy slowly. "Korio, wasn't it?" he asked.
"Yessir," the elven boy mumbled.

"What's going on here?" Anders made a gesture that encompassed the newly-swept room, the hole in the wall, the gathered mages.

The boy glanced up at him, determination chasing unhappiness across his face. "Well… we thought… it was one of ours who broke the wall," he muttered. "So we all ought to pitch in and help. Since this is our home, too.

"We all thought… At least, I thought… that we'd only be here for a little while," Korio admitted. "A place to hide out while all the fighting died down, and then we'd go back to the Circles. Maybe not in so many words, but... it's hard to believe that things could really change. But they have. We can never go back. We can never go back to the Circle, and most of us can't go back where we came from. This is our home, now. This is our new life, and it's time we started living it."

"Well, I certainly can't argue with your sudden work ethic," Anders said dryly, and the boy flushed. Then Anders sobered. "Do you know what happened… to Hamil's body?" he asked with some difficulty.

Korio's ears drooped further. "We… we wrapped it up in a sheet," he said, his voice nearly inaudible. "He's… he's down by the river… near the training ring. I don't know if you've been there yet, sir. It's all burnt up now."

That must have been the place where Hamil had made his fatal mistake. Anders nodded acceptance. "I'll go and take a look," he said. He swallowed. "We'll... we'll see about a funeral, tomorrow."

Korio looked astonished. "A funeral, sir?" he exclaimed. "Even though he -- he -- "

His words died, but Anders understood his surprise. In the Circle, no mage who committed the greatest sin would be afforded a funeral. Very few mages would get one at all, save the few that managed to die of old age. The rest, whether they succumbed to demons or took their own lives or were taken down to the dungeons and never came back, simply… disappeared.

"A funeral," Anders said firmly, swallowing his own sorrow. He cleared his throat. "Good work, Korio. Keep it up."

He moved off, letter in hand, still looking for Grandin. A hubbub from one of the clearings down near the river attracted his attention. Getting closer, he saw a half-dozen bodies moving together in some sort of drill formation, accompanied by shouting words.

"Aand… all together now… DISPEL!" bellowed a familiar voice. Marco stood on a small ridge at the edge of the clearing, periodically casting small fireballs to a point on the ground ahead of them, which the combined mages promptly smothered. "Not bad! Now… anti-magic burst! Hold it for three… two… one… and DISPEL!"

"What's going on here?" Anders asked as he walked up, and Marco turned quickly around.

"Anders!" he exclaimed, wiping at his forehead. The day was still warm, the sun streaming directly into their eyes. "I've been training the boys on anti-magic protocols. Just in case of emergencies. They all volunteered, after…" His voice died in his throat.

Anders stared around at the group of trainees. They all looked at him with a mixture of eagerness, daunted wariness, or respect. Not one of them looked at him with fear, or hatred, even after he'd killed one of their own. "They volunteered?" he asked.
"They heard what you said!" Marco sounded almost angry about it, and yet at the same time proud. "No Templars, ever again! You were right, Enchanter. We don't need them! We can do everything they can do. And we'll do it ourselves!"

A murmur of agreement went through the little Dispel squad. His breath caught. "I… good," he said, with an effort. "I'm glad."

They fell back into formation as Anders moved off, Marco still calling out *dispel! Cleanse! Center, hold shield; left and right, counterspell!*

 Everywhere Anders looked, Refuge was humming with an atmosphere of concentration, a sense of renewed determination. It was a complete change from the way things had been in the past few weeks, and left Anders somewhat at a loss. It was not at all what he had expected; he'd half expected to walk out the Tower door to a completely deserted valley. How could things have changed so much, so quickly?

He was sidetracked from his errand when he heard the piping of children's voices, suddenly urgently reminded of the importance of watching over the apprentices and keeping them safe and reassured.

The high-pitched voices, blended with the softer murmur of adult voices, led him to one of the clusters of sheds that had been repurposed into outbuildings. The voices were coming from the largest of the sheds. Poking his head inside he saw, to his astonishment, all fourteen of the apprentice mages sitting in a circle on the floor, while half a dozen adult mages -- most of them older, and female -- sat on benches or leaned against the walls. He recognized Ertha, but more to his surprise, Rannie, the red-headed middle-aged woman who'd so objected to the presence of the children.

"Something I missed?" he inquired.

"Welcome, Healer," Ertha said with a respectful nod in his direction. "We were just working out a timetable."

"A timetable for what?" Anders said, though the context gave him a few clues.

"For *lessons,*" put in Carrowyn, sounding exceptionally sullen about it. "We came here all this way from the Tower and we still have to have *lessons!* I thought this place was s'posed to be free."

"Well… sometimes freedom requires homework too," was all Anders could think to say to that. Carrowyn blew a wet raspberry in his direction, and was scolded by Ertha for it.

The impromptu school session continued, and Anders edged closer to Rannie's chair. In a bare murmur he said to her, "I thought you weren't interested in looking after children that weren't yours."

"I wasn't," Rannie said quietly. "I always wished for children, but back in the Circle, that… couldn't happen."

There was a wealth of meaning hidden in the brief pauses between those words; only Anders, with his long experience as a healer in a Circle Tower, could decipher it. In the Tower, there was no happy outcome for a woman who became pregnant. Even if she wanted to keep the child, she knew it would be taken from her the moment it was born -- to say nothing of the punishment she would likely receive if her indiscretion came to light. Most female mages preferred to end the pregnancy early, and came to the healers -- such as Anders -- for help in doing so.
"And now that the Circle is gone, and I'm free... it's too late for children of my own." The admission was nearly torn out of her. "I'm too old. It was easier to harden my heart, to take that resentment out on everyone else's children. But I realize now that all children -- whether they're your own or not -- are our legacy. They will be the future of this community when we are gone." Her mouth tightened, her chin set stubbornly. "And I want us to have a future. I want that, Healer, more than anything."

Anders nodded, speechless.

He stepped out of the makeshift schoolroom, head spinning as he tried to take in the magnitude of changes. The speed of them nearly gave him whiplash. All summer, all spring, all year he'd been trying to inspire and urge and goad the mages into taking just this action, and they'd refused, drawing more and more tightly into themselves. Now, now they were stepping up of their own free will -- why? After the disaster they'd just suffered, he'd expect them to be more demoralized than ever, and yet...

"Hey, you! Anders!" A familiar -- and unwelcome -- voice called from behind him. Anders groaned quietly, and wondered if he could just keep going and ignore it. But the village was too small to avoid people, and so he steeled his nerve and turned around.

To his dismay, not just Danum but Daros Amell was there, surrounded by a crowd of other mages. "Gentlemen," he said, nodding vaguely in their direction. "Ladies. Is there a problem?"

Danum scoffed. "You have to ask?" he said. "Demons running all over the place! Abominations in Refuge! And you -- you thought you could guarantee that would never happen! Not that I ever believed that you could guarantee that for a moment, of course -- "

"I didn't believe it, either," Daros felt the need to interject, with just a hint of his old smugness.

Anders flinched. Danum kept on going. " -- but it did, and, well, you handled it!" He planted his fists on his hips and huffed in disbelief. "I never thought you'd have the guts to do that, but you did! I always thought that you being an abomination yourself, you'd come in on their side, but no! You closed right up with a rage abomination and... well! I guess if you're going to get rid of the Templars, the least you can do is their job for them, I suppose."

"It was Rannie and the others who cast Dispel who really did the job," Anders felt obliged to point out. "Any mage can do that. Marco and some of the others are practicing that now."

Danum waved that aside. "Yes, but who can stand casting dispels while you have a demon charging at your face?"

Well, me, for one, Anders thought, but that didn't really seem to help his argument much, so he didn't say it.

"The point is, if a man is going to be stupid enough to stand there and take an abomination's charge head-on," Danum continued, "then he'd damn well be willing to stick around and doing it as many times as necessary."

"I wasn't planning to go anywhere," Anders snapped.

"Except into the Deep Roads, aren't you?" Danum cried triumphantly. "Planning to run off with your dwarf friends and leave us all in the lurch! Well, we can't have that. We need you here. In case of, you know, more demons. Or in case those Templars come back -- so you can run them off again. You're the one whose fool idea this was in the first place, and you're the one who makes it
"I… have no idea what you're getting at," Anders said, confused. Up until now, Danum had only ever advocated for Anders vacating Refuge completely.

"What Danum is trying to say," another mage in the crowd spoke up unexpectedly, giving the older mage an irritated look, "is that we looked at the books, and there are forty-seven years assigned to you right now. We worked it out so that if each one of us takes one and a half extra years, then we can get rid of all of them."

"What?" Anders said disbelievingly.

"Yes, that was what I was saying," Danum said irritably. "Us mages have to stand together. We have to support each other, we can be bloody well certain because no one else will."

"That was really not at all what you were saying," Anders said.

"I was getting to it!"

"And we are stronger if we stand together, instead of everybody just looking out for ourselves," put in one of the female mages. Everyone looked over her, and she blushed slightly, rubbing the back of her head. "I guess what I'm trying to say... What I'm trying to say is, thank you." She looked directly at Anders, meeting his gaze squarely. "Thank you for fighting for us, even when we wouldn't fight for ourselves."

Anders felt a sudden hot stinging in his eyes, his throat closing. "Thank you," he said, and if it came out a little choked, everybody pretended to notice. His face broke out in a huge grin; he couldn't help it. "Thank you. That's… that's all I wanted, you know. For you to stand up for yourselves, fight for yourselves."

"I think I understand that," Daros said softly, meeting his gaze. "Now. I didn't get it before."

Overwhelmed by emotion, Anders had to excuse himself from the crowd and find some privacy. He ended up on the north side of the valley, a narrow ridge of rock that led to a ledge overlooking Refuge below. He could see over the top of the Tower, the second story still in scaffolding, to the mess of buildings and footpaths, the glint of the river reflecting the sunlight through the trees and winding away into the shadowed gulch.

And there was the hole blown in the side of the Tower, and there were the overturned sheds from the apprentice's accident the other day, wounds and breakages in the body of Refuge… but they weren't broken. Even now, mages moved around them, working to repair them, to strengthen them, to grow ever stronger.

He watched as the sun crept towards the line of the mountains, and the water in his eyes was not at all from the sunset.

Mardra joined him on the ledge, towards the very end of twilight. "I thought you might be up here," she said, and sat beside him on the stone.
He turned to look at her, then waved out over all of Refuge. "Did you do all this?" he said, his voice still a little stuffy.

She snorted. "All by myself? Hardly," she said. "After... everything that happened -- the news of Dairsmuid, what happened with Hamil -- people wanted to help. They were eager to do something, to try to make things better. I suggested a few directions for their energy, that's all. The love, the effort, that's all theirs."

"Thank you," Anders said. "I know it's not easy for you, right now, after -- Astrida."

Mardra drew in her breath, and turned to look out over the valley. From the way her eyes stared out in the distance, Anders didn't think she was watching the mages work. "The Templars annulled Dairsmuid as a warning to the rest of us," she said at last, her voice low and angry. "They murdered my sister to send a message -- that they would never let us be free. That they'd rather kill us all than let us live our lives as we choose."

She looked back at him. "Well, I don't intend to give them the satisfaction," she said. "Do you?"

"Not for a moment," Anders said instantly.

Mardra nodded.

After a time of comfortable silence, she spoke again. "I think I understand now why places like this are so important," she said. "They're living proof that we mages can live free, live by ourselves. Proof to the Templars and the Chantry, certainly, and proof to the common people -- but they're also proof to all of us. That we can be more than they tried to make us to be."

"Yes," Anders said.

"Well." Mardra stood up, and dusted the dirt and gravel from her robes. "Then let's get to it."

"Let's," Anders agreed, and stood to join her.

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he reached into his pocket for the crackling fold of paper. "Oh. Can you get this letter to Kirkwall?"

---

**Years Remaining: 0**

~tbc...
Memorial

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Draw your last breath, my friends.
Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky.
Rest at the Maker's right hand,
And be forgiven.

Even as I stumble on the path
With my eyes closed, yet I see
I am not alone.

Though the darkness comes upon me,
I shall weather the storm. I shall endure.

-Trials 1:1-1:16

Hamil's funeral was held the next day, as Anders had promised. Not all of Refuge attended, but a fair number did: even many of those who hadn't personally been Hamil's friends or followers showed up, perhaps drawn by the gravity of the solemn occasion. It was Refuge's first death, and however much pain and damage Hamil had caused in his final rampage, there was not a person there who didn't see at least the possibility of themselves reflected in him. How he was treated in death, and laid his final rest, would set a precedent for their own passing as well.

Marco had suggested, and after some discussion, the Council had agreed to convert the old training gully into a graveyard. It was a practical gesture as well as a symbolic one: the ravine was scorched inch-deep by the fallout of Hamil's transformation, the walls burned black and smoothed over with an almost glassy shine. Most of the mages were wary to even get near it, let alone attempt to repurpose it into anything else. As well as the site of Hamil's fall, it would also be the location for his funeral, and his final resting place. Anders hoped that by the time Refuge had any other dead to inter, some of the lingering aura of shock and woe would have faded from the place a little.

On a rough-built pyre in the center of the gulley lay a man-sized cloth shroud. Anders was impressed that it even made roughly the shape of a body; there had been nothing left of Hamil except pieces. Several of the Nevarran-trained mages, experienced in the handling of bodies, had taken responsibility for collecting the remains and making them at least marginally presentable, and they had done a good job.

The funeral was short and informal, with no Chantry sisters to say the rites or lead the crowd in prayer, no incense to burn or libations to pour. Several of Hamil's closer friends got up to say a few words, including Marco. An older mage from Ghislain that Anders didn't know recited the
obligatory Trials 1:16. After he stepped down Anders, moved by a sudden impulse, took his place at the head of the pyre.

"Hamil was a man who believed in freedom, for himself and for others," Anders began, searching his complex, often ambivalent feelings for some unambiguously positive words to say. "He was… a man of strong convictions and powerful emotions, fierce to his enemies and loyal to his friends."

"I saw much of myself in him, and I thought I understood him," Anders admitted. "But in the last few weeks of his life he moved away from me, despite my efforts to reach him, and moved beyond where I could make sense of his mind."

He could have said much more on the topic -- of his own frustrations, and regrets at not having been able to reach Hamil -- but a funeral was no place to indulge in excessive self-flagellation. This wasn't about him; it was about Hamil.

"We will never know what was going through his mind in his final moments, but this we do know: that he did not die feeling an agony of fear or desperation, trapped or overpowered. He lived, and died, a free man."

He hadn't particularly liked Hamil while he was alive, fire-eating and trouble-making pain in the ass though he had been; yet tears still pricked in his eyes and his voice choked a bit on the last words, and he saw several others in the crowd weeping openly. Anders stepped back from the bier, and nodded to the volunteers who stood off to the side.

Two of the volunteer mages specialized in Elemental and one in Force, the grey-haired plump lady who had helped move the rocks in front of the Tower the day before. The Elemental mages stepped forward and summoned fire -- hot and high enough to incinerate bone -- a little redundant in this case, Anders thought, but it was the ceremony that mattered. The Force mage stood attentive to keep the fire and any possible breakages contained in the small space, and when it began to die down to ashes and cinders, she gestured with a force that crushed all the remaining pieces into a fine powder.

The ashes were carefully decanted into a sturdy ceramic jar -- crafted here at Refuge -- and set under a small stone bearing Hamil's name and dates. So distilled, reduced to an urn and a small plate, Hamil's remains looked lonely here in the empty space of the gulley. Anders hoped that it would remain lonely for years to come.

---

After the funeral Anders went back to the Tower -- skirting the busy repairs surrounding the hole in the wall -- and went to visit Anla.

Mindful of Bhelen's comments about keeping mage-specific risks out of Orzammar, Surana and Jowan had moved their things up from Brosca Manor to keep an eye on Anla during her recovery. At least Surana was more responsive now, speaking when spoken to and actively getting involved with the treatment plans, but she still refused to leave Anla's side for long, and only if Jowan would stay with the girl while she was gone.

It was therefore no surprise to see Surana in the room with Anla. There was no sign of Jowan -- most likely he'd gone to wash, eat and rest after having stayed up all night -- but Mardra was in the
As Anders lingered in the doorway, Mardra tied off a thong to affix a leather armband to Anla's upper arm. "Now, rune-bands like these have been in use in the Mortalitasi for generations," she said, and tapped one of the intricate sigils which glimmered deep violent from within the embossed lines. "The necromancers use them when a spirit has been induced into a human body, to keep them from escaping out into the open, and obedient to the caster's will. They will ensure that even if you should lose focus, nothing untoward will happen. I promise you."

Anla managed a tremulous, teary smile at that, one returned by both of the women sitting at the side of the bed. Anders shifted uncomfortably; he recalled Justice's own experience with similar runes that Mardra had cast, and felt obliged to tell them that they were not nearly so efficacious on a living body. Mardra caught his eye with the minutest shake of her head and he stilled, accepting her cue for now.

Her look had attracted the attention of the others. "Anders," Surana greeted him, and "Monsieur Anders!" said Anla in surprise. "Do you have any news about…"

Surana trailed off, her eyes darting to Anla, and Anders took her meeting immediately. "No news yet," he said with a shake of his head. "It's only been two days; I wouldn't expect a response from Kirkwall till next week."

Anla wilted slightly, and Anders stepped up his bedside manner. "We've got a number of different leads we're looking into," he assured her. "I've got a line to the Hero of Ferelden, the last person known to have successfully practiced an exorcism ritual of that kind. She's a good friend of mine, and I know her well enough that she wouldn't stint in helping a pretty little girl get well."

"To say nothing of our contact in Kirkwall," Mardra added, "We've written a few other Dalish clans as well, to cover all the bases. Arcanist Dagna is researching in all her Tevinter books to see how their alti handle a Fade ritual, and Grandin is even going to talk with the Avvar Sky-Speaker -- they have their own ways of dealing with stray spirits, so rumors say."

"Any one of these methods would be sufficient to help you," Anders emphasized. "It's just a race to see which one of them will come up first. Just be strong, and we'll have that little pest out of you and back in the Fade where it belongs in no time."

Anla started crying. "Thank you," she said between sobs. "Thank you so much."

Anders took her hand. It tingled just faintly in his own, a slight pins-and-needles sensation as Justice reacted to the presence of the demon still stirring faintly under her skin. He squeezed it reassuringly. "You'll be fine," he said firmly. "Just fine. Whatever happens, we won't let anything hurt you, and we won't abandon you."

"What was that side-eye for?" Anders asked Mardra under his breath, as the door to Anla's room closed behind them. "You know those runes don't work as well on a living body."

"Anla's enemy now is fear," Mardra explained. "To resist it, she needs as much confidence and
security as she can muster. If the runes help her believe that the demon is bound, and she doesn't need to fear it as much, then that's as good as actually binding it would be."

Anders considered that for a moment, then nodded. Justice believed strongly in the truth; but Anders the healer knew that sometimes a kind lie was better for the patient than the straight truth would be. "Now that I'm here, you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes," Mardra said. She rummaged for a moment in the satchel by her side and produced -- of course -- a fold of paperwork. "I wanted to discuss the list of mages who will be going as the vanguard."

"We still have a few more days, don't we?" Anders asked. Mardra huffed slightly. "The sooner we get a solid list, the sooner we can move on to the next stage of planning," she said. "Until we know who's going we can't start on the longer list of mages who will be accompanying the bulk of the army. We need to ensure that everyone going in the advance guard has all the equipment and supplies they need by the end of the week. We need to --"

"All right, I believe you," Anders said, taking the piece of paper and opening it. He turned it to the light and looked over the list. "Grandin and Varence are obvious choices, steady and combat-experienced... Sheran and Menehi, really? Are they up to it?"

Mardra nodded. "They're both still pretty spry for their age, and they each still have a year to serve," she said. "I gather they want to go together, to watch each other's backs."

Anders accepted that with a nod. "Who's Porta?"

"You know her -- the Force mage who won that tug-of-war-contest with the Avvar," Mardra said. "Oh, good choice," Anders said approvingly. He ran down the rest of the list. "I don't recognize these three."

Mardra glanced over his shoulder. "Tisha, Ynes and Katya," she said. "They're all younger women -- I knew Ynes from Perendale, a solid Primal mage. None of them are especially combat-experienced, but they're all young and healthy and eager to make a name for themselves."

Anders groaned. "Maker preserve me from headstrong rookies," he grumbled. "They all have to start somewhere," Mardra reminded him. "But that's eight, so we still need two more."

"One more," Anders corrected her absently, still looking over the list.

Mardra looked at him in shock. "Why, who's -- you don't mean you're going, do you?"

"Why not?" Anders said, glancing up at her. "Because you're not under contract any more!" Mardra shook her head. "The others took over your years, so you don't have to go into the Deep Roads again! Or had you forgotten?"

"No, I hadn't forgotten, it's just..." Anders felt at a loss. "I know I don't have to go. But Mardra, I'll be the only mage present who has experience fighting in the Deep Roads. They'll need me. And I was the one working out the mage-dwarf tactics with Captain Bardien and the others. Of course I would need to be there to demonstrate the new tactics, to make sure the dwarven units are following the new tactics and not just trying to shove mages in the front lines where they'll be..."
darkspawn bait. Someone has to go along who has the experience, and the authority to put a stop to anything the infantry commanders get up to that they shouldn't -- trying to overwork their mages, or abuse them, or…"

"All right!" Mardra held up a hand to stop the flow of words. "I believe you. You're needed down there. But Anders..." She bit her lip slightly. "You're needed up here, too. What will Refuge do without you?"

"They were without me before for nearly six months, the last assignment I went on in the Deep Roads," Anders reminded her. "They'll still have you."

Mardra shook her head. "I'm not the one they look to," she said. "And I'm not the one with the ideas."

"No, but you're the one who makes them work," Anders said. "Mardra, you understand better than anyone else at Refuge what I'm trying to do here. You know what needs to be done, you know my mind better than anyone. I would put my full trust behind any decision you make."

"Well... oh..." Mardra floundered, then gave up with a snort. "All right! Fine. I don't know how I let you talk me into these things."

"I don't either," Anders told her honestly, feeling a wave of relief. "But I'm glad you do."

The other reason Mardra wanted the completed list of vanguard mages sooner rather than later became apparent near the end of the week, when Anders was surprised by a farewell celebration feteing all of the mages who were to depart for the Deep Roads the next day.

"You don't have to do this," Anders protested when he found out, the night before, what Mardra had planned. "Nobody would ask it of you, so soon after --"

"Anders, it's fine," Mardra cut him off. "I like planning parties. It's enjoyable, and it takes my mind off things. And I think this is what the community needs right now. Something to take their minds off the losses they've suffered, looking forward to the future and emphasizing the heroism and bravery of their own. It will get people in a better state of mind, and inspire more of them to sign up for the larger group that will go at the end of the month."

Anders grimaced, feeling the truth of that. "How we're going to spare a hundred mages from Refuge, I don't know," he fretted.

"We don't need a hundred," Mardra assured him, looking surprised. "They'll be fine with fifty."

"What?" Anders stared at her. "Bhelen told me -- through that obnoxious Fermin -- that he needed a hundred or he'd cut the contract."

"Oh, that was just a negotiating tactic," Mardra said, dismissing the threat far more casually than Anders would have dared. "I managed to wrangle him down to half in short enough order that it was obviously his real goal. Certainly, if we'd failed to provide any combatants at all then he'd be in a position to invoke a negation clause, but that doesn't mean there's no room to maneuver at all."
"All right then, fifty mages," Anders said. "At least we won't quite be stripping Refuge bare in the process. But it'll still be an uphill task, wrangling that many mages together."

"We'll manage," Mardra said confidently. "This celebration will help."

And so Anders found himself being shepherded up to the head table along with the others in the vanguard group, duty warring with a sheepish embarrassment. He'd tried to protest that as he'd already had his first-time farewell dinner before his last Deep Roads jaunt he didn't need to be included, but Mardra would have none of it; she'd insisted that excluding the hero who'd supposedly saved Refuge from the abomination who'd menaced them all would be bad optics.

An array of tables and benches had been transported out of the Tower and arranged in long rows on the most level part of the sloping mountain meadow. One table was arranged perpendicularly to the rest, and those that would be going with the vanguard were seated up at the head table, in full view of the rest of those attending. With some careful maneuvering Anders at least managed to get a seat near the end rather than in the middle, the very center of attention.

But the real surprise came after all the mages had seated, a buzz of happy conversation and laughter starting up among the assembled. Anders turned to his right to see who the last mage in the row was and nearly choked on his drink. "Daros?!" he exclaimed. "You're the tenth person?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Daros said in that dry, sarcastic manner which always drove Anders crazy. "I may not have a demon in my head feeding me power, but I am a perfectly capable mage, believe it or not."

"I'm having trouble believing my own eyes," Anders said, shaking his head in amazement. "You've been against the idea of Deep Roads service from the start! 'Selling us to the dwarven king as cannon fodder,' and other variations on that theme, I thought you said."

Daros shrugged, reaching for a plate of tiny sandwiches that were being passed around. "I still don't have any investment in the Dwarf King's goals," he said. "And I still don't think this was a wise arrangement to commit us to. If I'd been negotiating the contract I could have done much better --"

"Funny how you're always the expert in things you weren't there for," Anders drawled, and Daros gave him a thin smile.

"But whether I approve of it or not, this is the arrangement we're stuck with," Daros said, looking displeased. "Refuge needed a tenth. It might as well be me. Someone else might screw it up."

Anders sat back for a moment, processing: balancing the feeling of smug vindication with the chagrined realization that he was now going to be stuck with Daros in close quarters for however long the next stretch of the Deep Roads campaign took. Although if his sudden change of heart extended far enough for him to commit himself…

"What changed your mind?" he had to ask, lowering his voice so as not to share the conversation with everyone else within hearing range. "Why are you suddenly the champion of everything Refuge needs? You were dead set against this place, everything it stood for, everything it was trying to do."

"I've always done my best for the mages here!" Daros protested, and Anders rolled his eyes.

"The mages, sure, those of us that could still fit into your neat respectable Circle box," Anders said impatiently. "But you did everything you could to try to get people to pull out of their
commitments. Now you're serving your own. Why the turnaround? Was it just the news of Dairsmuid that did it?"

"That… was a lot," Daros admitted, his own voice low. His hands balled into fists on the edge of the table, distant and hard. "Over the past few days I had a lot of time to think. I talked with Jowan --"

"You talked with Jowan?" Anders said, astonished; up till now Jowan had ranked just behind Anders himself on Daros' shitlist, without even the reason of being the head of Refuge to force Daros to interact with him.

Daros glowered at him. "You know, if you keep up this shocked-and-appalled routine for everything I do for the next six months, it's gonna get real old real quick," he bit out.

Anders waved in vague apology, and Daros went on. "I hadn't really talked with him before," he admitted. "He spent most of the time in this awkward word salad… Can you believe he actually tried to imply that I had some kind of thing for you?"

"Knowing Jowan, actually," Anders said, choking over the thought of it, "yes."

"But I asked him what happened…" Daros frowned down at the table. "What really happened back at Kinloch Hold… with Daylen, you know."

"And?"

Daros sighed. "And he told me that Daylen did everything right," he said. "Jowan said that as soon as he confided his plans to Daylen, Daylen went right to First Enchanter Irving with the truth. Irving ordered him to keep close to Jowan, to keep an eye on him and stop him… Irving told him everything, when he and Greagoir caught up with them. Daylen did everything that he was supposed to do and when Jowan got away, Daylen took the blame. The Templars didn't care whether he was guilty or not! They just wanted a scapegoat. They dragged him off to Aeonar for doing everything he was told, doing everything he'd been taught was right."

His hands were gripping the edge of the table now, so hard that the knuckles were turning white. Anders manfully wrestled down all variations of I told you so that wanted to escape his mouth, and ended up saying nothing at all.

"The Circles murdered my brother when he tried to do right," Daros said finally. "They murdered my sister when she tried to do right. I am fucking done defending the Circles. No more."

"Glad to have you," Anders said after a long silence, voice only slightly strangled.

Daros gave him a witheringly sarcastic look (Anders should know, he'd been flensed by the best) and turned back to his food with a muttered, "Thanks." Anders sat back on the bench, marveling at the retrospective.

When Daros had arrived at Refuge, thoroughly brainwashed by Chantry doctrine and Circle propaganda, Mardra had insisted that with time and patience they could bring him around to their point of view. At the time, Anders had thought she was fooling herself, blinded by her desire to be reunited with her family. And yet here they were, not six months later, and Mardra had been proven right -- and Anders wrong.

On this occasion, he was glad to be wrong. Mardra was right. They could not -- must not -- make other mages their enemy.
The party progressed about how Anders had come to expect with Mardra's affairs: there was food, some of it obviously brought up from Orzammar for the purpose, and cake, which judging by the plain undecorated squares of it had actually been baked up here. Since the party had been held outside the decorations were lacking, but the beautiful summer meadow and the slow-sinking sunset made for as decorative a background as they could have asked for, especially as it would be some time before any of them would get to see the sun again.

As the evening went on piles of paper-wrapped packages began to accrue next to each of the ten mages at the head table -- even Anders', despite his surreptitious attempts to nudge his gifts off onto Ynes, sitting on his other side. He'd already had his going-away party once, after all, and had all the traveling and fighting gear he would need. Still, there were a few trinkets that ended up by his plate that he knew he would cherish: an intricately dwarf-crafted watch, a sturdy reinforced compass.

Most of the gifts were craftworks produced by the other Refuge mages, the one part of this process that Anders wholeheartedly approved. Sturdy rune-embossed boots and hoods, gloves and belts, replacement staves for those who had lost theirs -- Anders could definitely see Mardra's hand in organizing which gifts went to which mage. Through their own efforts, their own hard work and skill, the mages of Refuge would see that none of their own went into danger undefended.

And if Mardra tended to heap her packages a little higher on Daros' plate than the others -- well, Anders couldn't really blame her for that. She'd just lost one sibling; it couldn't be easy to see another go off into danger so soon.

The sun met the horizon at about the same time the gift- and food-portions of the party began to die down, and an expectant air began to grow around the tables. Anders realized that the moment was ripe for a speech, and also that nobody else seemed inclined to give one.

That was what leaders did, wasn't it? He remembered Bardien's speeches after every battle, Orsino's final doomed speech at the Gallows. A shudder of anxiety washed over him at the thought. He was no inspirational orator; he never had been. He'd always avoided formal speaking, even among other mages. The closest he'd ever come to rallying others with his words had been his manifesto, and even that had been mostly Justice…

He found himself rising from his seat all the same, a peculiar feeling of lightness rising from within his chest and washing up to his skull. Threads of conversation around the tables died to a background murmur, and all eyes fixed expectantly on him.

"Mages of Refuge," he said. His voice rolled out resonantly across the valley, and he wondered if Surana was playing tricks with wisps for us. "These past few weeks have not been easy ones. We have suffered setbacks, we have suffered the loss of our brothers and sisters in Rivain at the hands of the duplicitous, murderous Templars. We have, I believe, lost a measure of our own innocence."

Mutters ran around the table, residual grief transmuting to anger. He went on. "But all is not lost. There are those, Fiona and her armies among others, who continue the fight. Though pursued by all the Templar armies the Chantry can bring to bear, she continues undaunted, rallying mages across southern Thedas under her banner. In her, at last, the mages have found a champion who will plant their spear and fight for what is right!"

Grandin made a hand signal, trying to catch Anders' eye. At his nod the elven man stood, clearing his throat. "On that note, I have some news from abroad," he said. "We received news from Antiva City late last night. The Enchanters there have changed their votes; they have declared independence. They stand now with Fiona and her army!"

A murmur of fierce approval and satisfaction went round the tables, though Anders heard what was
carefully not said: Antiva City had changed to independence, but Montsimmard had not. The Orlesian Circle still stubbornly clung to their loyalty to the Chantry, even in the face of the wholesale slaughter of a loyal Tower. He managed to suppress his grimace; this was not the time to focus on that.

Anders cleared his throat and went on, feeling slightly off-balance as he groped for the right words, the right sentiments. "I know sometimes it's hard… to be the ones who stay behind like this, to feel like you're turning away from danger instead of rushing headlong into it. But whatever you do, don't forget that you deserve this. You deserve this freedom, this peace, this safety, just by being who you are. Okay? The Chantry talks a lot about the peace and protection of the people of Thedas? Well, we're people, and we're here in Thedas, so I say we've earned a piece of that peace!"

A few scattered cheers from the ends of the tables. Encouraged he went on, his voice gradually falling back into the rolling speech-making cadence as his balance steadied. "And in a battle as far-flung, as long in coming as this one has many fronts. You are no less striving for the freedom of your brothers while you labor to create the weapons they will use to fight, the cloaks that will shield them, the food that will give them strength. Through our pact with the dwarves of Orzammar we will secure the material goods they need to fight this war and none the less, we will secure a place in this world for them to come back to. A place where, no matter the travails of the field, they know they can always find shelter.

"And when they come, they will need you to teach them the lessons you have keenly mastered: the ways of freedom. As you are free mages, you can help to bring that freedom to others: freedom not only of the body, but of the mind and the heart."

He paused; the assembled mages were quiet, but he saw a number of pale, solemn faces nodding in the waning light. "Every day we live is another day we defy those who would see us cast down," he emphasized. "Though all the armies of men are set against us, though all the demons of the Fade seek to prey on us, still we persist. We have survived that which they promised, in surest condemnation, would destroy us. And yet we are still here! We persist, and every day we strive to make this world a better place, a safer place for all men; for mages, for dwarves, even for the men and women who would spurn us. We persist, and that is the true victory."

The speech came to a close with an echoing cadence of finality, and Anders started as a cheer erupted from the gathered mages. A couple of the rowdier teens began to send up fireworks from their staves, bright flashes of red and gold and white to express their wild enthusiasms.

Now that the speech was over Anders was seized with a case of the shakes, but he did his best to cover it as he hefted his mug of cider into the air. "To victory!" he called, and the mages chorused in reply. "To victory!"

Marco stood up next, and raised his own cup. "To freedom!" he called out, seconded as wildly by the crowd. "To independence!" Grandin added, raising his own cup, and others began to call out their own toasts.

The toast came around to Mardra, who rose from the table and looked him directly in the eye. "To justice," she said, and raised her cup.

The bolt of blue heat that went through him was echoed by another firework going up from behind the table. He hid behind his own cup, flustered, as a cheer rang out in every voice.

The sun sank behind the ridge of the mountains, plunging the land below into shadow; but there was no darkness in the valley, for the mages made their own light.
Years Remaining: 0

~to be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are. The end of Act III. Whew! This thing really ballooned out of hand; it was only supposed to go about 50k words, and it ended up twice that.

In a lot of ways this Act was the hardest, both for our heroes and also for me to write. Though they'll face plenty more challenges going forward, they'll be pulling together for it, and an entire village full of mages is a pretty powerful force.

As hard as this was to write, I really felt it was necessary for any story about mage freedom to address the psychological inhibitions and scars that a lifetime in the Circle has left on these people. They had a lot to learn about freedom, about living independently, about regulating themselves and taking the initiative for their own sakes, and most importantly about trusting and caring for one another. If each Act is the mages having to face down a different opponent, then the enemy in this Act is themselves. But the mages (and Anders) have really turned the corner now. Act IV will be a lot more light-hearted, a lot more positive, and with cameos all the way down.

There will be another brief hiatus before Act IV, but not nearly as long as the last one. Really my only aim is "publish at least one fic other than OES," so we should be back on the horse before too long.
ACT IV

Chapter Summary

Anders returns from the Deep Roads heady with the flush of victory at Bownammar. But it's not going to be all smooth sailing yet -- life has a few more challenges and surprises in store for Refuge and its champion.

Chapter Notes

We're back! Thank you, to all of my readers who have patiently waited for this. Act IV of One Elegant Solution will be the last part of the story, and should be considerably lighter in tone than the previous Act; there should be fun and games, some familiar faces, and happy endings all around.

He was the last mage out of the Deep Roads, following the others at nearly a cycle's remove. Not, though, the last of the entire expeditionary force that had gone to Bownammar; more than a dozen mages had stayed behind in Bownammar to reinforce the perimeter, and in hopes of burning through their Deep Roads years on a comparatively quiet, easy stretch of duty. He'd stayed long enough to be sure that there was nothing more for him to do -- nothing more that they needed from him, either the dwarves or the mages that made up Bhelen's combined task force -- and then he'd come home.

Bownammar had been retaken. Nearly forty years after falling to the Darkspawn, it had been reclaimed in just four months of heavy fighting. And Anders knew that a lot of that had been the doing of the mages. Oh sure, Bhelen's army was a formidable force -- a solid core of two thousand fighting dwarves honed by a lifetime of training and Provings, supplemented by the veterans of the Legion of the Dead, supported by a crack intelligence force and top-of-the-line logistics division. Allowing for the smaller (hah) scale, it was probably the best-run army he'd ever seen -- but it had been the addition of the mages that had turned that fighting force into an unstoppable juggernaut.

The tactics that he'd worked out on a small scale with the Legion of the Dead had worked for the other units, too. There had been some rough spots -- inevitable when trying to combine two completely different fighting units -- and there had been a few losses. Varence, Ynes, and Claudia would not be returning from the Deep Roads, as well as over two hundred dwarven troops whose names he would never know. But the hybrid units had smashed through the darkspawn ranks, chewing up teeming hordes of the monsters in their combined wall of steel and magic, and they'd cleansed Bownammar of the taint in barely a season.

Anders was exhausted, but still buoyed by the elation. Much of it was bleed-over from the dwarven troops -- the loss of Bownammar had been recent enough in living memory to still chafe at the dwarves of Orzammar, and this victory was a heady one for them. But more than anything else he was proud of the mages who had followed him into the Deep Roads to fulfill the pact they'd made with the dwarven king.
They'd done it. They really had! They'd proven their value to the dwarves, and specifically to Bhelen, and there was no way he'd give up on them now that he'd seen first-hand the victories the mages could bring him. Although the campaign had halted while Bhelen consolidated his new territory, reinforcing the new boundaries and bringing in workers enough to rebuild the fortress, Anders knew he was already planning the next stage. Bownammar was only the first step -- it had been lost and regained a half-dozen times over the centuries. To truly gain ground against the darkspawn they needed to go further, push past Bownammar to reclaim some of the old lost thaigs.

In a way it was good news for them; it was a promise of security. Even if Bhelen's ambition eventually faltered, the darkspawn would never truly cease to be a threat. If there was ever a time when Orzammar no longer needed its strange magical allies, it wasn't going to be anytime soon.

Almost as warming as the victory over the darkspawn had been the way the mages had all worked together. Gone were the petty spats and infighting that had plagued Refuge for the last six months. In the Deep Roads, surrounded by the dwarven army, the mages had bonded together more closely than ever. It had helped, to be sure, that they were moving with an entire army instead of a small expeditionary force; with the sheer size and quality of a supply train that Bhelen was able to provide, they didn't lack for the small comforts. He'd been worried that many of them would crumble in the hardships of the Deep Roads (which was never any fun, even to Wardens -- or was that especially to Wardens?) and indeed there had been a few bad moments.

Anders had spent most of the last four months moving constantly between one unit and the next: reassuring spooked mages, soothing disgruntled dwarven tempers, and trying to smooth the integration of one into the other. On more than one occasion he'd had to sit with another mage through a panic attack -- brought on by the darkness, the tight quarters, the sight of darkspawn, or even the fear of their own magic. Some of them had never been called on to use their magic to kill before, and even if the target was darkspawn it was fear of themselves that was more paralyzing.

One mage -- not in the vanguard but the main army -- had reacted so badly to his first sight of real, live darkspawn that he'd set off a fiery explosion that knocked down his own forces. Anders had had to intervene swiftly to save the lives of the injured dwarves, and had changed places with that mage to avoid distrust or resentment among them. A few more had grown sick -- either from a bad reaction to the army food or exposure to the fungi and spores of the Deep Roads -- and Anders had had to do more hasty reassignments to prevent any dwarven units from losing their magical support.

But each time they'd rallied, and each small victory had given them the confidence to face the next hazard. By the end of the campaign, the younger mages had been swaggering and boasting like ten-year veterans, to the indulgent amusement of the troops around them.

He stopped by Brosca Manor briefly to get catch his breath; the place seemed oddly empty, with only a single mage puttering around the large desk in the front and another -- a stranger -- asleep on the cots in the back. The Manor was taking on more of the air of an embassy than a home, a halfway point for mages on their way up to Refuge.

As he was.

When he'd gotten some of the feeling back in his feet he picked up his staff and began the by-now comfortable and familiar trek up the tunnel and stairs to the valley. Orzammar had the same vast, weirdly echoing quality as Brosca Manor; the usually bustling city seemed hollowed out, all the life and energy of it focused away elsewhere. He knew objectively that only a small fraction of the dwarven population was deployed in the Deep Roads, but it was enough to make a palpable difference in the streets.
The cave at the top of the valley tunnel had been enlarged too, he noticed as he came up the last set of stairs. Busy dwarven hands had chipped away at the natural cavern that fed out into the valley, evening the height of the ceiling and squaring away the walls to make room for cabinets and couches.

A familiar dwarf sat at one of the tables, a small plate half-full of muffins at one hand and a rough-bound tome half her size in the other. So intent was Dagna on her work that she didn't even register Anders' footsteps until his shadow fell over her. "Whatcha reading?"

Dagna choked, a spray of crumbs flying from her mouth as she coughed, and she hastily thrust the book away so that it would not be caught in the line of fire. Still coughing she whirled around, and her eyes widened as she caught sight of him. "Anders!" she exclaimed. "You're back!"

He spread his arms out and smiled. "In the flesh!" he said. "Slightly battered, slightly blighted, no more or less than usual."

Trailing off a few more coughs Dagna stood up from the couch and came around the table, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug. "It's good to see you again," she exclaimed, and his heart warmed.

He returned the embrace, hugging her carefully. "You too," he said, trying not to let his voice get embarrassingly rough. After a moment she released him and stood back a step, and he nodded towards the tome on the table. "What's this?"

"Oh, this? One of the Bownammar collection," Dagna said, her attention quickly returning to its usual focus of academic and arcane lore. "I never thought there would be so many books in a dwarven thaig -- we mostly keep our records in stone, you know -- but there were over a dozen volumes that aren't available anywhere on the surface any more! I guess all sorts of things accumulate in the deep roads."

"Maybe the darkspawn brought it along as light reading," Anders joked. Although knowing some of the darkspawn he'd met, it was disturbingly not out of the question.

"I've already catalogued most of the rest of the books in the library at the Royal Palace," Dagna continued. "We can move them to the library at the Circle -- sorry, the tower -- once the third story is complete. Oh, I can't wait! It's gonna be so amazing."

"I think it's already pretty amazing," Anders commented, and Dagna grinned at him.

"Well, that doesn't mean it can't get better from here," she said. "Welcome back, by the way. You need to see Mardra?"

"Not for anything in particular," he replied. "I was just going to check in. Unless there's something she needs to see me for. Any crises pop up while I was gone?"

Dagna shrugged. "Nothing remarkable. Nothing we couldn't handle," she said, as though the prospect of an entire tower full of mages being both capable and permitted to handle their own crises was not remarkable enough.

"In that case I'm going to go back to the Tower to rest and get cleaned up," Anders said. "But food first. I've been eating deep mushroom casserole for three months and I'm starving."

"If you hurry there should be some muffins left," Dagna said, waving one from her plate cheerfully. Anders pretended to make a grab for it, and Dagna fended him off. "Hey!"
"Hey what?" Anders asked innocently. He feinted left and grabbed right, and held the pilfered muffin overhead out of her reach. "Hey look at this, a muffin all the way up in the air! Who'd have thought? Well, I guess if no one else is up here to eat it -- "

Dagna huffed and crossed her arms belligerently. "Don't make me bring you back down to my height, Anders," she threatened. "You won't like how I do it."

Anders thought about it for a moment, then returned the muffin to the plate. "On second thought, I don't think I want to find out," he said, and Dagna grinned at him.

"Get your own. There should be plenty in the Tower kitchen," she said, and Anders sighed in defeat.

"Will do," he said. "Hopefully by now they've had a chance to fix the holes in the wall."

Dagna looked surprised. "They finished that in the first week," she said. "Oh, right, you have been away a while. Well, this should be fun."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Anders said a touch suspiciously. He walked towards the front entrance of the cave. Dagna tagged along behind, stuffing the rest of the muffin in her mouth and grinning in anticipation of his reaction.

The sight of the valley below him stopped him in his tracks. For a moment, he wasn't sure he was in the right place; had he perhaps gotten turned around in the tunnels and come out on the other side of the ridge, overlooking some mountain town?

What lay before him... was a village. There was no other way to describe it. The tower was even higher than he remembered it, smooth and sturdy and finished through the second story and sprouting half-walls and scaffolding all the way up to the third. Windows punctured the walls at heavy intervals, clean-cut into the stone, and many of the visible apertures glimmered with glass. The north and east doors, visible from this angle, lay flung open to the rest of the valley, and small figures passed in and out as he watched.

But it was not the tower that surprised him half as much as the multitude of other buildings that had sprung up around it. When he'd left, the scraped-bare ground around the construction site had been littered with tents and flimsy sheds, more meant to hold building materials than people. Before the Tower's completion many mages had crouched in those buildings for shelter, but walls and roof to keep the sun off at noon and the cold out at night were about all they could offer.

Now the space around the tower was filled with buildings -- real buildings. Most of them were short, one-story squares of stubby stone topped with pointed roofs, but they were homes. Sturdy, permanent, with solid walls for protection and privacy, homes that mages could live in all by themselves, if they chose.

The lanes between the houses were narrow and winding, aside from the broad straight avenues leading straight up to the tower itself. Small figures passed to and fro even as Anders watched, short people teaming up to carry beams of wood and tall people holding books or baskets or nothing at all. Each going about their business, or pleasure, at their own pace and with no worse deadline or supervision than a desire not to be late for supper.

Those mages would never need to sleep under trees or on riverbanks again, always with one eye open and their ears straining for the sound of clanking metal or barking dogs in pursuit. They were no longer fugitives, outlaws seeking shelter under the nearest barn or overhang. They were home.
"It's a bit rough still," Dagna said, coming up behind him and eyeing the settlement with a critical gaze. "The roads are gonna be mudpits when it rains, and all that raw stone gets tedious, doesn't it? But it's workable for now, even if it is ugly."

"No," Anders replied, staring out over the vista. "It's beautiful."

Sentiment or not, he really was hungry. He headed for the tower; Mardra's cooking tent had vanished somewhere in the maze of new buildings, and Dagna had promised muffins from the Tower's kitchens. Passing through Refuge he saw many faces he half-recognized from earlier this spring, as well as a healthy sprinkling of new ones; the newer ones tended to stop in the street and stare at him as he passed by, at least one grabbing at their friend's sleeve and whispering urgently. Old and young, human and elf, male and female… it was a colorful concentration of people without a doubt.

One thing he didn't see in the streets was any of the children. He didn't know whether any new young mages had arrived during the Bownammar campaign, but surely they shouldn't have lost any.

Passing into the Tower answered the question, or at least gave hints: he heard the piping voices of the very young apprentices drifting out of one of the first-story rooms. Peeking in on his way past, he saw a couple of the older mages in a room surrounded by children: as far as he could tell they were doing sums, actually.

As he approached the kitchen, a tantalizing aroma led the rest of the way. Anders couldn't remember the last time he'd smelled fresh-baked breads. Hawke's mansion in Kirkwall, perhaps? Vigil's Keep? There must have been something since the memory of his mother's kitchen, in the dim memory of his childhood home. Too long for certain, he resolved.

He poked his head around the door and was startled for a moment when his eyes settled on the baker. He'd been expecting a mage, one of Mardra's assigned roster of chores, but instead a square and stocky dwarf bustled back and forth between the oven and a drying-racks, a metal sheet gripped in bare, callused hands.

As the dwarf turned back towards the door Anders caught sight of a tall rectangular tattoo framing one eye of a homely, bearded face. It was actually the tattoo more than the face that sparked recognition in him -- this was little Natya Junior's father, Rona's husband, part of the family that had come up from Dust Town to work on the Tower. What had his name been, again? Ranec? Ceran? Cenar, that was it.

His stomach growled and Anders cleared his throat to hide it, stepping into the kitchen with a sheepish smile. The dwarf's manner lit up at the sight of him, face spreading in a broad smile. "Healer!" he exclaimed. "Good to see yer! Back from the Deeps already? Knew they couldn't keep yeh down!"

"Thanks," he said. "It's good to be back. You're, ah, helping with the baking?" He nodded at the spread of pans and instruments around the kitchen.

"In a manner of speaking," Cenar said. He flashed his teeth in a grin and gave a wink, pointing both
thumbs at his chest. "I'm Head Baker around here, iffen there is such a thing -- at any rate, I turn out most of the bread this kitchen sees. Not too many others know the first thing about it."

"Oh," Anders said, surprised. "And, er -- you do? From what I'd heard, I thought you were more… That is, I thought you used to be Carta?"

Cenar snorted. "As if there's any duster who made thirty without working for the Carta," he said derisively. "But I picked up a few tricks here and there, aye so. I was always a good hand around a camp stove, and a few weeks back they had that bright-cheeked cloudgazer and his lad in, teaching all the mages who cared to learn the proper art o'baking. Well, I got on top of that, I did! Now I've got a place that can eat all the bread I can make! Now I've got a proper oven for once, and right tools to work with, and good flour that ain't half-eaten with weevils! Now I've got a place that'll have me, at last!"

"Ah," Anders said. It had never occurred to him, in all his work in Dust Town, that there could be those among the casteless who aspired to be… to be bakers, to spend their days making cakes and pastries instead of stealing and stabbing each other to survive. Maybe it should have. "But. Er. We are paying you for this, aren't you? …Aren't we paying you to build the Tower, not cook in it?"

"Eh…" Cenar shrugged. "They don't need so many hands cutting the blocks nowadays. My Rona is up on the work crews, doing a fine job of it. That long-legged girl offered to pay me the same rate to stay here and bake, so what kind of a rock-brained fool would I have to be to turn down an offer like that? Another season, and the Tower will be all finished. But you surfacers will still be eating my bread! Me and my girls, we'll be set up for life here!"

"How, ah…" Anders cleared his throat. "How are the girls? Your little girl, I mean?"

"Oh she's fine, healer, just fine," Cenar assured him, opening an oven door to peek in at the contents. A wave of savory warm air gusted over to Anders, and he felt his mouth begin to water at the rich smells from within the oven. "We set our hearth down in one o' those limestone caverns over on the eastern scarp. No good stone for building with, but easy as pie to chip out a good cozy home in. Nice short commute to work, too.

"Rona's doing honest work, making good money, and so'm I. Our Nat's living the good life now, the life a child should -- no more swimming in the poisons in Dust Town, no more Carta thugs in every corner. She can roam around all day safe as houses!" Cenar beamed at the thought. "She's making friends with some of yer little mage kids, too; sometimes she even sits in on lessons with them. Our little girl's learning to read! She's gon' grow up smart, not like her mom and dad!"

The pride and pleasure in his voice set Anders back. He wouldn't have thought that a life as what was effectively a domestic servant would be something to aspire to… but then, the casteless had spent most of their lives forced into a state even more wretched than servitude. Compared to that, steady employment and comfortable quarters were aspirations worth having. Hope for the next generation, for a better life for their children -- was there anything worth more than that? Wasn't it exactly what Anders was fighting for the mages to have, too?

He opened his mouth to say so, but the growl of his stomach cut off his words. Cenar chuckled knowingly. "You Wardens, eh?" he said, and pulled another tray out of the oven with his bare hands. Anders winced to see it, but he seemed unbothered; did dwarves just not feel the heat like humans did? "I think I've got just the thing for that!"

Cenar set the tray out on the rack. His thick fingers pried loose a muffin with surprising nimbleness for their size and scarred bluntness, and he handed it over to Anders with a cheery smile. Anders took the muffin and had to juggle it from hand to hand to avoid being burned, then set it quickly
down on the table. "Smells great," he said feelingly.

The dwarf beamed at him. As Anders returned the smile, an arm snaked in from the corner of his vision and snatched the baked delicacy from under his nose.

"Hey!" Anders whipped around in astonishment to meet the unimpressed visage of Daros Amell, back in his tidy Circle robes and in firm possession of the disputed muffin. As Anders gaped in outrage, Daros met his eyes and took a large bite out of the muffin. "That was mine!"

"There are plenty of others," Daros said as he chewed and swallowed. "Just get one of them."

"Oh… hello, Master Daros," Cenar said, looking between the two mages somewhat awkwardly. "The Healer just got back from the Deep Roads now, so…"

"Took you long enough," Daros observed. "We were beginning to wonder if you'd ever show."

Anders bridled slightly. "Yes, well, not all of us ran off at the first opportunity," he said. Then he sighed. He'd been doing better at not responding to Daros' blatant power pushes up until he'd been out of the man's company for a few days. "Have you seen Mardra?"

"Down by the market last I heard, bickering with the barbarians," Daros said with a sniff. "Why? Do you want her to do something else for you?"

"Not especially," Anders said, wondering why everyone thought that. "Just asking. I expected to come back to more of a crisis, honestly. Has everything been all right? Did Anla get cured? Have any new mages come? What about the Templars?"

Daros shot him an annoyed look. "How should I know? I haven't been here." The rest of the muffin found its way into his mouth, and he turned to the baker. "You know, these would be really good with some thyme and cheese in the crust."

"Oh, are you a baker yourself?" Cenar said, the enthusiasm returning to his voice at the prospect. "Thyme you say? Is that some fancy surfacer flour?"

"I've read some things," Daros said. "And with all the pots of plants they've got going in the nursery, I'm sure you could get them to plant a bit of sage and thyme on the side—"

Anders rolled his eyes. "Yes, well, have fun swapping recipes. Some of us have work to do," he said. "I'm going to get back to doing what I can to improve the conditions of mages in Thedas."

Daros selected another muffin off the rack and turned to go. "If you want to improve the conditions of mages here at Refuge," he said dryly as he left the kitchen, "please consider a bath."

~tbc...
He’d seen the market from his vantage coming out of the tunnel, a broad brown flat unrolled along the bank of the river. Unlike the Tower or the buildings of the town it was built not of stone but of leather and wood, tarps and tents that could be rolled up and carried away when the day's business was complete. As he approached the market he saw a few fur-clad Avvar hoist packframes onto their back and turn towards the paths leading away, splashing across the river and taking quick sure-footed steps up the rocky bank opposite.

A few others lingered, in deep negotiation or perhaps simple conversation with the mages. The mages were dressed somewhat similarly to the Avvar in leather cloaks and open hoods, but with bright feathers attached to the back of the hoods and little bits and beads of colored glass sewn to their hems. Anders caught a glimpse of what looked like a lap-sized harp, but whether it was being bought or sold or used for music he couldn't tell.

He ran into Mardra not quite all the way to the market, climbing up the near slope with -- of course -- a neatly bound notebook of paper in her hand. "Mardra!" he hailed, and she as she looked up and saw him she smiled.

"Welcome back!" she called out, and waited until she was a little closer to speak again. She was flushed and out of breath, taking deep inhalations and breathing out through her mouth as she steadied herself. "Good to see you back safe."

"Good to be back safe," he agreed as he drew level with her. He looked past her to the market, the departing leather-clad woodsmen. "What were you discussing with the Avvar?"

"Trade agreements. Trying to, anyway." Mardra made a face. "Ideally we could set up a form of local currency that they'd accept, but barring that, we at least need to fix a price schedule."

Anders looked at the semi-permanent market with some confusion. "Why? We've been trading with them just fine up till now, haven't we?"

"So far." Mardra shrugged. "On an ad-hoc basis, sure. Getting them nailed down to fixed contracts is the difficult part.

"We're supplying the Orzammar market as well as the Avvar. We could adjust our production to meet both, but the Avvar demand is variable. Sometimes they need a lot of potions, sometimes none at all. Yet they expect to always have access to the best of our inventory at all times." That
last part came out distinctly annoyed, and Anders got the feeling that not all of her flush was from
the exertion of climbing the slope.

"I'm starting to see the problem," he said.

Mardra vented an aggravated sigh. "It goes the other way too. We're interested in buying a lot of
their hunting surplus, but that's unreliable too. So some days they'll come here wanting to buy out
our stock and have little to nothing to offer in exchange, other days we'd like to buy some of their
furs but they don't even bother to show up because they don't need anything from us. It's an
uncertain market. Not to mention we don't want to get dependent on them for a food supply only to
have them suddenly decide to triple their prices in the middle of winter."

"They wouldn't dare!" Anders said, outrage lighting in his chest like a burner coming aflame.

"I'm not saying they're trying to cheat us," Mardra said, holding out a placating hand. "Just that
d they don't really look at trade the same way we and the dwarves do. They approach it like a game,
or a contest, instead of a business transaction." She shrugged. "I suppose culturally, they don't
really do business transactions."

Anders frowned, turning the problem over in his mind. It seemed a complex issue, no simple
solutions, but Mardra also seemed to have a fair handle on it. "Just so long as we can come to an
agreement that is fair and equitable for both sides," he said.

"Of course," Mardra agreed. She looked faintly wistful. "It would help if Amund would get more
involved in the process, but he doesn't really have any interest in the fine details. Too worldly for
him, I suppose. The younger ones are a bit more gung-ho, but sometimes they can get
overenthusiastic. Half the time if I agree to a single demand they decide that I'm 'displaying
weakness' and suddenly their demands double unless I shout them down. It's exhausting."

"Is that so?" Anders said. "Well, let me know if you need me to come stand over your shoulder
while you haggle and glow a little."

"That might help," Mardra agreed gratefully.

She looked tired, and not just from the physical running around she'd obviously been doing. Anders
thought of Daros asking him what Anders planned to ask his sister to do for him now, and felt a
twinge of guilt. "Better yet, let's get you an assistant," he suggested. "With all these teenagers
running around, there have to be at least a few of them who like haggling as much as the Avvar
do."

Mardra wavered, clearly torn between the desire to keep close control over Refuge's cashflow and
the desire not to have to deal with the Avvar's idea of negotiations any more. "Well... assuming we
find someone we can trust..."

"It's for the good of everyone at Refuge, isn't it?" Anders said. "I'm sure we can find somebody.

She ran a hand through her hair, freeing the last loop of it from a hair tie that had given up the
ghost well before. "Maker, that would be a relief," she sighed.

He fell into step beside her as they walked back towards the town. "So what all has been happening
here since I've been gone?" he asked.

"Oh, you haven't seen your desk yet?" Mardra said, not exactly the answer he'd expected.
"Everything should be there, status reports on pretty much everything, précis on top, with action
items flagged for your attention."

Four months of collected Mardra-reports? Anders suppressed an unworthy whimper. "Can you just summarize them for me?"

Mardra glowered. "Those are the summaries, Anders," she said tartly. "I don't want to go through them twice!"

"Right, right," Anders said hastily. "Then can you just tell me if there's anything that I need to deal with right away? Anything that's life-or-leave threatening?"

"Hm…" Mardra thought for a moment, her dark smooth eyes going out of focus for a moment as she seemed to run down some internal list. Then she shook her head. "No, nothing is immediately that urgent. There are some things that have been waiting for your return, but they can wait a day longer. You can take a little time to rest and catch up." She eyed him up and down. "And take a bath."

Anders frowned. "Daros said that too," he said. He tried to surreptitiously sniff his shoulders, but one inevitable side-effect of a Warden lifestyle was that your sense of smell died early in self-defense.

Mardra chuckled, then coughed. "Even a Chantry clock is right twice a day," she said.

Anders sighed. "I just wasn't looking forward to making the hike back down to the Manor twice in one day," he said.

"You don't need to," Mardra said, looking surprised. "There are bathing rooms in the Tower now. Didn't you know? They've got running water drawn up from underground springs somewhere. No heating system yet, but that really hasn't been a problem for us."

"Are you kidding me?" Anders exclaimed. "Libraries, bakeries, and bathhouses? What am I going to turn around and find next, a backwoods-chantry?"

Mardra opened her mouth to reply, then closed it. "Go ahead and get settled in," she said. "If you're looking for new projects to wrangle with, there will be plenty tomorrow. For today, just rest."

"Yes ma'am," he said, only half-jokingly, and sent her a salute. As he turned to go, she added:

"Oh, and Anders? Good to have you back."

The next morning saw Anders washed, fed and rested, a good night's sleep in his quarters in the Tower helping to re-orient himself away from the concerns of the Deep Roads and back to the needs and rhythms of Refuge. The bath had been everything that was promised, hot water or no; Anders didn't feel the need to burden anyone with a reminiscence of drawing buckets of silty water from the clogged wells in Darktown to try to bathe in during his years there.

But there was no time to sit around and luxuriate; it was time to get to work. He'd already lost enough time to interruptions as people stopped by to greet him and welcome him back from the
Deep Roads; if he let himself, he would lose himself in talking to them all day and never get anything productive done.

Anders had approached the pile of paper on his desk with dread. He didn't have the head for paperwork -- never had, and not since his final escape from the Tower almost ten years ago had he been faced with such a quantity of it. When he actually sat down and began to look through the piles, however, they were much less dire than he'd feared. Most of the bulk of it -- reports, archives, tedious correspondence -- had already been read and categorized, stacks bundled together with twine with only a single leaf on the top summarizing the most important conclusions.

The only stacks he read in any depth were the infirmary patient records (not many of these, thank the Maker; he resolved to follow up with the discharged patients, just to be sure) and the ongoing argument between the herbalist mages. Pages on pages of bickering over how much of each resource should be allocated to which project, interspersed with inventory and purchase dockets, concluded at last in a plan to grow more of their own herbs in a pot garden (their attempt at raising ground crops having failed spectacularly by the end of summer, as Anders had been pretty sure it would.) It reminded him enough of his own clinic at Kirkwall that he let himself be drawn into the details. He made a note to visit the plant nursery as soon as possible and see how the plants were coming along.

For the rest of them, reading the summary was enough to give him a fair idea of the situation, and only a few matters really required his direct intervention. Apart from the herbalism dispute there were other records kept by the craftsmen, pieces made and sold, supplies bought either from the Avvar or brought up through Orzammar. Meticulous, detailed treasury records turned in by Omelas (summarized, thank the Maker and his Bride too.) A copy of the proposed syllabus for the students, with suggested mentor-apprentice connections. A few more young mages had arrived at Refuge since the first large group had been delivered by Fiona, and had been folded into the system without too much difficulty.

News had come up from Orzammar as well, although much of it Anders already knew; Bownammar was close enough to Orzammar that couriers could still make a fairly rapid route between the two, carrying news of the home city and dispatches from the crown. One surprise was a note from Bhelen addressed to Anders himself, a plain missive stating in bland terms that Anders was once again welcome in Orzammar proper. Mardra had folded this together with a copy of a report about the sudden and dramatic downfall of House Vollney, the reading of which left Anders viciously satisfied (even if part of him still itched to deliver the punishment with his own hand.)

Records had been kept of every new mage who had come to Refuge during the campaign, as well as a few who had left, citing the desire to join Fiona's army to fight for their freedom against the Chantry. That was a disappointment, but he held firm to the idea that at least the mages knew they could leave.

Once the reports turned from the affairs of their small valley to the outside world, things got bleaker. Orlais was finally making the jump from the usual Game infighting into all-out civil war, to the surprise of nobody. Reports coming out of Halamshiral were garbled, but Duke Gaspard was accused of attempting to assassinate the Empress, an attempt that seemed to have failed with Celene fleeing the city as it burned behind her. But then again, reports put Celene back in Val Royeaux long before she should have been able to make the overland journey from her last sighting in Halamshiral, so there was clearly some unreliability going on there.

Kirkwall was still in turmoil. Bran Cavin, the former Seneschal, had been appointed Viscount -- provisional, temporary viscount, the reports all stressed. Frankly, Anders couldn't think of a man who deserved the headache more. His appointment had apparently done nothing to quell the
struggle of the various gang factions that had taken over the city, and he spent most of his time locked in largely futile efforts to discourage neighboring city-states from sniffing around in Kirkwall's discord, or take bites out of its borders and shipping trade while the city's militia was paralyzed.

The reports also mentioned that celebrated author Varric Tethras had put out a new book, although Anders had no idea why that bit of trivia was considered relevant enough to include.

Frankly Anders would have been glad enough to leave them all to fight each other, except for the bleak tide of news coming back from Fiona. Her army fought a running retreat, harangued on all sides by a motley Templar force mostly pulled from Orlais with companies donated by the independent Free Marches city-states. They had made the relative safety of Andorhal, but that would only be a temporary respite: the enemy had them cut off and isolated, and while they could not approach the fortress walls without putting themselves in range of the mages' fury, they were hard at work building up siege engines to tear the fortress apart from a distance.

Anders read all of Fiona's letters, a study in grim determination struggling with despair.

*I can now state, with some certainty, that the eve of battle is upon us. Toward this end, I have ordered the evacuation of Andorhal's Reach, and have ordered my men to take up stronger positions along the heights. At this time, my troops consist entirely of my White Spire loyalists, and Antivan refugees, a total of five hundred mages to stand against twenty-five hundred of the enemy.*

*As I write these words, the enemy is plainly in sight beyond the river, and I begin to notice that many of us are children under fifteen and elders, none of whom can truly be called soldiers.*

*How it will all end, I cannot say. But Maker! what brave souls I shall lose before this business ends.*

This broke his concentration for some time, since he was forced to put the paper down and prop his head in his hands, quietly weeping.

The world was changing, just like he'd wanted. But the ones to pay the heaviest price, as always, would be the most vulnerable among them.

There was no turning back. The only way out was through. He picked up the next report, and kept going.

---

One of the document piles on his desk, near the top -- bless Mardra -- had been a building map of Refuge, labeled with the names of who lived in what and where. Jowan and Surana had a little stone cottage to themselves near the edge of the village, closest to the wooded slopes to the north.

It was a humble building, he thought as he approached it, a single story with a pitched roof and more of those odd square-cut windows in the very center of each wall. The interior was divided by several board walls, a larger open room in the front and two more rooms, separated by a narrow hallway, at the back. No one was in the front room, but light and voices came from the room on the right.
As Anders made his way down the short hallway to the door, the music of a lute drifted through the wall to his ears. Almost immediately he could tell that the player was not Surana; the instrumentals were stilted and twangy, the melody consisting of only a single bar of notes played over and over. But the tune was sweet and the sound was soft, even when overlaid by a scratchy tenor voice.

"And I am nothing of a builder," Jowan sang, unaware of his expanded audience. "But here I dreamed I was an architect. I built this palisade to keep you home, to keep you safe from the outside world..."

Anders stopped in the hallway to listen. He felt uncomfortably like he was intruding, but he could neither bring himself to interrupt nor to leave as Jowan continued his simple tune.

But the angles and the corners

Even though the work was unparalleled

They never seemed to meet

The structure fell about our feet

And we were free to go

At a brief lull in the music, Anders made up his mind and knocked on the door. It swung open slightly at his touch, not having been latched, and through the gap Anders saw Jowan look up quickly from his seat on a stool. He had Surana's lute in his lap, his long gangly hands moving stiffly over the strings, and a lamp hung on the wall cast a soft glow over the scene. The window was covered by a curtain, keeping out the sun and the air. Surana lay in the bed, her eyes closed; her belly had grown in the months Anders had been away, but the rest of her looked gaunt. Her cheeks were hollow, her eyes deeply shadowed.

Jowan met Anders' gaze, then leaned over to the bed to murmur quietly "Be back in a moment, Ria." He reached out a hand to stroke her forehead, and she opened her green eyes for a moment to smile up at him. Jowan smiled back, his fingers lingering along her cheek, before he stood up and crossed over to the door.

"Anders," he said, closing the door behind him out in the corridor. "Welcome back. I hear everything in the Deep Roads went well."

"As well as could be expected," Anders said. "We lost more mages than I would have liked, but I can't say that it was anybody's fault. How's Neria? Is she sick?"

"I wish I knew!" Jowan raked his fingers through his hair, leaving it standing up in even more of a disordered mess than usual. "She was having problems even before you left -- you remember. But for the past few months things seemed to be going better. The nausea and fatigue passed off, and the baby seemed to be progressing normally.

"Starting three weeks ago... I don't know. She gets these lower back cramps that last for days. There's been some blood... I can't figure out the cause. There are dizzy spells that come and go, and she will suddenly just feel so weak. Nothing seems to be overtly wrong, but... I just don't know."
Anders' lips tightened. "I'll take a look," he said. He would have liked to offer a more solid guarantee (if only to show up to Jowan that his blood magic was no substitute for real healing) but... pregnancies could be strange. Even all the healing magic the Tower had to offer couldn't always decipher its mysteries.

"If she's been all right this far, she'll probably be fine," Anders added, on seeing Jowan's expression. "It's not all that unusual to have trouble in the last trimester. Even the blood... so long as it's only spots, not a torrent, it's not a sign of a serious problem."

"I just hope that..." Jowan trailed off. After a moment he took a deep breath, and spoke again. "I wonder if this is because of me. Because the baby's half-human. I... would never be able to forgive myself if..."

"You don't know that," Anders said quickly. "Listen. Half-elf, half-human babies happen sometimes. They aren't even that unusual; I've known a few in my time. There's no particular reason to think that there's any more danger attending a half-blooded pregnancy than a full-blooded one."

Jowan didn't look convinced. "Besides," Anders tried. "If Surana were human, pregnant with your baby and she died of some complication because of it, would you feel any less guilty simply because she wasn't an elf?"

Jowan gulped. "That -- was really not helpful, Anders," he said in a strangled voice.

"Sorry," Anders said contritely. He cast around for a change of subject. "How's your phylactery research going?" Anders asked. "You were looking into ways to destroy a phylactery. Have you cracked it yet?"

Jowan's eyes darted towards the door, then away. "That's, ah," Jowan said, and looked down, wringing his hands nervously. He swallowed. "That's been put on a bit of a hold, right now. Neria needs me, and Anla..." he trailed off. "Someone has to watch her all the time, and nobody else wants to stay the night -- so it's usually just me..."

He looked exhausted, and Anders wondered how much sleep he'd been getting. "I understand," Anders said. He laid a hand on Jowan's upper arm. "But you don't have to do it alone, you know. The two of you have friends, have a whole community here to help."

They went into the bedroom together, and Anders exchanged greetings with Surana. She made an effort to sit up to greet him, propping her back against some pillows with the help of a fussy Jowan, and she seemed alert and attentive, if tired.

A careful diagnostic spell mostly confirmed Jowan's report, with a few details that a non-healer wouldn't have known to look for. "Your blood pressure is lower than it should be," he reported as the spell dissipated. "Let me know what you've been eating; I might want to recommend some changes."

"I know it is," Surana said. "I've been having Jowan make me some dark green tisanes to try to get it up where it should be, but it just isn't keeping up."

Anders was reminded again that Surana had probably much the same Circle healing education as he'd had. But there were some things he'd picked up in Kirkwall that he doubted she knew. "This late in your pregnancy, you really shouldn't be laying on your back," he commented, and reached out a hand to pull the surprised elf forward. "The weight of your abdomen puts too much pressure on your vessels. Sitting up like this is good, but when you lie down, lie on your side. That should
help with the dizziness, and the swelling."

Neria shifted positions obediently, Jowan rushing in to help her reposition and straighten out the covers. As she moved closer to the light Anders realized with some surprise that what he had taken for a shadow around Surana's eye was actually a tattoo. She hadn't had that when he'd left, he was sure of that. It was hard to make out the details -- the light level in the bedroom was too dim -- but it looked like a vine of flowers, twining up and around her left eye.

"Nice tattoo," Anders commented, then caught himself. "Or… is that vallaslin?"

Surana seemed pleased by his recognition. "Yes," she said with a smile. "For Sylaise, the Hearthkeeper. According to the Dalish legends she gave the world the gift of fire, and the secrets of cooking and crafting with it. She taught the ancient elves how to weave and braid thread and rope, how to heal with herbs and with magic."

"I still say you should have gotten Mythal," Jowan fretted from his corner. "She's the one who protects women in childbirth, right? Maybe…"

"It was my decision, Jowan," Surana told him gently, and he dropped his head.

"I know," he mumbled.

"Shi'amelan helped me with the vallasin," Surana said, returning her attention to Anders. It wasn't a name Anders recognized, but then there were a lot of newcomers to Refuge. Hopefully he'd get to meet some of them soon.

"That was kind of them," Anders said, then finally got down to the question that had followed him for all the four months of the campaign. "So how's Anla?" Had Anla survived? Had they been able to banish the demon from her? Had there been any long-term side effects? She'd been all right -- well, stable -- when he'd left, but a demon in the mortal world was always a volatile situation.

Surana's face, always reserved, showed nothing -- but Jowan's expression bunched in tight. Anders looked from one face to another in rising alarm, until Jowan saw his dismay and rushed to explain. "She's fine!" he blurted quickly. "Mostly. That is… physically she's fine. No disasters, no crises. Mentally, she's… well, she's been very subdued. We've been taking it slow, keeping things quiet so she doesn't get startled or set off."

Anders frowned. "Wait, are you saying you still haven't found a way to get into the Fade to get rid of the demon? She still has it?"

"We did find a way," Surana chipped in as Jowan sputtered around for an explanation. "Actually, we're ready to go at any time. But so long as Anla was stable, there was no urgency, and Shi'amelan thought that it would be best to wait until you returned so that we would have your aid."

"Who is this Shi'amelan?" he asked, a little exasperated. "Is that one of the new mages who moved here?"

Surana shook her head. "Not permanently," she said. "She is one of the Wandering Ones. She responded to our appeal to the Dalish clans for those familiar with the Beyond. When she heard that a girl of the People was taken by a hostile spirit, she came to help."

"And she insisted on waiting for me?" Anders said. "Why? Not that I mind helping, but surely it was a risk to Anla to wait longer."
Jowan coughed, looking uncomfortable. Surana, cool as ever, replied, "She said that your spirit -- Justice -- would be a great help in facing the fear demon."

"She said what?" Anders exclaimed. "Wait, how did she even know about that? Why does everyone seem to know that I'm possessed by a spirit of Justice?"

Surana and Jowan exchanged a meaningful look. "Oh, that's right," Jowan said. "I guess you haven't heard about the book yet."

"What book?"

The directions Surana gave him led him back towards the river where the Avvar market was held, downstream a ways where the valley was more thickly wooded. Further ahead the river plunged into rocky gulleys and steep drops, a treacherous path which only an experienced hiker or woodsman could navigate closely. Well, pretty much any Dalish fit that description, he supposed.

The traveling Keeper had picked a good campsite, Anders noted with the experience of hundreds of nights on the run trying to find shelter in the wilderness. On a rise, far enough from the river not to get soaked in the night, taking advantage of the support of several of the trees to hold up the canvas while avoiding pitching under any deadfalls.

If he hadn't known what to look for, he wouldn't even have seen the tent from more than a few hundred paces away; it was colored a greenish-grey that blended seamlessly with trees and stone equally. He felt a little foolish, and a little annoyed, to have someone staying in his valley that he hadn't known about. Stupid, he chastised himself. The Avvar weren't part of Refuge either, and he'd never objected to their presence. At least this Shi'amelan must be a mage, if she was a Keeper.

Having found the tent, he stood around awkwardly, not entirely sure what to do next. There wasn't exactly a door he could knock on, or a bell he could ring. Making up his mind, he cleared his throat and called out. "Hello?" he said. "Shi'amelan? I've been looking for you. My name is Anders. I heard that you had come to help Anla with her… spirit problem, and that you wanted to meet me."

Movement stirred, and the flap swung open. "Oh! Hello!" a cheerful voice called from within, and Anders was seized by a sudden foreboding. Wait, no, it couldn't be…

A familiar face popped out of the tent, hollow swirls of vallaslin above and below a pair of large, luminous green eyes. The hair was different -- she'd let it grow out on one side, shorn it close above the ear on the other, and it hung down the side of her face and over her shoulder in intricately beaded braids -- but the face, wreathed with smiles, was unmistakable. "Good to see you again, Anders!" Merrill chirped. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"
Chapter End Notes

The letter from Fiona is actually a direct quote from one of the letters of General George Washington during the American War for Independence.

The song Jowan sings to Neria is "Here I Dreamt I Was An Architect," by the Decemberists. It’s a good song, listen to it here.
Catching Up

Chapter Summary

Anders catches up with an old friend, and makes plans to return to the Fade.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was something bizarrely familiar about being served tea by Merrill, Anders thought, even if it was in a tent and not in her cramped apartment in Lowtown. Many of the dishes and knickknacks were the same, and some of them made much more sense in the context of a traveling, mobile kitchen than they had in the sedentary one of the alienage. Utensils that had seemed bent or crooked were actually hinged to fold up small, and the wide base of the kettle that made it look so lopsided and unbalanced actually served as a broad anchor in a moving wagon.

The tea was still bad, though. Anders took a sip for politeness' sake, and let the rest cool in the saucer.

"So how's Kirkwall?" Anders asked. I mean, I read your letter from last fall, but since then…"

"Kirkwall is fine," Merrill said, and then quickly qualified: "Well I mean apart from the gangs. And the chokedamp, and the cholera outbreaks. Oh, and a mercenary group from Tantervale took over the Bone Pit, but me and Aveline and Varric were able to take care of that!" She gave a sunny smile. "So, really, pretty much the same as it's always been."

The mention of Varric gave Anders a pang, similar to seeing his name on the report of Kirkwall's ongoing disasters. "How is he? Varric?"

"Varric is fine," Merrill said, but there was a slight hesitation, a guardedness to the response.

Anders raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "Is that the same kind of 'fine' as Kirkwall, which is full of gangs and chokedamp and demons?" he said dryly.

Merrill shrugged. "Maybe a little bit," she said. "He's been sad since Hawke left. I think he misses him. And he misses Fenris and Isabela and Sebastian and you too, I think, even though he won't say it. But it's true I haven't seen him in a few months, so maybe he's feeling better now. Did you hear he wrote a book?"

"I heard something about that, but I didn't really believe it," he admitted. "What book?"

"It's called the Tale of the Champion," Merrill said, her enthusiasm quickly returning. "It's all about Hawke's adventures in Kirkwall. He let me read a bit of the draft when I was there last spring, and it's very exciting! I never read a story about myself before!"

"All about Kirkwall?" Anders balked. Not that it should have been a surprise, given what Surana and Jowan had said, but… "Including me?" He mumbled the question, then took a drink from the teacup to try to cover his discomfiture.
"Oh, yes, including you," Merrill affirmed, then casually added, "You die in the end, though."

Anders could stop it; he sprayed tea across Merrill's little table and covered his mouth with one arm while coughing the tea out of his lungs. "What?" he sputtered, groping for a cloth to mop up the spill.

"In the book, I mean!" Merrill said hastily. "Not in real life. Well, I mean, everybody dies in real life eventually, but you haven't. Yet, anyway. Anyway the book says that you died after you blew up the Chantry."

Anders sat for a moment, at a loss. It hurt more than he had expected, thinking of Varric writing that about him. Varric was an author, he expressed his feelings through writing; even if he wouldn't have expressed his vengeance on Anders in real life, he wouldn't have held back from doing it in print. "I... don't know what to say," he mumbled at last. "I mean, I knew he was angry at me, but..."

"I don't think that's why, though," Merrill said hastily. "He said he changed the end because the Chantry censors wouldn't let him publish it otherwise. Something about decency standards? But I think maybe he was doing it to protect you. If people think you're dead, they wouldn't go looking for you."

In a way, that thought was even worse, since Anders was definitely not dead and making no secret of that fact. "Maker's breath!" Anders exclaimed. "Is he trying to get himself arrested by the Chantry?"

Merrill stopped her puttering and looked over at him, black eyebrows flying delicately above her arched brows. "Are you?" she asked, and that stopped him for a minute.

"So enough about Kirkwall," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "What about you? Aside from clearing out the Bone Pit and traveling across the sea to Orzammar on a moment's notice, that is. What have you been up to?"

"It wasn't really all that out of the way," Merrill said, surprising him somewhat. "I mean, from Kirkwall it would have been. But I don't actually spend that much time in Kirkwall any more."

"Oh?" Anders said.

Merrill's face hardened slightly, an expression that went more with her new hairstyle and weathered outfit than it had with her old breezy manner. "Well, there just wasn't much reason to stay," she said. "With the eluvian broken... with you and Hawke gone, and... well, I needed something new. I travelled to Wycome and found the nearest clan, Clan Lavellan, and made an arrangement for their Second to go to Kirkwall and be their new Keeper. We brought back some halla, too, so that the Sabrae could move on. And after that, well. It made more sense to go on than to go back."

"The Sabrae finally left Kirkwall, then? That's probably just as well," Anders remarked. "The city Guard didn't like the idea of the Dalish camping there permanently. There would have been trouble, sooner or later."

"Oh, there was," Merrill said. Anders waited a beat, but she didn't elaborate.

"Surana called you 'Shi'amelan,' " Anders observed. "Or I would have realized it was you earlier."

"Surana's lovely, and she was just being nice, really. I'm not officially anything." Merrill sat down
opposite him, and made a slight face. "But it turns out that if you just act like you know what
you're doing for long enough, people start treating you like you do."

That was the Maker's own truth, Anders reflected. "So, shi'amelan is the word for 'Keeper?' " he
asked.

"It's one word for it, yes!" Merrill smiled. "It means, 'the Wise Ones that wander.' For the Keepers
who travel from clan to clan, instead of staying with one clan."

"Huh." Anders sat back to mull that over. "I didn't know that."

"Most humans don't. We'd rather they didn't. Templars, you know," Merrill explained. "A Keeper
wandering alone would be at terrible risk if they knew. But I'm sure you won't tell them, so it's
okay!"

"Not likely," Anders snorted a little. "So are these… Wandering Keepers… like traveling healers
that go from town to town and check on people?" That made a lot of sense; many healers and
apothecaries worked that way in the Anderfels, where there were a lot of scattered communities too
small to need their own doctors.

"A little, although most clans have their own Keepers for that, and not all Keepers are skilled at
healing," Merrill said. "We carry news from one clan to another, new stories, times and places for
the next Arlath'ven, other matters. Between gatherings, it's usually the Wandering Ones that
arrange marriages between tribes. Or if a tribe doesn't have enough mages, it will be a Wandering
One who escorts them to their new Tribe.

"One of them took care of me when I was transferred to the Sabrae clan years ago. I always looked
up to him. It seemed like he knew everything, could do anything. So… after… well, you know…"
Merrill made a little face. "Looking back on it now, I remember that my shi'amelan seemed sad. I
thought it was just because being separated from his clan was lonely, but now I think it was more
than that. Most Dalish don't become wanderers unless something awful has happened, and they
can't go back for some reason."

Like with you, Anders filled in. His heart ached in sympathy for her; you really never could go
home again. He sought a change of subject. "That tattoo around Surana's eye, that vallaslin… she
said you did that?"

Merrill nodded, her expression lightening somewhat with the change of topic. "I helped her with it,
but it was her idea. She's always felt a strong bond to the Dalish, this symbol was something that
was important to her. You know, she was taken to the Circle so young, she hardly remembers her
parents? She thinks one of them might be Dalish. But even if they weren't, her grandparents or her
great-grandparents might be," she said firmly. "We are all one people, no matter how far we
travel."

The sentiment filled him with a sort of wistfulness, an almost jealousy at that level of belonging. It
was something he'd always tried to find within the mages -- the only people he could really call his
own nowadays -- but it wasn't always there.

"The vallaslin, that's part of a coming-of-age ritual, right?" he asked. "I thought that you had to
successfully kill an animal, or something."

"Not really," Merrill said. "The new adult is meant to bring something worthy back from the hunt. I
mean, the word *va'seras* is usually translated as "to hunt," but that's not its entire meaning. It can
also mean quest, or pilgrimage, or even research."
"To become an adult you have to show the clan that you can contribute more than you consume by bringing back something worthy," Merrill continued. "Whether that's an animal to feed the others, or a new piece of knowledge to make the clan wiser, or a great invention to make their lives easier. There was a member of a dalish tribe in Antiva who earned her vallaslin when she invented a new formulation of axle grease."

Anders laughed. "Axle grease? Really?" he said, then noticed that Merrill didn't seem to find it funny. "I mean, it doesn't seem like that would be something important."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd spent your life in a wagon," Merrill said with a sniff. "Anyway, Surana learned many pieces of Elvhan lore during her time researching in the Circle that I didn't know. She learned so much, and gave the knowledge to me to pass on to the others. She's more than earned her place."

Looking at Merrill, comparing her to the elvhen girl he'd known back in Kirkwall, he thought that Surana wasn't the only one. In some ways, Merrill seemed harder than he'd known her before; thinner, sharper-edged, more watchful and wary. In other ways she seemed to have revived and grown into herself since leaving Kirkwall, no less than he had himself. She seemed more centered, more confident, more secure in her place in the world -- even if that place was a tent that could be packed up and carried on her back at a moment's notice.

"I'm glad you two were able to meet each other, Merrill," he told her sincerely. "I'm glad you're here."

Anders spent much of the morning talking with Merrill, catching up on what they both had been doing and then moving on to the topic of Anla. They discussed her condition -- Anders confirmed a few details about the circumstances of her possession, which Merrill was very interested in -- and the best way to remove the demon from her. Merrill was quite confident in her ability to reproduce the ritual that Marethari had used, years ago in Kirkwall, to do the same thing for Feynriel.

"It will be good to have Justice along, for certain," she said. "With him and me, and Neria and her husband --"

"Wait, Neria is going?" Anders interrupted. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Certainly, why not?" Merrill seemed surprised. "Anla is her daughter, or as good as. I wouldn't be the one to tell her no?"

"But she's not well," Anders said. "She's not strong at the moment --"

"Her body might be weak," Merrill said firmly, "but her spirit and her magic are as strong as ever, and that's what matters in the Fade. Honestly, I'd rather have more people just in case. Is there anyone else here that Anla knows very well? The trouble we had with Feynriel was he didn't really know any of us, except Hawke. One more familiar face might be the difference between success and, well, something terrible."

And so, around lunchtime, Anders found himself going up to Mardra's office in the Tower. At his knock, a familiar voice called him in, and he poked his head around the doorframe to see Mardra at
her desk, working on what looked like a large piece of draft paper.

"Oh, hello Anders," Mardra said with a smile, rolling it up as she turned around. Her hair had escaped both a leather tie and a headband to get in her face, and she brushed it back with an impatient scowl. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Maybe," Anders said. "I was just talking with Merrill -- you know, the Keeper? -- and she wanted to ask you to join us in the ritual to help free Anla."

Mardra frowned. "It sounds fascinating, but... does she really think I'd be useful? I'm hardly the strongest mage at Refuge -- or in this room, for that matter," she added. "My type of magic won't be very effective in the Fade, or on its residents."

That seemed a strange claim to Anders -- in his experience, Mardra had done quite well with Fade denizens. "I think it's less about strength than familiarity," he said. "She wants as many people as possible that Anla would recognize and trust in the dream. You knew her at Perendale, so..."

"Oh, that makes sense." Mardra nodded. "Certainly, then. When?"

"Tonight," Anders took a closer look at Mardra. Maybe it was the lighting, but she looked even more tired than she had in the full sunlight the other day. "Will you be all right? I know you have your hands full with the Avvar right now, and it's a lot to ask..."

"It'll be fine," Mardra assured him.

Anders frowned. "When was the last time you took a break?"

Mardra stopped for a moment to consider. "We had a coming-back party for the returned mages just three days ago," she said. "I'm sorry you missed it -- but we weren't sure when you'd be back, and we didn't want to make the rest of the mages wait."

"But you do all the work that goes into planning parties," Anders objected.

She blinked at him. "Yes, and?"

"And when did you last take some time just for yourself?"

"Some of the younger mages hold card nights once a week," Mardra said. "I don't really play, but I like to go and sit in the room while I work."

"Okay but what do you do when you're not working?" Anders said a trifle impatiently. "What do you do for fun?"

"I like reading," Mardra said.

"Oh? What do you read?" Anders asked.

"Mostly case studies of historical dwarven law, lately," Mardra admitted.

He shook his head in disbelief. "And that's your idea of fun?"

"It's a lot less dry than you would think," Mardra said, a trifle defensively. "Dwarven ideas of mediation usually involves at least two dismemberments. Very exciting, from a nice few centuries remove. Anders, what's this about?"

"I just don't like to think of you burning out," Anders said. "You need to take some time for
yourself, relax and rest for a while."

She looked torn between laughter and outrage. "Wh... well the last person in Refuge who can throw stones on that topic is you! Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!"

Anders was about to argue with her, but then realized that he was not likely to win an argument with a woman who read dwarven law studies for fun. "Fine," he said, and Mardra smiled in victory. The smile gave him a sudden burst of inspiration, and on an unexplained impulse he added, "I'll tell you what. If you'll take an evening off -- no working -- then I'll do the same. We'll do it together. Get dinner maybe."

The smile slid off her face, and even though she didn't change position, Anders had a sudden feeling that she'd moved several feet further away. "Oh, I... I'd rather not," she said.

Anders checked himself, somewhat dismayed. The atmosphere in the Tower room had suddenly gotten a lot quieter, more chilled. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. You've done nothing wrong. It's just..." Mardra bit her lip, then looked down. "Anytime people have asked me something like that on the past, it's the first step on a path I don't want to go down. It always ends badly when they want to keep going and I don't. It's really better to just not start."

Anders winced. Maker, he liked Mardra just fine, but not like that! But how to backpeddle from his misstep? "Mardra --"

"I've got to go." She stood up, collecting a sheaf of papers from the desk beside her. "I've got a meeting with Omelas at noon to discuss the budget for next quarter, and he gets upset if I'm late."

"Upset? Mardra, he's Tranquil," Anders said. "They don't get upset."

Mardra gave him a frown as she headed for the door. "Of course they do, Anders. The Tranquil like order and routine. They don't like when their routine is disturbed," she said. "Omelas is doing a lot for Refuge, the least I can do in return is be on time."

He stood out of the way so she could get through the door, then stepped into the hallway after her. "Listen, Mardra. I didn't realize that my suggestion was going to sound like an attack," he said. "I didn't mean..."

"I understand," Mardra interrupted, and she summoned a small smile for him. "I know you didn't. That sort of thing just isn't for me. I've accepted it. That's all."

She hurried off down the hallway, and Anders was left wondering why he felt such a strong surge of sorrow.

The ritual took place that night, when the dreams of many mages brought the Fade closer. Anders had expected that she would set things up in her tent in the woods, but instead she commandeered a chamber in the tower. "It's a lot easier to set up in a place that's already an enclosed space than to try to seal off a tent," she explained.
That statement didn't make much sense until he arrived at the Tower later that evening, about an hour before Merrill had said they would begin, and knocked on the door. The knock had a queerly muffled sound, and as Merrill opened the door from the other side he saw that it had been covered with some sort of draping material. He rubbed it between his fingers as he ducked through the portal, expecting leather, but instead it was some kind of waxed cloth.

"Hello, Anders," Merrill said. Anders thought she seemed nervous, jumpy, not so much from nervousness as just nerves. "You're early. Oh, you are early, right? It isn't midnight already, is it?"

"No, I'm early," Anders confirmed. "I thought I'd check in to see if you needed any help setting up."

"I don't think so..." Merrill seemed distracted, going over to check on a peculiar array of items set up on the table by the window. The window, like the door, had been blocked off with more of the waterproof cloth, and it seemed like every crack and vent in the walls had been carefully stopped up. It created an atmosphere that was close and hushed, the air stifling and yet holding a static charge. "Everything's ready, yes, everything's ready to go. We just need Anla and the others here, and then we can begin."

Anders looked around. "It'll be a little crowded in here, won't it, with the six of us?"

"A little," Merrill said, "but we won't need to move around much, and once we're in the Beyond it won't matter anyway. The more mages we have joining their power, the easier it will be to cast out the spirit. I think it's better to have too much help than too little, don't you?"

"Definitely," Anders said.

"I've never worked together with this many mages at once," Merrill confided. "Actually I've around so many mages at one time at all. It's very exciting! It reminds me a little bit of being back in Kirkwall, in the early days, before all that Champion business. Remember how you and I and Bethany would all go around together, and Hawke called it a mage party?"

The memory of those days -- the good days, in retrospect, as hard as they'd been at the time -- made him smile. "Yes, I remember," he said. He'd gotten to talk theory with Bethany, and compare it with the fascinating wildness of Merrill's Keeper magic, like Velanna's and yet unlike.

The smile vanished as he remembered what came next. Returning from the Deep Roads exhausted and half-starved, to find the unpleasant welcoming party of a Templar in Hawke's front room. "But then poor Bethany was taken to the Gallows." And then there had been no more mage parties, no more comparisons, no more shop talk at all. It was as though Bethany really had been the sunshine in their group, and her absence cast them into a pall of grey. "Her loss hit Garrett hard, I think."

"Yes, me too," Merrill said quietly. "And you too. You got a lot meaner after she left. It wasn't a good change."

"I..." Anders hesitated, then looked down at the floor. Memories of Kirkwall flitted across his mind's eye: nights at the Hanged Man, days on the streets, arguing, squabbling, finding himself gripped by such rages that more often than not lashed out at the closest available target, friend or foe. Feeling always sick, feeling always off-balance, driven by the remorseless background static of wrong, wrong, wrong.

Before Justice, before Kirkwall, he'd always thought of himself as a nice guy, friendly to everyone and easy to get along with, compassionate and giving. He'd continued to think that of himself long after it had ceased to be true, even when he spent more of his time accusing and baiting and
nagging than anything else.

Now… well, now he knew better about himself, and while he made more of an effort now not to spill his pain over onto other people, that didn't erase who he'd been then. Especially not to Merrill, who had only ever tried to be his friend.

"You're right," he said quietly. "Kirkwall… wasn't a good place for me, and it was worse the longer I spent there. I said a lot of harsh things I shouldn't have. I'm… I'm sorry."

Merrill accepted his apology with a small nod, and they sat in pensive silence for a moment before she said, "This new place is good for you. You look a lot less tired and angry than you used to."

She smiled brightly. "And Justice! He's calmer now too, I can sense it."

"Is that why you wanted Justice to be there? For this ritual?" Anders wanted to know.

She nodded. "It's always valuable to have a native guide, when walking the Beyond," she said. "And Justice has proven very good at resisting demon temptations, even when Fenris and… I couldn't."

There was a time in his past when Anders would have seized on this to gloat about it, especially in light of Fenris' constant harangues at him for being so "weak" as to ally himself with a "demon." Now, though… Fenris was far away, and Anders had made far too many mistakes to gloat about one victory that hadn't even really been his to claim.

"I'll do my best," was all he said instead.

Merrill looked at him and smiled. "Then I'm sure Anla will be fine," she said. "You do always seem to get your way, Anders, in the end."

A knock sounded on the door to the chamber, muffled but still loud enough to break into their conversation. Merrill got up and opened the door, then pulled it wide and ushered Jowan into the room. The other man was carrying what looked like a heavy folded blanket, which he bundled somewhat awkwardly through the doorway. "Will this do?" he asked Merrill, waving it somewhat vaguely towards her. "It was the only thing like a mattress I could find that was portable."

"Yes, that will do fine," Merrill said, and helped him lay it out in the middle of the space; folded in on itself, the heavy duvet doubled as a thin pallet.

Once it was set up Merrill returned to her restless prowling; Anders recognized her abstracted chatter as a means for distracting herself from her worries. "How is your research coming, Jowan?"

"Uh… not so well, honestly," Jowan said, ducking his head nervously. "I'm hoping that once we clear things up with Anla, I'll be able to focus a little better."

"Oh, I hope so too," Merrill exclaimed. "It's a really exciting project. And have you selected an apprentice yet?"

Jowan shot Anders a quick glance. "No, I, uh…"

"Wait, an apprentice?" Anders sat up straight, frowning intently at Jowan. "You're going to teach
blood magic to the kids now?"

"No, not to the kids!" Jowan said hastily, waving his arms in negation. "Necessarily. But if there were any of the other mages that, you know, wanted to learn… then I could teach them what I know."

"Why would you want that? To spread the practice of blood magic even further?" Anders demanded. "We agreed that you could research what you wanted, but one blood mage is enough."

Merrill looked at him with what almost looked like pity in her eyes. "Because knowledge needs to be passed on, Anders," she explained patiently. "What Jowan learns needs to be taught, even if it ends in disaster. Especially if it ends in disaster, so that future mages will learn what not to do."

"The ritual we're doing here tonight could go wrong in a dozen different ways, if we don't take the proper precautions. It is dangerous magic. But if my ancestors hadn't passed it on, what hope would there be for Anla?"

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation, and as Merrill got up to answer it Anders' eyes checked the clock. Midnight, nearly exact, and sure enough the voices at the door were the ones they'd been waiting for.

Merrill stood aside so the other mages could file into the room: Anla herself, Surana holding her hand, and Mardra bringing up the rear, her eyes darting around the transformed Tower room with great interest. She carried a stack of cushions in her arms, which she distributed with businesslike efficiency.

They settled on the cushions, arranged on a circle around the central pallet. Anla lay down on it stiffly, nervousness evident in the clenching of her fists down by her thighs. She stared at the ceiling, wide-eyed, and Anders reassured himself that even if she lost herself to Fear now, there were surely enough of them here to deal with it.

Merrill bustled around setting up. She passed around teacups to each of the adult mages, and set up a strange contraption on a small stand by the head of the pallet. "How does this work, exactly?" Anders asked, craning his neck slightly to try to get a look at the device Merrill was fiddling with. It looked a little like the censers the sisters used to spread incense around during a Chantry service, and a little bit like a teapot, and a little bit like a metal duck. The top was closed, so he couldn't see what had gone into it, but a thin transparent thread of steam issued from the neck of it. It was almost invisible, clear against clear, yet somehow Anders had no trouble seeing it as it crept steadily around the room. "This will help us get into the Fade somehow?"

"The Dalish don't usually have access to a lot of lyrium at once," Surana supplied as Merrill fussed with the careful placement of her items. "Instead, to communicate with the Beyond, they use herbs that grow in places that are setherenan."

Anders did not find that entirely reassuring. He knew of a few herbs that grew in spots where the Veil was thin, and they tended to be very strange, and frequently poisonous. "Are you sure this is something we should be putting in our bodies?" he asked, lowering his voice in the vain hopes that Merrill would not hear.

Mardra snorted. "Really, Anders," she said. "Of all of us here, you're the last one to talk about putting things from the Fade in your body."

Jowan laughed, then tried to cover it with a cough. Merrill giggled, and so, bizarrely enough, did Surana. Even Anla gave a tremulous smile, so perhaps it had been worth something after all.
"So that really is a teapot, then?" Anders asked, gesturing towards the steaming vessel. Merrill shook her head.

"No, this is to consecrate the space to the spirits," she answered. "In order for us to reach the Beyond together and have access to our magic, we'll need to pass through the Veil. This valley isn't actually easy for that -- the Veil here is quite strong -- but using this we can draw the Beyond closer, for a little while."

Anders was a little taken aback by the amount of preparation and materials invested. "I seem to recall this being a lot simpler in Kirkwall," he said.

"Yes, well, the Veil was a lot thinner in Kirkwall," Merrill explained. "The whole place was always a rift on the verge of happening. Also, there were some things that Marethari didn't want you to see, so she kept it out of sight."

"But it's all right for us to see them?" Mardra asked.

Merrill paused for a moment -- just a tiny hesitation in her ever-fluttering hands, but Anders caught it. "We're doing this to help a girl of the People," she said. "And most of us here are elves, or married to elves, or have been through a ritual like this once already, so… Knowledge is meant to be shared, isn't it?" she asked, and it sounded like an appeal. "Not with people who would seek to destroy it, Creators no. But people who want to learn, should be able to learn, right? That's what I think."

From the tone of her answer, he got the feeling that it really wasn't all right for them to be seeing it, or at least not everyone among the Dalish would likely agree that it was all right. But if it meant helping Anla, he wasn't going to argue with her that she should keep better secrets. "I think you're right," he said instead, and she gave him a tiny little smile.

"Let us begin," Merrill said, and in a moment she was all seriousness, her usual bubbly and flighty demeanor replaced by a solemn young woman with great training and authority. It worked on everyone in the room; even Anders straightened up unconsciously and leaned forward on the cushion.

Merrill turned to Anla. "Sleep, da'len," she murmured, and stroked Anla's forehead gently. Anders felt the familiar creeping, spreading itch that was entropy magic, and Anla's eyes closed and she slumped back on the bed as though she were a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Next Merrill collected the teacups and passed around small, familiar vials of silvery blue instead. "The ritual doesn't strictly need it, but since we have it, it's not a bad idea to make sure your mana reserves are topped off," she advised them. "You'll be drawing on your own energy from here while you're in the Beyond, and you don't want to run out halfway."

They each dutifully drank, though Anders was not sure he needed the boost, not with Justice always swirling close beneath his skin. Merrill stood in front of the blocked off window, completing the circle, and began to recite in Elvish. Anders didn't understand the words, but they made the hair stand up on the back of his arms.

"What's she saying?" he murmured to Surana, when Merrill was obviously repeating the same few lines over and over in a chant. "Sounds familiar somehow…"

Surana cast him a quelling frown, but then began to obligingly translate in a low murmur. "'Draw the breath of the Beyond, brothers and sisters; cross the Veil and take your place among the stars of the sky. Falon'din guide you by the hand through the darkness.'"
Anders started. "That's Trials 1:16, isn't it?" he said, surprised. He knew he'd known it from somewhere. "What's that verse doing in a Dalish ritual?"

"Maybe," Surana said with her lips barely moving, "it was a prayer to Falon'din before the Chant borrowed it. Now sh. You're supposed to be meditating."

"I was never any good at meditating," Anders sighed; the women shot him disapproving glances but he thought he saw Jowan, seated opposite him, grimace in what might have been agreement.

In the end, it turned out not to be necessary. The peculiar clear steam stole around the room, turning back from the waxed cloth barriers to pool about them. He could smell nothing -- other than the lingering bitter taste of the tea -- but the sight of the dim-lit tower room seemed to go clear and remote, as though seen through a window or in a mirror. He felt Merrill's magic gathering, and for a moment was not sure whether to be terrified or awed at its sudden concentrated strength.

Then an invisible something sparked, flashed around the room everywhere that the steam was, and darkness rose up to swallow his vision.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

A few notes this time: I'm playing around with worldstates again. None of my playthroughs have Merrill smashing the mirror because I thought and still think that the eluvian was too important for that, but I had her do so in this worldstate because I couldn't think of a way she could become a Traveling Keeper if she still had the eluvian weighing her down. I mean, it's not impossible -- she could have hidden it somewhere or gotten some Alienage elves to look after it, but it would have been too complicated to explain in a story that isn't specifically about Merrill.

Speaking of Traveling Keepers, I did a bit of world-building with the Dalish here, drawing somewhat on Bioware's other well-known nomadic culture, the Quarians. The word "sh'amelan" is pure invention -- combinations of suggestions from Tumblr and the Elvhen vocabulary wiki. The ritual Merrill conducts is also made up, based on certain assumptions (like the Dalish probably not having a lot of access to refined lyrium) and discussions on Discord chat as to ways they could get around that.
Cavalcade

Chapter Summary

Our heroes head into the Fade to defeat the monster and save the girl.

Chapter Notes

Mandatory Fade Gameplay Segment, activate! There's a bit of a perspective shift that comes with this chapter.

The Fade took shape around them. Mardra opened her eyes and did a quick survey of her surroundings: a dark sky shot with green clouds, the Black City hovering ominously on the horizon. She had not been in the Fade so fully since her own Harrowing, but the surroundings were unmistakable.

She hadn't really known what to expect -- the Tower at Refuge, perhaps, or the interior of the Perendale Circle, with its pale polished granite walls and ranks of buttresses circling the main hall. Instead she found herself in a mire, not unlike the ones they had crossed on their way through Orlais towards the Ferelden border. But unlike that swamp, which had been flat as a pan filled with water, the ground and sky twisted and flirted with one another. To her left, a pool of standing water sat perfectly still and flat on a steep uphill slope; a little ways to the right, water trickled upwards in a stream from the ground to a rock hovering in the air.

The others had arrived in the same place as her, a small raised mound of stone above the marshy water, and she did a quick scan of them. Surana, Jowan, Anla, the Keeper Merrill, and Anders -- Not Anders.

He had Anders' height and build, blond hair pulled back in braids and blond beard curling under his jaw, but his eyes were filled with white fire which branched and gleamed across his face and neck. Instead of the familiar jumble of cloth robes and leather work clothes she was used to seeing on him, he was garbed in a set of armor, chain sheets under steel plates, with a sword sheathed at his waist. He stood differently, held himself differently, moved differently than Anders had, yet there was a hint of the familiar in his expression and gesture.

"Justice?" she asked, taking a small step closer to him. "Is that you?"

He inclined his head in her direction. "I am," he said, and his voice… his voice was not Anders' voice, being deeper and more resonant, but there was something of Anders' tones buried in it. It sounded familiar -- or was it that in the waking world, this voice was sublimated under Anders'…?

"It is good to see that you are well."
"Justice!" Merrill chirped, taking a step towards him and beaming up at him. "It's been a while."

"Greetings, Merrill," he said, turning his solemn visage towards her. "We spoke earlier today."

"Oh, well, me and Anders did," Merrill waved that away. "But not me and you. We haven't talked face to face since... Goodness! That time in Kirkwall, with Feynriel?"

"Yes." Justice nodded. "I am glad to hear of the paths your life has taken since then, Merrill. Your work brings justice and balance to the elves, who have great need of such aid. Be warned, however, that if you should attempt to make a bargain with this demon, I will not hesitate to strike you down. Again."

Merrill's face flushed, and Mardra hastily moved to intervene. "I'm sure that won't be necessary," she interjected. "The Keeper has gone to a lot of trouble to bring us here."

"If that's all of us, we should get started," Surana said. Mardra noted with some surprise that in the Fade, she did not appear to be pregnant, though she still held onto Jowan's hand.

"I agree," Justice said. Before anyone else could move he took a step to the side, raised his sword, and casually lopped off Anla's head.

Jowan shrieked; Merrill let out a little gasping cry, and Surana jerked in place, as though unsure whether to jump back or forward. Mardra felt frozen, horror warring with denial. He couldn't have just -- "Justice?" she croaked, edging forward a bit. "Was there... why did you..."

He looked at her, a frown under his blank eyes, and then back to the headless body. "What?" he said. He glanced over at the other mages, taking in their horrified expressions, and apparently felt moved to clarify: "That was a demon."

With some difficulty, Mardra forced her gaze back to 'Anla,' only to see the body was dissolving into the air like ash flaking off a burned log. She was able to breathe again.

"It is a common tactic they use, to use illusions to disguise themselves as one of your companions, thinking that you would not dare to strike against them," Justice explained.

"Well," Merrill said, her voice quivering a little, "I did ask him to come along as a native guide. Um."

"My apologies," Justice said in the silence that followed, and he did sound a little remorseful even though his expression did not noticeably change. "I forgot that mortals cannot sense demonic illusions. That must have been distressing."

"It's all right, Justice," Mardra said after a moment. "Thank you for looking out for us, if you could just, um, warn us next time. Before you start chopping off heads."

"Understood," Justice said, and sheathed his sword. He stood for a moment at the highest point of the mound, gazing off into the distance with blind white eyes, then strode away off the mound without a backwards look. "I can sense more demons ahead. That is likely where we will find the girl, as well."

They followed him off into the marsh; Mardra had to admit that, however much stronger mages were said to be in the Fade, there was some comfort in having an armed warrior in their party to provide some physical barrier between her and things that might attack. She'd studied the theory of
combat magic, of course, all Circle mages did... but aside from a few chance encounters on the road from Perendale -- most of which had been more about scaring off their attacker than actually killing them -- she felt unsure.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Jowan said uncertainly, peering around the soggy Fade.

"Very sure," Merrill replied. "This is Anla's dream, and both she and the demon will be here somewhere, not too far away."

"It looks a little like the Nahashin Marshes, where Anla's clan was from," Mardra said, looking around at the blurry plants and trees and eerie, not-quite-liquid water. "Maybe if --"

The rest of her words were cut off when something burst from a dark pool at the side of the path, rearing above their heads in a supple serpentine arch. The head of it opened like a flower, four symmetrical jaws opening to reveal a vast dark writhing gullet, and the thing screamed at them.

Justice raised a hand and pointed at the monstrosity. "That," he said helpfully, "is a demon."

"Thank you, Justice!" Mardra shouted as the mages moved into attack position. Thankfully Justice drew his sword without further delay, and although the demon-serpent shrieked and gibbered, it seemed either unwilling or unable to knock Justice aside to get at the more squishy members of the party. A hail of magical spells followed -- fireball, spirit bolt, vulnerability hex, fireball, glyph of entrapment -- and in only a few minutes the demon was down and thrashing in the mire, the edges of it rapidly flaking and dissolving.

They found something like a path and followed it, hills and cliffs rising and falling in uncanny ways as they moved forward. Pools of dark water on either side of the track spawned more and more demons, small weak humanoid things with vivid green lights in their eyesockets which scrabbled and clutched at any nearby ankles. "Those are also demons," Justice observed before moving to attack them.

"Yes, thank you Justice," Merrill sighed as she cast some kind of hex on them that made them moan and bubble before dissolving into puddles of slime. Mardra mostly contented herself with glyphs of repulsion and paralysis, keeping the path clear and the demons at enough of a distance that they could be picked off.

"The girl is ours!" the demons squealed shrilly, their voices bouncing from one slimy head to another in an unsettling fashion. "Begone and leave her to us!"

"You're the ones who don't belong here," Surana said, an unaccustomed ferocious growl in her voice. "Get out yourselves, or die!"

"You can't kill all of us!" was the demons' next response. "If even the tiniest fragment of us survives, we will regenerate, once and always!"

"Is that true?" Jowan asked, looking a bit green -- probably at the prospect of having to stay in the Fade for long enough to hunt down each and every bit of demon-flesh.

"No," Merrill answered, thankfully. "It's just echoing our fears back at us, ours and Anla's. Once we find the main body of the demon and destroy it, it will be forced out permanently."

Despite the waves of attackers, their progress was actually fairly steady. Mardra judged that this demon was not terribly strong, as demons went; even on its home turf like this, five mages and a warrior were more than equal to anything it could throw at them.
The further they went, the more narrow and twisting the path became, zig-zagging up a hill of lumpy black rocks with brown and grey plants sticking out at odd angles. As they crested the ridge, however, the scene suddenly transformed into a peaceful dell: green-trunked trees lined a serene-looking river, a meadow carpeted with green grass ringed with the looming, shadowy silhouette of caravan wagons.

A little elvhen girl sat in the middle of the meadow, a crown of reeds and lilypads atop reddish-brown hair, calmly playing with what looked like a small toad while oblivious to the dark shadows that writhed and gibbered around her.

Jowan nudged Justice. "So, uh," he said tentatively. "Is that a demon?"

"No," Justice replied after a moment of careful study. "That is a mortal dreamer. Most likely it is the girl, Anla."

"Right," Surana said, and set off across the meadow towards her before anyone else could follow. "Anla!" she called, and the elvhen girl looked up. "It's time to go home, da'len."

Anla frowned in puzzlement. "But I am home," she said.

"No, Da'len," Merrill said, joining Surana by Anla's side. She had a look of regretful sorrow on her face, but her jaw was set and determined. "You left this place a long time ago."

"Remember the Circle?" Mardra put in, feeling it was time. "Remember the courtyard with the marble planters? Remember all the tapestries, and the stories they told? Remember Enchanter Viridis who taught the apprentice classes? Remember Anubis, the borzoi who slept outside the Knight-Commander's office?"

A flash of apprehension showed on Anla's face, and the shadows around her seemed to darken. "I remember a bad man," she whispered. "He had red hair and a red nose, and he always smelled bad, like rotten fruit."

A flash of recognition shot through Mardra, so sharp as to be almost nauseating: that would have to be Ser Gallio, who had been transferred in from Ostwick for only a year before being cycled out again. In that year alone he'd managed to rack up over a dozen officially registered complaints and many more that had never been registered, but to the adult mages he'd been only a passing hazard. To the apprentices, he had no doubt loomed much larger.

"Do you remember Refuge, Anla?" Jowan put in, stepping forward. "Do you remember the woods and the stream, and the Tower that we're building there? Do you remember the little houses, and the Avvar, and the day of games we played? Do you remember Surana and me and the family we're going to have together?"

For a moment Anla looked interested, but the shadows tightened once again. "I remember fire," she said in a small voice; she hugged herself and shiver. "I remember... it hurt. I was scared..."

"The man who threatened you is gone," Justice spoke up, crouching down to put him near the girl's level. "The Templar, too, will never reach you again. We will protect you, and teach you mastery of your powers so that when you come of age, you can protect yourself. Never again will you need fear that you will be punished for doing so. This I swear."

Anla wavered. The shadows thrashed and shrieked. No, no! the dark figures howled. Don't go out there! It's not safe! If you leave here, you can never come back, never come back, never come back!
"You can't stay here forever, da'len," Merrill said in a gentle voice. "This isn't your home, it's only a dream, and it's time to leave it now. I know it's sad… to leave behind the place where you were so happy, but you can't stay here. Come on. It's time to go."

The girl looked doubtful, on the verge of tears. But with Merrill, Surana, and Mardra standing over her, hands extended in protection and welcome, she slowly seemed to gather her courage. She got up from the thick grass, and took a step forward.

"NO!" the air above the clearing howled, and dark, gelatinous horrors erupted from the trees and the shadowy wagons. Mardra hastily drew a glyph of warding around the girl, and the fight was on.

The six adults quickly fell into a protective circle around Anla, facing outwards. The fear demons - or demon -- had them surrounded, cutting off their escape. With their backs to each other, they could see each attack coming and counter it, but the darkness kept on coming.

"How did it get so big? Or so many?" Mardra said, flinging a glyph at the wall of darkness that stuck and then began to smoke, scouring the demon with caustic spirit energy. It died with an ear-piercing shriek, and the mark detonated in a soundless wave of force that scattered the shadows to either side.

"It had plenty of time to grow once it got its hooks in her!" Jowan replied, casting one misdirection hex after another. "Or to call in friends!"

"Here," Justice called out, pushing forward and leveling his sword towards a patch of pulsing darkness centered in the aravel. "The center of it is here. Destroy this demon, and it will be cast out."

"You're sure?" Merrill shouted, casting a flame blast which quickly cleared a cone in front of her of demons.

"Very," Justice replied.

"All right then," Merrill decided. "Mardra, guard our backs! Everyone else -- hit it all together!"

The other four mages all turned towards the main body of the demon. Mardra moved around behind them, now trying to watch two-thirds of the circle at once by herself. She drew her repulsing ward as widely as she could, targeted the thickest clusters of demons with paralysis and spirit binding.

Movement flickered in the corner of her eye, but before she could turn to face it another figure was there: Anders, no, Justice, blue spirit energy rolling off him in clouds. He dispatched the demon and gave her a quick look, as though measuring her health, before he turned and lunged in the direction of the next demon interloper. More demons gathered at the edges of her repulsion barrier; she fed more mana into it and hoped Justice was right about the rest of the demons vanishing when the main one was defeated.

He was. A bright flare of light from behind her cast sharp shadows past her glowing ward onto the advancing demons; then they wailed and gibbered, trembled as wildly as though they were made of jelly, and vanished into the ground. The shadows lightened, dissipating like smoke, and the figures of the trees and aravels slowly attenuated into nothingness.

They were left on a broad plain of green grass beside a river, fading off into nothing after a dozen paces. Mardra let her glyphs and wards vanish, and turned to see Surana comforting a sobbing
Anla, still appearing as a young child. "Shh, it's all right now," she older elf murmured softly.

"I know!" Anla said, and gulped. "I know I shouldn't but -- I didn't want it to g-go. I knew I shouldn't but, but it showed me, and I want to go home, I just want to go home."

Mardra looked away, feeling depressed and uncomfortable. When she'd been a child the age that Anla looked now, 'home' had been Kirkwall, yet she had spent most of her life in the Perendale Tower. If anywhere was 'home' to her it was the place she had grown into an adult, where she had learned, where she had made and lost friends, where she had grieved for the death of her mother. But the tense, unhappy, painful memories of Perendale overwhelmed even the happy ones; even if they had not, she knew she could never go back there.

"We'll take you home," Surana said soothingly. "We will. It'll be okay."

"But for now, let's go back to the valley, okay?" Jowan said gruffly.

Anla sniffled, but nodded slightly. The illusion was falling away from her, gradually reverting her from her babyfaced, gap-toothed younger self to the pre-teen she had been. It was rather depressing how little change that really entailed.

"It is time for us to return now," Merrill said. She made a motion with her arms, leaning down towards the ground and pushing upwards with her arms, and a tall narrow shape formed in the air in front of her. It looked like a doorway, a blank-faced rectangle with the hint of an uneven ropy frame, like tree branches. "When you're ready, this portal will take you back to the waking world."

Jowan went first, Surana right behind with an arm over Anla's shoulders. Mardra began to start after them, but stopped at a call from Justice.

"Mardra..." the spirit called out, reaching one gauntleted hand in her direction. "Please stay here awhile. I would like to speak to you."

Mardra hesitated, then looked inquiringly at Merrill. "Is it all right?" she asked. "If he and I stay a little longer?"

"Oh, yes," Merrill said. "I mean, this is his home, so it certainly won't hurt him any to spend more time here. Not that it will necessarily hurt you to spend more time here either, as long as it isn't too long. Just walk through the archway when you're done!"

She turned back towards Justice. "Sure," she said, a little surprised and curious, and a little bit wary. "Why?"

In an unusual display of what was either hesitance or discretion, Justice waited until the others had vanished through the doorway before he began. He took a step towards her. "I regret imposing on you in this manner so soon after a difficult battle," he said, "but there are not many opportunities for us to talk face to face save in times of great emergency."

"That's putting it lightly," Mardra sighed. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I know you are concerned that Anders has begun to harbor feelings for you that may damage your working relationship," he said.

"Oh," Mardra said faintly, unsure what to say. What capacity was Justice acting in here, exactly? As Anders' friend, big brother, caretaker, or what? Surely he wouldn't regard her as a threat...

"I wish to assure you that is not true. Anders thinks of you as a friend. He does not desire to court
"Oh," Mardra said, stronger this time. "Oh, good." That was a relief, if it were true -- and she could see no reason to doubt it. Justice was not quite Truth, but they were similarly incapable -- or at least, uninterested -- in lying. That knowledge made her feel a lot better, a lot more comfortable, not having to keep her guard up constantly around her friend and partner.

"I do," Justice said.

Mardra didn't process this at first, still thinking about the ways in which her responsibilities and Anders' were closely entwined. "You do what?" she said, distracted.

Justice just looked at her, waiting. Was he nervous? Or was she projecting? And then it hit her.

"Oh," she said a third time, stunned. Not the man but the spirit was--? "Not... wait, you, but not Anders...? I thought you were one."

"In many ways, we are," Justice replied. "In other ways, we are not. Where we agree, we do not feel a separation, but in this we have frequently disagreed. Anders loved Hawke, loves him still. But his love is not mine, and mine is not his."

"Anders said that you didn't approve," Mardra said. "That you thought his feelings for Hawke was a distraction from your cause."

Justice shook his head. "Anders heard his own thoughts and fears more than mine. If I was wary of Hawke it was only because I did not trust him to be loyal and true, to stand by Anders when times were darkest, and that Anders would be hurt when such a time came to pass. And," he pointed out with just a hint of self-satisfaction, "in this I was correct."

"I don't understand," Mardra admitted. "You're a spirit. How can you want to... with a mortal?"

"Love is not exclusive to mortals," Justice replied readily. "It fills the dreams of mortals and therefore our world. I have always known of the existence of love, and desire, as I had encountered them here in the Fade. And yet, it was not until I crossed into the mortal world that I experienced such emotions for the first time myself."

Mardra tried to remember what Anders had told her about the strange journey of the spirit of Justice. "You were... enclosed in the body of a Grey Warden, yes?"

Justice nodded. "Yes. The Warden Kristoff," he said. "He was married, he had a wife who loved him very much, and he her. That love, those memories were still imprinted on his body after his death. It was faded, patchy, and yet... It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It woke in me a wish to someday feel such things for myself, not steal the experience of others."

Despite herself, Mardra was moved. Justice sounded so lonely, so wistful, and in that she could relate. "But you don't have -- I mean, you don't want to -- I mean, it's a mortal body thing, isn't it?"

And that was an understatement.

"I do not have mortal needs and desires, it is true," Justice agreed. "But I think it is folly to assume that bodily needs and love are one and the same. You know that desire can exist without love. Is it so hard to believe that love can exist without desire?"

Mardra sat back a bit, a little startled by the assertion. "It's... it's not been my experience," she admitted. Back in the Tower, fleeting physical attachments were the only kind that mages pursued. Everyone knew that marriage was an impossibility, so ideas of romance and courting were always
"Why should it be for anything, but for itself?" Justice countered. "The love that mortals feel is strong enough to span the sky in the Fade. Ages worth of poems and songs, great deeds and sublime works of art have been performed in the name of love. It has shaped and shaken the world in which I was born. It pains me to think that mortals would reduce it to a chore that must be accomplished, or a currency exchanged, for the fulfillment of a base desire. Love exists, beyond desire. It is worth doing, worth having, apart from desire. I wish to pursue it. I wish to know it. I wish to embrace it... with you."

Mardra was stunned. Her face felt hot, her chest tight. The spirit's words seemed to have jarred something inside her, cracked open what had formerly been a plain blank wall of her world and let through a glimpse of something on the other side. Just the concept that things which she had dreamed of a child didn't have to die with childhood, mortared over with the cynicism and wear of the adult world. It was too chaotic, too confusing to make sense of right away, and yet she still felt unmoored. "I…" She trailed off. In the face of this conviction, this sincerity, this absolute devotion to the truth of a concept she'd only ever encountered in fiction, she had absolutely no idea what to say. "Why... why me?"

"I have admired you since we first met. You are a just woman, a kind woman; your heart is true and your wits quick." The unconstrained flattery made her cheeks warm, but the next question was enough to make her feel chilled again. "I know that you have felt alone, separated from your fellow mortals because you do not feel as they do. Answer this: do you deny yourself thoughts of romance because you truly do not want them, or only because you believe you cannot have them?"

That was really the question, wasn't it?

"I don't..." Mardra shook her head, at a loss. "I don't know. The place I grew up, the Circle... there's no room for love and romance there. It isn't allowed. People find ways, they make do, but... I have been told since I was a child that love is not meant for me." It left a bitter taste in her mouth, finding honesty enough to match his own. She looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "How am I supposed to know?"

"Allow me to attend on you," the spirit… wheedled, was the only word Mardra could use to describe it. "As myself, not as Anders. If you find my attentions unwelcome, I will cease them. On this you have my oath."

Mardra had heard similar lines from other boys, more times than she cared to count. She had little faith in them. Yet Justice was a spirit, not a boy, not a man. If she could not trust a spirit to be honest, to be consistent, to be true, then who in either world could be trusted?

"Well." Mardra blew out a breath and huffed a laugh, more as a release of tension than because she was really amused. "Well! I... I'll think about it, Justice. You've given me a lot to think about, and this is all coming at me very quickly. But I will think about it," she promised. "For now…" she hesitated. "I can tell you at least that the answer is not no."

Justice smiled.

It was the first time she had seen him smile, either as himself or in Anders' body when he was ascendant. It looked very little like Anders' smile, which was usually wry and self-conscious,
actively using humor to soften or deflect some bitter blow. It was fresh, and innocent, and the most honest smile she had ever seen.

"Thank you," he said, radiating the utmost sincerity. And just like that, the moment of tenderness concluded, he was all-business once more. "Now. Let us return to the waking world. There is still much to be done."

~tbc
Anders had a massive headache.

He would have liked to attribute it to the previous night's escapade in the Fade, but the truth was that he'd felt fine on waking up this morning. The headache had come afterwards, from his constant back-and-forth arguing with himself about what his next move should be.

Justice. His other half, his live-in spirit, had... *propositioned* Mardra. Well, in the least sexy, least fun way imaginable. It wouldn't even qualify as scandalous if not for the fact that one half of the couple was an apostate and the other was a *fade spirit*.

"Well, I hope you're proud of yourself," Anders said aloud, to the silence of his room. "What am I supposed to do now?"

There were no answers, no helpful other voices in his head. It was just him, and Justice, as it always had been.

Still. Some things, once learned, could not be unlearned. In hindsight, *in hindsight* he could clearly see that a *lot* of his confusion around Mardra over the past year had come from his other self.

What was he going to do? Justice had made it quite clear, in his eloquent confession to Mardra last night, that he intended this to be a thing between him and Mardra, and neither expected nor wanted Anders to be part of it. Or else what else had the "Anders thinks of you as a friend" line supposed to have been? And that was a relief, but it was also vastly oversimplifying the situation. Like it or not, any relationship that Justice was a part of, Anders would have to be involved in some level as well. Would Mardra be okay with that? Was *Anders* okay with that?

Maybe he was getting ahead of himself. She hadn't said 'yes' yet, after all. He couldn't exactly hope that Justice's suit would fail -- that would be cruel -- but maybe he shouldn't go building a pen before the pigs were even born.

His headache was getting worse. Anders sat down and sank his head into his hands, feeding cool healing magic carefully through his fingertips, but all the magic in the world couldn't reach existential pain.

How exactly did Justice intend to carry out this courtship plan of his? In the Fade, Justice was dominant as Anders was dominant in the waking world. But even as in tune as the two of them had become it wasn't just a question of wanting or wishing to change places. They were one, unless some extremity of circumstance radically changed the balance between them. It wasn't exactly voluntary and it wasn't something they could easily hold onto.

What he *ought* to do was go find Mardra and talk about it, Anders knew. That was what rational adults did in these circumstances. But he wasn't sure he could do that until he'd sorted out what he
was thinking, what he was feeling for himself first. If carrying on an affair between Justice and Mardra required him to act as a go-between, could he do it? Would any of them truly be okay with that?

And… what would this mean for Hawke?

He'd gotten over Hawke, he thought. He'd gotten to the place where he could say Hawke's name, remember his face, and smile instead of breaking down into tears. But that didn't mean he wanted to be over Hawke. It was true that he was not… not currently in a relationship, because that kind of assumed that the other person still reciprocated, and Anders had no idea at this point if that was even true. But a part of him still held onto the old love, the old dreams. If he entered into this… whatever it was with Mardra, did that mean that he forfeited any chance of ever being with Hawke again? Was that something he was willing to give up, for a chance at making Justice happy?

No, he realized with a clogged, miserable feeling twisting in his stomach. No, he wasn't. He couldn't. Even if he never saw Hawke again, he couldn't give him up. Till the day we die, he'd said.

But…

This was something Justice had always wanted. Always wanted, long before they'd joined, for as long as Anders had ever known him. Anders had entered into a relationship with Hawke without getting Justice's approval, knowing that Justice did not share his feeling for the man. Was it fair, was it right to deny Justice that same chance?

Which of them was thinking that right now, anyway?

He was getting nowhere, chasing his own thoughts round in his head. Anders stood up with a groan, and decided to see if a walk in the fresh air would clear his head.

---

Anders ended up in the Tower dining hall, or at least the room that had sort of defaulted in that role due to being right by the kitchens. It was late morning, late enough that most of the breakfasters had gone and the lunch rush hadn't yet started, so the place was mostly empty; aside from two middle-aged mages having an intense discussion in a corner over a book, the only one there was Surana.

It was good to see his friend up and about again; already some color had been restored to her face, underlining the reddish color of the vine tattoo much better than the sickly pallor she'd had before. She had a dish of porridge in front of her that she was slowly working through, and glanced up at Anders as he flopped down on the bench opposite her with a groan.

"Anders," Surana said in her usual quiet, reserved way. "How are you?"

"Fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?" Anders said, injecting a note of humorous aggravation into his tone. "Not like I just discovered that the spirit sharing my head is in love with my best friend, and wants to start dating her, without my involvement. I think this is a perfectly normal thing that happens in people's lives all the time and there is absolutely no reason to freak out about it whatsoever. What about you?"
"Is that what Justice wanted to talk about with Mandra last night?" Surana said, taking another spoonful. "It's about time."

"Yes," Anders said. "Did everybody know about this except me? Why does nobody tell me these things?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Anders, he lives in your head. What reason would we have to think that you didn't know?"

There was no good answer for that, so Anders just groaned, dropping his head into his hands again.

They sat together in comfortable silence for a few minutes, Surana working her way steadily through her bowl of porridge. At length Anders sat up and looked around, frowning as the absences began to sink in. "Where's Anla? Or your husband?" he asked.

"Still in her room," Surana said. "Jowan is with her." She gazed at the far edge of the table, green eyes unfocused and abstracted, steam rising from the bowl and curling around the fair wisps of her hair. "She's leaving soon."

"Who is?" Anders said, not quite paying attention, before it caught on. "What? Anla?"

"We've talked it over, the two of us and Anla, and Merrill, and… we've decided that Anla will go with Merrill when she leaves."

"What?" He felt his jaw drop. "But… why?"

Surana took a spoonful of sugar from the cellar on the table and stirred it in before answering. "A few reasons," she said finally. "Even now that the demon is gone, it still won't be easy for her in Refuge. No one is actively cruel, but… there is still some awkwardness, some distrust. Many mages still believe that being possessed by a demon is a moral failing of some kind, a lack of will."

Anders scoffed. "That's preposterous!" he said angrily. "Anla was a victim and the Fear demon preyed on her. She needs support, not censure!"

"I agree. But we can't rule people to be kind," she said. "Right now, while she's still healing, and fragile… it might be best for her not to be here."

"If she's healing and fragile, surely she's better off staying where it's safe," Anders objected.

Surana sighed. "Emotionally fragile, Anders," she said. "And Shi'amelan is a more than capable guardian. She'll be safe with Merrill, protected, and she'll learn much more about her heritage than she could have here. Merrill is considering training her as her First, and if she chooses to return here, she can serve for the elves of Refuge in that capacity."

Anders considered that for a moment. All of Refuge -- not only the elves -- would benefit from having someone with Dalish Keeper training around, but Merrill clearly had no intention of making the valley her home. "I suppose so," he said.

"But the most important reason why she has to leave is…" Surana trailed off, then took a deep breath. "Is that she wants to go home. She needs to return to the marshes where she was taken from her clan, and I can't take her there. Merrill can. She can reunite with her clan, her parents."

She seemed so calm about it. Anders was well accustomed to Surana's reserve, her stoic demeanor,
but this absolute lack of reaction to the idea of Anla leaving took Anders aback.

"I thought that... well..." he said cautiously. "You were acting as a mother to her, pretty well it seemed."

"I... tried to be. I wanted to be. I do think of her as a daughter. But she already has a mother, and it's not me." Surana fell silent for a moment, and Anders dared not interrupt; after a time, she went on. "She deserves the chance to see her again, a chance that all too few of us get. She'll always be special to me, but that's not a reason for me to hold her here if she wants to go."

"Neria..." He dared to reach out, put a comforting hand on her arm. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She favored him with a small smile. "It's not forever, Anders. She may choose to return here someday. The important thing is that she has the choice."

Anders could only agree.

He made sure to be there to see them off, three days later. Merrill was up and ready to travel before dawn, but there was no sign of Anla just yet.

He lingered at the head of the trail with Merrill, waiting for the elvhen girl to appear. Alone with the Keeper again he found himself unsure of what to say to her; they had never been close in Kirkwall, but now that she was leaving it felt like a loss. Still, she had her responsibilities as a traveling Keeper, and he had his here in Refuge. Each of them, in the best way they knew, serving their people.

"Thank you for coming all the way to Orzammar for this," Anders said in the grey quiet under the trees. "I know it's a long way, and I know things weren't always easy between us..."

"Don't be silly, Anders," Merrill said. "I've spent most of my life moving around, a little travel doesn't frighten me. I grew up in Ferelden. It was nice to come back and see it again. Where the trees are just the right height, you know."

Anders stared around at the wooded slopes. The trees just looked like trees, to him. "I don't think I do. I don't pay a lot of attention to trees."

"Well maybe you should," Merrill said. "Anyway, when I heard that a girl of the People was in trouble, and I could help, then I couldn't stay away."

"Are you saying that you didn't make this trip just for me?" Anders joked.

"I did it for her," Merrill said in a sharper tone, then gave him a small smile. "Although it is good to see you again, of course."

Anders smiled ruefully. "It's been good to see you too, Merrill," he said.

The two of them lapsed into silence. Anders looked up at the Tower, but no one was stirring at this time of day. Even the dwarven workers were off-shift, this time of day falling into the cracks between two separate cycles. It didn't seem to Anders like the most auspicious start to a day, or a
journey for that matter. Not with Fiona and the mage rebels still pinned down at Andorhal, murderous Templars roaming the countryside, a civil war breaking out in Orlais, to say nothing of the bandits and troublemakers that the world just never seemed to run out of.

"You know..." Anders hesitated. "What with the rebellion heating up out there, and the Templars hunting down every mage they see... it's pretty dangerous. If you wanted, you could stay here."

Merrill pulled her cloak a little tighter around her, warding off the morning fog. "I appreciate your gracious permission, considering that Refuge is supposed to be a haven for all mages."

Belatedly, Anders remembered that even in Kirkwall, Merrill never had been a morning person. "Ouch," he muttered.

Merrill sighed. "It's a kind thought Anders, but I'm not worried about trouble with the Templars. I can take care of myself. And the Dalish need me, more now than ever."

"Well," Anders said, trying to rally, "if there are any mages in the Dalish that need a safe place to go, you can always send them here. Or anyone from Kirkwall, for that matter. We've got room to grow."

"I'll be sure to remember that," Merrill said.

Two figures appeared out of the morning fog; Anla, dressed in a traveling cloak that enveloped her completely, and Jowan walking a little way behind. Surana, Anders knew, had been up late the night before preparing Anla's clothes and pack for travel in order to ensure she would be ready; it was perhaps not a surprise that she couldn't make it to this final meeting. Or perhaps that she chose not to make this their final meeting. Perhaps she had preferred to say her good-byes to Anla in private.

"All packed up and ready to go?" Anders asked Anla as she got near, giving her his most encouraging smile. She returned a tremulous smile of her own, and he put his hand on her shoulder. "Remember," he said seriously, "you will always be safe and welcome here."

She sniffled a bit, but put her chin up and a brave face on. "Thank you, Enchanteur Anders," she said in a voice that was a little bit wobbly. "Thank you for everything you've done for me."

She gave Jowan one last hug around his waist, then surprised Anders with a hug around his, too. Then Jowan handed her a backpack, Merrill was smiling and holding out a hand in welcome, and Anla went to her side and they both turned towards the trail.

The two slender figures -- one shorter, one taller -- vanished very quickly into the grey mist in the gulley under the trees. But Anders and Jowan both stayed there, watching after where they'd gone, until the sun rose above the valley wall.

Things were quiet in Refuge after Merrill and Anla left. With the figure from his past gone Anders found himself quickly falling back into the rhythm of life at Refuge -- making sure that the wages were fairly distributed, that the children were being taught and cared for, that the young and elderly were staying healthy. He ventured down into Orzammar proper a few times to visit Moira and a
few of his other patients there, but the dwarven city was still eerily subdued in the absence of most of its army. He even had time to continue his writing -- an almanac on the best ways to integrate magic with everyday life for the common Ferelden -- finishing one chapter and starting another.

He spent time with his friends -- Jowan and Surana, Dagna, Grandin, Mardra and even Daros. The younger Amell sibling truly seemed to have turned over a new leaf; he doubted they would ever become close confidantes, but fighting together in Bownammar couldn't help but bring some level of understanding. He knew how to get along passably well with priggish, self-righteous boors; he'd lived in Kirkwall for seven years, after all.

He worried about Surana -- they all did -- but thankfully, in the days after the Fade ritual her health stabilized. She reported less dragging fatigue, and the bleeding slowed down to only occasional spots. If the return to health was matched by a new quiet melancholy, there was little to be done for that other than doing their best to be there when she needed them.

As for her husband -- well, Jowan didn't normally talk to Anders about his research. He only knew that the blood mage had returned to his project on the day that Jowan walked into the infirmary and said: "Anders? Uh… can you come look at something?"

"Can it wait?" Anders said, not looking up from the patient he was attending to: the little girl who sneezed ice had managed to get a large shard of it lodged in her lip, and although the ice melted quickly enough the cut it left had to be mended.

"Sure," Jowan said.

Anders looked up several minutes later, a frown on his face, to see that Jowan was quite literally waiting; the man stood by the infirmary door, fidgeting endlessly with a small piece of worked leather between his fingers, and didn't look like he was going to leave any time soon.

He sighed and stood up from his work, waving the last spark of creationism away from his fingers. "There," he told Astie. "All healed up, so you should be fine now. Do you remember the trick I told you to stop from sneezing if you feel a sneeze?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Bananafast, bananafast, bananafast," she chanted. "Just say banana real fast until the sneeze goes away."

"Right." Anders squeezed her shoulders, then released her with a pat on the back that encouraged her to hop off the table. "Back to Rannie, then."

She ran off, and Anders turned to Jowan. "Ready when you are," he said, striving to keep his tone civil.

"Ah! Right," Jowan said, and led the way out into the hall.

They didn't go far, just down the corridor into the great hall in the north-west quadrant of the building. He was a bit surprised to see a small crowd already waiting: Dagna, Daros Amell, and a few of the more recent arrivals from the Ghislain Tower. "Ready?" Jowan asked the others as he and Anders entered.

"We've been waiting on you, Jowan!" Dagna called out, but her tone was good-natured. There was an aura of suppressed excitement in the gathering, and Anders still had no idea what it was about.

Taking a deep breath, Jowan went over to a table and opened a small wooden box. Light gleamed off a handful of crystal vials within -- no, the glass glowed, a deep purple light that sent a chill down Anders' spine. He stared harder at the vial.
Okay, so first off, this is Milan's phylactery," Jowan announced, holding the vial up to the crowd. "Brought intact from the Ghislain Tower. Not many mages make it here still holding onto an intact phylactery, so I asked Milan if he would let me use it for this demonstration." The dark-haired mage -- Milan, presumably -- nodded in accord.

Jowan walked over to the far end of the room and set the vial on a shelf, then backed away. The light of the phylactery dimmed as it got further away from its owner, although the distance wasn't great enough for it to go out entirely. Jowan returned to his workbench and rubbed his palms on his robe, as though they were sweaty.

"And then I have this other one here, the anti-phylactery, made with Milan's blood earlier today," Jowan said, picking up another vial from the box. He almost dropped it. "Wait, shit, no -- that's the wrong one. This is is." He selected another hastily and held it up, turning it from side to side so the audience could see.

"You're sure you have the right one, Jowan?" Milan asked, a slight edge to his voice. "I don't want my head to explode."

"I'm sure, I'm sure," Jowan reassured hastily.

"And that does what exactly?" Daros said impatiently, and Anders silently agreed.

"Watch this." With an overdone flourish, Jowan produced a knife and made a small cut on the back of his hand. A red mist wreathed from the cut and surrounded the glass vial. Dagna looked absolutely fascinated. Several members of the audience looked revolted; one turned away and made the sunburst sign reflexively. Anders frowned at that one. Not that he didn't agree with the sentiment, but…

Jowan didn't quite have the dramatic timing he really needed to pull this off; the spell continued on for several minutes, ticking away in the tense stillness of the great hall as he worked. Nobody seemed to want to interrupt.

"And… bang!" Jowan finished his spell with another flourish. "It's done."

Anders opened his mouth to ask what was done, before the question was answered for him. On the other side of the room, there was a loud pop and a tinkling of glass. Red light flared for a moment, then went out. Anders' mouth stayed open, staring in amazement.

"That was incredible!" Dagna exclaimed, clapping her hands. Jowan smiled, wide and relieved and sheepish.

"Wait, you've done it?" Anders demanded, taking a step forward. "You've found a way to destroy phylacteries?"

"Well, technically I already knew how," Jowan said modestly, as the mage audience rushed over to the far shelf to examine the shattered phylactery. "It was just a matter of working out the details so that it works right every time, without any negative side effects."

"Dagna's right," Anders said. "This is incredible! Jowan, you've, you've…" He searched for the words to express his feelings of gratitude, but came up empty. "You've changed everything," he finished quietly.

"Thanks," Jowan said, looking deeply gratified by Anders' praise.

He remembered Merrill's words then, about apprentices and the passing on of knowledge, and
looked up at Jowan sharply. "Have you taught anyone else to do this yet?" he asked. "Did you take on an apprentice?"

"No, not yet…" Jowan gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Nobody's approached me who wants to learn. If they do, I'll teach them, but it's not like I can make somebody learn if they don't want to. But don't worry," he added hastily at Anders' look. "I've made copies. I wrote everything down."

Anders frowned, trying to decide what to do next. Properly speaking, this knowledge ought to be shared. Every mage in Thedas ought to know the way to break their own phylactery, break their own shackles. And yet, however far he had come in his own journey of acceptance, it was still blood magic. Bad enough to have rumors of blood mage cabals at Refuge, even worse to confirm them in writing. Anders could think of no better way to invite a true Exalted March than to blatantly publish the recipe to a blood magic spell.

It might be premature, anyway. So far no one but Jowan had performed the spell, so they didn't even know that it could be replicated. Or, for that matter, that it would work as well in practice as it did in test conditions. "And you're sure you could destroy the phylacteries from anywhere?" he said finally. "Even on the other side of the country?"

Jowan shrugged. "I tested it from here to the lowest reaches of Orzammar," he said. "That's the most distance I can get from inside the city."

"And from here to Denerim? Perendale? Antiva City?" Anders challenged.

"I… think it should work." Jowan started to look uncomfortable. "I can't see any reason why it shouldn't. I cast the same spell for Lura, who left her phylactery behind, and the spell completed successfully and there was no backlash on my end."

"But you can't be sure that it worked," Anders said.

Jowan sighed in defeat. "No. No, I can't be sure," he admitted. "Not without having someone in Ghislain to report back at the same time. But it should work."

For a moment Anders entertained the vision of phylacteries all over southern Thedas suddenly leaping off the shelves and smashing themselves on the ground… Phylacteries exploding like little grenades, in the stores and shelves where they were kept. Was it a strong enough force to destroy other phylacteries kept with it, as well? What would the leash-keepers make of the phenomenon, of their precious holy relics destroying themselves? He felt an unpleasant smile steal over his face, lips drawing back from his teeth in a grin.

"I suppose we'll just have to have faith," he told Jowan.

~tbc...
Considerations

Chapter Summary

Dagna and Jowan launch a new research project. Aside from that, things are quiet... maybe too quiet.

"Anders, have you got a moment?"

Anders looked up from his writing to see Dagna in the doorway to his office, bouncing slightly on her toes. He looked back down at the page he was currently on, reluctant to leave -- he was just in the middle of some truly inspired sections on mana storage -- but a glance at the dwarven clock in the corner told him that he'd been at this for hours.

"I should," he said, scribbling a finish to his line and closing the volume. "What's up?"

Dagna grinned at him. "Good," she said. She turned and beckoned, and Anders' eyebrows rose as Jowan appeared in the doorway behind her, looking sheepish. "Can we come in?"

"Sure," Anders said, and the two of them filed in -- Dagna closed the door behind them -- and found seats. "Something wrong? Neria okay?"

"Ria's fine," Jowan assured quickly. "This is something else. It's about, uh, research."

"Oh?" Anders glanced over at Dagna, who leaned forward earnestly.

"Ever since Merrill left I've been talking with Jowan about directions his blood research could go in now that he's nailed the problem of transitive annihilative signals," she said. Anders' eyes narrowed. "Let me guess," he said. "Creating long-range death weapons?"

"Uh --" Jowan started.

Dagna's nose wrinkled up in distaste. "What? No!" she said, then paused. "Although now that you mention it, that would be interesting..."

"Dagna, please..." Jowan sighed.

"Right, right." Dagna waved that away. "No, no long-range death weapons. You'd have to have a blood sample to work with in the first place, so I can't really see how it could be practical. Although... in certain circumstances..."

Anders interrupted before Dagna could get too far off track. "What does this have to do with Merrill?"

"Oh, right. Well, we talked a lot while she was here about her own research. She's working on such fascinating projects!" Dagna said, her enthusiasm returning. "What I wouldn't give to see a real live telecommunicative artifact like the one she used to have in Kirkwall! Really, if you think about
"Your next project is going to be to create a new magic mirror?" Anders interrupted. "Uh --" Dagna said.

"What? No!" Jowan scoffed, then paused. "...Although that's an interesting idea, now that you mention it..."

Dagna shook her head. "Something like the mirror is too far out of our capability right now. We don't even have the base artifact to work from, so we'd be starting from less than scratch and just duplicating Merrill's own research."

If not the eluvian and not new and interesting ways to kill people, Anders had no idea what else you could do with blood magic. "What, then?"

"What I meant to say was, is --" Jowan broke off. "Anders, how is your work going on the... the infertility project?"

Anders frowned. "I can't disclose personal details of patients' conditions. You know this."

"No, of course not," Jowan said hastily. "But I meant -- generally speaking. You know."

He did know, but he didn't want to admit aloud that his progress had largely been stalled. His first test case -- the Queen of Orzammar -- had been wildly successful, but he had not had consistent success in replicating it. The startling development of her multiple-pregnancy had made him cautious.

Anders had realized, after careful consideration of the process, that he had used far too much power in his creation spell. Too little fertility was a problem, but too much fertility was another problem in its own way: multiple pregnancies were dangerous, especially for dwarves, who had no experience with them.

So he'd toned down the power of his spell considerably -- but that made the results record spotty. Some of the women he treated became pregnant fairly quickly; others did not, and he was never entirely sure why. The only recourse was to attempt the treatment again and again, a slow and frustrating process for all involved.

And ultimately, Anders was forced to admit, it just wasn't something that could be expanded to help all of the women of Orzammar who needed it. The burst of magic required was intense and draining, and spirit healers were rare -- Anders was still the only one at Refuge. Even if he neglected all of his other duties and dedicated himself to only doing fertility treatments, he still wouldn't be able to help everyone.

Still, it had accomplished one very important goal: the women of Orzammar now believed that magic could help them, as it had so spectacularly helped their queen. It had made them willing to try.

"Not as well as it could," Anders admitted. It was a sting to admit his failure to Jowan, who'd just had such success on his own research, but... the welfare of his patients was more important than his own ego. "Why? You have some ideas?"

"Well, maybe..." Jowan took a breath. "I was really interested in how Merrill described using blood magic to cleanse the Taint out of the relic. I had no idea that could be done, but if it could... imagine the possibilities! Anders, didn't you say that the fertility problems the Orzammar women are experiencing is a result of long-term exposure to the Taint?"
"I said it was one possibility," Anders qualified.

"Well then, don't you think that the same blood magic that Merrill used to cleanse her mirror could help them as well?"

Now that he said it, it seemed an obvious connection. Anders paused, taken aback: why had he never thought of that? "I don't know," he said at last. "If it were possible, then surely it would have been discovered by now. At least --"

The next obvious thought, though he stopped himself before spilling Grey Warden secrets to non-Wardens, was that if anyone ought to know methods of cleansing the Taint from the blood, the Wardens already should. Though it was not well-advertised to outsiders, the Grey Wardens had always been more accepting of blood magic than the rest of southern Thedas. Encouraged, even, in pursuit of anything that would give them an edge up on the Darkspawn. With that combination of blood mages working in close proximity with the Blight for so long, surely someone must have learned how to cleanse the Taint with blood magic.

The next thought, less obvious but more horrible, was that someone among the Wardens had discovered a way to cleanse the Taint with blood magic, but the Wardens had suppressed the knowledge. Probably someone up at Weisshaupt knew, and never let anyone else in the Wardens find out. Knowing what he did of how they worked -- and how ruthless they could be in protecting their secrets -- it would not at all be a surprise to him if they did not want the news getting out that Wardenhood could be reversed or cured. They had trouble enough getting recruits as it was, after all. Oh, he hoped that wasn't true.

"At least, you'd think someone in Tevinter would have come up with it," he said instead. "I mean, they do blood magic left and right, and they've always had a close alliance with the dwarves."

Dagna shook her head. "We dwarves keep to ourselves, always have," she said. "Merchants and bureaucrats go to Tevinter, sure, but they don't go spreading our problems around to those guys. If they had, I would have found out something about it before."

"And anyway, how do you know it wasn't discovered before?" Jowan added. "Maybe someone did make this breakthrough, but they never told anyone, or never wrote it down. Or maybe they did write it down and all the copies of the texts have been destroyed. The Chantry hasn't exactly been keen on preserving and replicating blood magic texts."

It echoed Merrill's comments about how knowledge should be preserved, and how it could be lost. "I... huh," Anders said thoughtfully.

"Don't you think it's worth a try, though?" Jowan wheedled. "We could really help people!"

"And even if it fails, we'd gain all sorts of valuable data! Who knows what other paths would open themselves up?" Dagna enthused.

"All right," Anders sighed, "it sounds like you already have it all planned out. So what do you need me for?"

A sticky, heavy silence fell over his office. Jowan stirred and cleared his throat. He coughed. "Well..."

Dagna leaned forward. "This is an entirely new field of study, Anders," she said. "We're starting from a smooth slate, no data at all. We have to gather data, do field trials, before we can perfect our methodology."
"So?" Anders said.

"So, we need guinea pigs," Dagna finished.


You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. Jowan fidgeted nervously, hands fluttering as Anders' glare drilled into the side of his head. "And you need me for this because..?"

Dagna scoffed as if at great stupidity, unaffected by his glare. "Because the dusters trust you!" she exclaimed. "If you asked, I'm sure they'd line up to try out the new miracle cure."

"Are you serious? Are you flaming serious?" Anders demanded incredulously. "These people are deprived, desperate -- they react to me because I'm the only one in their lives who have reached out a hand to them, and you want me to use that hand to stab them in the backs? To turn these desperate women into lab rats for your experiments?"


Anders tried to rein his temper back under control. Jowan had just cracked the secret of destroying phylacteries, he reminded himself. He deserved the benefit of the doubt. When he thought he could speak calmly, he said: "How is it not like that?"

"I don't have any data yet, but I do have theories. And I have safe practices I learned from Merrill and developed while researching phylacteries," Jowan said. "I'll take some of their blood, ward it away from them, then work on trying to remove the taint before I cast anything on them directly. I know how to protect people from harmful effects while working with their blood. I get why you're upset, but really, Anders, I'm not going to hurt them in any way."

That was… probably true. Anders sighed, letting the tension out in a breath. "Why does it have to be Dust Towners, anyway?" he demanded. "Because you think they're more expendable?"

"Well, aren't they?" Dagna said reasonably, ignoring Jowan's quick negating hand gesture.

"No," Anders growled, and the conversation ground to a halt, Dagna seeming to pick up for the first time on the anger in his tone.

Bravely, Jowan stepped in to cover the gap. "If we can perfect this process, it's another service we can offer to sell to people, a source of cash flow for Refuge," he said. "Maker knows you've complained enough about charging money for healing, but it's not like this is a lifesaving service. It might be something that the Dust Towners can't afford, later on. But by getting in on the ground floor, they can get the treatment for free."

"It's a great opportunity for them, Anders," Dagna said earnestly.

Anders considered it for a few long moments, then let out a defeated groan. "I'm not going to lie to them, and I'm not flaming well going to pressure them into anything," he said warningly. "We'll tell them exactly what we're after and what we're planning to do, and if they still want to be part of your research study, then it will be of their free will."

"Of course," Jowan said with a relieved smile.

Dagna was even more effusive, pumping her fist in the air. "Yes!" she shouted. "Research thesis of the decade, here I come!"
"It certainly seems to have settled down around here," he told Mardra, setting the basket of cheese rolls down on her desk.

They had taken to meeting once a cycle for what she called their 'no working, no really' nights, although shop talk had a way of creeping in despite that. Anders had stopped in the kitchens on the way over to her office to secure food: to his surprise, Daros Amell had practically taken over the baking ovens. Anders had been subject to a ten-minute lecture on the cultivation of yeast and interactions with different kinds of wheat before he'd managed to escape with a tray of cheese and spinach puffs. Of all the paths that the younger Amell could take in life after abandoning his Circle apologia, Anders had to admit, he had definitely not expected that he would become a scholar of baking.

Mardra poked through the basket, looking at the various pastries, before finally selecting one with little green leaves poking out of the folds of dough. "Maybe a little too quiet," she admitted. "Call me paranoid, but I can't help but worry that the world is just gearing up for the next big punch."

Anders frowned, took a bite of his pastry and munched on it while he considered. Fate certainly had never been his friend, but he didn't see any reason to worry. "Does something in particular seem off?" he asked his friend, not wanting to just dismiss her concerns unduly.

She frowned, thinking it over. "I'm a little concerned that we haven't had any more new arrivals recently," she said. "You were gone the past few months, but we had a steady trickle of people coming in -- three or four in a week, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. There hasn't been anyone new in ten days, and I wonder about that."

"Huh." Now that Anders thought about it, he realized he hadn't been called in to assign housing or do wellness checks for any newcomers, hadn't had to disrupt the routine of everyday Refuge life to integrate someone new.

That definitely was enough to leave a cold feeling in his stomach, an unpalatable draft to go along with his dinner. "What do you think could cause that?" he said quietly.

"It might just be coincidence," Mardra said, although by the look on her face she didn't really believe that. "Or maybe all the mages who want to come, already have come, and the rest of them out there have decided to chance it on their own. Or perhaps the Chantry has launched a new propaganda campaign discrediting us, and people are afraid and stay away. Or maybe the Templar sweeps are catching more of them."

"Do you think we should send out another fact-finding group?" Anders inquired. He didn't really love the idea; most of the harder and more capable mages were either still in the Deep Roads, or had already left to join the Rebellion. Of the ones remaining, he wasn't sure which ones he could trust to send on a reconnaissance mission. Unless he went himself…

"Maybe," Mardra said. "It may be a little too early to panic, still. I'll wait till the next mail delivery, at least, see if my pen pals have anything new to report."
Anders nodded. Mardra's correspondent network still put his to shame. "Not till tomorrow, though," he cautioned her, and she smiled wryly.

"No, not on 'no-work' nights," she agreed. She stood up and tidied away the remains of her dinner. "I think that's it for me for the night, I'm going to turn in."

He nodded. "Same here," he said, already planning another page and a half of his almanac by candlelight before bed. It wasn't really work, so it wasn't cheating, right?

"Oh, and Anders?" Mardra called as Anders went to leave the room. He ducked back inside and gave her an inquiring look. "Give Justice a message for me, please?"

His eyebrows raised. That wasn't really how it worked -- Justice was always there, listening if Anders was listening -- but he'd given up on trying to correct people long ago. "Go ahead," he said, suddenly alert and energized despite the late night.

She met his eyes. "Tell him," she said, then hesitated for a moment, chewing on her lip. "Tell him, 'All right, I'll try.' "

"Oh," Anders said, at a loss for anything else. The sudden surge of elation that filled him nearly knocked him off his feet. "But how... I mean how are you going to..."

"I haven't quite worked that out yet," Mardra admitted. "But it will definitely have to be in dreams, as it was before. Something like the Keeper's ritual for meeting in the Fade, but less intense... I'll have to do some research, see if I can find out more. I'm not ready to start right this minute, I just -- didn't want to keep Justice waiting."

"Thank you," Anders said sincerely. "That is very kind."

They smiled at each other. Then the moment passed, and Anders found himself suddenly feeling very foolish. He gave Mardra a little wave of his fingers, then fled.

The mail didn't come the next morning. It was concerning, but not too alarming in and of itself.

What was alarming was Amund Sky-watcher turning up at the edge of the village, waiting for Anders to emerge from the Tower, and gesturing him over. Anders did not at first connect his sudden appearance to the other absences, assuming he wanted to talk more trade agreements or something similar.

"Walk with me, gods-touched," the burly shaman said, jerking his head in the direction of the woods.

Anders followed, although not without a grumble. "I've asked you not to call me that," he complained.

"Your asking doesn't make it not true," Amund returned, and that was all he said for the next half-hour.

The Avvar led him up the side of the ridge through switchback trails that weren't even visible from
the valley floor, scrambling up slopes and climbing a few faces that were near vertical -- though fortunately, with plenty of ledges and rough handholds that made climbing easily. Anders went along with it, assuming Amund must have some good reason for the trip, although by the time they topped the last ridge his patience was growing seriously strained.

"Is there a reason you brought me out here, Sky-watcher?" Anders said, trying not to puff too loudly. Amund, blight him, seemed as unperturbed by the climb as though he had flown up the last hundred feet. Only the exertion of climbing kept him warm against the cold air this high up; there was frost on some of the shadowed rock faces.

"This is an old scouting lookout," Amund said, indicating what looked like a sort of… cradle of stone up ahead. "Hasn't seen much use in the last few hundred years, but we maintained the path, just in case."

"That was a path?" Anders exclaimed with dismay. Amund didn't respond, but Anders thought he saw the corner of his mouth turn up.

"There's something up here I thought you ought to see," Amund said, and gestured him forward. The cowl hid the top half of his face, and Anders could not read his expression.

"All right," he said, with some misgivings as he made his way forward across the unsteady slope. At this point he truly had no idea what Amund had brought him up here to see: an old ruin, Darkspawn sign, an especially pretty cloud formation. He was ready for anything.

But when he made the edge of the ridge and looked down over the valley, his stomach went cold in a way that had nothing to do with the biting mountain wind.

Crossing the mountain ridge from this side put them high above a valley that, he realized after a few minutes of disorientation, was the outlet for the Gates of Orzammar. The road to Orzammar wound down in serpentine coils through the outer fortifications and outbuildings that, nowadays, mostly played host to caravans and travelers waiting permission to enter the dwarven city. From there, it snaked away through Gherlen's Pass and down to the Ferelden hinterlands to the east, and the wooded slopes of Orlais to the west.

But no caravans crawled up the frosted slopes of the pass now. Instead, the valley was filled from side to side with a mass of troops.

"It's been many a year since we've seen a lowlander army this far up the Mountain-Father's arse," Amund observed, climbing up easily beside him and gazing down at the tableau. He turned to regard Anders steadily. "Think you might have an idea why they're here?"

With some difficulty, he swallowed. "Yes," he said. "I think I do."

~tbc...
Chapter Summary

Anders and company find out more about the new arrivals outside Orzammar's gates.

Mardra and Grandin went with him down to Orzammar, as did Marco; his argument was that if the mages of Refuge were going to be called on to fight, he had to know what they were facing to train them into shape. The other mages spent the walk speculating in low voices as to what could be going on, although Anders, already out of breath, just concentrated on getting to the bottom of the many, many stairs on his feet and not on his head.

On their way down from Refuge they had passed the usual casteless workers in the cavern, but no other traffic coming up from the city. When they finally arrived at the city, they saw why: a pair of guards in Aeducan colors had been posted at the entrance, their stern glances and polished weapons keeping idle onlookers away.

Anders looked at them, looked out into the city beyond them, and took a step forward. "Excuse me," he said, exercising an effort to remain polite. "I need to talk to the king."

The first guard frowned at him and shook his head. "Not possible right now," he said.

"Why not?" Mardra said sharply from behind him.

"King's in council with the Assembly right now," the other guard put in helpfully. He sounded much more friendly than his fellow, and Anders could swear he'd seen those bristling blond muttonchops before -- yes, it was Dorlon, the affable guard who'd congratulated him over his defeat of Pyrag Haver in the first Proving. "We have orders that you can't enter the city just now. Sorry, Warden."

"Is that so?" Mardra said, her voice taking on a dangerous tone. "And does the King have provision in our agreement for unlawful detainment? Because if not, he's going to have some subcontract explaining to do in front of the Shaperate --"

"No, no!" Dorlon said, attempting to frantically shush her with his hands. "You can go into the city if you like, ma'am, and your two friends here too. It's just the Warden that can't. Sorry, Warden."

"And why is that?" Anders demanded, aggravation wearing thin his already strained patience.

"Because," a new voice said from the space behind the guards. "The delegation from the army camped outside is all over the city right now, in talks with the Assembly. And you're the one they want to kill."

"I've had a lot of people try to kill me over the years," Anders said stubbornly.

"Why am I not surprised," Fermin muttered.
"I want to know what's going on." Anders folded his arms over his chest. "And I'm not going back until I do."

Tension hovered for a moment between the guards and the mages, thick enough to cut with a knife.

Fermin gave a weary, practiced little sigh. "Somehow I had a feeling you wouldn't choose the sensible option," he said. He started walking away, and gestured for Anders to fall in behind him. "Come with me."

Anders followed.

Anders didn't recognize the halls and doors that Fermin led them through. They looked vaguely familiar in the way that all Orzammar stonework did -- same styles, same patterns -- but he quickly lost sense of direction underground. Once you got out of the main cavern and the buildings that lined it, the rest of the city was a warren tunneled into the rock. He pitied the army that decided to try to invade this city, then thought about it some more and retracted the pity.

Fermin paused at one set of doors, barely dwarf-height but wide and with thick heavy bars leading into the ceiling. "From here on, I will need you to be silent," he said, looking at Anders pointedly. "The whole intention of this detour was to keep you out of sight and hearing."

Anders sensed it was not a moment for jokes. "Understood," he said instead. Fermin looked at him for a moment longer, apparently trying to gauge his seriousness, before he nodded and spun the wheel on the door.

It opened in surprising silence, and Anders immediately heard voices coming in from beyond. "-- harboring a wanted criminal!" a strident voice was saying. It was high and nasal, and had a self-congratulatory tone to the voice that immediately set Anders' teeth on edge. Well, and maybe the content.

He had to duck low to get through the door; once on the other side he found himself on a shadowed balcony, with a chest-high wall and a long drop beyond. A glance behind him showed that the door had shut behind them, near-invisible from this side. Peeking carefully over the wall he found himself looking down on the Assembly from a great height, up near the ceiling of the big cavern. From this direction they were facing the central dais, on which sat Bhelen and a small crowd of other dwarves in Aeducan colors. The rest of the deshyrs sat in tired benches that followed the circular walls of the room, and on the open space in the middle -- facing away from them, at this angle -- was an unfamiliar human.

One of the dwarves up on the dais -- Anders didn't recognize him, and was unsure whether he was a deshyr or part of the King's retinue, but he bristled with the heavy weapons of the Warrior Caste - stood up at this and scowled down at the floor below. "The Warden known as Anders has become one with the Legion of the Dead," he said, a warning edge to his tone. "By two thousand years of stone under the Mountain-Father's halls, he is absolved of all crimes!"

The envoy scoffed. It was a good scoff, one that managed to convey a great amount of scorn without actually letting fly any sputum. "Your petty pagan superstitions are no concern of ours," he said.

Looking at him Anders wanted to laugh, he did. There was a certain set of Marcher nobles who considered the Free Marches to be a temporarily inconvenienced suburb of Orlais, and themselves slightly geographically-disadvantaged members of the Orlesian noble class. They tended to take their fashion and manner classes directly from Val Royeaux at best -- or else they imitated what they thought Val Royeaux was like, which somehow managed to be even worse.
This particular gentleman must have been of the latter set, since he managed to dress in a way that took the worst of half a dozen decades of Orlesian fashion and combined them. He had the leg ruffles, the heeled cavalry boots, the implausibly shaped collar, and a headpiece that was halfway between a hat and a wig. He wore no mask, but instead had adapted the peculiar alternative custom of caking his face with heavy white makeup to resemble a mask, with dark lines drawn to imitate where the eye and mouth holes would be.

It was clear from the expressions, sneers and snickers, of the Assembly that the dwarven nobles didn't think much of this watered-down Orlesian wannabe. But it was also clear the longer he ranted, the more their amusement wore thin.

"These are our terms!" the envoy said shrilly, very nearly stamping his foot to command the attention of the Assembly. "Item one: you will hand over the criminal Anders for judgment immediately! Item two: the false Circle Tower at Orzammar will be dissolved, and this 'Refuge' for apostates and maleficarum will be shut down, and the mages will be remanded into the custody of our Templars immediately! Item three: you will disburse a settlement, in goods or in money, to the name of the Most Holy Divine, in amends for the insult you have rendered to our lord the Maker, in your careless defiance of His will."

"And is that also immediately?" Bhelen drawled.

"What?" the envoy said, startled. "Yes! Yes, that payment is also to be made at once!"

"Well, you've given us so many things to do 'immediately,' it's hard to know where to start," Bhelen said. A chuckle ran around the Assembly, although the joke had not really been that funny.

"Very funny," the envoy said coldly. "But you are in no position to make light of our holy mandate. I have stated our terms. Abide by them at once, or the wrath of the Holy Princes will wipe your miserable little kingdom of gnomes off the map!"

Bhelen sat up on his throne, and although he would not have come up past the envoy's chest, he somehow managed to loom over him. For a long moment he stared down at the ambassador, face grim and eyes like icy granite chips, until the man faltered and began to fidget. Just before he managed to work himself up to some further outburst of demands, Bhelen suddenly burst out laughing.

He continued laughing for several long seconds, shaking his head as he chuckled. At last he managed to get hold of himself. "My, my apologies, good lords and craftsmen," he said, turning to address the Assembly. "I just heard the funniest… If you can believe it, I think some jumped up petty noble from the surface world thinks that he can come into our house, in our city, in our kingdom, and make demands!"

An echoing laugh began to build from the rest of the Assembly, a dull roar both dark and angry. "Unbelievable, right?" Bhelen called over the continuing thunder of the laughter. "To believe that they can disregard our laws, our traditions, and somehow think they can dictate terms? That they can tell us what to do? That now, after a thousand years of ignoring our struggles as our lands were torn from us and begging for our help against the Blight, they think they can take away from us the one thing that has put victory back in our reach? Ah! What hilarity, deshyrs and warriors! What a jape!"

The laughter continued. The envoy sputtered, the skin around the white makeup beginning to redden with cholera until Anders was unsure whether he was going to have a brainstorm right there on the Assembly floor. "Stop that laughing!" he demanded shrilly. "You little -- jumped up -- the Triune of Princes command your respect!"
Abruptly Bhelen's laughter stopped, and his face snapped instead to an angry scowl. "The Three Little Princes command nothing," he snarled, leaning forward in his throne. "You think to invoke the authority of your Divine? Of your petty man-Maker? We are the Children of the Mountain, and your cloudgazer religions have no power here. Our strength is the strength of the mountain's bones, our roots run to the world's core, our history runs down to us from a time when you and your princes were not even a speck of sand on the mountain's peak!"

A deep rumble of agreement ran around the Assembly; whatever they might have thought of Bhelen's politics, his speech managed to evoke a deep and lasting pride in their homeland. The warriors in the audience, apparently spontaneously, started pounding the butts of their weapons against the stone in a deep, slow rhythm that completely drowned out the protests that the envoy tried to make in response.

Bhelen waited until the noise had died down. "You are dismissed," he said shortly, leaning back again in his throne. "Tell your little princes that we will consider their demands when next the sun rises in the Deep Reaches."

"No! You cannot dismiss me!" the envoy cried out, but two guards had already detached themselves from the walls and were heading towards him, looking implacable. "You dare get your hands off me!"

More spontaneous snickering broke out in the Assembly as the Marcher was dragged unceremoniously towards the exit. At the very edge of the hall he managed to shake off the grasp of the guards, and rounded on the audience for one parting shot.

"You may claim dominion underground," the envoy said, shaking his fist one last time at the audience. "But all of the lands aboveground are in the sight of the Maker! No maleficars, no merchants, nothing shall move on these roads that is not subject to His will, and we will be His hands upon it! I swear it!"

On that somewhat foreboding note, he was ushered out of the Assembly. The Steward banged the butt of his spear against the ground, echoed by the door closing soundly behind him.

That seemed to be the signal for a general recess; the air of tension over the Assembly broke, and the men and women began to mill around, get out of their seats and walk over to consult with each other in low voices. Bhelen stood up and went into a small door behind his throne, vanishing from sight.

"Well!" Anders said, feeling a little light-headed from the sudden release of tension. "That was fun, wasn't it? Maker, that man was a complete ass."

"Oh, yes," Fermin replied. "It took half a cycle of negotiations to get in an ambassador that would be that obnoxious."

Anders stopped to stare at Fermin in astonishment. "Wait, are you saying you planned for that?" he asked, motioning out over the balcony to the Assembly floor.

He supposed it made sense. Not everyone in the Assembly supported Bhelen, or even necessarily agreed with the campaign in the Deep Roads to reclaim the lost dwarven empire. There were many among the deshyrs who disliked Anders, but apparently, they disliked arrogant surfacer dandies coming into their city and telling them what to do even more.

"His Majesty has more than one way of fighting wars," Fermin said with a thin smile, and Anders didn't doubt it for a second.
Afterwards Fermin led Anders through another maze of corridors, all small rooms and narrow hallways. Anders was beginning to realize that for all the time he’d spent in Orzammar, he -- and everyone else who was not a dwarf -- had no idea how large it really was. Most outsiders never saw past the gates at all; even those who did mostly only saw the great subterranean palace and the smaller caverns that branched off it. But those were only part of the space that the dwarves had encompassed -- centuries of patient toil had laid all the area under the mountains fair game for their tools. It was enough to wonder how much of the mountain was really left, after all this excavation.

Familiar voices up ahead brought him out of his thoughts; he looked up and saw Fermin gesture him through a doorway into a warm-lit room. He didn't specifically recognize it, although by the wealth of furnishings and decorations he guessed it was part of some nobles' estate. Mardra and the others were there, along with another dwarf -- on the short side for his race, in neat and dapper clothes with his beard done up in neat braids.

He looked vaguely familiar too, but it wasn't until he saw the neck of the lute slung over the dwarf's shoulders that he placed him. "You're that bard!" he exclaimed, his memory flashing back to the disastrous party at the Paragon's Fountain where a ballad about Hawke had nearly undone him. "You're... uh. I don't think I ever got your name, actually."

The rosy-cheeked bard gave him a short bow, causing the strings of his lute to twang slightly. "Tovez Galra, at your service," he said.

"I trust you can take things from here, Bard Galra," Fermin said from behind Anders; Tovez, to Anders' interest, gave the King's agent a bow and salute that looked like more than simple respect. It was the address of a man to his superior.

So Tovez was one of the King's Bards, one of the agents that Bhelen used to spy and spread news throughout his kingdom, Anders deduced as Fermin left and everyone left settled back into their seats.

"What did you see?" Mardra wanted to know, and Anders switched his attention back to the problem at hand.

"Some fool ambassador calling himself the envoy of the Triune," Anders replied. "No idea who that's supposed to mean. I missed that part of the meeting."

"Three lords of the Free Marches, all with a history of either staunch devotion to the Chantry, or conflict with mages to some degree," Tovez explained, running a gentle scale on his lute as he did. He must have hit a sour note because he frowned and adjusted the string. "Albright Thorne of Markham, Reginald Trevelyan of Ostwick, and Sebastian Vael of Starkhaven."

"I've never heard of any of these people," Marco complained. "What do they want with us?"

Anders did know one of them at least, but he wasn't sure how useful it would be to contribute his opinion on Sebastian's choices of marching songs or fashion accessories. But if the other two were anything like Sebastian Vael -- aggressively pious, incredibly stubborn and with a highly enflamed sense of vengeance -- they could be in real trouble.

A part of him did actually admire Sebastian for that; he remembered the man's determination to avenge his family and discover the true culprit in their deaths, even in the face of Elthina's attempts at quelling him. A shame that he had never fully realized the depths she would sink to in her crusade to suppress justice and maintain the status quo that so privileged her, instead clinging to her like a substitute mother figure even as Kirkwall sank further and further into the quagmire under her apathetic eye. He had conviction, determination, a strong sense of right and wrong and the
desire to enact it on the world.

The greater part of him just thought of Sebastian as a bloody nuisance, and didn't it just figure that he would turn up again like a bad penny, dragging two thousand other pious fools along with him.

"They seem to have formed an alliance, or at least an expedition," Tovez said. "Officially, they're calling themselves the Triune of Sanctified Princes."

Mardra gave a loud, and rather rude snort that expressed her feelings on that title. "How exactly did they come up with that?" Anders asked rather waspishly. "Did they win a contest for 'most pompous title imaginable'?"

Tovez chuckled, but didn't allow himself to be diverted. "Unofficially they've already gained a number of nicknames, including the *trois-saints garcons*, the Happy Boys, and the Three Little Princes," he said. "Though technically that name is wrong on the face of it, since only one of them is a prince. Thorne was appointed by a committee, and Trevelyon would be equivalent to a Bann in the Ferelden tradition. Either way, their claim of being 'sanctified' is a bit specious, since as far as anyone knows they're acting entirely on their own initiative, without sanction from the Chantry.

"Albright Thorne is Lord of the Watch in Markham; he recently inherited his post from his father, Aldred Thorne. Markham doesn't actually have a royalty as such, or even really a centralized government, so Lord of the Watch is really the highest municipal post they have.

"Control of the city is mostly split between the Lord of the Watch, the Knight-Commander, and the Guildsmaster. With the Knight-Commander away at Andorhal, it's odd that Thorne thought it wise to strip the city of its Watch as well. But, given the riots in Markham last year when the Circle was sacked, he seems to have strong feelings on the subject."

"What? Sacking one Tower was just so much fun, he had to come all this way to find another one to burn down?" Anders said sarcastically.

"Well, since the last intact circle is all the way in Orlais, it would be a long way for him to go," Tovez said equably.

"Then there's the Duke of Ostwick, Sir Reginald Trevelyon III. He's actually quite well spoken of in his home province, supposedly a fair and pleasant ruler. However, he and his family have very close ties with the Chantry and the Templar Order. Generations of Trevelyans have donated heavily to the Chantry, and younger siblings not in line to inherit are expected to go either into the sisterhood or the Templars. The occasional mage does pop up in the line, but they tend not to be troublemakers."

"Of course," Anders said bitterly. "No doubt the Trevelyans make much of their pious sacrifice while they bundle the kids off to the Circle with a nice stipend to make sure the Templars treat them well." He got a disapproving glower from Mardra for that, but it was worth it.

"I believe the current Duke has a son in the Templars and a niece in the Ostwick Circle," Tovez continued. "So his interest in the matter is familial as well as theological. The Trevelyans have invested a lot in the Chantry's vision of a prayerful, ordered world. He's the one actually providing most of the money for this excursion; most of the logistics and supply are his. Vael and Thorne didn't bring much with them except bodies."

"And then there's Vael," Mardra said quietly. She glanced over at Anders. "I think we know what his motivation is."
Damn that book of Varric's; everyone knew as much of Anders' business as Anders did these days. "I can hazard a guess," Anders sighed. "He did swear the last time he saw me that he would put an arrow through my chest, and I haven't exactly been hiding my location. I suppose it was only a matter of time before he showed up."

Tovez nodded in agreement. "Of the three, Vael's political position is the most tenuous," he said. "Starkhaven's been suffering from civil unrest and disorder for so long it's practically a local pastime. He had his work cut out for him deposing his cousin Goran from the throne after his return from Kirkwall, and there's still a substantial faction that would be more than happy to dethrone him in turn. He's brought all his most loyal and devout knights with him, so he can't have left much in Starkhaven to hold his powerbase secure. Politically speaking, this expedition is insane, and under most circumstances I'd expect him to be the first to break and go back home. Under these circumstances, however…"

"He won't leave till he gets what he's come for," Anders said grimly. He glanced around the room. "I suppose if I make some kind of stupid comment about sacrificing myself for the greater good of Refuge, you're all going to tell me to go stuff myself?"

"Not in those exact words, but yes," Mardra said dryly. The others nodded emphatically.

"Look at it this way," Grandin said. "The longer he stays, the more likely he'll get overthrown back home and lose his crown and his army. Are you exactly going to be crying if that happens?"

"I'll suppress my grief somehow," Anders said with a smile. "So, three little princes roll up to Orzammar and plant their flags. Sounds like the lead-in to a bad joke, although I don't know what the punchline would be."

"There's already a song about it," Tovez assured them. "A rondel in the Orlesian style, full of high language and praise for the Maker and his Bride. And at least one rude version. I can play it for you, if you'd like."

"I'll pass, thanks," Mardra said.

"Ooh, I want to hear this," Marco waved her away, and Grandin nodded enthusiastically.

He lifted his lute to his lap, and began to strum out the familiar bars of a Free Marches drinking song that Anders recognized intimately from his years in Kirkwall.

"Three little princes
Riding off to war,
Thorne couldn't get his mum to come --
Or else there'd have been four"

Mardra snorted; Marco grinned. Anders didn't even try to contain his laugh.

"Three little princes
Tin soldiers shining new
To knock the gates of Orzammar
And sit outside and stew

"Three little princes
Rolling up the pass
Vael can take his bloody Holy Writ
And shove it up his --"
"I think I get the idea," Anders interrupted hastily.

"But sanction or no, self-imposed titles or no, the fact remains that they have three thousand very real troops sitting outside Orzammar," Tovez said, his expression becoming more serious. "As for what they want -- well, you heard that pompous envoy. They seem to all have their own agendas to some extent, but they're agreed on a few things: Disbandment of the Magi Tower at Orzammar, return of the mages to Templar custody, and Grand Cleric Elthina's killer remanded for judgment."

"Oh," Anders said, trying to quell his dismay. He'd known that Sebastian had sworn vengeance upon him -- known that the man would always be a danger to him, unless he was lucky enough for the other man to fall over dead first. But he never dreamed that he would go so far as to dig up an army to follow Anders.

"And is the King going to go along with this?" Grandin asked anxiously.

Tovez looked at him, his square and even fingers running over the string in a steady and soothing rhythm. "Officially speaking, we're too early in negotiations to have given an answer," he said. "But speaking for His Majesty's policy, I can tell you that neither he nor the Assembly are in any hurry to give up their best advantage in the Deep Roads -- especially not after Bownammar. We will do everything in our power to retain the mages of Refuge in our service."

"I hope His Majesty's policy understands that the mages of Refuge do not come separable from their First Enchanter?" Mardra said in a tense, brittle tone. "The Charter offers protections to all mages, including him. If that were violated, the rest of us would consider our own contracts to be null and void."

Anders moved to object, to say that the other mages of Refuge ought to take advantage of the safety that Orzammar provided them at any cost, even if it meant sacrificing him -- but Mardra shot him a quick glare that had him subsiding.

Tovez observed the interplay, then offered a short bow their way. "I shall convey the position of the mages of Refuge to His Majesty, then," he said smoothly.

"Good," Mardra said vehemently.

"The sons of the Stone are no easy pushovers," Tovez assured her. "We have no intention of merely rolling over to them, and they will find it no easy task to breach the walls of Orzammar -- unless they plan to do it by subterfuge, which I think unlikely to succeed.

"That being said, there is the problem of an army on our doorstep. So long as they're out there -- and especially so long as their envoys are roaming around in Orzammar -- it's not safe for you to go about in public, Warden Enchanter," Fermin addressed Anders directly. "Negotiations are all well and good, but from the way they've been talking, it seems entirely possible they would kill you on sight."

"They can try, anyway," Anders muttered, and Mardra groaned.

"Yes, you're very tough and manly," she said. "Can we all agree that getting into a bloody fight with the heads of three independent nations would be a bad idea even if you win?"

"Hey, they started it," Anders defended himself.

"Can't you just drive them off?" Marco wanted to know. "I mean, Orzammar has its own army."
Tovez nodded. "That is true," he agreed. "But our forces are seriously overdeployed right now. Most of our troops are still in Bownammar, holding the front there. It would be sheer insanity to open a second front on the surface at the same time."

"So if you're not going to fight them and you're not going to give them what they want, then what are you planning to do?" Anders asked.

Tovez gave a shrug. "I couldn't say for sure," he said. "But at a guess, nothing. We don't have to do anything, so long as the doors of Orzammar hold. Winter's coming up; I doubt these Free Marchers know anything about winter camping in the mountains. Eventually their food will run out, they'll get bored, or something will happen at home that it more important to them than wasting their time out here."

"So those are the players on the board in front of us," Mardra said, leaning forward to look at the lists. "What about any others in the background? Patrons and supporters who might be contributing to this without wanting to put themselves directly in the line of fire?"

Tovez shrugged. "Not that we've heard," he said, "although of course if they were being that discreet, we might not hear about it. At any rate, all the money they're spending so far seems to be accounted for, most of it Trevelyan's."

"They're claiming to be performing the Maker's work, and using the label of Sanctified," Marco said. "So they imagine themselves on an Exalted March, essentially. Has the Divine sanctioned them?"

The bard shook his head. "Not so far," he said. "Though there's no saying whether that will last. It wouldn't be the first time an Exalted March has been declared post facto."

"Then we need to do anything we can to try to head that off," Mardra decided. "We should draft a letter to the Divine."

"Saying what?" Anders said, irritated. "Dear Justinia, pretty pretty please don't arrest us and make us all go back into the Circle? Our very existence violates the religion you're in charge of, but we promise to be good apostates, pay no attention to all the possessed abominations and blood magic?"

"The current Divine is said to be sympathetic to mages," Mardra said hopefully.

Anders snorted. "I'll believe that when it snows in Antiva," he said. "I'd been in Kirkwall when the Left Hand of the Divine had visited. He'd come face to face with her over a pile of cooling mage bodies, when she had looked him in the eye and told him that the Divine was considering an Exalted March on Kirkwall, in response to rumors of mage revolutionaries pushing for power.

He'd known on that day that there was no help to be had from the Divine, no higher authority over the Grand Cleric and Knight-Commander's heads to appeal to. A Divine that was willing to raze an entire city rather than let mages have their freedoms would never heed any calls for independence. He'd known then that the annulment of the Gallows was inevitable, because if an Exalted March could be averted by spending a few mage lives, they would do it. They always had before. And they always would again, and again, and again.

If that was what sympathetic to mages looked like in a Divine, Anders hated to think of what harsh opposition would look like.

"You're serving an important function supporting the Kingdom of Orzammar," Tovez offered,
bringing Anders out of his brooding. "I don't know how much weight that pulls with the Divine, but in real-world terms it means a blighted lot. You can claim you're serving international relations."

Anders frowned, turning the concept over in his mind. "Perhaps… the central justification for the Circle of Magi," he said slowly, "has always been to maintain the mages as a fighting force to use against the Blight. In practice it's morphed into a tool of control and suppression over magekind, and as a way of maintaining public fear of Tevinter and support for the Chantry's private soldiers. Nevertheless, it's still there in the Accords."

Mardra saw where he was going immediately. "If the Tower at Refuge is officially recognized as a mage tower, and we can point out that we're fighting the darkspawn in the deep roads, then technically we're doing only what we've meant to be doing all along. Surely the Divine can't object to that."

"Well, she can," Tovez cautioned. "But she might choose not to. Her neutrality is all we really need. Opposition would be catastrophic, and open support… unlikely. But neutrality is still possible."

Anders nodded. "Let's do it, then," he said. He glanced over at the bard. "If we put together a formal letter to send to the Divine, will you -- or Bhelen -- have some way of getting it there?"

"Well, it would be easier if it were set to a jaunty tune," Tovez said with a smile. "But aye, we'll see what we can do."

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best they could come up with at this time. The meeting broke up, Anders reluctantly allowing himself to be shuffled back towards the passage leading up to Refuge. Marco volunteered himself to stay down in the city and report back, while Mardra hurried off to talk to her friends at the Shaperate -- what she thought they could contribute, Anders had no idea.

He climbed the stairs slowly, legs complaining from all the climbing he'd already done that day. At least the ascent gave him time to think.

On some level, he'd always known that something like this was coming. He was trying to remake a world order, to upend centuries of tradition of thinking of mages as nonpersons, resources to be hoarded and exploited. Of course the Templars would resist, of course the Chantry would push back… but the rest of the people, nobles and commoners and all the rest, had spent their lives being taught the same Chantry propaganda and anti-mage brainwashing. Too many kings and nobles had their own fortunes bound up with the dominion of the Chantry; it had been too much to hope that none of them would decide to take matters into their own hands.

Now they just had to deal with it. Somehow. He'd made the alliance with the King of Orzammar precisely in the hopes that the Dwarf King would be able to protect them; he hadn't anticipated the dwarven armies and fighting mages all being tied up with something else when the danger arrived. Had Bhelen? The speech in the Assembly below emphasized just how much the dwarves considered themselves above -- well, below -- the hegemony of the Chantry. Had the king realized
just how far that Chantry was willing to go to retain control?

He stopped to rest in the entrance chamber that had been hollowed out by the Casteless, housing workers and supplies and not a few bedrolls and lockers. No sign of Dagna, and he wondered what she was making of the latest development.

Footfalls in the tunnel caught his attention, but it was only Mardra, puffing for breath as she crested the final flight of stairs. She too stopped to rest for a moment, bent over with her hands on her thighs, but when she spotted him sitting on the low couch she came over and flopped down beside him.

"Here, I got our mail from the Shapers," she said, showing him a sheaf of papers. She peeled one off the stack and handed it over to him. "Thought this one would interest you."

Anders unfolded the battered, stained letter and read it. It took a bit of doing between the dim light of the cave and the blurred, hasty handwriting of the missive, but the elegant handwriting jumped out at him at once. "From Fiona?" he exclaimed, startled.

Mardra nodded. "She's broken the siege around Andorhal," she said, "and her people are coming south."

~tbc...
Cooped up

Chapter Summary

The siege continues.

If not for the sudden arrival of the Three Holy Boys, the news from Andorhal would have been the biggest news at Refuge. Fiona's missive wasn't the only one -- half of the stack was from various sources excitedly retelling the last battle that had broken the siege.

They pieced it together from a half-dozen different accounts, Fiona's included. The reason the siege of Andorhal had lasted as long as it had was that the Templars -- and the Orlesian troops they'd picked up to pad out their numbers -- learned very early on what a bad idea it was to approach a tower that was being defended by mages. With the fortress locked and barred and the bridges pulled up, no assault on foot or horseback could succeed. Templars, it turned out, had very little practical experience with enemies who weren't unarmored, isolated, and out in the open.

Orlais on the other hand had a long and grueling history of warfare and siegecraft. Some of the petty nobles who'd tagged along in the Templars' train had knowledge enough to start constructing siege engines. The defending mages, under Fiona's command, had waited until the first round of engines was complete -- trundling confidently towards the fortress walls -- before unleashing furious fire that reduced the battering rams and siege towers to smoke and kindling.

Over the next few months of the siege, the attackers gradually managed to work out the longest effective range of the defender's magic, and finally came up with a fleet of ballistae and trebuchets that could gradually wear down the fortress walls without placing themselves in range of the mages to do it. By the end of summer, they had made a sport of coming up with newer and more complex mechanisms, many of them inspired by the dwarven engineers of the surface.

With all of their attention focused on the fortress and its defenders, it had apparently never occurred to the besieging forces to keep vigilant watch against allies and sympathizers from the country around them. On the very day that the long-range assault of stones finally managed to breach the walls of Andorhal, an infiltration team managed to sneak into the army, seize control of one of the siege crossbows, and turn it on their very troops.

The chaos that resulted cut a lane through the Templar army that Fiona and her troops -- well-alerted to the opportunity -- used to fight their way out of the fortress and break through the army. Most of the Templars' mounts and wagons were either sabotaged or stolen in the chaos, so the army had been left paralyzed as Fiona's people fled south.

It was a magnificent victory, one worthy of being immortalized in history -- there were already half a dozen songs floating around about the Storming of Andorhal (though whether it was seen as a victory or a terrible tragedy rather depended on the sympathies of the bard singing it.) At the very least, all the versions that came back to them sang of the foolishness of the Orlesian siegemasters, the endurance and courage of the besieged mages, and the daring and cunning of the infiltrators… led by the once Champion of Kirkwall.
"Hawke was there?" Anders said, flabbergasted, when that particular detail came up.

"Three different sources cite him by name," Mardra said, still watching Anders carefully for his reaction to her cousin's name. When there was no sign of temper or distress, she relaxed somewhat. "And four more describe him down to the boots. I think it's a pretty sure thing to say he was there."

Anders tried to sort out how he did feel about it. The first feeling, startling in its force, was a wish to have been there with him while the battle was fought. This was just so like Hawke, so exactly the sort of thing he would be involved with -- the most dangerous, critical part of any mission, putting himself in the place where one man could make more difference than a dozen. He wished he could have been there, fighting for the mages, for the freedom of the Rebellion, fighting with Hawke, healing him and watching his back…

"Was he hurt?" he asked anxiously, and Mardra shrugged.

"There's no mention of that," she said. "He fought his way out of the Templar camp once the walls went down, but it's not clear where he went after that -- if he vanished into the wilderness or rejoined Fiona's army. We'd have to see what the latest missives from Fiona say." That last came with an unhappy grimace because, of course, there would be no more word from Fiona while the blockade lasted.

Because as heartening as the news from Andorhal had proved, there was still the news of the Three Princes camped outside Orzammar, and their presence tended to eclipse all goings-on of the outside world.

The bard's prediction seemed more or less correct: Orzammar didn't have to do anything to keep the army out. They had nothing in train that could challenge the great stone and metal doors of Orzammar. Oh, they certainly tried -- they rolled up a few siege engines, a shielded battering ram and two ballistae -- but the doors held. Not only held, they didn't even seem to be dented or scratched. After a few days of fruitless pounding the siegemasters seemed to give up, and settled in to wait.

And wait. Day followed day, and the situation settled into a stalemate. Autumn was coming on fast up in the mountains, and warm clear skies were replaced by a roll of sullen clouds and blustery wind. The trees in the valley were shedding their leaves, and the herbalists talked of moving the pot gardens under shelter to protect them from the cold wind.

Nothing seemed to be happening. The news about Andorhal was the last news of the they were to received for some time, it seemed. The obnoxious ambassador had been right about one thing: Nothing moved on the roads without their allowing it. No trade caravans, no messengers, no contact from the outside world at all.

Anders couldn't figure out why Bhelen seemed so unconcerned about food. The way Varric had always described it, Orzammar relied almost exclusively on trade from the surface to feed its people, let alone field an army. Yet the troops at Bownammar seemed to be getting supplies from somewhere -- Anders suspected a logistical network that spread further through the Deep Roads, surfacing elsewhere in Ferelden. For the Dust Towners, not much had changed -- imported food being far too expensive for their means, they continued to mostly rely on food scrounged from the deep caverns. Mushroom, deepstalker, and nug made up as much of the cooking pot as they always had.

There was one bright blessing in the situation: the Avvar seemed largely unaffected by the encamping army. The Three Princes might be blocking the only road leading up the pass, but the
Avvar continued to come and go among the slopes of the cold peaks with the same goat-agile ease as ever. In this season, the deer and bears and goats they hunted were especially fat and thick-pelted, so the trade with the Avvar flourished even while trade through the city petered to nothing. They even seemed to do a modest amount of farming, judging by the piles and piles of green tubers that suddenly appeared at the Avvar trading market.

But while the Avvar seemed unconcerned about the army occupying the pass, they were not ignoring them. Anders hiked up every other day to the lookout on the ridge to find one of the Avvar already there, wrapped in furs against the biting mountain wind and watching down over the slopes. More often than not, it was Amund at that post; Anders took to spending hours with him, watching out over the valley in strange solidarity.

Never had Anders been more thankful to be a mage, he thought as he warmed his hands with a mild fire spell and tucked them against his knees. How did the Avvar stand it?

"They're not getting much accomplished, are they?" he remarked, looking down over the valley. A contingent of men in a block formation marched to and fro on maneuvers of some kind, but from this vantage all they were doing was going in circles.

"I wouldn't expect them to," Amund said, words muffled as he chewed a mouthful of what seemed to be ram jerky. "They're sending out more scouts than before, though. Trying to find paths that will lead them through the mountains."

"How do you know?" Anders said, startled. "Can you see them from here?"

"Sometimes. Mostly though, you can tell from the birds."

The big man pointed north and east; squinting against the sun, Anders looked in that direction. Black spots swam in his vision -- no, that was birds. "You think something disturbed them?" he ventured. "Army scouts?"

"The Lady of the Skies has her eyes on all this region," was Amund's reply. "And her thoughts and her touch are with all of her children, lending her their eyes and wings. You see the direction of her gaze in their flight, her anger in their cries."

"The Lady of the Skies?" Anders mused. The wind gusted, and he ducked down a little lower against the lip of the little scouting post. "You Avvar worship spirits, don't you?"

"The Lady is more than just a spirit," Amund said.

"Oh sure, a very advanced and powerful one for certain," Anders said. "So if the Lady of the Skies is a big spirit, are the birds all separate little spirits, or is she controlling them all at once somehow? Does she possess them or what?"

Amund let out a deep him of displeasure, turning to look at him. "I suppose you could describe it that way," he said. "Just like you could describe your Maker man as a giant man in a big gold sky castle, who throws fits when people don't do as he wants and has to be nagged by his wife back into behaving proper, and then when you lot die you fly up into the sky to live on the clouds with them."

Anders blinked, taken aback by the edge in his voice. "That's... really simplified and kind of offensive, actually," he said.

"Exactly," Amund said, and turned back to watch the birds.
With the news of scouts in the mountains, Anders made the mages of Refuge re-set up their
guards and lookout postings on all the surface approaches to the valley. The dwarves blocked
passage through Orzammar, but that didn't mean there weren't other ways to get into the valley. It
wasn't a popular duty -- the weather was turning colder, and started coming with fits and starts of
chilly rain -- but thankfully the mages seemed to understand the importance. He mostly left the
organization to Marco, who never lacked for enthusiasm when it came to martial concerns.

And waited some more. Eventually the mail resumed, as Bhelen's courier system found routes and
ways around the army; Anders met with Mardra in her office to go over the news from the outside
world.

"The Civil War in Orlais is still going strong," Mardra commented, reading one missive as she
cross-checked it against a map of the Orlesian empire. "Pitched battles on the Exalted Plains
between the forces of the Empress and that of the Duke. It sounds like a real horror show -- the
usual battlefield rumors of walking dead, dire beasts that feed on corpses, visitations by Andraste
or Hessarian, the like."

"I did wonder why Orlais didn't set up a shriek at having a Free Marcher army sitting on their
border," Anders said. "I suppose there's no hope that they'll do anything about it."

"Probably not," Mardra said, "but at least we don't have to worry about them joining in the fun,
either. The secret pipe dream of every border lord along the Frostbacks is getting to conquer
Orzammar and seize the lyrium trade for their own."

"And do what with it?" Anders said, incredulous. "Dwarves are the only ones who can mine lyrium
without dying, going mad, or dying mad."

Mardra shrugged. "I didn't say it was a smart dream," she said. "Besides, that's what peasants are
for."

"Bloody aristocrats," Anders grumbled, and took the page as she passed it over. He skimmed it, but
it didn't really say anything Mardra hadn't already said. "What about Ferelden?"

"They aren't happy about having a Free Marches army on their border," Mardra said with a shrug.
"There have been a few sharply worded letters exchanged. But Ferelden doesn't really have a
standing army of its own, not since it's still rebuilding from the Blight ten years ago. Each
individual Arl raises and maintains its own troops, and is expected to commit them to the defense
of the country in times of war. But since the Three Princes insist they're not at war with Ferelden,
only with Orzammar, there's not much the Crown can do about it."

"I met Queen Anora once, you know," Anders commented as they traded letters. "She seemed
decent enough. Very strong-spoken. Encouraged the Commander to recruit me for the Wardens.
Why isn't Bhelen pushing the issue? I thought Orzammar and Ferelden had a mutual aid treaty after
the Blight."

Mardra shrugged. "I'm sure Bhelen has his reasons," she said. "Maybe he doesn't want to burn any
favors, when he still thinks he has the situation under control."

That sounded like Bhelen, Anders thought glumly.
Mardra filed each letter according to some arcane system as they went, and after the next one -- a big, rolled piece of parchment written in bold calligraphy -- she let out a laugh. "Well, here's some of the outrage you were hoping to hear from the Orlais or Ferelden governments, Anders," she said, and turned the paper over.

Anders read it quickly; it was a missive signed by half a dozen merchant guild leaders, all screaming bloody murder about the blockade the Three Princes were maintaining. Caravans delayed or turned aside, shipments not arriving, profits plummeting… "Hitting them in the pocketbook, doesn't it?" he said. "Maybe this will put some pressure on the Holy Boys."

Mardra sighed. "Some, but I don't know which way they'll really jump," she said. "Some of them are mad at the Princes for starting this, but there are others who are pushing for Orzammar to just give in to the Holy Boys' demands quickly so that trade will flow again. And if that means the dissolution of Refuge that's a bonus, not a cost."

"Great," he grimaced. He glanced over at the stack of letters, and his eyes met bare desk instead. He leaned back in the chair and stretched. "Is that all of them, then?"

"For today at least," Mardra answered.

Anders stood up. "Then I think I'll head back out," he said. "Check on the sentries, maybe climb up to the overlook again. It might not actually accomplish much, but at least I can see what's going on."

"There's just one thing before you go…" Mardra started, and her tone was unusually hesitant.

Anders tilted his head in inquiry, and Mardra started digging around in her desk. "I've been working with Dagna, going through to catalogue a lot of the items that arrived from Markham and other fallen Circles before the blockade. She'd accrued quite a backlog. But the other day, we turned up this."

She set something on the edge of the desk. Curious, Anders picked it up for a closer look. It looked sort of like a small lantern, the base made of stone, the lamp part of it three panes of glass enclosed in a black metal housing. The panes of glass slanted inwards towards the top, making a sort of flat pyramidal design with an open top, and the frame and base were etched with complex scrolling runes.

"Pretty," Anders remarked. "What does it do?"

"As best as we can tell, it's a Fade Beacon," Mardra said. "Or at least, it seems to match that entry in the book… When activated it basically moves half into the Fade and acts as a… a beacon, of sorts, allowing anyone who knows what they're looking for to find the dreamer and enter their dream. The seers of Rivain use them for some of their rituals, though this one actually seems to be of Tevinter design."

"Really?" Anders turned it over in his hands. "How come I've never heard of this before?"

Mardra shrugged. "They aren't commonly used in the South, largely because of the danger posed by demons," she said. "Most Southern mages are more interested in keeping spirits away from their dreams, not inviting them in. Maybe the Rivaini seers have ways of negating that danger, but we don't know what they are. But I thought that wouldn't be a problem for Justice."

"Justice? Why would Justice need a…" Anders trailed off as the world seemed to shift slightly on its access, a sudden and dramatic feeling of the room increasing in focus. A device that would let
others find him in dreams, that would let _Mardra_ find _Justice_ in dreams. "Oh," he exclaimed.

"Right," Mardra said. "I promised I would look into it... well, I have."

"Right," Anders said, fidgeting slightly with the beacon before he hastily set it back down. "Uh, thanks. Thank you for keeping your word," he added. "To try."

Where had that come from? At this point, he probably didn't need to ask. Anders turned to go, then swore under his breath as he realized he'd forgotten the beacon. He turned back and picked it up, then paused and looked at Mardra. "Er... no offense, but I have to ask. This... thing with you and Justice. I just want to know..." Anders trailed off. "This won't change anything between you and me, will it?"

"Why would it?" Mardra said. "He's him, and you're you."

But he was also Justice, and Justice was also him. He'd never been able to explain it before, and he didn't think he'd succeed now. He sighed. "It isn't going to... I don't know. Spill over? I mean, we have the same body, same face."

_That_ doesn't bother me," Mardra said decisively, lifting her head to meet his gaze for the first time since giving him the beacon. "Remember, I had two brothers who were twins. That didn't mean they were the same person. From what I've met of him, Justice really isn't much like you. He's more like... your twin brother, who also happens to be a spirit."

Anders wasn't sure that was entirely right. Twin brothers? Not really. Well, unless it was like those rare twins who were born conjoined, parts of their body connected with strands of flesh or melded entirely. It was rare for such children to make it to adolescence, but what of those who did? Did they face similar challenges when trying to make lives for themselves, separate from their sibling?

"That makes sense, I guess," was all he said. "Well... good luck."

He left, taking the beacon with him.

More days ticked past, flowing like slow honey. Although he was no longer banned from Orzammar, it still wasn't safe for him to spend long periods of time in the city when they still had envoys and messengers from the Three Princes going in and out. The cycle before, a pair of envoys wearing the Vael and Thorne livery got away from their handlers and made it over to the Brosca manor before the guards apprehended them.

According to the reports, they had flung mud at the façade and attempted to light it on fire with arrows before they'd been stopped and removed from Orzammar with prejudice. It was clear to Anders that the soldiers had been expressing their outrage towards what they saw as the face of the enemy, but to the dwarves of Orzammar, all they saw was the invaders defacing the house of one of their beloved Paragons. Negotiations had further broken down -- not that they'd been going well to begin with -- and the atmosphere was tense.

So Anders mostly stayed up in the valley. Unfortunately, that didn't leave him with much to do -- with no newcomers and with trade stopped, life in Refuge had settled into a sort of stasis. At least, he thought, he was making progress on his new book.
It was hard to concentrate on peaceful, productive ways for man and mage to work together when there was an army sitting outside wanting your blood. Anders abandoned his writing and prowled restlessly around the valley, kibitzing the herbalists and crafters until they politely threw him out of the Tower.

The sun was nearing the peaks in the northwest -- it wasn't actually that late, but the time of year and the height of the peaks meant the valley was cast in shadow early. Long fingers of dim grey crept across the valley, and on impulse Anders decided to go check on the sentry pickets.

Under Marco's enthusiastic oversight, the mages were actually managing a fairly alert screen of sentries. Outposts were posted at every trail, however faint, that led up into the valley; two at each outpost at any given time, with a third walking in shifts between the outposts to relieve the tedium and keep an eye on the ground between them. Somewhat to Anders' surprise most of the outposts had sprung up with little wooden shacks or lean-tos to keep off the cold autumn rain; apparently some of the lessons of construction they'd sat in on with the casteless had stuck.

It wasn't raining now, fortunately, although the cold breeze made a brisk walk a respite. Anders visited one outpost, then another, chatting with each of the sentries stationed there before moving on. Virtually all of the able-bodied mages who weren't off in the Deep Roads were standing a turn; he met up with Grandin and Jowan at the little shack built at the top of the gulley twisting away down the valley. The same one that the Templar contingent had used to climb up to the valley earlier this spring; it was the easiest point of entry, and so the most carefully watched.

"Anything to see?" he asked them, and Jowan shook his head. At least they weren't trying to play cards, like the teenagers up at the other end of the valley.

"Not much moving out here," Grandin replied. "Which is how we like it, sir."

Sir? Anders wondered, feeling vaguely outraged. He was no man's commander, he would not place himself above them… except that he kind of had, when he'd agreed to be the leader that everyone insisted the community needed. He let the appellation go by.

"Yeah, the only thing to watch is the birds," Jowan added. He pointed to a spot of clear sky through the trees, as they wound away down the gulley.

Birds? Anders went over and looked in the direction he pointed. "I keep trying to count them, but I'm never sure whether I'm seeing new ones or the same ones over and over," Jowan added.

Anders frowned. The memory of his conversation with Amund up at the lookout nagged at him. "They are the Lady's eyes and wings," he'd said. Was that mere religious metaphor, or something deeper? Was there a presence on this mountain that was angered by the intrusion of the army, which sheltered and looked out for mages?

"Something's wrong with the birds," he said, staring at them more intently. They wheeled and cawed, agitated from their nests. No - he wasn't imagining it. They were angry, swooping and diving at something below. "Someone's moving on the mountain."

"The army?" Jowan exclaimed, while Grandin suggested "Another one of their scouting parties?"

"Not the army," Anders said. "They wouldn't be able to get that many men up this far, or hide the disturbance if they did. It has to be a scouting party. But moving fast, faster than they would on a normal scouting mission."

"But why?" Jowan said plaintively.
Anders took a few steps forward, climbing the nearest ridge that overlooked the plunging gully. He strained to see through the trees -- in spring or summer it would be impossible, but the trees had shed their leaves, giving him striated flashes of vision between their branches.

He caught an agitated rabble of bodies tramping through the underbrush, in bright colors. And in front of them -- a smaller, slighter body darting through the trunks, trailing a flapping skirt behind them. No, a robe.

"They're chasing someone," he realized in a flash. "A mage. Hurry! Come with me!"

~tbc...
Anders barreled down the mountainside, heedless of thin branches that whipped and snapped in his wake. He caromed off one small cliff and rounded another boulder, searching for a glimpse of the melee his had seen briefly through the trees from above.

He couldn't see it, but from this close he could hear it -- shouting and cursing, the grinding clatter of rocks and splintering of trees. Grandin pulled up, Jowan lagging behind. "We're close," Grandin said, puffing for breath. "We have the high ground. I think we can set up an ambush --"

A scream cut through the thin mountain air, and Anders was off again, leaving Grandin cursing in his wake.

He burst out from the trees into a clear space and found himself nearly on top of them: it was not so much a meadow as a broad rocky ledge overlooking a steep rocky gulley. The soldiers -- Anders counted six -- had run the mage to ground and were in the process of recapturing him, several standing back with weapons drawn and wary expressions while two leather-and-chain clad soldiers tried to drag the mage to their feet. Not one to easily give up the fight, the mage had apparently wrapped their arms around a few whippy tree trunks and refused to let go, and in exasperation one of the soldiers let go and drew his sword.

Perhaps they meant only to chop down the trees so that they could no longer be used as an anchor, but Anders' world flashed black and white and he charged in.

The four soldiers not engaged with the mage turned towards him, cries of astonishment and anger rising from their mouths as they raised their weapons. Anders drew back his arm and drew on the Fade; it thrummed up his bones through his elbow and formed into a casement of stone surrounding his fist. He launched forward; it clipped one soldier and connected solidly with the one behind her, knocking them backwards and off the cliff.

As he drew his mana for a second strike, a bolt of fire streaked past him and impacted against the soldier he'd clipped. She cried out and fell back, beating at her cuirass to try to smother the flames. From beyond the wall of chain-clad backs there was a sudden detonation of psychic force, and the soldiers that had been accosting the running mage reeled backwards. One slipped and slid down the slope, cursing turning into a sudden broken-off cry.

"Maker give me strength!" a voice called from the edge of the crowd, and Anders looked over just in time to see the soldier wearing the tabard of the Sword of Mercy clap his sword and shield together. A wave of soundless force rushed out from him, and Anders found himself suddenly magic-deafened as the Silence washed over him. Grandin's cursing, from the slope behind,
indicated that he'd been caught in it too. *Shit.*

The soldier closest to him rushed him, obviously thinking him powerless now that his magic was suppressed. Actinic fire surged in his veins, and Anders stepped forward and caught the man's charge with one hand. Lifted him from his feet, and tossed him off the cliff.

The rest of them encircled him; two broke off to converge on Grandin's position, even as two more soldiers he hadn't seen before charging in appeared from the woods, joining the fray with swords gripped tight in their hands. Flaming bronto *shit.*

A whistling sound cut through the air, and an arrow suddenly sprouted from the back of one of the soldiers facing him. They toppled over, and Anders saw Grandin up the slope drawing back on -- of all things -- an elven shortbow. Had he had that before? Yes, Anders had a dim memory of him nabbing it from the outpost when they'd run out, but why did he have it?

Grandin drew and released, and another arrow flew in a short curving arc and buried itself in the thigh of another soldier. His aim wasn't perfect, but with the range so short it didn't have to be. "Where did you even learn how to use that?" Anders shouted, parrying sword swings with his staff and keeping the soldiers at arm's length.

"I spent some time with the -- with the Dalish after I left the Tower," Grandin said, his voice disjointed and distracted between pulls of the bow. "They taught me -- some things, some hunting things before -- I had to leave."

That was history Anders hadn't heard before. "Wait, if you were accepted into a Dalish clan enough that they taught you their hunting secrets, why did you leave?"

"Well, I -- " Grandin started, then cut off as one of the soldiers charged him. He leapt aside, and managed to knock the soldier down the slope, but the tussle left him winded. "Really not the time!"

"Right," Anders said.

They were learning to be wary of his strength; they stayed back out of his reach even as they tried to close the distance on Grandin. Anders was just feeling for the first returning stir of his mana -- not sure what spell he could cast, to get them all out of this -- when another figure stepped onto the path further up the slope, hands held forward and spread apart.

The spell washed over him, sliding off like water off oilskin, but he still heard the noxious insidious whispers. *Sleep,* the magic insisted, *sleep, sleep.*

The soldiers around him fell like puppets with their strings cut.

The ones closest to the cliff, menacing Anders, dropped limply and rolled down the short slope over the edge. Anders heard several meaty thumps from below, but no screams. The pair that had been assailing the mage, too, fell over unconscious -- as did the mage, caught in the nimbus of the spell. He'd never seen a Sleep spell that powerful. That left only two soldiers standing -- and they were caught between Anders and Grandin.

One tried to rush him, and Anders met his charge with a blow that snapped his neck. The other broke and ran. Grandin fired a shot after him that caught him in the leg. He stumbled, fell, and rolled over the edge; *his* wail echoed up across the gulley until it ended with a crunch.

Anders leaned on his staff, catching his breath in the wake of the battle. Jowan advanced slowly down the slope, looking around the battlefield with a horrified expression.
"A-are they dead?" he said uncertainly, peering over the cliff. "I didn't mean to kill them..."

Anders shook his head. His cuts and bruises stung, but he didn't have the mana yet to spare for such trivial hurts. He put his hand on Jowan's shoulder. "It's not your responsibility to protect the lives of people who are attacking you," he said.

"But I don't want to kill people. I just... tried to make them sleep..." Jowan protested.

Grandin came slowly down the slope, still holding his bow at the ready. "If they survived the fall, then when they wake up they can get themselves back to their unit," he replied.

"But what if they broke their legs?" Jowan asked anxiously. "We can't just leave them out here to die... can we?"

Anders sighed, pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose. Silences always gave him a headache, like his head was full of pressure that couldn't be eased. "Grandin, can you keep a watch or find somebody else to keep watch over these guys?" he said. "Discreetly. If they don't wake up, fine. If they wake up and get themselves back, also fine. If they can't get themselves back for whatever reason..." He wavered between finish them off and help them out before finally settling on, "Do what you think best."

Grandin nodded acceptance, and began to hike back up the slope. Anders turned towards the mage they'd come to rescue, an unconscious sprawl of limbs and robes. "All right," he said. "Let's get this one back where it's safe. You can help carry, Jowan, since it was your spell that put them out."

Back at the Tower medical concerns took precedence. A group of excited mages had gathered in the Great Hall; Anders chased them out of the way and firmly directed his helpers, carrying the now-conscious but groggy mage refugee, into the infirmary. He took a few moments only to dispatch the sentries to observe the downed soldiers, since the Sleep spell was clearly wearing off. By the time the mage was completely awake and lucid, Anders had determined to his satisfaction that their newest arrival had taken no harm from the clash with the Templars. He was also, privately, a little puzzled as to how to place the newcomer. They wore robes that were a size too large for them, in unobtrusive colors and a plain style, and no jewelry. They had skin of a cool shade of brown, with prominent bones and ears that were large for a human, small for an elf, and came to a softly tapered points at the end. Black hair grew out in messy close curls that looked like a full shave whose owner hadn't been able to maintain it in a while.

They could have been human, or could be elf-blooded; they could have been a very small man, or a particularly straight-framed woman. They gave their name as Alim, which didn't help much as Anders knew that name could be either male or female given the local spelling. In the end, Anders supposed that Alim did not seem to want to be seen as either male or female, and thought it best to just put the question away.

Of more importance was Alim's story. Once he'd ascertained there were no major injuries, Anders called a meeting of the Council and his lieutenants to hear the refugee's testimony. Sheran and several other Council members were still at Bownammar, but the elderly lady Ertha, Marco, Grandin, and Anders himself all crowded into the infirmary to listen. Surana was there to represent
the mages of Refuge as usual, and Jowan tagged along behind Surana.

"I left Highever six weeks ago with a group of five others," Alim said, hands wrapped around a mug of bracing restorative tea. A blanket was draped over their shoulders, shoes off and feet perched on a warming pad to combat frostbite. "Two others from the Free Marches like me, a few from further away. We came looking for the rumors of a refuge for mages Orzammar, in the mountains of Ferelden.

"We had been traveling for weeks, avoiding the armies of the Chantry and lords alike. But when we neared the end of our destination, we found the way barred. The road leading to Orzammar was blocked by a horde of armed men. We met up with others like us, penned up in the hills behind the army. None of us knew what to do.

"Me and my friends got impatient with waiting. We thought we could sneak around them. Talor found a trail that seemed to lead higher into the mountains. But we got lost in the ravines, doubled back on ourselves, and a patrol caught up with us. We were completely outnumbered, and too worn out from our travels to think of fighting.

"There were two different colors of uniform among the patrol that caught us -- one in red and gold, the other in black and blue. The leader of the first group wanted to bind us and take us back to their camp -- they said they had templars there, who would guard us. But the second group…"

Alim shivered, eyes wide with the memory. "The men in black and blue wanted to kill us on the spot. They said it was too dangerous to try to contain us, that we were monsters just waiting for an opportunity to destroy them. The other leader, the captain, said it would be dishonorable to kill prisoners. They argued -- they nearly came to blows. While they were distracted, the six of us decided to break for it. They ran one way -- I ran the other. I don't know what happened to the others."

"You ran all the way up the mountainside with half their patrol on your tail?" Grandin asked, astonished.

Alim grinned, showing a flash of strong white teeth. "I run very fast," they said.

"Thank you, Alim," Anders said. "Get some rest. And welcome to Refuge."

The smile faded from Alim's face. "What about… the others?" they asked quietly. "Talor, Lyddie… I don't even know if they..."

"We will find a way to help them," Anders said staunchly. "You have my word on it."

The other mages filed out, gathering in the great hall across from the infirmary. They settled into chairs or behind desks, and they all looked at each other expectantly.

"Well," Ertha said. "We seem to have a problem."

"We do." Anders looked over at Marco. "I hope we can agree that trying to fight our way past the blockade to reach the refugees is impossible," he said with only a hint of challenge in his tone. Marco sighed in regret, but nodded.

"Is there another way into the city apart from the pass to the main gates?" Grandin asked pragmatically.

"Maybe they could sneak past the army somehow?" Jowan offered. "They're looking out for mages, not dwarves, right?"
"Are you suggesting they disguise themselves as dwarves?" Anders asked, torn between amusement and irritation.

"No, no! Of course not," Jowan said, shaking his head emphatically. "But... maybe they could hide in the backs of wagons, somehow? Disguise themselves in crates or under blankets?"

Anders wanted to protest that as the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, if not for the small fact that he'd used a very similar method of deception to sneak out past the Templars on his fourth escape from the Tower. "We'll come back to that one," he said instead. "It would be better to avoid the army entirely."

"Perhaps the Avvar could help guide them through the mountain passes," Mardra suggested. "They are quite adept at getting around. Maybe with their help, we can avoid the patrols entirely."

"This is all getting ahead of ourselves," Ertha said. "Before we can coordinate any arrangements with these refugees, we have to find a way to communicate with them. We don't even know where they are now, or if there are any still at liberty after Alim's group was captured."

"Alim said that the larger part of the refugees stayed behind -- that only a few tried to break through," Mardra said. "They ought to still be safe."

"But we don't know that for sure," Ertha argued.

"All right," Mardra said. "Let's take this one step at a time. First we need to open lines of communication -- to locate the refugees and ensure their status, and find a way to exchange messages. Then we can concentrate on a plan to get them here."

"You can use birds to carry messages, right?" Marco suggested. "I've read about it in books."

"We're taking ideas from bad adventure stories now?" Ertha rolled her eyes.

"No, that's a real thing," Grandin replied. "Armies, scouts and caravans use some kinds of birds to carry dispatches."

Anders' interest had risen when the suggestion was made, but Mardra's next words shot it down. "Yes, they do, but that won't work for us," she said. "The birds they use have been bred and trained specially for the purpose, and that takes years, time we don't have."

"Also, they really only know how to go 'home,'" Grandin added. "They're kind of a one-use trick, really. You have to have a whole cage of them, one for each message."

"Oh," Jowan said.

Surana stirred and spoke up. "If we can't rely on animals to carry messages, perhaps we could get a wisp to do it," she said. "They're quite good at memorizing and mimicking sounds, and they can obey simple instructions. I'm certain I could convince one to memorize a message, and they seek out mages naturally. If we can find the right area of the mountain to send them, they're bound to run into the refugees eventually."

"No," Mardra rejected the idea, somewhat to Anders' surprise. "Wisps are too fragile to make a protracted journey overland. They need to be near a replenishing source of energy constantly or else they start to fade. Asking one to carry messages back and forth through all that empty space, without any kind of sustaining vessel, would kill it."

"But not before it achieved its purpose," Surana said. "And there are always more in the Fade
"No! That's too cruel." Mardra shook her head emphatically.

"It's only a wisp," Surana said, slight annoyance starting to shade her tone. "Or do you believe that the life of a wisp is worth more than the life of a dozen mages?"

Mardra bristled. "Listen, just because some of us have a heart not made out of —"

"All right!" Anders hastily stepped between them. "Let's just… take a minute here," he said. He glanced around the room, picking out a quiet niche in the corner.

On the outer wall of the room there were windows spaced well above head height, and the blocks under the windows were wider, creating a sort of overhang. Anders took Mardra's elbow and pulled her aside. "Mardra?" he asked, pitching his voice low. "What's this about?"

"I'm sorry," Mardra sighed. "It just -- it touched a nerve. It's not that I don't understand the importance, it's just… back home is full of these callous mages who claim to call themselves responsible Andrasteans and yet stick wisps in everything from books to kitchen knives --"

"Back home?" Was she talking about Kirkwall? It took Anders a moment to reorient himself; Mardra had attended the Circle in Perendale. "You mean, Nevarra? Spiritbinders?"

"Yes." Mardra glowered a bit at the word. "It's just so -- oh, it's so hypocritical! They teach at every catechism that spirits are the Maker's children just like we are, that they were created from love and purpose like men. We mages are supposed to have a duty to care for the spirits that get displaced into the world from the Fade. To care for them, not -- not to cage them and bind them into items for a bit of a magical boost, to be drained of life like some kind of rain-cistern for mana!"

"But you know Neria isn't like that," Anders said when she stopped to catch a breath. He glanced across the room, where Neria was looking down at a piece of paper on the desk before her, a slight frown on her face. "She's friends with wisps, she brings them into her music -- I don't think she regards them as a disposable resource."

"I know," Mardra admitted, deflating a bit. "I don't think she is. But -- it's a little like you said, last season, about forcing unwilling people to take Deep Roads terms. We should start as we intend to go on. And if we intend for spirits to be our partners and wards, not our slaves, we can't abuse them like this. Or it will cast a shadow over every dealing we have with the Fade and its people."

She was right, Anders realized. He hadn't even considered it from that perspective -- but the Nevarran mages looked at the world, and the Fade, differently. The denizens of the Fade had long memories, and helpful spirits would quickly learn to avoid an area where they were liable to be trapped and abused. With the area cleared of benign or friendly spirits, demons would not take long to move in.

But the problem still remained: mages trapped on the far side of the blockade, cut off from communication. They had to find a way to find the mages, to send and retrieve messages, and if neither messenger bird nor friendly spirit could make the journey…

Flocks of birds wheeling over the mountain. *The Lady's eyes and wings*, Amund had said.

"You said the lack of a sustaining vessel was the problem, right?" Anders said, coming out of his thoughts. Mardra stared at him curiously.
"Yes, and a life-energy source on this side of the Veil," she agreed. "Wisps can cross the veil without too much trouble, but they need to remain in areas with high levels of ambient --"

"Right, I know the theory," Anders waved the rest of the lecture away, and turned back to the rest of the Council. "All right, I have an idea. Surana, see if you can prepare a wisp with a message to take. Grandin," he said, turning towards the elf, "come with me. We need to catch a bird."

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

There will be another short chapter going up tomorrow, a sort of interlude that doesn't entirely fit in with the main narrative.

I wanted to explore a little more of Mardra's Nevarran background. As a reminder, the mages of Nevarra have rather unique views of magic, spirits and religion which the rest of Thedas doesn't share. Although Mardra was born in the Free Marches, she was educated in Nevarra, so even if she is not a member of the Mortalitasi herself their views would have shaped her outlook on the world.
Interlude - Fade Date I

Chapter Summary

Justice meets Mardra in the Fade, as promised.

Chapter Notes

I've actually had this scene written for a while and was looking for a good place in the main story to drop it in, but something else always seems to be happening. In a way, it can happen at any time, since it occurs during the night when everyone else is sleeping.

Anyway, separating it into its own chapter also gives people who are not here for the Justice/Mardra romance plotline the opportunity to do a skip. Main storyline will resume in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scene took shape about him slowly; not piece by piece, the way a human would build a room, but layer by layer. Blurry frameworks of dull earthen tones were covered by a riot of colored blobs were covered by an intricate tracery that seemed to serve no direct purpose at all. He didn't understand all of what he saw, but he could feel Justice's intent concentration. Justice's focus could be frightening sometimes, and it was strange to see it turned on something other than their cause.

All at once the vision abruptly resolved itself, and he found them standing in an ornate courtyard. It wasn't a place he'd ever been, though he thought he recognized some architectural elements from the Chateau Haine, that one time he'd been off on a wild wyvern chase with Hawke and that elven spy girl.

The time was somewhere intermediate between day and dusk; no direct sunlight shone down from the open sky above, but there was enough light to see all of the details. A walkway of patterned tiles ran foursquare around a small garden cultivated of exquisite plants; he recognized roses, carnations, and hyacinths among a dozen other plants he'd never seen before. More flowering vines covered a wooden trellis that arched over a creamy marble bench in the center of the garden. The tiles were colored soft pink, blue and cream in a pattern that looked like a starburst emanating from the garden outwards, centering on the trellis and the bench below it.

A few more trees were placed at the corners of the courtyard, and ivy climbed up the stone walls to a roof whose outlines were only vaguely suggested. One of the walls had an arched stone opening leading into a well-lit hall, with a window and balcony extending over the courtyard. From somewhere nearby came the soft sound of a bubbling fountain, though none was in sight.

Something shifted in the dream, a subtle undercurrent whose tone he had not even noticed until it changed, and he became aware they were not alone. Another dream had connected to this one,
another consciousness entering the scene, and he stood up straight and looked over at the archway as Mardra entered.

She looked around, her eyes wide as she took in the details; when her gaze passed over him, she picked up the folds of her skirt and stepped quickly over to him. "Justice," she said, and smiled. "This is… I don't know what I expected, but this blows all my expectations away."

"I hope it pleases you," Justice said earnestly, and Mardra nodded.

"It's incredible," she said. She turned in a slow circle, taking it all in; Justice waited, feeling unaccustomedly anxious. "Is this a real place?"

"It is real in the Fade," he replied. "It originated from a novel written in the Towers Age by Marceline of Salmont. A highly romanticized version of the keep there, I believe, which was long since destroyed. But the setting remains in the Fade, a popular destination for many spirits of love and desire."

"Wow." Mardra shook her head, but she was still smiling. "I hope I'm not underdressed."

Her dream-self was dressed in a long gown of some flowing material in dark blue; the color was solid, mostly lacking other adornments, but he decided right away that it suited her. "You look beautiful," he told her honestly.

She blushed, but he thought she looked a little uncomfortable, and resolved not to pay too many compliments to her appearance. There were better ways to spend their time together, short as it would have to be. "Would you care to take a closer look at the garden?" he asked her.

As she looked over at him Justice held out his hand; at her nod, he placed her arm upon his and began a slow stroll about the courtyard. They took their time in this courtly stroll, Mardra paying serious attention to the mosaic of semiprecious gems that were inlaid on the supporting pillars, stopping to closely examine each flowering plant.

"You know, in the mortal world, a place like this would cost a fortune to build and maintain," she commented as she ran her finger along a polished marble tile. "Gardens like these were solely the province of nobles who could afford to spend hundreds of royals per annum to maintain, squeezed out of the tax base of peasants their estate could support."

"A great misappropriation of wealth and power," Justice agreed. "Yet here in the Fade, such a garden takes no more effort to create or maintain than the lowliest of peasant huts or ugliest of dungeons: all are equal, measured only by the focus and will of the spirit or demon that engenders them."

"That's true," Mardra said, looking highly amused by the idea. "I suppose in the Fade, a king's dreams would be worth just about the same as a peasant's, wouldn't they?"

"That is correct," Justice said, and they completed their circuit beside the bench under the trellis. "Here in the Fade, ideas of social rank, of prestige and privilege, are no more than illusions."

"Which might lead a man to wonder: is that all they are in the real world, as well?" Mardra mused. She tucked the skirt of her gown aside and sat down on the bench. "Will you sit, my lord?"

"I am not a lord," he reminded her. "But if it does not make you uncomfortable, I shall stay standing."

"I suppose I can't get a crick in my neck in the Fade, at least," Mardra quipped; she placed her
hands on the bench and leaned back a bit, looking up at him. "So what now?"

"When I was serving at Amaranthine under the Warden Commander, she gave me the gift of a book of poems," Justice said. "It was the first time I had ever encountered them in that form, although I realized that I had seen many of the ideas and characters represented in them in the Fade. Many of them speak of love, and loss, and pride, and hope; all concepts that mean much to those of my kin. I have prepared a poem for you, if you would care to hear it."

"I'd love to hear it," Mardra said softly.

He stood straight, and resisted the urge to clear his throat; or was that Anders' influence, the memory of performances delivered in the auditorium at the Tower?

Pourquoi sous tes cheveux me cacher ton visage ?
Laisse mes doigts jaloux écarter ce nuage :
Rougis-tu d'être belle, ô charme de mes yeux ?
L'aurore, ainsi que toi, de ses roses s'ombrage.
Pudeur ! honte céleste ! instinct mystérieux,
Ce qui brille le plus se voile davantage ;
Comme si la beauté, cette divine image,
N'était faite que pour les cieux !

Tes yeux sont deux sources vives
Où vient se peindre un ciel pur,
Quand les rameaux de leurs rives
Leur découvrent son azur.
Dans ce miroir retracées,
Chacune de tes pensées
Jette en passant son éclair,
Comme on voit sur l'eau limpide
Flotter l'image rapide
Des cygnes qui fendent l'air !

By the time the poem came to an end Mardra had shifted stances to lean forward, her chin resting on her elbow as she listened. "That was beautiful, Justice," she said softly. He inclined his head in thanks. "You speak Orlesian? How did I not know this? Does that mean Anders speaks it too?"

"Anders does not. Kristoff did," Justice answered. "He learnt the language when he was posted in Orlais, at the time when he met and courted his wife. In truth, he studied the language mostly in aid of his efforts to woo Aura. He might have liked to recite this poem for her, had he known it."

Mardra nodded. "Thank you for sharing it with me," she said.

"It gave me joy to share it," he said. "And that you would accept it from me. As I hope you will accept this." He handed her the corsage he had prepared, held out of sight for this moment. "As we are in a garden of flowers, it seemed an appropriate gift."

Mardra accepted it, bending her head to examine it and sniff its fragrance. It was a modest collection of flowers, a spray of white clover wrapped around a single yellow rose. "I hoped it would speak of my intentions," Justice said.

A chuckle broke from Mardra as she examined it. "You know, it's only a lucky break on your part
that I happen to have studied the language of flowers," she said. "Otherwise this would be lost on me, a pretty bunch of vegetation and no more."

"But you have studied it?" he stressed.

She nodded again. "It was a fad among the Nevarran nobility ten years or so ago -- their own imitation of the Great Game," she said. "Although they mostly used it to send terrible puns or elaborately coded insults to each other."

"That is not my intention," Justice said.

She looked up at him, smiling. The light reflected from the white and yellow flowers shone faintly on her skin, making her glow. "I know," she said. "Thank you, Justice. I accept."

"Then I will sit beside you," he said. Somewhat stiffly, he lowered himself to the bench next to her; wordlessly, she moved her skirts aside to make way.

For a time they were silent, regarding the dream garden together. Gradually the linkage began to grow strained, their time growing short. Mardra coughed quietly, breaking the silence.

"As it so happens," she said, "I prepared a poem too. If you'd like to hear it?"

"Please," Justice said.

Mardra nodded. Looking out across the impossible lush and vivid growth of flowers, she quietly began to recite.

"Love is not all, it is not meat nor drink
Nor shelter, nor a roof against the rain
Nor yet a floating spar to men who sink
And rise and sink, and rise and sink again.

Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath
Nor cleanse the blood, nor set the shattered bone,
Yet many a man is making love with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

It may well be that in some desperate hour
Pinned down by pain and crying for release
Or nagged by want past resolution's power
That I would be driven to sell your love for peace
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It may well be. I do not think I would."

Poem finished, she glanced over at him to see his reaction, her dark brown eyes deep and soft in the twilight.

It was hard to speak. His throat had grown thick, his tongue heavy. In the end he had to clear his throat, as Anders would, to free his voice. "Thank you, Mardra," he said, and even those three words nearly cracked.

The dream ended, and they woke.
The poem Mardra recites is *Love is not all* by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

The poem Justice recites is *Chant d'amour III*, by Alphonse de Lamartine, and the translation approximates as follows:

Why under your hair hide your face?
Let my jealous fingers spread this cloud:
Do you blush to be beautiful, oh charm of my eyes?
The dawn, as well as you, of its roses is darkening.
Modesty! heavenly shame! mysterious instinct,
What shines most is more veiled;
As if beauty, this divine image,
It was only made for the heavens!

Your eyes are two bright springs
where a pure sky is painted,
When the branches of their banks
discover their azure.
In this mirror traced,
Each of your thoughts
Throws its flash,
As we see on the clear water
Float the fast image
Swans that split the air!

The yellow rose stands for friendship, happiness and beginnings, and the white clover represents great affection and a desire for the recipient to think of the giver.
Chapter Summary

The mages search for ways to reach and aid the refugees as the enemy presence on the mountain grows heavier.

When Anders announced his intentions -- to try to make use of both bird and spirit to carry messages for Refuge -- he had expected a certain amount of protest and backlash, and had been prepared to deal with that. Whether from Mardra, protesting what she saw the abuse of spirits, or from some of the more traditional members of the older Circle magi who saw any mixing of flesh and spirits as abomination.

What he hadn't expected was just how invested the mages of Refuge were going to get in the project. Their imaginations were caught, and they showed it in the way they showed interest in any other subject or project: argument.

The first debate to break out was over what kind of bird would be an appropriate subject for experimentation.

"We should use a seagull for our messenger," was Marco's bright idea. "Seagulls are hardy, can eat a wide variety of foods, and can fly great distances without rest. Their wing operation is among the most efficient of all birds, even in the face of powerful air currents."

"Okay yes," Anders said impatiently. "Unfortunately we do not have any seagulls in this climate, since they are seagulls, hence the name, and the nearest sea is five hundred miles away!"

"All right, well then, how about an albatross?" Marco forged on undeterred. "The albatross has the most majestic wingspan of any bird and can lock its wings for long periods of glide..."

"Were you even listening at all?"

"Why not a hummingbird?" suggested Rannie, the middle-aged mage who ran the children's lessons. "I heard those are the fastest..."

"Only in relation to their size. They're so tiny they don't actually cover much ground, and besides they need huge quantities of very specific foods to function," Marco shot down this idea.

"I think we should use a swallow," Ertha was the next to make a contribution.

"Why a swallow, for the Maker's Sake?" Anders demanded.

Ertha gave a delicate little shrug. "Well, it was on the list of the Marlowe Society's two dozen best birds..."

"That has literally nothing to do with anything," Anders groaned.

Thankfully, the debate ended when Grandin reappeared, covered in pecks and scratches and
carrying an extremely displeased crow. Since a crow was what Anders had in mind in the first place, this was the best outcome he could have hoped for.

Then the second debate started up, almost on its heels, as to what the messenger should be named. Anders had no idea why they even thought this was open to debate, or mattered in the slightest; nevertheless, everyone from Jowan to Dagna to the Council had their own suggestions on the matter.

Jowan made the suggestion that the bird should be named "Worc" -- as it spelled 'crow' backwards, and also was close to the sound that a crow actually made. He seemed terribly pleased by his cleverness, but the rest of them mostly ignored it. Mardra decided on the name "Duchess," mostly because the ruff of feathers around the bird's neck reminded her of Orlesian fashion. Anders was amenable enough to the name, but their hopes were dashed when Grandin informed them candidly that the bird in question was a male.

Grandin himself favored "Captain Corvin," but that seemed rather too plain for Anders' tastes. He put forth the title "Serah Squawks," and assumed that would be the end of it until Ertha came back to inform them that the Council -- the Council! -- had taken a vote. It was a tie, they were informed, between "Birdy McBirdface" (Dagna's suggestion) and "Wispy Tipsy Teeny Weeny Demon Brother Genitivi" (Daros', which figured.)

Surana had stayed quiet throughout the whole debate; when someone finally thought to ask her, she simply gave them a serene smile and informed them that the wisp already had a name, thank you very much, and would tell them what it was when it was ready. As it didn't seem to be quite ready yet, that was no help to the matter whatsoever.

Just when Anders thought that was settled, the project ran aground on the third question.

"How do we get the wisp into the bird?" Jowan wailed.

The four of them on the informally dubbed Spirit-Bird Project -- Jowan, Surana, Grandin and himself -- were gathered in a small Tower room on the second floor. It was mostly used as a crafting room, though at the moment the only supplies it held were bird (plus associated bird-keeping supplies) and wisp (1-count.)

"What?" Anders said. "Wisps possess things that aren't mages all the time. Blight, they'll possess rocks and trees if there's nothing else around -- I've run into any number of them when following the Commander around."

"Yes, but we don't know how they got that way in the first place," Grandin said impatiently.

"We've introduced them to each other," Surana explained. "And put them in the same room, but the wisp has shown no inclination to move into the bird."

"And the bird?" Anders asked.

As he watched the crow, eyeing the wisp with a sideways-cocked head, took a sidling step forward and then lunged. The wisp bobbed and rippled as the wicked black beak snapped at it, then accelerated several feet away before returning to drifting in the air.

"Thinks the wisp looks delicious, best guess," Jowan said with a sigh. "But they still aren't, I don't know. Merging."

"Why not just induce the wisp into the bird?" Anders asked.
The other mages looked at him. "How do you mean?" Grandin said.

"You know..." Anders stepped into the room. The crow greeted him with a hoarse, challenging caw, but the wisp drifted towards him and began to swirl around him. It was a fairly common reaction among wisps; Anders was used to it. Attuning Spirit, he made the effort to bring the wisp under his influence.

The wisp was a little different from the ones he normally used for healing -- most of those were still in the Fade, for one thing, and had been used for healing many times before -- but this one seemed obliging enough. It took rather longer to corral the disobliging bird, but once he had a firm enough grip on it he was able to induce the wisp into the bird the same way he had induced other wisps into countless patients.

Once he had done that there was a strange sense of expectation, of incompleteness -- this would normally be the stage where he directed the wisp to mend or reshape or set bone or flesh inside a living body, but there was nothing inside the bird to heal. He was left with a hovering question, awaiting instruction.

\textit{Take messages}, he tried to tell it. \textit{Help mages}. The directive was frustratingly vague, unclear. With an effort, he resisted the urge to complete the process by calling the wisp back out of the vessel, and broke off the spell with the wisp still inside.

To find everyone else staring at him. "How did you do that?!" Jowan exclaimed.

Anders shrugged. "You just sort of..." He waved his hand, unable to verbalize what had always, for him, been a mostly instinctive process. "Slide it in?"

"Of course," Surana said with a faint tone of enlightenment. "It's a spirit healing technique, isn't it?"

"I mean, I've never used it for this particular purpose before," Anders said. "I don't know if that will even work."

"Well, let's try it," Surana said. She turned to the crow, which was standing stock still and looking at them that same sideways way, only an unnatural blue highlight on its beady black eyes giving anything unusual away.

"Do you remember the message I gave you earlier?" Surana asked. "Tell me."

The bird gave a little hop in place, then opened its beak. From it emerged a startling copy of Surana's voice, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Free Mages, fear not. I am Neria Surana of Refuge --"

The message rattled on to its conclusion, a brief introduction of their names, location and purpose. When it came to an end, the bird started to repeat itself, and Surana stopped it with a little wave.

"Very good," she said, and the bird preened visibly. "Now fly. Fly over the mountains, look for more mages like us. When you find them, give them this message, and take any message they have for us. Then return here and give the message to us, and we will give you a nice reward."

The bird let out a high-pitched caw and launched from its perch. It flapped around the room twice before veering towards the open window -- but at the last moment it was just a few feet off course to the left, heading on a collision course with the stone wall instead of the window. Before Anders could try to intervene, however, it hit the wall and vanished in a bright blue flash.
"Well," Anders said, slightly stunned. "I guess that worked."

Though there were still a few (mostly treats-based) kinks in the system that had to be worked out, the new spirit-bound messenger bird worked as well as Anders could have hoped. Serah Squawks (as Anders still insisted on calling him) found the enclave of refugee mages on the second day of combing the mountainside and returned with a new message.

Like Surana's first message, this one came in the form of a perfectly-captured voice. The mage on the other end did not give his name, but Anders couldn't help but think that it sounded familiar somehow -- there was a distinct trace of an Antivan accent, and how many Antivans did Anders know? He put the question aside; where the refugees hailed from was less important than getting them to safety.

With the help of Squawks, the refugees scattered all over the mountains were able to find each other at the least -- greater numbers made them easier to find, but also left them better able to defend themselves and share what little food and shelter could be found on the open mountain. Anders had hopes, shared by the rest of the Council, that the Avvar would be able to help guide their strays over the mountain passes to Refuge.

But the meeting with Amund did not go as fruitfully as Anders might have hoped. Even before he'd finished explaining the situation the man was frowning -- the only expression visible on his face under the headpiece -- and shaking his head.

"Afraid not, gods-touched," Amund said in his deep voice. "The lowlanders have already got scouting parties crawling everywhere through the passes. They say the prince of Starkhaven knows the ways of the rangers. If you tried to bring your people over the mountains, they'd be spotted and captured in a moment."

"Wait -- if they can get up into the mountains, why haven't they attacked Refuge directly?" he said anxiously.

Amund shrugged. "There's a couple dozen of them, scattered over the passes. There's a couple hundred of you, concentrated in one place," he said. "They can't amass enough force to really force an assault. You might see some hit-and-run, though."

"Great," Anders groused. "And you're just letting them roam around freely?"

Amund studied him for a long moment. "We have no love for the lowlanders, but no blood-quarrel with them, either," he said. "And Chief Movran has no desire to go to war with the Free Marches. If they attack us, or start poaching our game, then we'll drive them off. We like you well enough, you and your mage friends, but not well enough to start dying for you."

"That's..." Anders couldn't help but feel a little stung. Still, he had to admit that the man had a point. "Fair," he sighed. The dwarves of Orzammar had pledged to defend the mages of Refuge; the hunters of Sky-Ram Hold had made no such pledge. Unless he could figure out a way to get them in blood-debt to him, that probably wouldn't change. It was his own misstep to assume that the Avvar were a resource he could command, instead of allies that might or might not be willing to take on the same risks as them.
He ran a hand through his hair. "Would you at least be willing to keep an eye on them?" he asked. "Send us warning or a message if it looks like they are planning some sort of coordinated assault?"

Amund nodded. "That we can do, gods-touched," he said. "That, we can do."

So there was no help to be had from the Avvar. That left the dwarves of Orzammar -- not a difficult request, Anders thought. After all, the dwarves knew the country around Orzammar second to none, and they had a vested interest in increasing the strength of the mage colony. More mages in Refuge would translate to more mages fighting in the Deep Roads, after all. He sent a message to Bhelen, asking him for his assistance with the refugee problem.

No reply came. Anders waited out the rest of the cycle with increasing impatience, then sent another message. And a third, which finally came back with a reply: a short, vaguely worded non-answer. Infuriated by the delay, Anders went down to Orzammar to see Bhelen in person, only to be turned back by the steward at the gates to the palace.

He spent half an hour in a heated argument with the guards before returning to the Brosca manor. The next day he returned, determined this time not to let anyone stop him -- but within minutes of his arrival at the gates, the spy Fermin appeared.

"Warden Enchanter," he said. "Let's take a walk."

"Blight if I will," Anders shot back. "Unless the walk is into the palace to talk to the King."

Fermin jerked his chin at two of the guards; to Anders' outrage, they took hold of his elbow and marched him out into a narrow hallway and a small antechamber. He could have broken free of their hold of course, but -- he didn't actually want to get in a fight with the Aeducan guards.

The fair-haired dwarf followed them into the antechamber, then dismissed the guards. Anders straightened the sleeves of the tunic, scowling. "What was that about?" he demanded.

"That was about as much of your whining as the Crown has decided to take," Fermin snapped back. Anders was more taken aback by the tone than the content; the usually cool and smooth spy's demeanor had cracked, showing deep agitation behind it.

"Wow, you're in a pissy mood today," he said snidely. "Wake up on the wrong side of the slab this morning?"

Fermin pulled a chair out from a dusty desk and sat at it, rubbing red-shot eyes. "There hasn't been a supply shipment from Tevinter since three days after the siege started. I ran out of coffee at the end of the last cycle," he said. "I'm really not in the mood."

"Well, that makes two of us," Anders said. "I'm getting sick of Bhelen foisting his lackeys off on us instead of talking to me face to face."

"Believe me when I say you'd rather deal with me right now than him," Fermin bit out. "I, for instance, can't get fed up and order you back to Bownammar when I inevitably lose my patience."
Anders rocked back on his heels, taken aback. For the first time, it occurred to him that the dwarves as well as his own people had stresses that threatened to push them towards the breaking point. Bhelen had been quite clear, after the conclusion of the Bownammar campaign, that he wanted to reserve his mage troops for further excursions and not waste them on simple sentry duty. If he was reconsidering that, it could only mean… "The Darkspawn are pressing the attack at Bownammar?"

Fermin sighed tiredly. "I'm afraid so."

"Why didn't anybody tell us?"

"Because we're holding, for now." Fermin shrugged. "It's what we're best at. But His Majesty is less enthused than ever about the prospect of pitched battle with the Holy Boys, or with the prospect of stripping Bownammar of any more of its defenses. If we lose our foothold in Bownammar -- even if we later gain it back -- it will be a blow to his credibility, perhaps even the death knell to his vision of a reclaimed empire."

He was probably right about that. "But this is all the more reason why we should be helping the refugees get here safely!" Anders argued. "You'll need their firepower, more than ever. Surely Bhelen understands that adding more mages to his forces can only help him?"

"In the long run, yes," Fermin said with a nod. "His Majesty has always held a view of the long run. Unfortunately, the Assembly is more short-sighted. They look to a time very soon when we will need to enact rationing, and they don't want to add more mouths to feed."

Anders went still. "This is the first mention I've heard of rationing."

Fermin held up a stemming hand. "It may not be necessary at all, and His Majesty doesn't want to spread fear and discontent," he said. "There are less than two hundred of you mages. On the grand scale, you're a drop in the bucket when it comes to feeding a city and an army. But the Assembly doesn't see things that way; they focus on the small things."

"So if he's not going to help the refugees and he's not going to see off the armies, what is Bhelen doing?" Anders demanded. "It doesn't seem like him just to sit on his thumbs."

"He is doing any number of things, Warden Enchanter, most of which is none of your business!" Fermin snapped. "But if it will quiet your carping: he has agents and contacts stirring up trouble in the home kingdoms of the Three Princes, that they would need to go home to deal with. So far, they've been more stubborn than anticipated, but we have also provided arms to a number of unlicensed mercenaries -- "

"By which you mean bandits?" Anders said dryly.

Fermin ignored the interruption. " -- to harass the Holy Boys' supply lines." He leafed through a few papers on the death, choosing one and flipping it around for Anders to read. "At this rate, our logisticians calculate they will run out of food before we do, even if the winter storms come later than usual."

Anders frowned down at the paper. It was full of shorthand and references he didn't recognize, and didn't make much sense to him without context. But one thing he was certain of. "The refugees will run out of food first," he said. "And the winter storms will hurt them worse."

Fermin looked thoughtful. "If they're in the place I think they are," he said, rifling around for a notation-covered map. "there's a little valley and cave system somewhat to the east of them where
they can shelter, without ever coming into sight of the army. It's very discreet, very well supplied, out of sight of the main road. Some of our... caravans, occasionally break their journeys here."

Anders snorted. "Caravans that need to stay out of sight of the main roads, right," he said. "Are these the kind of 'caravans' that you can buy lyrium from?"

"They might be," Fermin said equably.

"All right," Anders said, taking the map page and tucking it away. "That's something, at least. But they still won't be safe until they're here, under cover."

Fermin didn't speak for a long moment; Anders thought he could almost see him reining in his temper, biting back whatever words he first wanted to say. When he spoke at last, it was in a deliberately calm and measured tone of voice. "I'm not denying the problem, Warden Enchanter," he said. "I'm simply saying we don't have a solution to offer you. If you can come up with one on your own means, by all means, we'll back you against the Assembly's griping."

"Like what?" Anders could have torn his hair out with frustration. "We're trapped here in the valley and the slopes are crawling with scouting parties!"

"Then why not bring them through the Deep Roads?" Fermin said in a tone of utter reasonableness.

Anders sat back a moment, stunned. He hadn't even realized that was an -- "That's an option?"

"It is certainly an option," Fermin said. "All the mountains in this range are honeycombed with caverns, both dwarf-made and natural, and all dwarf-made tunnels eventually lead to the Deep Roads, and from there to Orzammar. Of course, you'll have to deal with the darkspawn, and any other Deep Roads wildlife that's inhabiting the deserted portions, but I have faith that you're up to the challenge."

He thought it over. Of course it would be a dwarf to suggest such a route; it was the natural way of thinking of the world, for them. But Anders knew that it wouldn't be as simple as Fermin made it sound. He'd spent enough time in underground cavern systems -- with the Commander, with Hawke, and with the Legion -- to have a real idea of just how much volume they could cover, how easy it was to get lost and turned around and blocked from your destination once the tunnels were no longer regularly maintained. He wondered if Fermin did, whether the trim and precise spy had ever spent long periods of time in the wilderness under the earth.

It was only a dozen miles between Orzammar and the mountain slopes where the refugees were hiding out, as the crow flew. But covering the same distance in the labyrinthine world of the underground was worth nearly ten times that in hazards. And without good maps of the area -- which he didn't have -- they might well never make it at all.

Still, no one had ever promised that it would be easy. So long as it was possible, they could see it done.

"All right," Anders said at last. "We'll try it. Thanks, Fermin."

"My pleasure." The dwarf gave a little smirk as he ended the audience, and Anders realized with a flash of resentment that he'd gotten out of the conversation without having to give any concessions at all.
There was not much point in delay. He stopped by the offices at the Refuge Tower, to pass on the message about the safe camping spot and to tell them what Fermin had proposed. Grandin and Mardra were both there, and listened with interest and dismay to his idea of searching for a safe route through the Deep Roads.

"It could work," Mardra allowed, looking worried. "But surely you don't have to go alone? If you could find a dwarf who would be willing to go, at least just for their underground direction sense…"

Anders sighed. "I can ask around, but I don't know if I'll get any bites," he said. "None of the casteless workers are really equipped; they're civilians, not adventurers. And Fermin was adamant that Orzammar won't, can't spare any experienced warriors right now."

Mardra frowned. "I can't believe they haven't asked us for more reinforcements," she said disapprovingly. "Maybe we should send some anyway…"

"What if we could contact the Legion of the Dead?" Grandin offered unexpectedly. "There's no one better equipped to exploring abandoned sections of the Deep Roads."

Grandin had met Anders' friends in the Legion during the Bownammar campaign, and had hit it off with them much better than Anders had expected. The woodsy elf and the stoney dwarves, seemingly opposites at first glance, had developed a peculiar understanding and strange bond, and Grandin had expressed regrets when their assignments had taken them apart.

It was a good idea, but -- "If Bhelen won't spare any troops from Orzammar, I can't imagine he'd be willing to let the Legion go," Anders said. "They're not permitted back into the city in any case, and they're far more valuable fighting on the front lines."

"Maybe not allowed, but they owe you a few favors," Grandin said with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "If you asked, I can think of one or two of'em who would be willing to bend the rules a bit. I've never met more loyal men."

"True..." Anders allowed. "But they're all stationed far out in the Deeps, past Bownammar, and I'm not completely sure where. It would take a long time to find and contact them, and longer for them to get back, before we could even set out." Time that the refugees might not have, if the weather turned.

Grandin looked disappointed. "Well, it was a thought," he said.

"A good one," Anders agreed. "But I think we'll have to do this on our own."

Mardra frowned as she thought it over. "Well, I'm the last one to doubt that you can do it, if you put your mind to it," she said at last, and Anders couldn't help a little swell of pride at that. "You're a Warden and a mage, and Justice is a match for any darkspawn you might encounter. When do you leave?"

"Today, I think," Anders said. "Don't really need to ration the daylight when you're headed underground, after all."

"Do you have everything you need?"

Anders thought it over. "I should," he said after a moment. "I'll stop by the supplies cabinet if I
don't, and the kitchens after that."

"If it isn't too heavy, take..." Mardra hesitated for a moment. "Take the beacon with you too."

Anders turned around to look straight at her, eyebrows rising. "Oh?" he said, a wealth of meaning in that one word.

Mardra kept her composure in the face of that knowing smile, although a faint blush colored her sheets. "So we can keep in contact," she said. "Justice can give me updates every night, and we can track your progress and send help if necessary."

"How very practical," Anders said, enormously amused. "All right, I'll find room for it somewhere."

"That's everything, then," Mardra said. "Good luck, Anders. And be careful."

He strode out of the Tower, mind already going over what he needed for his trip into the Deep Roads. Food, water, his mess kit his compass, paper and charcoal to chart a map... He wasn't quite sure how long it would take to navigate the tunnels between here and there, and better to pack too much food than too little. The beacon would be heavy, but the weight was not insurmountable.

Should he take anyone else with him? Anders liked to think he was more than capable of handling himself in the Deep Roads, but he also knew enough to respect the hazards of the unknown. On the way back he'd have the refugee mages with him... but then again, they likely had no experience traveling through the caves at all. Maybe better bring someone just to help herd them, if trouble happened.

Who could be spared? If he went, Mardra had to stay and keep things running without him. Surana and Jowan were out. Maybe it would be better to take a dwarf, instead; they could lend a dose of valuable melee to the fray and their inherent Blight resistance was much greater than the mages, who were vulnerable. No, but they had signed up to build the Tower, not fight in the Deep Roads; many of them weren't even fighters.

Deep in thought, he stepped out of the north Tower entrance and turned to walk along the side of the building towards the main part of town. The sun was high and bright, the sky achingly blue; it was one of the rare autumn days where the cold wind relented and allowed the last of the sun to bring an echo of summer's warmth to the stones. He thought, vaguely, that it was a shame to miss this nice weather underground for as long as it lasted, but the mage refugees really couldn't wait any longer...

The swiftly-moving silhouette he at first took for a bird, high overhead and moving too fast to be anything else. Then the faint shrieking noise, also not unlike a bird on its dive -- but something about it triggered an alert in his mind and he turned, hand reaching for his staff, not yet sure entirely what he was defending against --

It was too late anyway. The arrow screamed down out of the sky and struck him with a thump that seemed to rock the world. Anders found himself staring up at the beautiful blue sky -- this time from a lower, and oddly canted angle -- and suddenly unable to catch his breath.

The shouting started up around him, and he heard footsteps thundering towards him. Still trying to work out what had happened, Anders struggled to right himself -- and then the pain started, crashing waves of agony centered in his lower chest. Blue light crackled from his hands, his face, flowing up his arms and down to the point where the pain was centered, and he felt a surge of power and strength like adrenaline in his veins.
The mountains tilted crazily around him, and he fell back against the ground even as the blue light roared higher. Hot blood began to leak down his front, and with an enormous effort Anders managed to wrench himself into a sitting position with his back braced against a tree stump. He looked down and the source of the problem resolved itself.

Slanted at an odd downward angle, the point buried just above the lowest edge of his ribcage, was an arrow. Well, the back half of an arrow, anyway -- the rest of it was somewhere inside his torso, with the head poking annoyingly out through his back. The mind tended to fixate on small details at times like these, and Anders found his attention captured by the fletching on the end of the arrow. Three-pronged, feathers cut in a trapezoidal wedge, and dyed bright red.

He knew those arrows; they were the same kind that Sebastian had always used.

~tbc...
"There! Up there!" he heard someone crying, but he had no attention to spare yet for anything outside himself. Marvelously solipsistic, this arrow-in-the-chest thing tended to make you.

"Forget him! Help Anders!" a more familiar voice yelled, from so close it was almost in his ear. He winced.

"Can you not shout?" he said, and was surprised by how normal his voice came out.

He looked up. There was a ring of scared-looking faces hovering over him, and the bright blue sky beyond that. There was Jowan, and an older lady with wispy white hair, and an upside-down elf-face he could only identify by the ears. He had to squint when one of the faces moved, letting the sunlight fall directly on his face.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said. "I've survived worse than this before. Ow." That last word had accompanied a very ill-advised attempt to shift position, which sent a sheet of flame throughout his entire torso. Unfair, really, when the arrow wound itself was really so small…

"Worse than an arrow through your chest?!" Jowan demanded incredulously.

"Sure. Ask me about the sword sometime," Anders said. "This thing isn't anywhere near my heart, at least. It's not going to kill me… and if someone could help me remove the bloody thing, I could get to work healing it!"

More shouting, the sound of a fireball exploding against rock. It sounded like the mages were pursuing the intruder. Anders wanted to sit up and get a better look, but that was out of the question.

"We need to get him inside," Jowan said to the others. "If that man comes back for a second shot --"

"He won't get a second shot," the elf-face said. "Not with Marco on his tail."

"I can move him," the white-haired lady said and oh, that must be Porta, the force mage. Well, that would involve less jostling, at least.

The next few minutes, Anders knew from experience, would be very unpleasant. Vainly he wished for the good old days, when he could just melt the inconvenient weapon pinning him front to back.

**Convalescent**

**Chapter Summary**

Anders slowly recovers after his close brush with trouble, but Refuge's problems seem intractable until an unexpected but welcome newcomer arrives.
He felt the staticky tingle of magic a moment before the Force spell engulfed him and he rose in the air. It was smooth and steady, not jerky or awkward like a carry would have been, but it still sent wrenching sheets of pain through his chest. He coughed despite his best efforts to suppress it, and felt something wet and sticky spray his lips and chin. Knickerweasels.

The world slipped by him, and the bright sun was suddenly occluded by dark stone. Panicked voices near him were shouting to get Mardra, get Daros. Despite his quickly unraveling grip on the situation, Anders still found it in himself to be annoyed by that. What was Daros going to do to help the situation? Lecture the arrow to death?

Another painful jolt, and he was flat on his back and staring up at a vaulted stone ceiling of the great hall. The pain was overwhelming -- his muscles seized up and convulsed -- and then a rising tide of white fire in his veins drowned out the pain, dampening it to a background hum. Better. That was better. Now if only he could catch his breath…

"Daros, thank Andraste," Jowan was saying urgently, somewhere behind his head. "You've got to heal him. You're the only healer we've got!"

"I... I can't!" Daros said. His voice was high and stressed, and Anders reflected that he'd never heard the composed mage sound so panicked before. "There's still -- the arrow's still in the wound. I can't heal around that, it would get trapped, and open again every time he moves!"

"So remove it already," Anders wheezed. "Told you…"

"Let me try," a contralto voice said from behind him. The arrow shaft shifted within him, then abruptly wrenched upwards, then stalled -- it ripped and seized, grinding against something inside him. He still couldn't feel pain, precisely, but Maker that was an unpleasant sensation.

The pressure eased off. "It's caught on something," the woman's voice reported. "I can't pull it out."

"I've read a book about this," a familiar voice spoke out unexpectedly. "Many arrowheads are barbed, or flanged backwards, to catch and dig in so they can't be pulled out."

"Well we can't just leave it in there!" Jowan yelled, and Anders silently agreed.

"No, but we'll have to do it another way," the familiar voice said, calm and collected. "Get him sitting up -- and cut the arrow shaft. We'll have to push it through."

His position shifted, and he opened his eyes, watching the tableau around him with a curious detachment. The fire was still surging through his body, an almost palpable rush and flow. It was as though all his veins ran with fire, and all the blood that had previously been in them was now dripping down the inside of his tunic.

"Anders? Are you still with us?" the familiar voice asked. He focused enough to see Surana, hovering close, face deliberately calm.

"I am," he said, though he knew it was not entirely true; the world was growing black-and-white on him, color draining. But it was true in the sense that she meant it. "Do what is necessary." He had enough energy to maintain himself until the arrow was removed, and then Daros would be able to assist with the healing.

He kept careful hold of himself while he was jostled, the world dipping and pitching around him. His tissues screamed pain at him, blaring a warning of further ripping and damage, which he ignored. Pain was not relevant.
"It is barbed," Daros reported with an unsteady note in his voice. "It's caught in the bone -- in the rib. We're going to have to yank it free."

The elf -- Korio, he recognized him now that he was right-side-up -- cursed. "That blight-breath Starkhaven dog! He'll pay for this when we catch him!"

"No," he said, quick and imperative. "Do not chase after Sebastian. He's done what he came to do."

"What are you saying?" Jowan asked, sounding incredulous.

"Sebastian loved the Grand Cleric like a mother," he replied. "He was blind to her faults, to her manipulation. Her death was necessary, but the pain it caused to him was regrettable. His anger was not unfounded. He came all this way to see justice done. Now that he has, perhaps he will be sated."

"You're protecting him?" Jowan looked like he didn't know whether to laugh or be outraged. "You were the one who told me that if someone is trying to kill you, it's not your job to protect their lives!"

"I'm not protecting his, I'm protecting yours," he retorted. "In the wild terrain he has the advantage, and he can land an arrow faster than you can land a spell. I don't want any more mages hurt chasing him. Let him go."

"All right," Porta inserted herself into the conversation, all business. "Enough chatter. I'm in position."

"Then let's not wait any longer," Jowan said. "We'll brace him. Daros, are you ready? All right, then. Three -- two -- "

Fire flared to new heights, and the world went white.

He didn't so much wake up as… fade back into consciousness. White became grey, became shadows cast by a lamp across the ceiling and walls. Anders frowned up at them, trying to sort things out.

The last thing he clearly remembered was talking to Mardra about heading into the Deep Roads to try to guide the refugees to safety. Instead he was on his back in what appeared to be a room in the Tower, breath short and torso numb. Clearly, something had gone wrong.

He searched his memory but could only dredge up soundless flashes: blue sky, white mountainside… something swift and dark, arcing towards him? Then a sudden shock of impact, and…

Only pieces were coming back to him. Anders tried to sit up, and groaned as his chest and stomach flared to life. Blight. It had been an arrow, hadn't it. That part hadn't been a dream.

"You're awake?" a familiar female voice said from the other side of the room. The pool of light brightened as a lamp was unshaded. "Wonderful! Hey, guess what! Anders is awake!"
"Dagna," Anders mumbled, still trying to re-position himself. "Give me a hand, will you?"

"Sure!" The little Arcanist stepped over to his bedside, and hauled him into a sitting position with an ease that belied her small size. Anders gasped as the change in position made the room lurch and his ribs spasm. He called up healing magic to feed into his chest to counter it, and frowned at the weak trickle of magic that resulted. His mana was depleted -- badly depleted. He could barely feel Justice.

"Welcome back," a soft voice drew his attention away from his injury. He looked up to see Surana enter the room and move to a chair not far from his bedside, carrying a book that she folded between her hands. She was smiling slightly. "It's good to see you awake again, Anders."

"It's good to be awake," he said automatically. "What happened? Where's…" He squinted, trying to make sense of his patchy memories. "Sebastian? Was Sebastian here?!"

"Been and gone," Surana assured him. "Marco and his squad chased him halfway across the next mountain before they gave up the chase. They didn't catch him, but they scorched that pretty white armor well enough to make him think twice about coming back."

"Well, that's something," he muttered. "I would have liked his Andraste-embossed codpiece on a spike, but I'll settle for a few scorch marks on his pristine white behind."

Surana's eyebrows rose in surprise. "This is new," she remarked. "I thought you were the one calling the score settled now that he got the justice he came for?"

Anders groaned. "That sounds like something Justice would say," he said. "He always had respect for Sebastian, Maker knows why. Personally, I hated the spoiled poncy git."

He had, for a lot of reasons, many of which were more personal than noble. He'd always resented the way Sebastian came from a life of wealth and plenty, a life he still had as a favored guest of Kirkwall's nobility, and came down to the slums and gutters to play hero with Hawke. He didn't have a clinic to run, or food bills to pay; his needs were all taken care of the Chantry. He'd taken jobs with them because it was fun. He'd killed, not because he had to but just because he felt like it, like it was all some kind of game. And even then, he'd had the nerve to preach the Chant at Merrill, to tell Fenris that his sufferings were for a noble purpose, to tell him that he was supposed to forgive…

"With any luck he'll pack off back to Starkhaven and take his army with him," Anders grumbled. "Has anyone alerted Bhelen that one of the Holy Boys is running around by himself in the mountains? What about the Avvar? And for that matter, what about the refugees? Did anyone --"

"Don't worry about that," Surana soothed him.

"It's all being taken care of," Dagna chimed in. "Mardra has been taking care of the day-to-day running of the community. Marco and his people have been patrolling the perimeter, just to make sure Vael or anybody else doesn't try again. And, oh! Jowan and I worked together and came up with these blood wards, they're really effective, you orient them along a horizontal axis and apply a touch of blood, and they'll activate along that whole area in sequence with another --"

"More blood magic? In my Tower?" Anders moaned.

"It's more effective than you'd think," Dagna said.

"You don't need to worry about a thing," Surana said, still in that comforting tone. "Just rest and get better."

Anders sighed. "Okay, top marks for bedside manner, but really, let up on it and tell me what's really going on," he said. "You don't need to treat me like an invalid. I wasn't that sick."

Dagna sobered. "You were more sick than you realize, Anders," she said seriously. "It's been three days."

"Three days?" he sputtered. "Then -- the refugees ..."

Surana's slender shoulders lifted in a shrug, then fell. "Grandin sent a message to the Legion of the Dead asking their help, but heard nothing back," she said. "We don't even know whether they received it. It's just too early to tell."

"But we really are doing just fine," Dagna said staunchly. "You just need to get better. Everybody was worried for you. Heck, the herbalists made enough healing potions over the last three days to last us a year!"

"So in that respect, everything really is fine," Surana said.

Anders wanted to ask in what respect everything was not fine, but he'd never gotten an answer out of Surana when she didn't want to give it, and it looked like today wasn't going to be the day that changed.

Anders continued to rest the remainder of that day, but by the morning after he was ready to try getting out of bed. His caretakers at first tried to argue with him, but he had years of healing practice on his side: as soon as a patient was able to stand and walk around, they should, in order to avoid bed sores and encourage proper circulation.

He walked around the room with help first, then after another rest, on his own. By the end of the day he felt ready to tackle a longer walk. It was probably for the best that none of his helpers knew how much slower a normal recovery was, or they probably would have tried to argue with him more. As it was, he knew he had Justice to thank for even this much recovery.

With slow, careful steps he walked the long hallways that cross-bisected the bottom floor of the Tower, starting at the infirmary and running lengthwise down the building. Mardra had been visiting on one of her rare unoccupied hours, and now accompanied him with one hand under his elbow and his hand on her shoulder for support. Dagna tagged along, less providing physical support (she barely came up to his chest) than company and distracting conversation. They had reached the end of the corridor and were just turning the corner when Mardra did an abrupt about-face.

"Whoops," she muttered, then plastered a bright and obviously fake smile on her face as she tugged him back the way they had come. "Okay, that's enough for today, don't you think?"

Anders gave her a look. She fidgeted slightly, glancing down the hallway and back at him, looking faintly upset. "Okay," he said slowly. "What exactly is it that you don't want me to see?"

"It's nothing," Mardra exclaimed unconvincingly. "It's just... some of the younger mages..."
"Oh, is this about that Chantry shrine?" Dagna said brightly, and Mardra groaned. Anders went very still.

"What shrine?" Anders demanded. Till now, there had been no Chantry in the Refuge valley, and he had never had any intention of building one. They had no Templars, no Sisters, no Mothers, and no need of any; after having gone to such trouble to extract the mages of southern Thedas from the iron grip of the Chantry, Anders had no intention of letting it gain a foothold under his watch.

But apparently, it had happened anyway, under his nose and behind his back. He stood up straighter, supporting all his own weight instead of leaning on the others, and strode off stubbornly in the direction Mardra had tried to steer him away from. She trailed after him, half-heartedly reaching to pull him back, but she didn't physically try to stop him again; around the corner and down the next hallway brought him face-to-face with a makeshift shrine.

This corner of the building had been largely ignored and unused, a sort of dead-end hallway left over when the rest of the rooms had been built, and the mages had taken it over with religious paraphernalia. He had no idea where they'd gotten the statue of Andraste -- Brother Burkel at work down in the Commons, maybe -- but it stood in its little cabinet with the doors flung wide open.

Fury built up in his chest just looking at the thing: up at the still and stylized face of Andraste, her expression so serene, so cold and uncaring. A bright sunburst behind her head made a mockery of every mage that had ever been brought low with the brand. A low shelf had been set up in front of her, holding an unlit brazier and piled high with offerings: flowers, food, glass vials. Someone's jewelry, which they must have kept through all their years at the Circle and all the arduous journey here, just to surrender it to the icon of the same faith that would see them enslaved and all sacrifices taken.

It wasn't Andraste that he objected to. Anders had always believed in her, in the Maker, in the legend of her holy war and victory and ascension. It was just the Chantry that he had issue with, the powerful and corrupt institution that had taken over Andraste's legacy and twisted and perverted it to their own ends. Andraste had said that magic was to serve man, but that wasn't the same thing as making mages into slaves, or imprisoning them, or crippling them, or murdering them at will. Andraste had said nothing about conquering other nations, or forcing other peoples to convert, or elevating humans over all other races on Thedas. The modern Chant of Light had about as much to do with Andraste as a nug had to do with a naval flotilla, and Anders hated the vile symbolism of the corrupt institution as deeply and fervently as others believed in it.

In a sudden surge of rage he reached out to tear the foul thing down, only to have his hand caught mid-reach by Mardra. "Oh, no, Anders," she said feelingly. "Don't -- you can't."

"I won't have it here," Anders snarled, feeling a tongue of piercing bright blue energy licking over the skin of his face.

Mardra steered him out of the hall, into a side room where he could no longer see the shrine, where they could talk in private and not be overheard. "Look, I know how you feel," she began. "I don't agree with it either. But you can't tell people what they can and can't worship, Anders, not if you really believe in mages being free to make their own choices."

"This is the wrong choice!" Anders insisted heatedly. "The Chantry has spent centuries refining its anti-mage propaganda, teaching mages to fear and hate themselves, teaching generation upon generation of children of their own unworthiness, their own sin. How many mages have killed themselves in despair because of that Chantry doctrine taught them that the best fucking thing they could do to please the Maker was to die?"
"I know!" Mardra said urgently, then lowered her voice again. "I know. But that's not all the Chant is, and you don't get to decide what parts of it mean things to other people. You can't tell them what faiths they can and can't believe in, what messages they can and can't take meaning from. Would you try to ban Surana from worshipping the Creators? Would you try to tell the Avvar that they're wrong to worship the gods they do, that they aren't allowed to venerate their spirits any more? You can't police one faith but not the others. Either people are free to practice what they believe as they believe, or they aren't."

"Then maybe they shouldn't be," Anders said darkly.

Mardra let out a long sigh. She sat down, not looking at him, and for a few minutes the silence in the small room grew until it was distinctly uncomfortable, and Anders began to regret his last few words.

"People are scared," she said, "and there's not much they can do about it; their fate is being decided by forces they can't control. They go back to things that have been a comfort to them in the past, to the rituals and beliefs they know. They need to have faith in something, in order to believe that things will turn out right. You can't take that from them, Anders."

Anders hated it when Mardra was right.

He insisted on walking back to his rooms alone, a defiant gesture mostly born of pettiness. Pain flared in his chest and torso with every step and he took to grousing under his breath just for the distraction.

"I can't understand why any mage would still subscribe to the Chant," he complained to Dagna, the only one still willing to stick around to listen to him. "How can they cling to a faith that constantly teaches them to vilify themselves?"

Dagna shrugged, the intricacies of human religions largely lost on her. "Yeah, I never got that either," she said cheerfully, and then dropped an offhand bombshell: "I mean, wasn't your Andraste a mage too?"

Anders nearly tripped over his own feet. "What?" he demanded.

"Yeah!" Dagna said enthusiastically. "I read this whole book about it. 'The Search for the Lost Prophet,' or something like it?"

"That book…" Anders took a gulp of air. "Do you have any idea how banned that book is in the South? Not only can it not be bought from vendors or found in collections, but just owning a copy can get you excommunicated by the Chantry!"

"Oh… well," Dagna said, expressing with an eloquent shrug just how much the Chantry's attempts at outlawing books really meant to her. "Anyway, there was a whole section on how Andraste was a mage, and how she came into her powers, and all that. Really, that whole business in her campaign with summoning wind and fire and lightning to smite her enemies -- that sure sounded like magic to me. I mean, it just made sense."

Anders was too stunned by the blatant heresies he was hearing to respond immediately. Apparently, there was more of the good orthodox Andreastean in him than he had thought. But Dagna had said she read the book, not just that she'd heard about it from elsewhere, which meant…

"Dagna," Anders said thoughtfully. "Do you still have that copy of 'the Search for the True Prophet'
in your library?"

---

The shrine to Andraste at the end of the hallway stayed up. But the next day, a new addition appeared to the offerings laid out on the altar before it: a book with a plain brown cover, lying pointedly open to a few specifically dog-eared pages.

Despite his best efforts, improvement was slow to come. Even after he was up and walking again on his own, his chest still twinged if he took too deep a breath or tried to lift anything heavy. More annoyingly he found himself persistently short of breath at even the slightest exertion, and any kind of exercise or excitement quickly wore him out again and forced him to rest.

He was an experienced healer; he knew the process. Right now all his body' energy was being devoted to fixing itself, so there was little to spare for other activities. Even healing magic, for all its power, could not force a body back to full condition. For a normal person, he would have expected the recovery process to last six months at the least; for himself, he estimated six weeks.

Even six weeks might be six weeks too long. The season was fast fading, and deep autumn was turning to early winter in the iron-grey plates of the sky. He woke one morning to find their first snowfall, a nearly-invisible light dusting of grey flakes that melted by noon. Freezing fog followed it, then a short day of cold sunshine, then a deeper dry cold that chilled the marrow. Anders could only be thankful that the builders of the Tower had had the foresight to include heating ducts under the floors and in the walls, powered by a few simple runes.

But the refugees in the mountains, Anders knew, had not even those comforts. Even reports of how poorly the armies of the Three Holy Boys were faring did not brighten his outlook, not when he knew that the mages were suffering worse. At least the troops away at Bownammar, battling the constant press of the darkspawn, were untouched by the weather.

All of it combined -- the weather, the attacks pressing from all sides, the uncertain fate of the refugees -- cast a pall over Refuge. The mages went about in an unnatural hush, scurrying from building to building -- when they dared to go outside at all. Anders knew that the assault by Sebastian had shaken them more than the arrival of all three armies combined, proving that even their safe refuge was not safe.

And… well. It was a bitter taste on his tongue, the knowledge that he was partly responsible for their malaise; his injury and convalescence had an unexpectedly crushing effect on their morale. They expected him to be immortal, unbreakable -- standing between them and the danger of the world -- and in the end, he was breakable too.

A number of the mages had gone back to Bownammar. Anders was surprised when he heard that, but it made sense on further thought -- Bownammar might have darkspawn but it was safe from falling arrows and hateful zealot soldiers. Most of the ones who had gone back wanted to work off
more of their years of service, and hoped that in so doing they could convince Bhelen of their value and the importance of protecting them.

Between the Rebellion and Bownammar, almost all of the mages of Refuge who were fighting-fit had gone, leaving behind the elderly, children, the convalescent and those with a physical or emotional impediment to fighting. Those that remained had redoubled their attention to producing crafts, and although the results were good for Refuge's treasury, they made him sad. They weren't working because they felt productive, or because they wanted to create: they worked long hours because they hoped that work would make them valuable, worthy of protection.

Anders sat at his desk, pen in hand, though his thoughts were preoccupied. Writing was almost the only thing he could do at the moment -- it would be weeks before he was well enough to venture into the Deep Roads, and he very much worried they were out of time. The messenger bird had come back after several days without a message from the refugees; it had not been able to find them on the mountain.

That was grim news on top of an already grim outlook. He wondered if he could ask Mardra to plan some kind of party, something to lift the mood -- though it was hard to imagine what occasion they could celebrate.

A commotion outside his window caught his attention. That was nothing new in Refuge, really -- with so many mages packed into one space the odds of at least one thing per day catching on fire or being electrocuted or crushed were pretty high -- but the shouting voices had an excited, joyful note.

The excitement rose to a volume that he couldn't ignore; he rose from his table with an effort and stuck his head out the window (no small feat, considering the thickness of the outer walls.) "Hey!" he shouted down towards the crowd on the grassy slope. "What's going on?"

A mage dashed up towards him, almost putting herself out of sight below the window. "Come quick, Healer!" she shouted.

"Why? Is someone hurt?" he called back.

"No! Well, I don't know! Maybe! There's a bunch of new arrivals down in the city!" she yelled back up.

Now that was news getting up for. He rose hastily from the window, banged his head on the sill, healed it with a muttered oath, then thought to stick his head back out the window. "Did they come through the main gate? Through the valley?" he shouted.

"No!" the messenger yelled back up. "They're at the Planascene Gate! They came up through the Deep Roads!" The voice faded out somewhat. "Has anyone seen Mardra? Or Daros? They have got to be here for this…"

Anders hastily threw on a robe over his bedclothes, grabbed his staff to use as a walking stick -- he still got out of breath more easily than he would like -- and headed out the main Tower door. Mages arriving through the Deep Roads entrances -- it had to be the refugee party that had been stranded by the blockade. They must have chanced the Deeps themselves, without waiting for a guide from Orzammar -- Maker, that had taken some iron guts!

It was a long hike down to the city, and he couldn't go as fast as he normally could; he was forced to stop and rest several times. Several other mages galloped past him on the stairs, much to his annoyance -- he was tempted to warn them that going this fast on downward stairs might feel easy
now, but they'd feel it in their knees tomorrow. Well, they'd discover that for themselves soon enough.

By the time he reached the Planascene Gate a crowd had gathered, both mage and dwarf. This particular Deep Roads entrance actually opened up close to a main thoroughfare leading into the Commons, one of the reasons it was always so heavily guarded -- in ages past it had been a major trade route, the lifeblood of Orzammar flowing directly from its forges and into its markets. Might still be again one day, if Bhelen had his way and the Deep Roads all around Orzammar were truly made safe.

The newcomers were easily distinguished by their tattered, grimy, travel-worn clothes and exhausted demeanors. There were more of them than Anders expected, a whole crowd of them -- anywhere between a dozen and twenty, difficult to tell at first glance. They were surrounded by an equal number of excitable Refuge mages, and an interested spectator crowd of dwarves who had caught the holiday mood. All around the Commons windows onto the main cavern had opened to let dwarven faces peer out on the spectacle.

Anders was nearly pushed aside by Mardra, flying forward like a quarrel shot from a crossbow. "Damie! Damie!" she screamed, and flung herself into the arms of one of the refugee mages who had been bringing up the rear. "You're here! You're alive!"

She was caught and swung around by a laughing figure, dark-skinned, curly dark hair, slightly shorter than Mardra herself… Anders caught sight of the hooked Hawke nose and proud black brows and had a moment of déjà vu, thinking that Daros had somehow gotten down here ahead of him.

But no; as the man finished the circle and turned back towards him Anders saw that the right side of his face was dominated by a massive scar that ran down from his hairline to the corner of his mouth, completely obscuring his right eye. The eye itself was covered with a black patch; the wound and scar ought to have been disfiguring, but his face was so transformed by a cheerful smile that it merely looked rakish.

"Mardy!" The man caught Mardra's hands between his own in a glad clasp. "I'm so glad to have found you! The rumors all said that you were here, in Refuge, so I had to come find you."

The voice was familiar, tinged with a faint Antivan accent... with a start, Anders recognized it from the messages they'd gotten through the bird. No wonder the voice had seemed familiar to him; it was almost identical to Daros' voice. And speaking of Daros...

"Daros is here, too," Mardra informed him, which garnered an excited whoop from the man. "Damie, what took you so long? I've been searching all over for you!"

"I'm sorry, Mardy, but the Rebellion needed me!" the young man exclaimed. "At first I was just keeping back the Templars so that the other mages could get away, but then I joined up with Fiona's army, and Mardy, she's amazing, wait until I tell you! Then I got stuck in that mess at Andorhal, and not until the siege was broken were we able to bring the army south -- and since I was in the area, I just had to come and see if the rumors of a mage paradise were true. And my sister and my brother already here! Is Daylen here, too?"

For the first time Mardra's smile faltered. "No," she said. "We haven't found him yet. But Damie, how did you get here?"

"Through the Deep Roads, of course!" the man enthused. He gave a dramatic shudder that Anders thought was not much exaggerated. "If I never have to go back in those tunnels, it won't be too
"Believe me, I can understand the sentiment," Anders said, joining in the conversation at last. The newest Amell sibling turned to look at him, his good eyebrow rising on his forehead as he looked to Mardra for introduction.

"Mardy, who is this?" Damie asked. The two siblings hadn't let go of each others' hands yet.

"Oh!" Mardra exclaimed, still flushed and all in disarray. "I'm sorry. Anders, this is my brother Damien Amell, of the Antiva City Tower --"

"I'd prefer, 'of the Mage Rebellion,' lately," Damien interrupted.

"-- and Damie, this is Anders, the Kirkwall Healer, and our First Enchanter here," Mardra finished.

Damien's mouth opened in an O of astonishment. "The Kirkwall Anders?" he exclaimed. "Then you're the one from the --"

"-- the song, yes, that's me," Anders finished for him.

"I was going to say, the one from the book, except that you're obviously not dead," Damien said. He looked Anders up and down. "Nor twenty feet tall, spitting fireballs and glowing like a lightning storm, either."

"Oh, he does do that," Mardra put in helpfully. "You just have to get him in the right mood."

"You have my welcome, and my thanks," Anders said, holding out his hand for a clasp. Damien took it without hesitation, despite the rumors, which was a relief after some of the reactions he got. "To lead a group of inexperienced people through the Deep Roads is no easy task -- believe me, I understand that. It took immense strength of will, and courage."

"Oh, it wasn't my idea," Damien said. "I was all set to just stick it out in the mountains, or maybe try to catch up with Fiona again if conditions got too bad. But then we managed to find a guide who'd been in the Deep Roads before, and was willing to lead us in the tunnels. Not even a mage, but he saw us through."

"Then he has my gratitude," Anders said. "I am indebted."

"Mardy, you are not going to believe who I met at Andorhal," Damien said excitedly to his sister. He pulled her through the crowd of tired mages, which obligingly parted towards the back, and turned her to face a figure that had been lurking towards the back of the pack. "It's our cousin! Leandra Amell's son, Garrett Hawke!"

Time seemed to stop, the air frozen solid, as the path of bodies cleared between them. Hawke met his eyes, a sheepish smile on his face as he straightened up from his casual leaning pose against the wall and stepped into the light. He gave a little wave.

"Hi, indebted," he said. "I'm Hawke."
~to be continued...
Concursion

Chapter Summary

In which Damien is hungry, Hawke is thirsty, Anders' friends are hostile, and Anders himself is ambivalent.

Chapter Notes

I didn't introduce him properly last time, but here is the last of the Amell clan: Damien Amell, Daros Amell's twin brother!
All around them the tumult of greeting and happy homecoming filled the cavern: Damien was
entirely wrapped up in his sister, a sight that filled Hawke with a pang of envy. Talor and Lyddie were caught in a tearful three-way embrace with a short and spindly mage in shapeless robes, evidently the lost Alim of their party. Emile du Launcet, who had been a pain in Hawke's side ever since he'd found him moping in the gutters of Gwaren, had collapsed into a sodden pile of robes in relief at being out of the Deep Roads at last. But of it all, Hawke only had eyes for Anders.

The last time Hawke had seen Anders, they'd been standing under a burning sky while the hot wind blew cinders past his ears and ashes that had once been Chantry Sisters flaked in his beard. Anders… Anders had been going steadily downhill for months by then despite all Hawke's efforts to get him to cheer up, to turn his attention to better things, to take care of himself and let go already of hopeless causes. He'd been as thin then as Hawke had ever seen him, face gaunt and ghastly-grey, his blond hair dark and stringy and brittle.

"I never want to see you again," Hawke had told him then, and for a long time after he never thought he would. That picture of Anders had come to dominate his memory no matter how he tried to hold on to memories of happier times past them: Anders used up, burnt out, hollow and crumbling.

But now… Anders looked great. Hawke had never seen him in robes before, but here he was in a pale flowing mantle from shoulders to ankle that only served to emphasize his height and coloring. And the body under that robe - ! He'd filled out nicely, Hawke couldn't help but notice, his torso lean but taut and his arms and shoulders thick and strong under the mantle.

Anders' eyes were a rich and vibrant gold, his skin full of color, his hair darker but full and vibrant, overflowing the hasty ponytail to spill around his neck and over his shoulders. At some point he'd apparently given up shaving too, since his cheeks and jaw and chin sported a red-auburn beard that Hawke itched to bury his fingers in.

In the face of this glorious vision, all of Hawke's carefully crafted and prepared speeches and apologies deserted him, and he did what he always did in fraught situations: he bullshitted.

"Hello again Anders!" He stepped forward, beaming broadly, and gestured to the crowd of tired travelers behind them. "I brought you presents! Nice, eh? You always used to complain that I gave shit presents. So check this out: Free mages! Ta-daa! Some of them are even spirit healers. They're handy to have along in the Deep Roads, but let me tell you, the Chantry does not like letting them out of their sight! Whoa nelly, no! But I figured, those would be the ones who'd need the most help making it through. Right?" He laughed awkwardly.

Anders didn't answer. Actually, Anders looked like the Maker had turned him to stone with a bolt from the blue: he stood stock still, staring at Hawke as though unable to believe what his eyes were telling him. Around them, the happy noises of reunion and rejoicing were falling away; more and more heads were turning their way, conversations dropping as people directed their attention to the two of them instead.

"Anders?" Hawke tried, taking a step forward. "I - I figured you'd be happy to see them, even if you weren't happy to see me. I know I left you in the lurch, but I..." He shook his head, voice trailing off as he grooped for and failed for words to follow that but. "Well, I'm not going to make excuses now.

"The important thing is… I'm back. I came back to see you. I had to find you again. ...I'm making a total hash of this, aren't I? Why aren't you saying anything?" he said desperately, as Anders continued to stare silently. "Please, Anders. Please say something."

Anders seemed to start, as though he'd been in a trance and something had poked him awake. He
looked around at the assembled crowd, looked back at Hawke, licked his lips, and finally blurted out: "D'you want a sandwich?"

A nervous titter ran through the crowd. Hawke felt like laughing too, more out of disbelief than real humor. "Do I want a what?"

"I mean..." Anders licked his lips again and Hawke followed the motion, his eyes arrested. "All of you. You've just come a long way, through a road whose hardships I know better than most. You must all be hungry, you must all be tired. Before... before anything else, let's get everyone to a place where they can rest, and eat, and wash."

"Maker, yes," Emile whimpered. Lyddie added, "Please tell me we don't have to do any more hiking!"

"I guess that depends," Anders said. He turned aside, angling away from Hawke, and addressed the woman still tangled up with Damien -- his much-spoken of sister, Hawke gathered. Their coloring matched, and the shape of her face and features was similar to his own. "Mardra, can they stay in Brosca Manor tonight?"

The woman -- Mardra -- pursed her thin lips. "I count eighteen mages, plus Cousin Garrett," she said, glancing at him and then quickly bouncing her eyes away. "They could all fit in the Manor, but not comfortably, and it would be a challenge getting food and wash-water for everybody. Much easier to accommodate everyone up in the valley."

Anders nodded, accepting Mardra's advice and input with an easy grace. "Then this is what we'll do," he said. "Those who are too tired to move further tonight, follow Dagna here to Brosca Manor. The rest of you come with me, if you can -- it's a bit of a climb to get up to the valley, but we'll take it in slow stages, and there will be food and real beds at the end of it."

Enthusiastic and grateful cries met this pronouncement, and the group of mages fell into chaos as they tried to sort themselves out according to these criteria. Emile, unsurprisingly, opted for the option with the least possible walking involved; Lyddie and Talor chose to accompany their friend. Hawke tried to work his way through the crowd to get closer to Anders.

"I'll go ahead, make arrangements," Mardra was saying in low voices to Anders; at his nod, she gave one more quick look in his direction and then turned and hurried away. Hawke found himself baffled as to their relationship. She and Anders seemed to work closely, easily together, making decisions and executing them in close harmony.

"Anders?" Hawke said tentatively, once he got close enough to be heard without shouting. He put a wide smile on his face. "Not a word for me, your old friend Hawke?"

Anders opened his mouth, then closed it again. His face reddened, a flush driven by some strong emotion, but Hawke wasn't sure which one it was. The taller man ducked his head, strands of hair falling over his face as he did, and mumbled, "You helped them get here... Thanks, Garrett."

Garrett. It had been so long since he'd heard his given name in that voice, in those tones. But as soon as he said it, Anders turned away and hurried off, almost as though he were fleeing.

The crowd of mages shuffled off. After some internal debate, Hawke commanded Carver to go off with Emile and the other exhausted mages to the Brosca Manor. The mabari was used to keeping an eye on the hapless mage by this point, and even now she was a bit on the nervous side when it came to new people; she would do better spending some time in an enclosed, underground space while acclimating to all the new crowds. As Carver slunk off behind Emile, Hawke fell to the back
of the crowd heading up to the valley. He was joined there by Damien, who gave him a sympathetic smile and an encouraging punch to the shoulder.

After the last of too blighted many jaunts in the Deep Roads, the last thing Hawke wanted to do was spend any more time in tunnels. Only the prospect of clear sky overhead at the end of this one kept him moving. As they went, though, Hawke noticed any number of small touches that indicated that this tunnel was well traveled: benches placed at the switchbacks for climbers to rest, large stone jugs of water that had been recently refilled, treads cut into the steeper slopes to give purchase to slipping feet.

At what the locals claimed to be the halfway-mark the party stopped to rest, and Hawke noticed with interest and alarm that Anders took the opportunity to stop and rest as well. He would have expected Anders to stay up and moving, taking the opportunity to check the health of everyone in the group as he always had when they went around together in Kirkwall. Instead, Anders looked almost as exhausted as the mages who had been in the Deep Roads for days. Had something happened?

Hawke sidled through the crowd, trying to get a closer look at Anders. Although the mage never looked directly at him, nevertheless he seemed to be aware of Hawke's proximity; just before Hawke could get into range to strike up a conversation, he was on his feet and calling for the group to move onwards. Hawke fell back, determined to bide his time -- and truthfully, he was tired enough that just climbing each slope as it came sapped his strength.

At last, though, they saw the light at the end of the tunnel -- literally, an orange-tinted glow reflecting down from the stone walls above. A number of the mages cried out in weary gratitude as the tunnel widened out and finally leveled. They found themselves in a cave with one end open to the air; it must have been natural once but it had clearly been widened and squared into a large chamber. Goods and furniture cluttered the cave, glowing hot braziers and crates and screens and even short low cots. Hawke's attention was arrested from the clutter of the cave, though, by the sight of the open entrance ahead.

Through the arch he could see daylight, and Hawke squinted against it as his eyes worked furiously to adjust. A gust of cold, wet air blew a menagerie of scents into his face - burning charcoal, churned-up mud, crowds of human bodies and the biting ozone smell of coming snow. It was a late winter afternoon on the surface, and Hawke felt as disoriented as though he'd stepped into another world.

"Well, we're here," Anders announced to the entire group in a bright, cheery voice despite his weariness. "Welcome to Refuge!"

If Hawke was expecting anything, to be brutally honest, it was a refugee camp. He'd seen the inside of all too many of those in his life -- in Gwaren while fleeing the Blight, again at the gates of Kirkwall. A number of huddled tent camps had sprouted up here and there along the Ferelden-Orlesian border, from people fleeing the Orlesian Civil War, and of course the roving hungry army of refugee mages under Fiona. Some were better managed than others, but the sight of shabby rows of canvas tents, pale and shuttered faces huddled in dirty cloaks under the cold was a too common one.

Instead, what he found on the other side of the tunnel was... well, a city. Like the lost fabled city of Barindur that had vanished in a single day had popped up again once more, an entire settlement not found on any map.

The center of the city was dominated by a huge stone tower, a squat and blocky structure of sharp-
cut rock accented with glittering glass windows. Spreading out from the central point was a scattered jumble of other buildings, all different colors and shapes and designs; they were clustered more thickly in close, more sparsely further away, like a double handful of gravel dropped on a table. Moving confidently through the narrow, twisting alleyways between buildings were mages dressed in a riot of different colors and clothing designs, from cloth robes to leather hunting cloaks to woolen hose and jerkins.

Nor were mages the only ones in the streets. Hawke caught a glimpse of a healthy sprinkling of dwarves as well, and slower-moving people with the Chantry sunburst on their foreheads. A crowd of children ran by, goggling at high speed as they went. Hawke recognized the body language; too curious to stay away but too cautious of strangers to approach just yet. What boggled the mind was not the existence of children, but the fact that the crowd was a mix of elves, humans and dwarves. He'd seen dwarven children before in Kirkwall, melting pot that it had been, but the dwarf and human families there had tended to keep strictly to their own kind.

"You're free to come and go as you please," Anders was telling the crowd of exhausted mages as they gawked at the hidden city. "For now, though, I expect most of you will want something to eat and a place to rest. Follow me to the central Tower and we'll start with food, and by sundown we should have places for you all to sleep."

"This place is incredible!" Damien said, and Hawke really could only agree.

"Where did it even come from?" Hawke asked. "Were there some dwarven ruins up here, just waiting to be built up again?"

"No, this is all new," one of the local mages -- Hawke hadn't gotten her name -- said proudly. "When we came here last summer, none of this was here -- just a big empty lot. The Dwarven King had it built for us up from nothing!"

Hawke was left to boggle at the sheer feat of will it must have taken Anders to convince the king of Orzammar, by Varric's account the most hidebound and xenophobic kingdom on the planet, to build an entire city from the ground up just on his say-so.

They continued through the narrow little towards the Tower, and their little procession was joined by what must have been half a hundred other mages, all dressed in that odd eclectic mix of styles that was common here. They stood on boxes or peered out of windows to get a look at the newcomers; sent cries of welcome and gladness; many of them came up to offer a handclasp or a hug or even a small token of a gift to the weary new arrivals.

For the mages of Hawke's party, who had spent a long and grueling journey to reach this sanctuary even before daring the horrors of the Deep Roads, such a glad welcome was almost too much. Several of them broke into tears; one sat down right on the side of the road, shoulders shaking. But with a gentle word and a firm hand Anders got them all up and moving again until at last they reached the Tower.

"We'll give everyone a full tour later," Anders said, shooing off the last of the gawking crowds as the refugee mages straggled inside the doors. They turned to gawk at the inside of the Tower, and Hawke joined them; the halls were an odd echoing height, lower than a cathedral but higher than any other building he'd been in, it reminded him more than anything of the inside of a warehouse.

The Tower was well-lit and also warm, he noticed as soon as the door shut behind them. His good traveling gear and the exercise of moving had kept him warm enough, but the air in the valley had been damp and biting-cold. Inside, though he could see no fires and smell no stoves, the air carried a warmth that seemed to come from the walls and ceilings themselves.
Anders wasn't done talking, though. "In the meantime, you can find the dining hall on the left along this corridor, and the kitchen on the right; we'll arrange food for everybody. As you eat, or after you eat, I'd like to see each of you one at a time in the infirmary, which is on the other end of the corridor. If anyone is hurt, let me know -- but even if you think you're fine I'd like to look you over, just to be sure."

Of course Anders had his own infirmary -- that sounded more like the Anders that Hawke knew. It also sounded like an opportunity. Subdued murmurs of agreement and gratitude met Anders' announcement, but most of the pinched and hollow faces were more interested in the promised food than anything else.

The crowd of refugees straggled into the wide dining hall, and Anders disappeared into a room down the end of the hallway. Hawke and Damien followed their noses down the other end of the hall and found a wide-open, dark-walled kitchen through the double doorway, occupied by a thickset dwarf with a tray of pastries and a curly-haired man bent intently over an open oven door.

"Get out of here," the man ordered crossly, and Hawke started at the familiarity of the voice. "This soufflé is at a very delicate stage, and any of you clumsy --"

The mage straightened up and turned around, pan in hand, and Hawke was treated to a view of what Damien would have looked like without the scar, which he'd gained before Hawke had met him. Dark brown eyes went huge with surprise, and he dropped the pan, which hit the floor and promptly deflated.

"Roro!" Damien said delightedly, and yes, this could be none other than Daros Amell, another of the Amell cousins.

"Damie?!!" Daros said, eyes wide and incredulous.

Damien spread his arms, beaming widely. "Looking good, baby bro!" he exclaimed

"Don't call me that!" Daros retorted. "You are twenty minutes older --"

This familiar, enormously practiced complaint was cut off when the two brothers crashed into an all-engulfing hug. Hawke lingered for a moment, waiting to see if he was going to be introduced, but the brothers seemed entirely occupied with each other. Well, he hadn't come all the way to Refuge to see Daros Amell.

Hawke stole two of the cream pastries off the tray as the baker-dwarf goggled, and went in search of Anders.

Anders was rummaging through boxes and shelves of supplies when Hawke entered, and the sight shot a pang of familiarity into his chest. The setting was different, but Anders' motions and manner -- even the ways that the bins and barrels were organized, the colors and the labels, took him back to the Darktown clinic under Kirkwall. He half expected to catch sight of the ocean past Anders' shoulder, out the breach in the wall that overlooked the sea. A gleam of light from the setting sun, at just the right angle and time of day, would fall on Anders and illuminate him in a cloud of dust and fumes.

"Is there anything --" Anders turned around, papers in hand, and broke off midsentence. He stared, apparently as struck dumb as he had been down at the Deep Roads entrance, and once more Hawke found himself with the urge to babble.

"I wasn't particularly hungry," he said with a nonchalant shrug, and pretended to study his nails.
"So I thought I'd get ahead of the line, beat the rush."

Anders let out a breath of exasperation. "I'm sure you're just fine, Hawke," he said, and turned back towards his workbench (though Hawke had enough experience with his routine to know when he was just fussing to occupy his hands.) "You always are."

*Mostly only thanks to you,* popped to the tip of Hawke's tongue, but wouldn't pass his lips. A bit too melodramatic for the situation, really. Instead he said, "But I've just come out of peril, great peril. I was in the Deep Roads for days, who knows what ugly bugs I might have picked up down there? I think I've got slimelung, matter of fact."

"There's no such thing as slimelung," Anders said, looking both amused and annoyed.

"Says who?"

"Says the Warden and healer," Anders said with a snort.

"But really," Hawke persisted. "I might have hurt myself without knowing it. I might have a contusion!"

"That's concussion," Anders sighed. "Fine. Let's have a look at you, then."

Victory! Hawke suppressed an urge to punch the air. Anders shucked the robe, a loss which Hawke had mixed feelings about, and began to tie back his sleeves. "All right, have a seat."

"Don't worry, I still remember the routine. Bend over and drop my breeches, right, healer?" He followed this up with an outrageous wink.

Anders laughed. A burst of laughter had him clap his hand over his mouth, and a blush spread upwards from there; and *there* was the crinkle around his eyes, the dancing sparkle they got when he smiled; and how long it had been, Hawke wondered indignantly, since any of the sticks-in-the-mud here had made Anders laugh?

Still chuckling, Anders called magic to his hands and moved in, searching over Hawke's body for any sign of injury or disease. Encouraged by the close proximity, by the initial success of his joke, Hawke was about to move in further when the scene was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. They both looked over at the door of the infirmary, and Hawke did a double take.

The newcomer was an elf, Dalish going by the facial tattoo under her eye, but dressed in a mix of rose-colored Circle robes and fur-lined leather overgarments. She was also heavily pregnant -- the first time Hawke had ever seen a pregnant Dalish elf -- yet somehow managed to glide over the stone floors without making a noise.

The elf met his eyes, and Hawke felt sweat break out on the back of his neck as the icy blue eyes assessed him. She said not a word, but at the same time Hawke read the message as clear as if she had shouted it: she could see right through him to every one of his weaknesses. She would not threaten him -- such a move was far too overt -- but she didn't *need* to; he knew with a sudden surety that if he made one wrong move under her scrutiny, she would take swift and certain steps to end him.

She looked from him over to Anders, and he felt like he could breathe easily again. "Flirting with heartbreak, Anders?" she said, and her eyes flicked over to him again. But she still didn't address him directly. "Or just flirting?"
Anders blushed and stepped back, waving his hands to dismiss the green glow. "Ah... nothing to worry about," he mumbled. "I was just checking Garrett -- Hawke here over for, for injuries. Garrett, this is Neria, she's a friend."

"He seems to be quite healthy," Neria said, her voice perfectly flat and even. Hawke would have wondered if she was Tranquil, except for the lack of a brand. "Perhaps it's a good time for you to take a break, Anders? You're still recovering, after all, and we're all quite worried about you. We don't want to see you get... hurt, again."

"Ah." Anders' expression shuttered, and for a long moment he stood still; the nervous movements of his hands rubbing a stretch of bandage over themselves were the only motion around them. He looked back up at Neria, and a fleeting smile touched his lips and then was gone. "Maybe you're right."

"I can come back later," Hawke offered, inserting himself into the awkward moment.

Neria gave him a look that managed to convey quite a lot, for how unexpressive it was. "You could."

Hawke looked to Anders for support, but the healer was back to shredding the bandage between his hands, avoiding Hawke's eyes. What was going on here? Anders had responded, Hawke knew he had; why was he freezing Hawke out again? Did Anders want him back, or didn't he?

Maybe he was trying to take this too fast; maybe a tactical retreat was in order. Hawke slipped out of the infirmary, and went to console himself with a few more of those cream puffs.

Hawke found Damien out in the dining hall, steadily making his way through a bowl of soup. Three other bowls and two plates littered the table beside him; Damien was clearly making up for the last few weeks of tight rations. He'd been a big eater for as long as Hawke had known him, but neither Andorhal nor the road to Refuge had allowed for him to indulge himself.

"No luck?" Damien asked between slurps of soup. Hawke slumped beside him on the bench with a groan.

"I don't even know," he confessed. "I managed to get him alone for a bit, and I got him to laugh..."

Damien nodded. "Always a good sign," he said.

"...but then this terrifying pregnant elf woman came in and broke the mood," Hawke sighed. "I'll tell you, Damien, better to watch out for that one. If she weren't a mage, I would have guessed she was a rogue. Maybe a Crow."

"So your lover's got over-protective friends," Damien said. "That's not too big of a problem, you just need to get around them. You're sneaky enough -- I'm sure you can find a way."

"It's not that simple." Hawke frowned at the table, absently stole the plate from under Damien's elbow and began eating off it. "Anders could have chased her off, if he wanted. Stubborn as a mule, nobody could run off one of his visitors if he didn't want them to. But he didn't come in on
my side, he just sort of… shut down. But he also didn't tell me to fuck off himself? I don't know what he wants."

Damien hummed. "Maybe he doesn't know either."

"I think you may be right."

"But hey, at least he doesn't know what he doesn't want! So you've just got to convince him that what he wants is you!" Damien grinned. "Come on, cousin, don't give up so easily. You're a great catch, anyone would want you. I'm sure that given a little bit of time, he'll come around. Have you tried writing him a sonnet?"

"A sonnet?" Hawke stared at his friend incredulously. "What would he ever do with a sonnet?"

"Hey, it worked for Giacomo da Rialto," Damien defended his suggestion. "He won over the hearts of six reluctant suitors that way."

"He's also a fictional character." Hawke was beginning to rethink the wisdom of asking a former Circle Mage for advice on romance. The more he met of the breed, the more he began to realize that Anders had been remarkably worldly and well-adjusted compared to the rest, and this was a man who thought a promise to 'drown the world in blood' was high romance.

"He's a legend," Damien huffed. "And so are you, Champion of Kirkwall, so --"

Their banter was interrupted by a stir of movement towards the door. A handful of mages and Tranquil entered, led by Mardra carrying a clipboard. Behind her trailed Anders, the scary elf-lady, and a tall and gawky dark-haired man Hawke didn't recognize. Damien's face lit up, and he got up from his seat at the table to stride over and hug his sister again, even lifting her off the floor a few inches, eliciting a strangled squeak. "Damie! Put me down," Mardra hissed; laughing, the other mage did so.

"I can't believe I'm big enough to do that now," Damien chuckled. "What fun!"

"Well, have fun some other time, when I'm not working," Mardra replied grumpily.

"Which is when?" Anders said, sounding amused. Hawke watched him carefully, but Anders did not look his way; however, he felt Neria's gaze boring into him from the other side of the room.

Mardra took a moment to rearrange her hair and clothes, then turned to face the crowd of refugees in the dining hall. "I thought you all would like to know where you'll be sleeping tonight," she announced, to general approval. "I had to do a bit of shuffling, but I managed to clear up enough rooms for everyone. You'll be doubling up, but at least everyone should be able to sleep in a real bed."

That elicited a cheer; Mardra looked flustered for a moment, then smiled. She pulled out a large sheet of graph paper and handed it over to the Tranquil, who took it and began to fasten it up against one of the stone walls. "All the rooms and names are noted here," she said. "Damien, you'll be staying in Daros's room in East-C. Lydda and Talor will be in southwest-A. Jun and Jannik, southwest-B. Garrett and Emile, you'll be in southeast-B --"

Hawke looked up, slightly startled to hear his given name called by someone other than Anders. "Wait, me?" he said.

"Yes, of course." Mardra frowned at him. "I didn't think you'd want to camp outside; there's snow due before morning."
"Well, I guess..." Hawke sputtered. "I sort of assumed I'd be in with Anders."

"What?" the dark-haired man jumped into the conversation. "Are you serious? You think you can just waltz right in and --"

"Hush, Jowan," Neria interrupted him. She gave a little nod over to Anders. "Let him decide."

All eyes turned towards Anders, who fidgeted uncomfortably under the weight of it. He looked briefly over at Hawke, who sent back his best puppy-dog gaze, begging shamelessly for Anders to open the doors and let him in.

Anders' mouth tightened. He looked away. "I guess Garrett can stay with Emile," he said. "They're both Kirkwall nobility, after all; they have plenty in common."

"What?" Hawke said, horrified by this betrayal. "Come on! You can't put me in with Emile! He blows his nose on the pillow."

"Yes, and you --" Anders broke off, frowning. He shook his head. "Never mind. Work it out among yourselves, it's fine."

Damien, thank the Maker, came to Hawke's rescue. "Well, if we Kirkwall nobles are going to stick together, then me and Hawke can be roomies," he said brightly. "Emile can be in with Daros. He'll love that."

"If that's decided," Mardra interrupted them, looking distinctly disgruntled to have all her planning swapped around on her. "In a few weeks, once more rooms on the second floor are ready to be inhabited we can reconsider rooming arrangements. In three days, we'll have a welcome banquet for all the newcomers that everyone is invited to attend. For tonight, everyone just try to get to bed with no more arguments."

The gathering broke up then; Mardra turned and marched out of the dining hall. Hawke stared after her, wondering why she -- and so many of the other Refuge mages -- seemed to dislike him.

Maybe it wasn't that much of a mystery. Even as Hawke stood up off the bench, Anders abruptly rose and left the hall ahead of him. Hawke sighed. It was that damnable song, he was willing to bet. Spreading the tale of his and Anders' doomed romance from here to Antiva.

"Don't look so glum, cousin," Damien said, as he threw an arm around Hawke's shoulders. "We've got food in our stomachs, and roofs that don't leak, and no mangonels lobbing burning pitch at our heads. I'd say we've come up in the world!"

"I didn't realize he'd be so..." Hawke trailed off, at a loss. He'd expected anger; he'd also expected joy and enthusiasm. He hadn't expected this odd mixed in-between, wavering between warm welcome and cold blank nothingness.

Damien slapped his hand against Hawke's shoulders. "Come on, it's only been one day!" he said. "Give it time. I'm sure he'll take you back sooner or later!"

Later rather than sooner, it appeared. Hawke let himself be steered by his cousin's arm over his shoulder, towards a bed much colder than the one he'd hoped to find here.
~tbc...
Chapter Summary

In which a number of people find out things that take them rather aback.

Chapter Notes

Readers please note: I went back and made edits to Chapter 62, Concursion, to correct a few oversights that should never have made it to final print: explaining what happened to Hawke’s dog, as well as Damien and Daros’ reunion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was something to be said for down time, Hawke supposed, especially after a grueling journey (and while it didn't hold a candle to the infamous Expedition, Hawke automatically classed any journey that included the Deep Roads in any capacity as 'grueling.'). The little mage town surprised him time and time again with its little secrets and luxuries: hot baths, warm beds, good food.

It was a strange juxtaposition to Hawke's eyes: Refuge seemed at once incredibly rich and yet also peculiarly poor. They had all these communal wonders, the huge building with all its amenities, food to spare for everyone even including an influx of sudden arrivals, and yet... few of the mages had much of anything of their own. He spotted almost no jewelry, and they all seemed to wear the same outfits daily, no wardrobes or stashes to change from. The Tower was littered with little decorations, yet they were all flimsy glass or cheap paint, no rich paintings or tapestries or treasures. For all the richness of their surroundings, they seemed to have almost no possessions to themselves.

Entertainment he mostly had to make for himself. He spent the three days between his arrival and the welcome banquet exploring the little valley, together with his dog and sometimes with Damien. The mages at Refuge met his arrival with varying degrees of wariness or coolness, but it was hardly the first time he’d been met with a chilly reception; he was confident that a handsome and witty man with an adorable dog could win them all over in the end. Or maybe one of them would have lost a wedding ring, which he could helpfully find, that always helped to get in people's good graces.

He ventured down to the river on the first day and was surprised to meet up with an Avvar trading expedition, and spent most of the day talking and swapping boasts and tales. The second day the weather worsened, so he took a trip down through the tunnel to Orzammar itself -- the dwarven city was a sight worth coming all this way to see, all by itself.

The third day after his arrival, to Hawke's surprise, was First Flame. He hadn't realized they were coming up on it. He wondered if Refuge had already planned a celebration on that day and the refugees' arrival was coincidental, or if they just chose to theme the party after the holiday to which
First Flame was a fairly minor holiday on the Chantry's ecclesiastical calendar, much less important than Bonfire's Eve or Ascencion Day. Supposedly it marked the day that the first candle was lit in the first Chantry devoted to Andraste. The Anderfels observed it, as they observed every holy day ever imagined with rigorous piety, and it was also celebrated in Nevarra, perhaps because it coincided with the end of their harvest season. In Orlais and Ferelden, though, it tended to get overshadowed by Satinalia and forgotten.

But it had always been celebrated in the Hawke household right up until Malcolm's death. As a child Hawke hadn't thought to ask why; he enjoyed being able to lord an extra day of candle-lighting and sweets over the neighbor's children, and their neighbors just assumed them to be especially pious. Only much later in life did Hawke learn that First Flame was always observed inside the Circle, emphasizing one fact that was notably absent from the rest -- that it had been a mage who lit the first flame, and every flame after that until the signing of the Nevarran Accords.

There were not many holidays under the Chant that celebrated the existence of mages; perhaps it was not a surprise that they clung to this one.

Whatever the reasons, the great hall had been done up quite impressively for the First Flame celebration: lamps and candles lined every wall, casting a warm golden glow that helped offset the faded graying winter light that filtered in through the window. The hundred little flames caught and refracted in the glass that seemed to be everywhere, filling every window and even decorating the walls and doors in many places.

Delicate spheres of glass -- were those potion-bottles? -- hung from thin threads tacked to beams and lintels, some of them holding candles and others just reflecting back the light. Some of the tables had been pushed together in the center of the room to create a wide, flat platform, and a design had been set up of colored foods in the center of it, in the Nevarran style. Golden wheat grains, tiny red crabapples, small green and orange gourds and violet-blue grapes had been set in a spiral pattern, a visual delight and a celebration of the recent harvest in one.

As the day waned, the hall filled, and people were directed to tables by Mardra and a few mages apparently drafted as her helpers. Everyone had dressed up for the party, or at least dressed up to the extent of their wardrobes; Hawke saw mostly robes and tunics, less of the leather wildman gear. Anders sat at one long table at the edge of the room with Surana, her husband, and a few others. Hawke himself, along with Damien and Daros Amell, were ushered to a table set at right angles to the first one, all tables set in a square pattern around the central display.

He was too far from the head table to try further persuasion on Anders, but at least he had a good line of sight on him, and he made the most of it. Anders had cleaned up too; his hair was neatly tied back and freshly washed, his beard trimmed and his clothes laundered. He wasn't wearing the robe today, and Hawke already missed it.

"Well, it's hardly a real city, but it could be worse," Daros was saying to his brother. "We're starting to get some real signs of civilization around here at last."

"It beats a cold camp in the Hinterlands all hollow," Hawke told him frankly. "A couple of the colder nights on the way here, I was hoping a bear would attack our camp just so that we could cuddle up to it; but no, they all had the good sense to be away hibernating."

"This is a good position, though," Damien said appreciatively; he'd accompanied Hawke on some of his explorations in the past few days, the two of them getting a sense of the lay of the land. "Fortifiable, secret. You could stage raids out of here for years without the Templars being able to
trace you back to your home base."

Jowan, who'd been listening in to the conversation, turned to join in. "A nice thought," he said, "but the Templars already know where we are."

"Eh…" Damien shrugged. "In a general way, sure. Thanks to that proclamation everyone knows that we're somewhere around Orzammar, but they don't know how to get up here."

"No, they do," Jowan said, with a particular scowl aimed at… Daros? Who, for some reason, was looking down at the table with a dark flush on his cheeks.

Damien looked baffled. "What?"

Daros cleared his throat, and set down his fork. "I told them," he said. "I sent a letter to the Redcliffe Templar contingent with our location and directions to approach."

"What?" Damien said. He stared at his brother, who looked defiantly back at him. Apparently at a loss for words, he wound pack his arm and punched Daros in the head.

Daros reeled back, rocking the table and overturning his bench. All eyes in the hall turned towards them as Daros sputtered. "What?!" he demanded, holding one hand up to his nose. "Hey!"

"What'd you go and do something so stupid for?!" Damien bellowed.

Daros' temper flared in response. "Don't call me stupid, stupid!" he yelled back. "Which of us still has both his eyes?!!"

Damien lunged at him, and the two brothers fell to the floor of the Hall, punching and kicking. Hawke gazed down at the pair of them, strongly reminiscent of certain scenes of his own youth, and fed his dog Carver another piece of cheese.

The mages watching the brawl hooted and clapped their hands, until Mardra hurried up with a scowl ferocious enough to put both of theirs to shame. With one smooth movement she stooped and grabbed each of them by the scruff of the neck, hauling them apart and to their knees. "You two!" she scolded, and shook them both. "Don't make me bang your heads together again like you're six!"

"Sorry, Mardy," the twins said in chorus. Mardra huffed in exasperation, gave them another shake, then let them go and stormed away again to oversee the distribution of the main course.

Hawke watched her go, nibbling on a piece of cheese of his own. "Bit tightly-buttoned, isn't she? No sense of humor at all. Hard to believe she's related to you."

Damien sat back on the bench, his fit of anger apparently all forgotten. "Mardy has always been serious," he said.

Daros leaned around Damien to scowl at him. "And you can keep your hands to yourself," he said venomously. "I've heard about your reputation, 'Kirkwall's Premiere Bachelor.'"

Where in the Void was this coming from? "No fear of that!" Hawke said fervently. "Trust me, not even tempted!"

Daros' scowl only deepened, and he leaned forward to get into Hawke's space. "What, you think she's ugly? Our sister not good enough for the likes of you?!!"

"She's my cousin!" Hawke protested, leaning back on the bench.
"Second cousin, technically," Damien commented, separating a bunch of tiny grapes from their vine. "Mamere and Aunt Leandra were cousins."

"First, second, or seventh, still not interested!" Hawke said. "I've got my own affairs to look after, thank you very much!"

"Hmmph," Daros said. His scowl didn't let up, but at least he leaned back.

Once again, Hawke found his eyes drawn to the blond figure sitting at the head table. One of the lines of hanging glass ornaments has sagged from its position, and Anders, after some low-voiced debate with his seatmate, had stood up to reach up and adjust it. His face so intent in concentration, the familiar furrowed look of his brow, lit by the candles only inches away; the golden light bobbed and shifted as the light swung back into position, and Anders sat down again. One of his seatmates said something in a laughing tone, and Anders smiled…

"Your own affairs, hm?" Damien said, and grinned. "Speaking of which --"

They were interrupted by a clanking noise from the head table, and all eyes turned in that direction. Jowan had stood up, tapping his eating-knife against his plate to get everyone's attention. He cleared his throat. "Um," he said. "Uh, welcome to Refuge, everybody. I hope you're settling in okay."

A chorus of assent. Hawke glanced over at Anders. He would expected him to be giving the welcome speech, or Mardra. Why this guy?

"I know you're hungry, so I won't keep you long," Jowan forged on. "I just wanted to say, uhm, well. If there's anyone among the new group who left their phylactery behind when they left the Circle, like I did… well, if you didn't have a chance to break it yourself or you don't know where it is or what happened to it, um. I can help with that."

"Help do what?" An older, rather tetchy mage named Lloyd, who had come to Refuge in Hawke's group, called out in response. "Help find it? I know where it is, thank ye kindly. Knowin' doesn't do us much good."

"No, not with finding it," Jowan protested. "With, uh, well, with destroying it."

"But you just said --" Lloyd protested.

"Right, you don't need to have it with you," Jowan said immediately. "I've, uh, we've figured out a way to destroy it anyway. Remotely. From anywhere."

A sudden silence fell over the hall. You could have heard a pin drop. Hawke glanced around, somewhat confused; the effect of this announcement on the mages seemed entirely out of proportion.

He knew what a phylactery was, of course -- Malcolm had told them, when he told them about the Circle. Unless it was destroyed, there was always the possibility that a Templar would be able to track them anywhere they went. Well, that was a concern, but so what? With the Circles in ruins and the Templars growing more and more fractious with every week their lyrium shipments were delayed, how big a risk was it really?

The silence on the hall broke into a low murmuring. One woman stood up from the table -- Metea, one of the Tranquil who had traveled with them. "That is impossible," she said in her smooth, calm voice. "There is no magic that could track an item from such a remove, let alone have a physical effect on it."
"There is, though," Jowan replied. Hawke thought he looked nervous, and had to steel himself to blurt out the next words. "The same kind of magic that makes the phylacterys work in the first place. Blood magic."

An uproar broke out in the hall, with mages jumping to their feet and shouting from both the new group and the old. "That's impossible! Impossible!" Lloyd bellowed, spitting little bits of fire from the frizzled edges of his white hair.

"It's not!" another mage Hawke didn't know retorted. "I saw it done, I saw it! He broke Milan's phylactery right in front of our eyes with that spell of his. It's about time somebody found a way to take us out from the Chantry's yoke!"

"But blood magic?" another woman cried out, her hands fluttering as she wrung them together. "Is it worth it? Is anything worth it?"

"Well, I say it is!" the first mage snapped. "I say that to live free, no longer living in fear, we should use whatever tools the Maker gives us!"

At Hawke's feet, Carver whined and pressed herself closer to the floor; the amount of sparks and heavy vibrations rising from the crowd of upset mages was making her uneasy. Making him uneasy, too, to tell the truth; Hawke stroked his dog with a comforting hand and cast an eye on the exits.

"Blood magic does not come from the Maker! It is an abomination under His sight, and so are all that use it!" a voice rang out in a strong Anderfels accent. Jannik, one of the two blond mages from the Anderfels whose tough leather gear and gleaming muscles made them look more like bodyguards for a particularly discerning noblewoman than mages, had risen from his table with his hands clenched into fists. "He does not brook the presence of maleficarum, and neither do we of the Anders!"

Anders rose from his seat as well; up until now he had been staying out of the fray, letting the mages argue among themselves. But now he did enter the argument, and the heated voices faltered and fell silent as his presence rolled out across the crowd. "That is not for you to say," he said. His voice was calm, but there was a deep, reverberating note in it that did not invite contradiction. "Jowan is not a maleficar; he has harmed no one."

"But he openly admitted to blood magic!" Jun shouted, leaping up beside his countryman. "What else does that make him?"

"If that's all it takes to make a maleficar, then every Templar who has crafted a phylactery is one as well," Anders said dryly. A few strained chuckles broke out among the crowd. "No. We have judged him by his intent and his outcome, and he has harmed no one. Here at Refuge we keep all forms of magic in the light, where they can be watched and kept safe, and used for the benefit of all. If you find that too outrageous to your sensibilities, we are not forcing you to stay; but I will not allow you to harm or cow any who have taken refuge here."

No one moved. Jowan looked close to tears, hearing Anders' speech in his defense. The Anderfels mages argued among themselves. But now he did enter the argument, and the heated voices faltered and fell silent as his presence rolled out across the crowd. "That is not for you to say," he said. His voice was calm, but there was a deep, reverberating note in it that did not invite contradiction. "Jowan is not a maleficar; he has harmed no one."

"But he openly admitted to blood magic!" Jun shouted, leaping up beside his countryman. "What else does that make him?"

"If that's all it takes to make a maleficar, then every Templar who has crafted a phylactery is one as well," Anders said dryly. A few strained chuckles broke out among the crowd. "No. We have judged him by his intent and his outcome, and he has harmed no one. Here at Refuge we keep all forms of magic in the light, where they can be watched and kept safe, and used for the benefit of all. If you find that too outrageous to your sensibilities, we are not forcing you to stay; but I will not allow you to harm or cow any who have taken refuge here."

No one moved. Jowan looked close to tears, hearing Anders' speech in his defense. The Anderfels mages looked like they'd bitten into a lemon; most of the rest looked thunderstruck. And a few, hidden here and there among the rows of mages sitting at the back table, he thought a few looked relieved.

Nor were the mages the only ones thunderstruck. Hawke had a front row seat to it, and he still couldn't believe his ears. Anders was the one saying this? Anders? The same Anders who'd routinely blistered poor Merrill's ears with lectures about her bad choices and the shame she
brought on all magekind?

Hawke had never considered himself a regressive; he'd grown up in a house with two mages living out from under the Templars' thumbs. He'd made friends over the years mostly with criminals and cutthroats, fugitives and apostates… and Merrill, the friendliest blood mage he'd ever met. She was so kind and good-hearted that he'd cared for her and done his best by her, however much he disapproved of her use of blood. Almost the only one among their group to be so tolerant, excluding the rogues who knew even less of how magic worked than he did. And he'd always prided himself on his tolerance, especially when compared with Fenris and Anders.

And now Anders was the one preaching for the use of ethical blood magic?

Had he stepped into a storybook, or fallen back in time, or what?

Jannik went milk-pale under his sun-blown tan, and sat down meekly at the table again. Anders did the same a moment later, and the crisis seemed to have passed. Slowly conversation began to pick up around the room again, and attention returned to the food, but there was an underlying air of tension under the room that hovered unspoken. Unfriendly glares were exchanged between the members of the new faction and the old, a frosty coldness in word and gesture. One pitcher of wine was jostled between two tables, slipped and spilled, leading to an outbreak of recriminations and denials that was slow to subside. Mardra, Hawke saw out of the corner of his eye, was looking increasingly frazzled.

It helped somewhat when the food was brought out; whole spitted sides of venison, roast potatoes, salted vegetables, tray upon tray of pies, rolls, and loaves of herbal bread. Hawke's eye was drawn to the bright colors of the centerpiece foods, and in an unattended moment swiped one of the apples from the central display. He bit into it, and dropped it with a muttered oath; it was wax.

There was music, too; on a raised platform in a corner of the room a handful of mages and one dwarf had assembled into a makeshift chamber orchestra. Somewhat to his surprise the scary pregnant elf lady was one of those up on the stage, a small harp in her lap as she played along with the rest of them.

Damien groaned as the first notes of the song drifted over to them. "Blight, not Enchanters again," he grumbled.

Daros sniffed at him. "I would have thought such revolutionary tripe would be right up your alley," he said.

"Oh, it is," Damien assured him. "But it also got played approximately fifty times a day back at Andorhal. Even the best songs lose their pall after that."

"Could be worse," Hawke said. "They could be playing The Champion's Heart."

"Speaking of which…" Damien put aside his plate and turned a wide grin on Hawke, nudging him with his elbow and nodding up towards Anders. "How's operation Get Back in the Darktown Healer's Robes going, eh? Eh?"

Hawke winced. But before he had a chance to report on his progress, or lack of progress, the blood mage from before turned to them with a scowl and jumped in. "Get back with Anders? Not a chance!" he said heatedly. "You don't deserve Anders! Not after you stabbed him in the back in Kirkwall!"

It might have been just unfortunate coincidence that the music was between verses when he said
that, so his voice rang out in a sudden silence over a hall. Heads began to turn, and Hawke suddenly felt all eyes on him. "I didn't!" he said quickly, furiously, cursing Varric silently to the Void and back. He stuffed his mouth with roasted potatoes, trying to look casual and non-guilty.

"After he what?" Anders himself pushed his way into the conversation. He looked over at Hawke, then over at Jowan with a dangerous scowl that made Hawke's heart rate increase incrementally. "Where did you hear that?"

Jowan seemed to realize his misstep, as he stammered and stuttered. "Uh... it was in the book..."

"Varric's book?" Anders exclaimed. "Varric is a consummate liar! If Hawke had really shanked me in Kirkwall, do you think I'd still be standing here?"

"Well, why not? How should I know?" Jowan said indignantly. "You said you got stabbed through the heart with a sword one time and survived that!"

Hawke coughed on a potato. "What?"

"And that assassin last spring who shot you up with magebane and poison and you survived that!" Jowan went on. Anders glanced over at Hawke, and sent furious little negating-motions at Jowan.

"WHAT?" Hawke demanded.

But Jowan was on a roll now. "Vael shot an arrow through your chest less than a week ago and you're up and standing here now! How should I know what you can and can't survive?"

"WHAT?!" Hawke roared, jumping to his feet. "What kind of flaming trouble have you been getting into, Anders?!

Anders shot Hawke a dark scowl. "Oh, like you're one to talk?" he said hotly. "You made it clear that you didn't care what sort of trouble I got into any more!"

"That's not true!" Hawke said indignantly. "I do care! I never said I didn't care!"

Anders sputtered, looking too astounded and furious to reply; but then another one of the Refuge mages came to his rescue, a bare-faced elf with shoulder-length blond hair and bow-calloused fingers. "No, I think you've made it clear that you have no say in where Anders goes or what he does!" he said hotly. "You don't deserve Anders. He deserves better than someone who would betray him and throw him away!"

Hawke could, well, Hawke could think of a lot of things to say to that, but he didn't get the chance; Lloyd broke into the conversation, full of righteous anger on Hawke's behalf. "Well, I didn't see your 'Anders' fightin' to break the Templar lines at Andorhal," he said pugnaciously. "Or protectin' us from bears in the Hinterlands! Nor disguisin' himself as a Chantry sister to get info out of the Seekers, neither!"

Anders boggled. "What?"

"Long story," Hawke sighed. It had been a very harried night of intrigue, and stolen missives, and secret midnight rendezvous with the Knight-Captain, and not one he looked forward to revisiting.

Another Refuge mage added their name to the descant, getting to her very wobbly feet. "Well, that's because Anders was HERE, offering to spend FORTY YEARS in the DEEP ROADS so that WE could have a home!" she said at the top of her lungs.
Just what Hawke thought he'd reached the end of it -- "WHAT?!"

"Look, I don't see why we have to fight," Damien said in a placating tone. "Hawke is a champion, a fighter for the mages, and that's what matters the most to Anders too, isn't it? They're perfect for each other! They just have to see it, and put aside their differences."

That was too much for Daros. "No! I won't have it," he snapped, surging to his feet and glaring daggers at Anders. "We may be working together for the good of mages, but I refuse to have you as an in-law. I won't accept you dating my cousin!"

Anders glowered at Daros. "Look, in the first place, it's none of your business who --" he started to say.

"Besides, he's already dating your sister!" the wobbly mage piped in helpfully.

The head table rocked as several people slammed into it. Hawke knew the feeling, nearly hitting the floor himself as a surge of shock and awful, unpleasant realization crashed over him. The close way they'd worked together, the easy understanding between them -- "What?" Daros demanded, pointing accusatorily at Anders. "You -- my sister --"

"That's not true!" Mardra chimed in hastily, looking startled and deeply alarmed to be dragged into the argument.

Daros sagged, hand on his breast. "Oh thank the Maker," he whimpered.

Mardra looked out over the party, took a deep breath, and stood up from the table. "I'm dating Justice," she said. "Not Anders. The Spirit of Justice who possesses him."

"WHAT?!"

The entire hall devolved into a melee, shouting and accusations. It took Jowan and Damien together to restrain Daros who was screeching his head off. One of the Anderfels mages lunged for Anders and Mardra, only to be tackled to the ground by the blond elf by a sucker-punch to the stomach. That seemed to be the signal for a general brawl, mages from both factions yelling or piling on each other. Someone cast a mind blast, knocking back three mages and overturning a table; somebody else got knocked into the central table, overturning all the carefully placed decorations. Hawke saw Emile and several younger mages diving for cover under the tables as the air began to crackle and smoke.

It was an excellent time to make use of the quick exits he'd scouted early in the meal. Hawke used them.

It took almost an hour before the shouting died down, and Anders returned to his quarters. Hawke was, of course, already there.

Anders paused with his hand on the door; then his mouth firmed and he stepped inside. "I suppose a sense of privacy is too much to ask for," he said snippily. "But then, you always came into my home back in Kirkwall as you pleased, didn't you?"
"Your door was never locked in Darktown," Hawke reminded him. "Blight, a lot of the time you didn't even have a door!"

"Yes, and now that I have one I rather am enjoying the novelty," Anders said with a sigh, shutting the door behind him. "What do you want, Hawke? Haven't you made enough trouble for one day?"

Hawke sighed, his shoulders sagging. This wasn't how he wanted this to go. "I didn't come here to make trouble for you, Anders. I... was... hoping we could recover what we once had."

Unhappiness tugged his mouth down, and he studied the swept stone floor intently. "But now I find that you have someone else. You could have just told me, you know, saved us both the embarrassment."

"I don't..." Anders reached up to run a hand through his hair, pulling it loose of the ponytail. "It's not like that, Garrett. Mardra is a good friend of mine, but we aren't together. It's only Justice that she's interested in."

"Justice? You always said that you and Justice are one. Now you say you're not," Hawke said indignantly. "You swore you'd never go back to the Deep Roads again. Now I hear you're volunteering for years on end. You were always against blood magic, more than any of us! Now you say you're not. You've changed, Anders. I feel like I barely know you."

"Did you expect me to wait for you, Garrett?" Anders said bitterly. "To put my life on hold? You were the one who told me you never wanted to see me again!"

The words rang between them. Hawke looked away, but didn't move. After a moment Anders walked over to his desk, and sat down in the chair in front of it.

"I decided to go on," Anders said softly. He glanced up at Garrett and the cold flintiness had gone out of his eyes, leaving them unutterably tired. In that, at least, he looked like the Anders that Hawke once knew. "It was the hardest thing I've done in my life, but I've done it. I can't go back now, not to who I was, not even for you."

"I'm not asking you to go back to the past," Hawke said, a little desperately. Maker knew that Kirkwall was enough of a pit, he wouldn't ask anyone to subject themselves to it. He didn't want to go back to Kirkwall with Anders, he wanted... he wanted to go on with him. Go on to whatever was next. "I'm asking if I have a place in your future."

Anders was silent. A dwarven clock ticked away on the walls, the only sound in the darkened room. "I don't know, Hawke," was all Anders said at last.

For once all his words deserted him, all his charm and wit and clever sarcasm leaving him speechless. Throat closed, eyes burning, heart in his boots, Hawke let himself out into the darkness.

~tbc...
This will be the last of the Hawke POV chapters, at least for a while.
Crosswind

Chapter Summary

Anders attempts to deal with the fallout of yesterday's revelations. Meanwhile, Hawke has somewhere else to be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast the next day was a strained, uncomfortable affair. Most of the Refuge mages had taken themselves elsewhere, but the newcomers largely didn't know where else to go to eat their meals aside from the central hall. Some, like the Anderfels mages, were cold and hostile; others were not hostile, but clearly daunted and unsure of their welcome.

Anders decided the best course of action was to brazen it out; he took his breakfast rolls and sausages into the main hall to eat, to see how things looked in the morning light and more importantly to be seen. Mardra apparently had similar thoughts, as she was eating her own breakfast of oatmeal at a table nearby with Daros.

When Anders approached the table Daros gave him a black, evil look and then pointedly moved to the next table over. Mardra rolled her eyes, and Anders suppressed the urge to do the same as he set his plate down. "Good morning, Mardra," he said.

"It is a morning, at least," she said with a sigh.

"I meant to apologize," he said. "For last night."

"Why? It wasn't your fault," Mardra said. "Not even Jowan's fault, really. We all agreed that the banquet would be the best time to make the announcement, and, well… it could have gone better, but it could have gone worse."

The four of them had talked it over beforehand and decided that Jowan should announce his new findings about the phylacteries at the first public opportunity. The opportunity to destroy your phylactery meant too much to mages to keep it from them, and the fact that it was blood magic… well, if they weren't going to keep it hidden entirely, then it was best to be up front. That way there was less room for misunderstandings, late shocks and betrayals, like there had been with the truth about Justice.

And if everybody at Refuge simply acted like it was normal and accepted for a mage to walk around joined with a spirit, for blood magic to be used for healing and warding and breaking chains… well, then maybe the newcomers would come to accept it too.

But it looked like that would be a ways off yet. "Still, even if it's not anybody's fault," Anders said. "I'm still sorry that your party got ruined. You worked hard on that."
"Thanks," Mardra said, and sighed.

He saw movement, and glanced up to see Emile du Launcet heading their way. Internally, he groaned and braced himself.

Of all the refugee mages Hawke brought with him, Emile was the one that Anders wondered the most at. It boggled the mind -- first that he had survived this long since Kirkwall to begin with, secondly that he had been willing to brave the Deep Roads to get here, and thirdly that even Hawke had been able to shepherd his uselessness to bring him through it.

Anders had first met Emile back in Kirkwall, where he had escaped from the Circle and then followed up that decision with a host of terrible ones. He'd gone home first and then, upon being blessed with the miracle of a relative who actually loved him enough to help him out, gone on to a tavern where he'd proceeded to spend all his money and tell everyone he was a mage. A **blood** mage. Hawke had given him over to Isabela's tender mercies to get him out of the city, and that had been the last he'd hoped to ever see of the man-child again.

On a more abstract level Anders pitied Emile, and those like him: it wasn't their fault they were as they were. Their indecision and incompetence was a direct result of the way they'd been raised, the way they'd been made by the Chantry, incapable of taking care of themselves outside of their prisons. But Maker, that didn't stop the man from being personally insufferable.

Anders feared that Emile was heading for him as a rare familiar face in the crowd -- but instead, Emile veered at the last minute and headed for the next table over instead, where Jowan and Surana were eating their own breakfast. Jowan glanced up, looking somewhat confused to be approached; he looked around the room as though there must be some mistake before he tried, "Can I help you?"

Emile bobbed his head in a nod. "I -- I just wanted to ask, is it true? That you're a," and here he dropped his voice into a hoarse whisper that clearly carried to every corner of the room, "a **blood** mage."

Jowan cleared his throat, then coughed, but lifted his chin proudly and answered, "Yes. Yes, I am."

"**Wow.**" Emile's eyes widened comically, and his mouth dropped into a perfect O. In a tone of absolute admiration, he breathed, "That's **so bad.**"

Jowan cleared his throat again. "Well," he said, "it's certainly a discipline that has a lot of -- a lot of potential, for harm as well as good. It's a big responsibility to take this power and use it ethically, you know."

"**Wow,**" Emile repeated. He looked over at Surana. "So it's true then? Blood mages really **do** get all the hottest girls."

Anders choked a little. Surana glanced up, looked at Emile for a moment, then transferred her gaze to Jowan instead. Jowan coughed. "Well," he said. "It's not like that -- not -- not like you're thinking. It's more like: you have to be true to who you really are, to the gifts that you have been given. And if you find that truth, and you live by that truth, then it's more like -- the girl gets you."

Surana actually smiled at that, and Jowan reached out and squeezed her hand. They shared a sappy gaze for a long moment, until it was broken by a gusty sigh for Emile. "I don't think I ever found my truth," he admitted sadly.
Jowan transferred his attention back to Emile with an understandable reluctance. "Well," he said, "if you have an interest in blood magic -- at least, as long as you don't intend to hurt anyone with it - - then I could teach you what I know," he said.

Emile lit up like a First Flame lantern. "Really?" he squealed. "Nobody's ever asked me to be their apprentice before!"

"Well," Jowan said; he looked a little daunted, but rallied to it. "Nobody's ever asked to be my apprentice either, so we'll be starting out on even ground, don't you think?"

Well. That wasn't what he'd been expecting… but Anders had to admit, they were suited for each other.

Movement at the doorway to the hall caught his eye, the more so because one of the silhouettes moved in a way that was distinctly different from a human shape (or a darkspawn shape, always a guaranteed attention-grabber.) He recognized a canine lope and silhouette and for a moment his heart shuddered in his chest, but the man who walked by the dog's side was not Hawke, but Damien Amell.

Either Damien had slept badly the night before, or else he just wasn't much of a morning person; his usual eyepatch was missing, and the hair that fell over the wounded eye was a tangled mess. His normally friendly and sunny demeanor was absent as he threw himself down on the bench beside his brother. The dog followed him, resting its head on the bench with a deep doggy sigh, and Damien slapped a piece of paper on the table with an attitude of deep annoyance.

Anders cleared his throat, raised his voice enough to be heard across the intervening table. "Morning, Damien," he said. "Your… roommate not coming to breakfast?"

"How should I know?" Damien said crossly. He picked up the paper again and waved it. "He took off in the night! Again. Left a two-page letter and a dog."

"He what?" Anders' heart dropped into his stomach. If Damien had been any closer, Anders would have lunged to grab the note out of his hand, table in the way or no. But almost as soon as the impulse grabbed him it subsided, leaving him feeling vaguely ashamed.

What was he thinking, chasing after any hint of Hawke's intentions? He'd made it clear last night -- to Hawke and to himself -- that he wasn't going to just fall into Hawke's arms again. Why should it bother him if Hawke took off without warning, leaving as suddenly as he'd come? He didn't know what to think. He didn't know what to feel. He didn't want to fall back together with Hawke -- or at least, he knew it wasn't a good idea. He didn't know what to want, but…

But he couldn't forget what Hawke had said last night, the look on his face, the naked honesty that was so rarely seen under the smiling, clowning mask. He'd forgotten the sheer attraction of Hawke's presence, his physical power, the pull it always and still had on him.

He'd been so sure that it was over with Hawke forever; and while he'd mourned that and gradually, slowly been able to move past it, to let it not dominate his every waking moment… he'd never dreamed that Hawke would come back. That there would be even the potential for anything more - - and it was that potential, so suddenly and shockingly snuffed out, that hurt.

His shoulder sagged despite his efforts to keep them straight, and he fought to keep his voice steady. "What exactly does the letter say?"

"There's something I have to do. Please take care of Carver," Damien read out, then sighed.
Anders frowned at him. That was far too short to have taken up two pages, even in Hawke's abysmal handwriting. "And the rest?"

"What? Oh. That's all," Damien said, and flipped the paper over. "The rest of the page and the next page are all feeding instructions for the dog."

'There's something I have to do.' "What does that even mean?" Anders demanded.

Damien threw his hands into the air, a gesture oddly reminiscent of Mardra when she was feeling frustrated. "I don't know! He didn't tell me!" he shouted. "Maybe if you hadn't been such a dick to him when he came all this way to see you, he wouldn't have left!"

Anders stiffened. The eyes of the rest of the hall were on them, attracted by the raised voices and emphatic movements. "I'm not responsible for Hawke's comings or goings," he said coldly. "He's always done what he wants."

Damien slumped back onto the table. "I don't understand you," he complains bitterly. "Hawke came all this way just to see you. He still loves you, don't you realize that? Why couldn't you just kiss and get back together again? That would have been better for everyone!"

Daros leaned forward, speaking around a mouthful of half-chewed bread. "Yeah, especially because if you had Hawke's tongue down your throat maybe you'd be too busy to make up to our sister."

Anders and Mardra both raised their voices in objection at the same time, but Anders got there first. "She told you, that's not how it is," he said. "I am not... making up to your sister. Justice is. And the relationship isn't what you... seem to think." Whatever that was. Anders didn't really want to know what weird things he was thinking.

"Yeah, I bet that's how you tried to spin it," Daros said with a sneer. "A good way to fool her into going along with your gross abomination depredations."

Mardra responded hotly: "Daros, don't talk about things you know nothing about --"

"Oh, do you think you know better?" Daros' sneer only deepened. "Stupid. Everyone knows demons just tell you whatever you want to hear to get them to go along with them."

Damien added his voice before either Mardra or Anders could reply. "I just can't believe you'd be unfaithful to Hawke," he said bitterly. "He wasn't, you know! He waited all this time for you, and came all this way, only to find you cheating on him behind his back! Mardy, how could you?"

"Yeah, Mardy, how could you?" Daros echoed, turning an exactly matching look of accusation at his sister.

There was a moment of dead silence in the hall, and then Mardra pushed back from the table. "Would you excuse us a minute," she said, and stood up.

Her black eyes blazed, her lips were pressed so tightly they were pale white, and two high spots of color appeared on her cheekbones. She marched past the dining room table, out into the hallway, and the door closed behind her.
After breakfast, Anders spent a few hours working on chores around the Tower and trying to avoid the buzz of whispers and gossip among the mages. His love life was the talk of Refuge again, it seemed. It was simultaneously understandable and exasperating. Understandable because romantic gossip, who was making time with or fallen out with or giving eyes to whom, was the cheapest and easiest form of entertainment back in the Circle, and old habits died hard. Every Circle mage had an avid interest in romance and yet very little direct experience with it, so the romantic affairs of others were an object of intense scrutiny. Furthermore, as their First Enchanter Anders was known to every mage at Refuge and always a font for interest and drama.

Exasperating because the last thing Anders wanted when trying to sort through his own thoughts about Hawke was to listen to a steady flow of speculation and critique from others as well.

Around noon the weather began to clear, the heavy clouds breaking up and the sun making an appearance. Anders decided that the best way to escape the gossip was to relocate out of the Tower entirely, and wrapped himself up in a sturdy coat and boots to start up the hike to the ridge watchpost.

He wasn't too worried about Sebastian. Whatever his opinion of Jowan's ventures in blood magic, he was usually able to do what he claimed he could do. If he said he'd warded the approaches against intruders, then he had. Anders just wanted some peace and quiet, some clear air and solitude to sort himself out.

By the time he made it to the top of the trail the sun had already traveled notably down in the sky, thanks to the frequent rest breaks he had to take, but one of the Avvar was already -- or was it still? - camped out at the watchpost.

It wasn't Amund today; instead it was an older woman, head shaved except for a single flowing lock of hair and with white streaks of paint across her cheekbones. Anders had met her a time or two before, but she never volunteered her name. She gave him a respectful nod as he puffed his way up to the eyrie, then settled back down to the arrow shafts she was whittling as she watched over the valley.

It wasn't quite solitude, but given his companion's reticence, it might as well have been. Anders settled down as best he could, catching his breath and casting a mild heat spell to keep him warm against the frigid winds, and tried to sort out his feelings.

He didn't really believe that Hawke had left for good, he admitted. While the note he'd left was ambiguous, he'd left Carver behind. Anders couldn't see Hawke abandoning his dog so easily; even if he was going into danger he would sooner keep the dog with him as an ally than leave her. So the chances were that Hawke intended to return soon.

Still, he couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility, or banish the awful, aching pit that formed in his stomach at the thought of it. That after all the years and miles that had come between them Hawke would have crossed the gap, reached out a hand, and Anders had shattered any chance there could be between them.

The idea that he'd gone for good was upsetting, but almost as unsettling was the idea that he hadn't. In a way it would almost be easier if he did leave for good -- not better, perhaps, but easier.

But if he hadn't left -- and Anders didn't really think he had -- then where had he gone? What was he doing? Hawke often got these strange tangents in his head and ran off on them before anyone could talk him down. Or, well, try. Nobody could really dissuade Hawke from a course of action
once his mind was set on it.

Where could Hawke have gone? Back to the Deep Roads? Out in the wild mountain? Down to Orzammar? Anders only had guesses, but knowing Hawke, it was sure to be dangerous. He was always getting himself into trouble, and now he wouldn't have Anders -- or anyone else -- along to back him up. No one to watch his back, or to heal him if he got hurt… the fact that he'd been getting along without Anders fine, apparently, while he'd been running around with the Rebellion for the past year and a half wasn't as reassuring as it could have been.

What if Hawke got himself hurt, or worse, and the last thing Anders would ever say to him --

Wrapped up in his own thoughts, Anders paid hardly any attention to the sudden flurry of activity in the pass below. Only when the Avvar huntress suddenly shifted to an alert stance, nearly quivering with attention as she stared out over the stone, did he snap out of his maudlin preoccupation.

"What is it?" he asked, scrambling around to peer out over the pass. Far down below, dizzyingly far below, there was the usual mass of men and horses and tents, stockpiles of gear and trash and cut trees and stone. The camp seemed abuzz, more men milling around than usual, but he couldn't make sense of the chaos at first. "Are they… attacking?"

The huntress shook her head. "There," she said, and pointed down towards the far end of the pass, where the road wound down and out of sight through the peaks and led back towards the lowlands, away from Orzammar.

Anders looked over in the indicated direction, eyes straining to try to make out individual figures in the valley below. As he watched, a company of mounted men -- at least a dozen, maybe twenty -- broke away from the main body of the camps and galloped out of sight. It was too far from here to possibly recognize any individuals, but… had those horses been decked in Vael's colors?

He thought so. In fact, more and more of the men that began to gather at the far end of the valley wore the red and black of the Vaels. As the sun slid down in the sky, the activity became more and more hectic: assembling horses, breaking down tents, piling supplies into wagons. A block of about a hundred men massed up and began marching down the road; as he watched, another block began to gather itself up to follow.

"What are they doing?" he asked, even as his heart began to beat faster in anticipation. No, he shouldn't jump to conclusions. "Are they… they're leaving. Vael's army is pulling out! But why?"

The huntress shrugged. Anders sighed; he should have known better than to ask.

Another hour watching from the outpost brought him no nearer to understanding, so he eventually went back down to the valley. The news that Vael's forces appeared to be pulling out spurred a burst of excitement and a frenzy of speculation. Was Sebastian Vael giving up? Going home? Retreating to gather more allies, maneuvering to a better position for a flank attack, feigning retreat to draw out a counter-response? Was this a genuine retreat, or some kind of trick? If Vael truly was leaving, then why?
Personally, Anders had his own theories, ones he didn't share with the others. Unlike Thorne or Trevelyan, Sebastian had come to Orzammar on a mission of personal vengeance. And as far as Sebastian knew, he had accomplished his vengeance. Could he hope that, with Anders presumed dead, Sebastian's wish for revenge was satisfied, and he had no further reason to stay?

The why of it almost didn't matter. What mattered was that the Triune of Sanctified Princes was falling apart. The more of the army left, the weaker the positions of those who remained. With luck, this would start a cascade that would eventually force the entire army to retreat.

Finally, something was going right for them. Anders returned to his quarters that evening with a spring in his step.

Hawke was already there.

Of course.

Anders stopped in the doorway, one foot on the threshold, and just looked. Only the lantern over his desk was lit, casting a puddle of light that did not quite reach the edge of the bed. Hawke was a shadowed shape in the darkness, the only light from his corner the glint of lantern-light off polished steel as he ran the whetstone down the edge of his war knives: scrape, scrape. Sharpening out a burr in the steel, Anders recognized from long familiarity, a nick in the fine edge most often caused by the knife getting hung up on steel or bone.

Hawke glanced up at him as he stepped in, but said nothing, returning to patiently whetting the stone against the steel edge. "You're back," Anders said unnecessarily.

"Of course," Hawke said, and his voice still sent a shiver down Anders' spine. Still. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your note was excessively vague," Anders said. "For all we knew you'd run off to Antiva."

"Not nearly as far as that," Hawke replied. "But I couldn't risk anyone knowing where I was going ahead of time. Operational security, you know how it is."

"I really don't," Anders said, and he finished stepping inside and shut the door behind him.

"Is Carver okay?" Hawke said, a note of anxiety in his voice.

Anders rolled his eyes. "You were only gone for a day, Hawke. It's unlikely that your dog would starve in that time." He paused. "She's probably with Damien in your rooms. You know, it's kind of a dick move to pawn your dog off on him to take care of."

Hawke's outline shrugged. "There was something I had to do, and I couldn't bring her along. Not stealthy enough."

"Oh?" Anders put his hands on his hips, squaring up to face Hawke. "And what was it that you had to do that was so all-fired important that you'd leave your dog behind?"

Hawke made a quick motion, and metal flashed in the lamplight as it spun towards him. Anders automatically put out his hand to catch it, and looked with confusion at what seemed to be a medallion of Andraste's face in his hands.

Then he nearly dropped it as he remembered where he'd seen this particular piece of metalwork before: decorating Sebastian Vael's belt buckle. "This is..." he sputtered.
"Tacky, isn't it? I know," Hawke sighed. "But I figured, cats drag much more disgusting things in to leave on your pillow, and you seem to like cats quite a lot, so I thought I should take a leaf from their book."

Anders turned the belt buckle over in his hands, mind working furiously. Hawke disappeared for a day, Sebastian galloping off down the road as though the Void nipped at his heels... "It's because of you that Sebastian is running for home?" he said in astonishment. "What in the Maker's name did you do to him?!"

The humor drained from Hawke's voice, and he leaned forward until the light fell on his expression. His eyes were black and flinty, brows drawn tight down towards his hooked nose -- his expression was fierce and resolute. "I sent him a reminder of what can happen to people who try to hurt the ones I care about," he said. The tight mouth moved in an upward curve, a nasty lingering little smile. "For some reason, he didn't seem keen on staying around after that."

Anders found himself speechless.

"Actually, he seemed to think he'd killed you," Hawke added, leaning back again. "Didn't have the heart to correct him that you were walking around just fine a week after he put an arrow through your chest."

"Garrett..." Anders shook his head, helpless. "Blight. I'm certainly not going to defend Sebastian, but you can't..."

"Can't what?" Hawke cut him off. "Can't defend you? Can't tell other people you're someone I care about? I can, and I will."

Hawke stood up in one fluid movement, sheathing his war knives at his belt. He stepped forward into the circle of lamplight, stepped forward again. Anders eyed him warily, holding his ground as Hawke approached. If he tried to do something stupid, like steal a kiss...

He stopped a few feet away. "You know, the thought occurs to me that we never really courted properly," Hawke said conversationally. "You kind of just threw yourself at me and I didn't duck..."

"I never 'threw' myself at you," Anders interrupted indignantly.

"Really?" Hawke's eyebrow quirked upwards. "Because I definitely remember one near-tackle, slamming me against the wall kiss. It was very sexy."


"I wasn't complaining," Hawke said mildly. "Anyway, the point is that we sort of skipped the whole, you know, courting thing. So I'm going to rectify that now. Consider this --" he pointed at the buckle in Anders' hand, "-- a promissory note. I'll prove to you that I'm here to stay, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to win you over. I'll wrest you back from my cousin if that's what I need to do."

"She and I aren't..." Anders gave up mid-protest. He'd already told Hawke this; if it hadn't sunk in the first time, repetition probably wouldn't help. Besides which, even if they were -- "Garrett, this isn't a game. I'm not a prize you can win, for the Maker's sake!"

The humor faded from Hawke's face. "Anders... the other night I asked you if I had a place in your life," he said seriously. "You didn't say yes, but you didn't say no, either. Do you want me out of your life? I'll go, if you say the word."
Anders said nothing.

He couldn't say yes, as that would be an open invitation for Hawke to try to move on him again. But he also couldn't say no, because… because he couldn't lie. Not to Hawke. Not ever again.

"That's what I thought," Hawke said, when the silence had stretched out near-unbearably. He flashed Anders a smile, that sly cheerful smile that Anders had seen a hundred, a thousand times in Kirkwall, usually right before he did something incredibly impressive and dangerous. "See you next round, Anders."

He moved -- almost a blur in the shadowed room -- and then he was gone. Anders stared perplexed at the dark corner he'd been in, before he felt a draft of cold air on his face. Lighting another lantern showed that the window at the far end of the room had been left open.

"Honestly, you are such a drama queen," Anders grumbled, and went to shut the window.

---

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

MARDRA AMELL IN HER FIRST APPEARANCE: I'm searching for my brothers and I came here only because I thought they might be here. I'm desperate to find and reunite with my family since they're all I have left in the world. Finding my siblings is my top priority and I can't let anything else get in the way of that.

MARDRA AMELL NOW: Remind me why I ever wanted to see these two assholes again
Mardra sat at her desk, reading the latest round of responses from Steward Gavorn and evolving impractical but satisfying fantasies of marching down to his office and smacking his head repeatedly in a cabinet door. She'd been trying for a week now to get some solid predictions on the upcoming rationing scheme, only to be put off time and time again with vague and noncommittal waffling.

She understood the reasoning behind it -- that the administration didn't want to cause a panic, especially among the "volatile" mage population -- but it was frustrating and insulting that Gavorn refused to consider her as an administrator over Refuge with authority similar to his own, or indeed as anything other than another hapless civilian.

If rationing was indeed coming down the pike the mages needed to know. There were measures they could institute at Refuge that would ameliorate the worst of the burdens. They could try to increase their meat purchases from the Avvar, or even convert over some of their indoor gardens to growing food plants only. Both tactics would eat into their resources, though, so she didn't want to institute them until and unless rationing was actually going to happen.

It might not be necessary at all, but then again it might. The departure of Vael's forces from the army camp was significant but not necessarily decisive. It certainly seemed a sign that the coalition of the Sanctified Princes was dissolving, but as of yet the other two armies gave no sign that they were giving up. Even without Vael their forces were more than sufficient to continue the blockade.

Tellingly, there had been still no word from Val Royeaux. The Divine had by now had more than enough time to hear about the expedition and draft a proclamation in support of it, and yet had not
done so. That left Mardra hopeful that she would continue to maintain her neutrality and deny the Holy Boys their much-desired legitimacy. With the pressure increasing and support diminishing, how much longer would they persist? There was simply too much that was uncertain.

A knock on the door broke into her musings. "Mardra?" Anders' voice called, muffled by the door. "Are you up?"

"Come in," Mardra called back, and set the paperwork aside.

Anders slipped into the office, looking tired. Well, that was no change, he always looked tired. His eyes were red, his cheeks drawn, but he managed a grateful smile for her as he settled into a chair on the other side of the desk. "What's all this?" he asked, gesturing to the papers spread out on the desk.

Mardra grimaced. "Trying to get straight answers from Steward Gavorn about whether or not they plan to institute rationing. The departure of Vael's forces is a good sign that the coalition is starting to crack, but the other two armies are still out there." She frowned down at the map, more stylized than artistic, that covered most of the left half of the desk. "I wish we knew what made Vael pull out so suddenly. If there's unrest in the Free Marches --"


"Who? You mean..." Mardra's eyes narrowed. "You think Garrett had something to do with it?"

Anders nodded. "That seems to be where he went all day -- he infiltrated Vael's army camp to... I don't know, stalk him or something. He was kind of cagey on the details, but he at least got close enough to get this." He held up an amulet of some kind -- no, a belt buckle, embossed with a stylized frieze of Andraste.

"Well, that would explain a lot," Mardra said. "Although how he got through all the sentry pickets and through the camp undetected, I couldn't even begin to guess."

Anders was silent for a moment. She got the feeling he was marshalling his own thoughts, coming to the real reason he'd asked to come in and talk. "He was in my room just now," he said at last, and of course this was about Hawke. "He said... He still wants to try again. To court me. To 'win me back' from you, apparently."

Mardra couldn't suppress the eye-roll. "Did you tell him we're not dating?" she said, with more than a little bite.

"He didn't seem convinced." Anders grimaced. He looked up to meet her eyes, his expression serious. "Mardra... I know how much your family means to you. I don't want to be the thing that ruins your relationship with your cousin."

"My family does mean everything to me," Mardra agreed. "And that's why you mean more to me than a relationship with a cousin I've never even met until a week ago."

"I..." Anders sat back in the chair, cheeks reddening slightly. He looked a little embarrassed, but touched. "Thank you."

Mardra studied him for a moment, then sighed. "Look," she said. "If you want me to stand aside, I will. If you want me to back you and Justice against Hawke, I will. No matter what happens, I hope I will remain your friend."

Anders shook his head. "I'm not asking you to step aside," he said. "I don't -- I don't think I even
have the right to ask that of you. But Hawke can be incredibly... annoyingly persistent," he said in an aggravated tone. "He usually gets what he wants."

"Well, so that's what he wants," Mardra said reasonably. "What do you want?"

Anders frowned. "I don't know what I want yet," he said.

Mardra set her chin on her palm, elbow supported against the desk, and studied her friend. She was the farthest thing from an expert on love, but this one seemed obvious even to her. "You still love him, don't you?" she said.

Anders sighed. "Yes," he said quietly.

"I thought so," she said, and shook her head. "But I'm worried for you, Anders. I'm scared you might be hurt."

"I'm scared of that, too," Anders admitted. "I'm... so confused. All these different thoughts are fighting inside my head. I don't even know which thoughts are mine and which are Justice's."

"Can you usually tell?" Mardra asked, interested.

Anders shook his head. "No. Where we agree, we are one. It's only when we disagree sharply, that I feel something I have no reason to feel, that I know he's making his thoughts known."

"Then," Mardra reasoned, "if Justice were entirely opposed, and you yourself were not, then you would know. Wouldn't you?"

Anders stayed silent.

"If it will help you, I can talk to him," Mardra offered. "In the Fade. Ask him what he is thinking, and what he wants."

Anders looked grateful. "I would appreciate that, thanks," he said humbly.

There were a few beats of silence, the two of them just enjoying one another's company, before Mardra stirred and looked over at the clock on the wall. "Well," she said, "if that's what we're doing, then you should get to bed. It's getting late, and you're still healing. I can't meet Justice in the Fade if he isn't in the Fade."

"That goes for you too, doesn't it?" Anders protested. "What have I told you about all these late candlelight nights doing for your eyes?"

"The work needs to be done," Mardra said, an automatic reply.

"Yes, but it won't get done tonight," Anders parried with the ease of long practice. "Come on. Let's call it a night."

Mardra sighed defeat, and started sorting her papers away. Anders rose to help her.
Interlude - Fade Date II

Chapter Summary

Justice gets a chance to tell his side of the story.

The Fade took shape about her, the scenery shimmering into a forest glade. It was a place she'd been before, a place that Justice had shown her, one he'd crafted himself out of the formless background energy of the Fade.

Since leaving the Perendale Circle Mardra had experienced all too much of forests in the real world. They had their beauties, she was willing to admit, but mostly they consisted of acres and acres of rolling, rugged, vegetation-littered terrain covered with a thin layer of rotting leaves. Trees grew according to the hazards of their environment and histories: extending crookedly this way and that according to the sun and wind; dead branches and leaves caught among the living canopy; scabbed-over boles and animal droppings streaked the branches. The smell varied between fresh green and wet rot, and such animals as were encountered there were either skinny, weary and wary, or filthy, blood-hot and aggressive.

Instead, this glade was a forest clearing from a fairy tale. It was perfectly round, a carpet of short green grass growing soft and level underfoot, peppered with tiny white flowers. More flowers -- pink, purple and white -- bloomed on the even, symmetrical branches of the trees, bunched together on graceful branches with glowing green leaves. A soft wind blew the branches in an even, rhythmic susurration, and yet not a stray breeze touched the peaceful atmosphere of the dell.

The trunks of the trees were straight and dark, the undergrowth rich-green with moss; graceful horned shapes flitted through the shadows just out of sight, and tiny bright-colored birds perched on the slender twigs and sang unearthly, beautiful melodies. One wall of the dell was given over to a striped-stone cliff wall over which a tiny waterfall poured, crystalline and delicate and filling the clearing with the clear smell of fresh water and a soft tinkling counterpoint to the birdsong.

It wasn't much like a real forest, Mardra admitted. But it was beautiful all the same.

She became aware as she walked through the fairy-tale forest that someone else was there, holding her hand and guiding her forward. It was Justice, of course, as it always was in the Fade. His braids were more elaborate tonight, and over his mail and plate he wore an embroidered tabard, the edges stitched and decorated. On the frontspiece there was a symbol Mardra had not seen before, but the symbolism was immediately clear: a Circle Tower bisected by a sword, surrounded by the emblem of the Circle, which had been broken in two places by the thrust of the sword. It seemed as though the more time he spent in the Fade, the more time he spent with her, the more clear and detailed his dream-self became.

The last time they'd been here, she'd sat on a log beside the waterfall and braided flowers into a chain while Justice played the lute and sang an ancient love ballad. At the end of the night, she'd looped the chain into a crown and placed it on his head, declaring him the Champion of Song. And he'd smiled. That smile that was so different from Anders' smile, so rare to see on his usually serious and stoic face, that she was quickly coming to treasure.
But tonight they were not here for romance, but to have a serious discussion.

"Justice," Mardra said as they reached the center of the glade and stopped, her arm outstretched and her hand clasped in his own. "It's good to see you again. I hoped we could talk. About Anders... and Hawke."

Justice inclined his head to her, his expression stoic as always. "I as well," he said. "In truth, I have been looking forward to the opportunity to speak on these topics. To clear my own conflicted thoughts. My kind do not deal easily with complexity and nuance."

"Most humans don't seem to, either," Mardra said wryly, thinking of plenty of apprentices and even Enchanters she'd known over the years.

"You speak in jest, but I mean that in truth," Justice said seriously. "We spirits are born to an ideal: single, simple and perfect. Change does not come easily to us, and not often without damage. Since I came to the mortal world I have learned, I have changed and grown. In the early days, speaking with the Warden-Commander helped me to find my way in this perilous landscape. After her departure, Anders and the other companions helped to fill the gap. For a long time after we joined, I had no one. Now I have you."

Mardra stood still for a moment, struggling to come to grips with that. To the thought that she could be so important to such an ancient, imposing being. It was... more than a little intimidating, in truth. But at the same time, it made her feel -- lifted.

Justice was watching her carefully, as though seeking to read sonnets from her expression. "Do you doubt that I speak true?" he asked.

Mardra shook her head. "No, I never doubt your sincerity. Lies are not part of who you are, but Justice..." She sighed. "The situation has become complicated. It's not just about you and me, it's about Anders too... and Hawke."

"Yes. That is why we are here," Justice agreed. "To find a resolution that is fair and just, without inflicting unnecessary hurt on any party."

"I was talking with Anders earlier... as you know," Mardra said, feeling a little foolish. Justice had been there, after all, in a way. "Hurt or not, it sounds to me like Anders wants to go back to Hawke."

"He does," Justice replied. His expression did not waver, his voice flat and unencouraging.

Mardra tried anyway. "And you're okay with that?"

Justice grimaced. He seemed to be thinking hard, and Mardra waited for him to gather his thoughts. "Anders' feelings towards Hawke are passionate and intense," Justice said finally. "There was an attraction between them from their first meeting. Hawke is a handsome man, a powerful man, charming and magnetic. Anders was drawn to him, and his thoughts were often preoccupied with sensual concerns. He had one recurring dream of being chained in a bedchamber..."

"Yes thank you Justice, I think you'd better stop there," Mardra said hastily. "I have a feeling Anders would rather you not share this with me."

"For three years Anders pined for him, and once they fell in with one another, they made up for the lost time with great enthusiasm," Justice went on. "They were athletic, enthusiastic, and often unhygienic, but they were happy. I cannot deny the strength of their desire for one another, nor would it be right to do so."
The word picture of their relationship, the vivid bond between the two men… it left Mardra feeling a little flattened, a little downcast. But, now was not the time to wallow in feelings of inadequacy. "So that's what Anders desires. What about what you desire?"

"As before. To remain with you," Justice answered immediately.

Okay, maybe now was the time to wallow in feelings of inadequacy. "Still? Why?" Mardra couldn't help but ask. "I thought... well. 'Passionate intensity,' you said. I thought that... you and Anders could have more of a relationship with Hawke than you could with me. I mean, dream dates? Flowers and poetry and songs? That's nothing compared to a real relationship. I would understand if..."

She trailed off. Justice was shaking his head. "I do not believe you understand at all," he stated firmly. "There is nothing less worthy in our love than any liaison between any other mortals. Our love is not less real, it is not less.

"What Anders feels towards Hawke, I do not wish to have. I do not… want." He closed his fist in front of his chest, frowning. "I do not want anything with anyone but you. And I will not put aside what we have, not at his demand or any other."

"Oh," Mardra quavered.

It was hard to accept. Not hard to believe, not with the certainty and surety that Justice said it. But it was hard to accept, not with the certainty and surety that Justice said it. But it was hard to accept in her head, in her heart, which still believed down at the bottom of it that nothing she had to offer, nothing she could do, nothing she could be would ever be good enough. That she was only good for a temporary or passing relationship until the boy found someone better, someone who could give him what he really needed. But she'd try, for Justice, because she knew he wasn't lying, and that he meant what he said.

But this wasn't about her and her insecurities. This was about the three-way tangle they'd found themselves in. Mardra bit her lip and forged on. "You told me once before - the first time we met face to face, actually - that you didn't disapprove of Hawke or his relationship with Anders. That he interpreted those feelings as yours, but they were really his own."

"Inasmuch as there is a difference, yes," Justice said with a nod. "I feel what he feels, so his feelings are mine also. But I think they did not originate from me. Back then, I bore no grudge against Hawke."

Mardra homed in on the sudden shift -- from the universal and timeless to the specific and past. "Back then you didn't?" she repeated. "But you're angry with him now?"

"It is not a matter of anger," Justice protested. "Hawke committed an injustice when he broke his oath. He must make right what he has done. Although, we also did wrong to him. We lied about our true purposes, we deceived him. Yet while that might mitigate his actions, it does not excuse them."

"Well, it sounds like he's trying to make it right now," Mardra said.

"As he should," Justice said decisively. "He has done wrong; he should atone for the wrong. That is not a price of entry for them to resume a relationship, it is simply what is right to do." He hesitated. "And yet..."

"And yet what?" Mardra pressed.

"Even having said that... I find that my feelings do not settle," Justice said. "I feel anger, I feel
pain. Hawke's rejection drove Anders to the very brink of despair. I do not even know if the anger is mine or his."

Mardra remembered what Justice had said earlier, about how their feelings overlapped. "Inasmuch as there is a difference."

"Yes," Justice agreed.

It wasn't easy for him to talk about this, Mardra could tell. But at the same time, she thought he needed to. She took his hand, and waited for him to go on.

"I do not enjoy these feelings," Justice said finally. "I find myself angry at Hawke, for forcing us to this pass, and now for trying to force me from you. Whatever his second thoughts later, Hawke severed the ties between him and Anders that day. His words were quite clear. If he now wishes us to give up our other ties to be his alone, then it is he who is unjust."

He spoke with the firm finality of one for whom matters of fairness and justice were as clear and obvious as the sun in the sky. Despite herself, Mardra was heartened. "Well, I'm not exactly unbiased in this matter, but I agree with you," she said. "Anders was under no obligation to wait, and Hawke had no right to expect him to."

"Precisely," Justice said with a firm not. "But still… I doubt myself. I feel anger, resentment, feelings I do not want to feel. I fear…"

He fell silent. Sensing some important milestone being left unsaid, Mardra decided to push. "What, Justice? What do you fear?"

For the first time since she'd known him, Justice avoided her eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd think he looked… ashamed. "Selfishness," he said at last.

Mardra felt her heart crumble a little in her chest at the misery in his voice. Usually so staunch and determined, to see him hurting hurt her too. "Oh, Justice…" she sighed.

"My union with Anders has caused him anguish enough in the past," Justice said unhappily. "I do not wish to deprive him of happiness. I do not wish to be the villain who robs him of all he desires."

"Because you love him, don't you?" Mardra said gently.

"Yes," Justice said.

"I don't think it's wrong to feel hurt and angry towards someone who did you wrong, whether or not they make up for it," she said. "Those feelings linger, and they can't always be dispelled by reason."

"Perhaps you are right," Justice admitted. "But they still… disquiet me. Spirits should not have such feelings. They are the province of demons."

Mardra had read _Tale of the Champion_, and she'd heard Anders talk about Justice enough to know just how deep a terror that ran. "And that worries you," she said, willing to state the obvious for Justice's sake.

"Yes."

"I can see why." And she could, at that; every Circle mage was instilled from childhood with the
terror of becoming an abomination, of having your self obliterated by a predatory demon. Justice's fear was a slightly different flavor, but a familiar enough form. "Justice, you aren't a demon. I'm sure of that. But you aren't just a spirit any more, either. Joining with a human has changed you, made you more human. These negative feelings -- it isn't just demons who have them, it's humans too."

Justice was frowning. "It is true that I am not what I once was," he said. "But I am not human -- I am not Anders."

"Anders said that you are one being," Mardra said with a frown. This didn't match up. "You are part of him -- I saw it in him long before I met you, and knew what I was seeing. And he's a part of you as well. The longer I get to know you, the more of him I can see in you."

"We are one! But we are also two," Justice insisted. He got to his feet and began to pace back and forth, gesturing as he talked. "It -- it is difficult for me to explain in mortal terms. Another spirit would understand. We share a body, we share many thoughts -- but I am still my own being, my choices are still my own. Together we can do more, we can be more -- but I never consented to give up all that I am!"

The thing of it was -- the more agitated he got, the more of Anders she could see in him. In the way he paced back and forth to give vent to his frustrations, his increasingly sharp gestures in the air. Would a spirit bother with such body language, if they never even had a body? Would a spirit even feel the need to insist on the boundaries of selfhood, distinct from their purpose? But pointing out the shared mannerisms, the shared unconscious language, wasn't what Justice needed to hear right now.

Anders had, when talking about his time in Kirkwall, confessed how he had frequently felt claustrophobic, overwhelmed, like he was fighting for control of his own boundary of self. But perhaps he had never thought that Justice would feel the same restlessness, the same fear of annihilation. Perhaps he'd never considered Justice's feelings at all.

Inasmuch as there was a difference.

It seemed that venting to a friendly ear was helping; at least, Justice seemed to be calming down, his voice losing the sharp edge, his movements slowing down. "I am not Anders," he said at last. "We share one body, one mind. But we cannot be one."

He seemed to be fixated on this point particularly, and Mardra wasn't sure what exactly was going on here. In all the time they'd spent together, he'd never felt the need to differentiate himself from Anders so sharply. "Why not?" she asked.

Justice shook his head. "If we are two people, then we can love two people. If we are one person, then we must choose." He faltered. "And I cannot choose."

Ah. "I think… I think I understand," Mardra said slowly, feeling her way through the reefs and shallows of the emotional currents. "You feel that you have to be separate from Anders, so that you can have your relationship and he can have his?"

"I… yes." Justice's head dropped forward, leaving the spirit looking despondant.

"You want your own happiness, but you also want Anders to be happy, because you love him," Mardra went on.

"I do." His habitual frown intensified, a stubborn set to his chin that Mardra was more used to
seeing on his human half. "Our union has caused enough misery for him in the past. I do not want him to be unhappy any more."

So that was it. Justice was just being stubbornly, naively, unnecessarily self-sacrificing. A lighter breath came into her chest, and Mardra smiled. "Of course you don't," she said. "But Justice, these things are not mutually exclusive."

His brow furrowed over blue-fire eyes. "How do you mean?"

"You're two people, but also one," she said. More one than two, she thought, but now was not the time to push that point, not when Justice was so upset. That wasn't relevant to her next point, anyway. "But even one person can have more than one partner."

Justice jerked his head back, startled. "I do not understand," he said after a beat. "Is that not infidelity? The breaking of oaths? That is unjust."

"It's not breaking any oaths if you haven't made any oaths to that effect," she pointed out practically. She bit her lip. "As for infidelity… well, it's complicated. Most of the romantic tales would have you believe that there is only one true love in people's lives, and you either get them or you're alone forever. But real people aren't that simple. Life is complicated, feelings are complicated."

She shifted over, and patted the edge of the tree stump thus exposed. Slowly, like a wild deer being coaxed to her hand, he came and sat down next to her on the edge.

"Are you familiar with Lucius of Qarinus' work on the Four Loves?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. When I was in the Fade, my aspiration was for Justice, not love. No doubt a Spirit of Love would know more, as it is their special interest."

That was actually an interesting idea for a research project, but not really useful to the discussion at hand. She forged onwards. "Well, his thesis was that human beings have four types of love. There's passionate love, physical love --"

"That is the kind that Hawke and Anders shared," Justice observed. "Hourly, some nights."

"Yes. Well. Moving on…" Mardra said hurriedly.

"Please do."

"There's also romantic love, such as… such as what you and I share." That came shyly, even after everything else they had said and done. "And then there's platonic love, philios, like that shared between siblings or close friends -- like Anders and I. And then the fourth… the fourth is agape, or unconditional love, the love that exists regardless of any other changing circumstance. Like your love for Anders."

Justice nodded slowly. His eyes were inscrutable as ever, but the furrow slowly smoothed out of his brow, the frown released its hold on his mouth. "I… understand," he said at last.

"Anyway, Lucius' point was that humans can experience any or all of these loves, alone or in combination," Mardra said. She leaned forward and placed her hands on Justice's, held in his lap. "And once you realize that, then you start to realize that to hold someone to loving just one person is wrong. You can feel different loves for different people, or the same for different people, or several for one person. And once you accept that, love becomes fractal and complicated."
"I had not thought about it in that way before," Justice said, and his tone was one of wonder.

She sat for a time in quiet, letting him process the new thoughts. She'd dumped a lot on him at once, she knew. It was lovely enough just to share his company, the faint hum and crackle of his aura that you could only detect at close range, listen to the song of the birds and the music of the waterfall.

"How would such a thing even work?" Justice said at last. "I know nothing of such arrangements."

Oh, Maker. Of all the people on Thedas she was surely the last authority to consult on matters of romantic arrangement, having gone thirty plus years with it only ever being an academic subject. "I can't say I do either, for practical reasons," she said, feeling her cheeks flush. "But I know people make it work somehow. You should talk to Surana."

"Neria Surana?" he seemed startled. "Truly? I thought her entirely devoted to the blood mage."

"Yes." Mardra hesitated, and decided against any more revelations of things heard in confidence. "I can't say more without her permission… but, I think she might be able to counsel you."

"I see," Justice said, and his face lightened. "Perhaps I will. Mardra, I thank you for Wisdom, and for Compassion as well. Speaking to you, you listening to me… it has helped."

Oh, she'd hoped it would. That getting the chance to talk to someone in his own voice would help, getting his tangled emotions outside of his head so that he could get through them. "I'm glad, Justice," she said with a smile. "When you care about someone, like I care for you, you want to help them in any way you can."

Justice looked down into her face, his burning eyes meeting with her own. "I agree," he said.

Another silence fell between them, easier this time. But although Justice's aura has lightened, his mind has not stopped working, and his next thought is off a branching path that Mardra wasn't on. You spoke earlier of philios, the love between siblings," he said. "And yet your brothers do not seem to feel such towards you. The way they speak, the way they acted to you earlier was unjust. It was cruel."

"What? Oh, those two… oh…" Startlement turned to frustration, and Mardra barely resisted the urge to pull at her hair. They'd been having such a nice time, away from her brothers, did he really have to bring them back up again? "I did say humans are complicated, Justice. And nothing's more complicated than siblings. I do love them, even when I want to strangle them both. And they also love me, even if they're completely disregarding my agency and personhood," she added acidly.

"They should not pry into your personal affairs. It is none of their business," Justice stated disapprovingly.

It was nice to know he thought that, but she wasn't the one who needed to be told. "You know that, and I know that, but apparently they don't. Oh, I hate when the two of them gang up on me like that!" She ground her teeth. "It just makes me so angry, and they think it's funny. They just don't listen to me."

"If you wish it, I will speak to them," Justice offered, and Mardra groaned.

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't think they'll listen to Anders, either," Mardra said. Aggravated, she added, "Daros at least is still convinced we're having an affair."
"I did not offer for Anders to speak to them," Justice said. "I will speak to them myself."

Mardra sat up a little straighter, intrigued and confused by the offer. Justice wasn't usually able to show himself in the waking world unless there was an emergency going on, and even when he did, it wasn't a guise that encouraged conversation. "How... would you do that?" she asked.

"I could enter their dreams, and speak to them as I speak to you now," Justice said.

It was a tempting offer. Oh, it was nice to imagine, if only to have someone else backing her up when the twins started their tag-team routine. But -- "They won't listen to you," Mardra said.

Justice actually smiled. It wasn't his usual happy smile; it wasn't particularly pleasant. It was the smile that a seasoned warrior got before a long-anticipated battle. "I think you underestimate my ability to make myself heard," he said.

Now Mardra was even more intrigued. There were probably a thousand reasons they shouldn't do this, but --

"You know," Mardra said, "I think I want to see this."

---

Daros Amell walked the Fade with the confidence of a mage who had long since passed their Harrowing. Tonight it took the form of a mountain valley, the slopes populated by conifers and the ground carpeted with short grass and alpine herbs. The stone and vegetation were not unlike Refuge, but the Tower and all its buildings were absent. The only landmark in the vale was a single statue of the Avvar style, standing at the bottom of a shallow dell ringed with stone benches. He studied the statue carefully -- statues were common hiding places for demons -- but sensed no demonic energy emanating from it. Just a dream-relic.

"Roro!"

He heard his name called; turning, he greeted his brother without surprise or worry. If he had been anyone else, he would regard the appearance of a familiar face with suspicion -- but not his twin. It was a secret they had always been careful not to let slip to any enchanter or Templar, a special power unique only to the two of them: no matter how far the distance, no matter what stone walls or oceans or armies separated them, he had always been able to find his twin in the Fade.

In the Fade, Damien's beaming face was whole and smooth, the wound that had blinded his right eye and scarred his face entirely absent. In years to come it was possible that Damien's self-image would change over time, and he would wear the eyepatch even in the Fade. But for now, he still remembered himself as he was, whole and unmaimed.

"What's this place?" Damien asked, looking around interestedly.

"Blasted if I know," Daros said with a shrug. "Could be somewhere in these mountains, I guess. You find statues like this --"
He stopped, staring. The statue had changed.

Instead of an axe-wielding warrior wrapped in furs, the figure in the center of the clearing was now a tall man in robes, carrying a staff. A cloak was draped over his shoulders, hood pulled over his head, but the eyes that gazed out from the hood burned with their own azure light.

Something about the way he was arrayed gave Daros an uneasy sense of familiarity, like he had seen this person before, even though he'd never -- wait.

With the sudden certainty of dream-knowledge, he knew: this was how Anders had looked on the day Daros betrayed Refuge to the Templars. He'd held that staff when he went out to meet the Templars alone, and he'd had that blue fire in his eyes when Daros had admitted to what he'd done. "You!"

Damien caught on a moment after Daros did. "What... you're Justice!" he exclaimed.

Daros stared at his twin. "How do you know him?" he demanded.

Damien rolled his eyes. "I read Tale of the Champion, dummy," he said.

Any other time Daros would have given the elbow for calling him a dummy, but now was not the time. He kept his attention fixed on Justice. "You're Anders' de --"

"Uh, ixnay on the emonday," Damien interrupted, making urgent cutting gestures. "He really doesn't like being called that."

The demon -- spirit -- whatever, finally spoke. "I am Justice, Cause of Mages," he said. Those burning blue eyes watched them, taking Daros right back to the awful hour in the courtroom. He found his words sticking in his throat.

"What do you want with us?" Damien asked.

Justice turned towards him. "To speak with you regarding your execrable behavior towards your sister, Mardra Amell," he said. "You have insulted and disparaged her, caused her no short amount of distress and pain. That will stop."

That gave Daros the strength to find his voice. "Stay away from our sister!" he shouted, stepping forward in a rather limp attempt to crowd Justice and intimidate him.

Justice regarded him disdainfully. "I will stay at the precise distance that Mardra Amell desires," he drawled, and Daros sputtered as he tried to work out whether that was dirty or not. Justice went on. "We are not here to speak of me."

"If you set a finger on my sister, I don't care whose demon you are," Daros threatened him. "I'll find a way to banish you!"

"Will you?" Justice asked, not sounding the least bit intimidated. "Try."

The scene seemed to freeze for a moment, colors leaking through the grass, as Daros summoned all his Circle training to try to will a change in the fabric of the Fade. Nothing happened; he might as well have been trying to make a hole in a stone by blowing on it.

"Help me!" he hissed at his twin.

Damien shifted nervously, sending glances at the unmoving spirit. "Uh, Roro, I think he may have
the high ground here," he said.

Daros gave up, breathing hard from the futile effort. "You... how?" he demanded.

"For five hundred nights I have been working to strengthen the defenses of this place, to make it a bastion in the Fade... a refuge," Justice answered. He tilted his head consideringly. "You could say... it is my demense. You will not find it easy to push me back from here."

Damien stepped forward with a nervous laugh, placing himself not-quite between his brother and the spirit. "So what now?" he asked.

"Now?" If he didn't know better, Daros would swear that the spirit actually cracked a smile there for a moment. "Now, I talk." His blue-burning eyes bored into them, and one hand came around to point commandingly at the stone benches half-buried in the green hillside. "And you listen."

~tbc...
Chapter Summary

Hawke makes good on his promise to try to woo Anders back. It goes well, right up until it doesn't.

Chapter Notes

As per standard, the Hawke in this story is not actually from any of my worldstates. He's a much more purple Hawke than any of mine ever were. Unfortunately, down the pure-purple route is a lot of pretty cruel remarks, a number of them directed towards Anders; you'll see a few of those sentiments repeated in this chapter. Try not to hold it too much against him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thwock.

The sound echoed, bouncing around the mountain dell, between the houses and streets of Refuge and into Anders' room through the open window. Anders paused a moment, pen lifted between paragraphs, and glanced at the window again.

Thwack.

Cold air came in from the window, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. There'd been more freezing rain, then snow, then a day of warming where the sun dove in and out of the clouds and melted the snow in the open areas. It still lingered under the trees and shady sides of the rock faces waiting for more snow to join it as the winter inexorably progressed.

Thock.

There'd be few enough days of good weather once winter really set in, so Anders had opened the window of his room to let the day inside. And, coincidentally also let in the sight and sound of Garrett Hawke chopping wood.

Thwock.

Shirtless.

His eyes caught on Hawke -- as he was sure they were intended to do -- and his face heated slightly as he found himself staring. Hawke had a pile of split logs to his right and whole ones to his left, and even from this distance Anders could see his shoulders bunch and flex as he hauled a new chunk of wood onto the flat stump he was using as an anvil. A brief gleam of winter sun stole between the clouds and caught on the head of the hatchet he was using as he swung it up,
stretching his arms and chest, and brought the blade back down with a mighty thwack.

It was quite a sight, and Anders knew he was not the only one staring. Hawke had obviously chosen this location for maximum visibility, and a few other windows along the wall had swung open as well as an oh-so-casual crowd of dwarven gawkers at the edge of the clearing. He was clearly enjoying the attention -- pausing to toss off a gleaming smile and flashing a pose to his admirers before he wrestled the new log into place -- but Anders had no illusions who this little show was really for.

Whack. Hawke paused to theatrically wipe the sweat from his brow, glancing up through dark eyelashes towards Anders' window. The flush deepened and Anders quickly looked back to his work, but the next time the axe rang out he found himself looking back again.

Shameless.

He wasn't even sure which of them that applied to.

Not all of the eyes on Hawke were friendly ones. As Anders watched Daros came into the scene, striding self-importantly in with a stubborn set to his out-thrust jaw. "Hey... hey! Excuse me!" Daros said, waving his arms as he hurried up to the makeshift chopping block. He thrust a finger at the poor dismembered hunks of wood. "This is unnecessary!"

"On the contrary," Hawke said, unruffled. "I happen to think it is completely necessary."

The sly glance he sent up at Anders' window was anything but subtle. Anders snorted into the hand he was resting his cheek on, but he couldn't deny that it only succeeded because he was watching.

"Hardly," Daros said haughtily. "This isn't some backwater barbarian village; all of the buildings are heated by fire runes. There's no need for firewood because there's no need for fires!"

"Oh, well, there's always need for fires somehow or another," Hawke said, unbothered by Daros' attitude. "Can't cook a proper 'unidentified camp mess stew' without firepit to hang it over you know. And then there's the traditional Satinalia roasting of fungus -- can't be done properly without an open flame."

Daros, not experienced enough with Hawke's brand of bullshittery, let himself be diverted by this. "There's no such thing as a traditional Satinalia roasted fungus!"

Hawke laid a hand over his heart, looking offended. "Excuse me? You're the expert on dire little hamlet local traditions now, are you? I'll thank you to keep your opinions about my family's religious observations to yourself!"

Anders muffled a laugh. He had to admit, in a contest between Daros and Hawke he couldn't really lose. It was as fun to watch Daros be taken down a notch as it was to watch Hawke's exasperating, infuriating charm turned on someone else.

Daros looked ready to tear out his curly hair. "Look -- have you forgotten that you're in a valley surrounded by mages?" he demanded. "If we need fire for whatever reason, we can conjure it up ourselves!"

"Far be it for me to tell an oh-so worldly mage how to use his magic!" Hawke smiled sweetly. "But I seem to recall that you can start as many fires as you like, but you'll still need some fuel to burn unless you plan to stand there channeling all night until your mana runs dry. I suppose you could always set fire to one of your toes -- that should burn like a nice little torch for, oh, five minutes at least."
"What?" Daros sputtered, and Anders' next laugh was not so muffled.

Daros was good at winning arguments -- you didn't stay a Loyalist long at a Liberarian-dominated Circle without a solid mastery of rhetoric. But what he hadn't seemed to realize yet was that you couldn't have an argument with Hawke, because he didn't play by the rules. He just kept up a steady stream of distracting nonsense until you'd lost sight of your original objective, and he could keep it up for hours. Anders, still smarting a bit from too many of Daros' smug logic-chopping lectures last season, couldn't help but enjoy the show.

"Oh, yes! Surprisingly good source of tallow, toes are," Hawke continued relentlessly. "And you've got ten of them! And that isn't even starting on fingers! And --"

"Gah!" Daros spun around and marched away, shaking his head. "I can't stand here arguing with this -- this nonsense!"

" Didn't think so," Hawke said to his cousin's back. An appreciative giggle broke out among his remaining audience, and Hawke grinned at them before he picked up another log and hefted it onto his chopping block.

*Thwack.* Well, it wasn't as though Anders had anything particularly pressing to do. He could stand a little distracting.

Hawke's reception at Refuge had been mixed from the start and continued on the cool side as time went on. Some of the mages had warmed up to his -- inevitable -- charm, but others remained wary of him. Even the ones who weren't actively indignant on Anders' behalf were suspicious of his motives, skeptical that any nonmage could really mean them anything but ill-will in the long run. Conversations tended to trail off when he joined them, mages made excuses to be elsewhere -- except for the ones who revived the centuries-old Circle art of conversational cattiness.

So far Hawke had borne it all with fairly good humor, better than Anders might have expected. He continued to be friendly and offer whatever services he could to whoever took him up on the offer, even when that offer backfired on him. One particularly mean-spirited mage from Ghislain had accepted his offer of help, and asked him to go into the woods behind Refuge and catch them a snipe. Its horns, the woman had said with a perfectly straight face, were a rare and valuable ingredient in many of their potions.

Of course, there was no such thing as a snipe, and snickering at Hawke's gullibility had been the topic of the table at dinner that night -- at least until Hawke strode into the dining hall as sunny as ever, firmly holding under one arm a mountain hare to which a set of ears and horns had been firmly epoxied on. He'd presented it to the astounded Orlesian mage with a flourish, a stupefied expression on her face as her tablemates roared with laughter.

(The 'wings' were discarded feathers from a mountain hawk, appropriately enough, but they never had been able to figure out what the 'horns' were made of. Both had fallen off within a week, and the critter quickly became a fond pet of the Refuge mages.)
Anders' feelings on the episode had been mixed; on one hand he felt slightly ashamed of the mages' ill-treatment of Hawke, but another part of him did somewhat enjoy seeing Hawke be the outsider for a change. And in the end it had brought laughter to the Tower, and that was something they still had sore need of.

Two evenings later, the dining hall filled with lamplight and chattering voices, Garrett Hawke strolled in with a set of Alamarri warpipes under his arm. He sauntered over to the emptiest table and flashed his most charming smile at the mage sitting there, a rather stunned teenage girl who grabbed her soup and scurried away at his request.

Hawke put one boot up on the bench seat, then leapt on top of the table and struck a pose. By now he had the attention of the entire room, some two score of nosy and agog mages. He arranged the warpipes with the bag under his arm, brought the chanter reed to his mouth and began to play.

Alamarri warpipes were meant to carry between peaks or across battlefields; if he hadn't had the attention of the room before then he did now. The bag continued to play a long, mournful note even after he stopped for breath. He took the reed from his lips with a flourish, extended an arm towards Anders' table, and began to serenade. Thus began the single worst example of love poetry Anders had ever heard, and that included the dregs of the Kinloch Hold library.

"My name is Hawke
and here I stand
in mages' town
on dwarven land,
a hundred eyes
upon this stage
I say my love
I kiss the mage"

Nobody in the hall was eating any more. Anders had his face buried in his hands, but he could feel the blush flaming to the tips of his ears as Hawke continued his outrageous performance.

Surana stood abruptly from her chair, her face calm but her eyes glittering dangerously, and marched -- well, waddled -- over to the wooden stage at the edge of the room. A few musical instruments were piles there, and she picked up a middle-sized lute and set it on her knees. Gaze boring straight into Hawke, she began to play.

The lute was an acoustic instrument, its chamber small -- in terms of volume, there was no way it should be able to compete with the war-pipes. But Surana's playing, though it started out soft, quickly came to dominate the room. He recognized the tune -- it was a riotus, vulgar Ferelden drinking song guaranteed to get a tavern room either dancing or fighting. The wailing tunes of the warpipes seemed to fade into the background as though they were being sucked from the very air, and the furious strumming of Surana's fingers over the strings completely overtook them.

Hawke made an effort -- he took up the chanter and played again, louder this time, though still somehow more muffled than it should have been in the stone room. Surana simply launched into a new descant, and the sound of her single lute was now that of an entire orchestra playing at once. Several of the mages were starting to decide that romantic drama or no, the dining hall was not a good place for their ears right now, and taking their dinners elsewhere.
Hawke leapt off the table -- landing lightly on his feet with only a sad squeak from the pipes -- and walked up to drop to his knees in front of Anders, looking up imploringly at him as he tooted at the pipes. Anders kept his hands firmly over his face and began to slide down in his chair, hiding under the table.

At last Hawke gave up, grinning and red-faced from laughter and the exertion of playing as he rose to his feet and flung out his hands in surrender. Whistling along to the tavern song, he sauntered out of the dining hall as nonchalantly as he'd come in.

The dining hall was deafeningly quiet after Hawke left, most of the mages having been scared off by the clash of instruments. Surana set the lute aside and rejoined them at the table, her face still serene with only a lingering tightness around the eyes betraying her annoyance. "This is getting ridiculous," she said as she took her seat. "Can't you do anything to rein him in?"

Anders nearly choked on his food. Swallowing hastily he said, "Neria, you've got a highly inflated opinion of my abilities if you think I can make Garrett Hawke do -- or not do -- anything he doesn't care to do. He's a force of nature -- how am I supposed to stop him?"

"You could, though," Mardra noted dispassionately. "Either by giving him what he wants, or telling him 'no' once and for all."

Anders had nothing to say to that. She was probably right -- one way or another. But… and yet…

"But you won't," Surana spoke for him, watching his face carefully.

_No, I won't_. He didn't want to admit it, but he _liked_ this. Not the pipe serenade or the terrible poetry -- it would take a masochist to enjoy that -- but he liked being at the center of Hawke's attention. Liked having all this effort paid to try to impress him, win him, woo him. There hadn't been a lot of wooing the first time around -- the attraction between them had been immediate and intense, and he hadn't taken much persuasion. The only barrier between them had been Anders' own lingering grief over Karl and his recurring insecurities.

They'd all, Anders thought, been a little bit in love with Hawke. He could have had any of them at his beck and call, but he'd chosen Anders. Back then, the thrill of being chosen -- of being wanted - - had been more than enough.

Now, he wanted to see a little more effort on Hawke's part. Was that really so wrong? "He's not hurting anything," Anders said at last. It sounded a little weak.

"Except all of our nerves," Mardra muttered.

"And our ears," Surana agreed.

A few more days dragged by in the Tower, the temperatures hovering just around freezing as the sun played hide-and-seek in the clouds. The weather, with the ongoing threat of the armies outside their doorstep, kept people mostly inside.

The army was still a concern, but a distant one. Anders was getting updates from the Avvar, from
Bhelen's spies, and from the wisp-ridden bird that they had used to carry messages. They hadn't been up to much since Sebastian had so hastily departed, and although his had been the biggest defection, their numbers were dropping slowly but steadily over time. Their morale was at rock bottom, with their supplies running out and the constant harassment from Bhelen's agents. Indeed, between the low supplies and the flagging spirits, one might have thought that the besieged and the besiegers were switched the wrong way around.

Desertion seemed to be a constant source of loss -- soldiers slipping off in ones or twos to try to find their way back to civilization -- and every day saw the army shorter by a dozen soldiers. Still they clung grimly on, even as ferocious arguments kicked up among the remaining leadership. More and more voices were advocating a retreat -- Bhelen's spies reported -- but the holdouts and zealots refused to suffer from such a defeat. It was looking as though a solid core of stubborn soldiers would still be there when the deep storms of winters buried the pass under three meters of snow.

It hadn't snowed yet, though. The weather was clear and dry -- if cold -- when the door to Anders' office burst open, revealing an ebullient Hawke. Anders sighed; he really had to get a lock on his door. "Garrett," he said dryly.

"Anders!" Hawke greeted him enthusiastically. "I thought you might like to accompany me on an adventure."

Anders was immediately wary; adventures-with-Hawke could cover anything from a trip into the woods to gather herbs to a foray into an ancient Tevinter prison to battle a primordial darkspawn. He'd learned better than to commit himself too early. "What kind of adventure?"

Hawke sprawled artlessly over Anders' spare chair and rested his elbow on the table, chin in hand. "Well, Gunhild says Tanngnjóstr slipped his pen and is running loose on the mountain again, so I thought it would be a good-will mission to put a leash on him."

Anders opened his mouth. Closed it, ran that sentence through his head a second time. It didn't make much more sense on replay. "You lost me," he admitted.

"Well -- apparently Avvar settlements each have a hold-beast, sort of like a pet or a mascot, but religiously." Hawke drew up one leg, began swinging his boot idly against the leg of Anders' table. "The hold-beast for Sky-Ram Hold is, well, a ram, beastly old horner they've named Tanngnjóstr. He's a clever bugger, and he's apparently figured out how to unlatch his pen from the inside and let himself out for a night on the town, or mountain as the case may be. Good for him, wine and song and lady rams, but it would be terrible trouble for the hold if he were to get himself killed by some ambitious hunter. Fortunately, Carver is an excellent tracker!"

"Is she?" Anders asked. Hogger had been, for certain, but Anders hadn't seen Hawke's dog do much aside from play fetch in the meadow and embark on an ongoing campaign to rid the Tower of all bread.

"I have no idea," Hawke shrugged. "Probably. Who cares?"

"It's not the greatest time..." Anders began.

"The sun's shining, the weather ought to hold for a few days at least. It's the perfect time! One last trip before winter takes hold," Hawke coaxed him.

"Garrett, the mountain is crawling with scouts of the Three Little Princes," Anders said. He was willing to be persuaded, but he liked making Hawke work for it. In the old days, all Hawke had to
do was show up at Anders' clinic and whistle, and Anders would fall eagerly at his heel. He wanted to make sure Hawke understood those days were over, that other things took precedence in Anders' life.

Hawke's cheery smile went briefly vulpine. "And if we run across any army scouts, we can slit their throats and make the mountain a safer place."

Anders couldn't help it; a small wicked smile touched his own lips in response to Hawke's bloodthirstiness. "Sounds dangerous."

Hawke scoffed. "Oh please, you laugh at danger. You always did, when you were following me around." He paused. "Unless all that time you were actually laughing because my underwear was caught in the back of my belt and nobody ever told me."

Anders laughed. Hawke leaned forward in his chair, looking at Anders intently. "See? There you are again," he said. "I don't think you laugh enough nowadays, you know. Clearly what you need is more danger."

"I don't know, Garrett…" Anders said reluctantly. He was tempted. It was tempting. As far as Hawke-adventures went this one sounded downright pleasant, and it had been a while since he went anywhere -- or got into any trouble -- just for the joy of doing so. He missed those days back in and around Kirkwall, traveling with Hawke, doing good deeds and kicking ass. He did.

But something held him back. Well, some things. He was perfectly aware of Hawke's intentions in getting him alone, away from his disapproving circle of friends. A night camping out in the mountain, with no one else around but the dog -- it was almost certain to lead to something, and Anders wasn't sure he was ready for that yet.

Even apart from that, he felt a strong unwillingness to leave Refuge. He wasn't sure where it was coming from, which meant that it was probably a feeling of Justice's. The spirit's midnight chat with Mardra had clarified a lot of things for him. He didn't think this was disapproval per se -- not an objection to Hawke, but specifically a reluctance to leave.

He cast around his room for a pretext and his eye fell on his writing desk. "There's always something that needs doing around here. My writing…"

"Oh, your manifesto? Are you still writing that thing?" Hawke smiled, that gleaming charming smile that he always used in his very best persuasion. "No need to worry about that, then! I've been told on very good authority that Refuge is heated entirely by runes, so they have no need of all that extra kindling!"

The warmth in Anders' chest turned abruptly cold, falling like a cold rain into his stomach to douse all his warm and happy affection. One word -- that was all it had taken to make him feel wretched and worthless, like a fool, like a joke. "Kindling? Are you serious, Hawke?" he demanded. "Is that really how little you think of me? Of my work?"

Hawke looked taken aback, the smile draining from his lips in the face of Anders' sudden fury. "Of course I'm not serious!" he protested. "Come on Anders, you know me. It was a joke. I make jokes, that's what I do. If you don't laugh at this world you'll never stop crying. I make jokes about everything."

"Not everything," Anders spat. "When that Tevinter woman Hadriana came around and threatened Fenris, you didn't stop to make jokes -- you didn't hesitate to drop everything and follow him off on a wild hare hunt."
"What? Yes, of course I did!" Hawke sat up, dropping his easy manner as he crossed his arms over his chest. "He was scared, he was nearly frenzied; he needed to know that we would back him up if his old master came calling. Which I did."

"Yes, he was upset and you just rushed to his aid," Anders said bitterly. "So clearly, you are capable of being serious about things that matter. Just not the things that matter to me."

"Anders, you and Fenris needed totally different approaches," Hawke began with exaggerated patience. "Fenris was traumatized -- he needed reassurance. You were totally different. You always laughed at my jokes, except when Justice froze up your sense of humor --"

"Don't bring Justice into this!" Anders said furiously. "He had nothing to do with whether I laughed at your stupid jokes, Maker. Some things aren't funny, believe it or not. Some things you don't fucking joke about!"

"I'll leave Justice out of it when you leave Fenris out of it," Hawke retorted. "Where is all this coming from, anyway? Anyone would think you were jealous of him!"

Anders stared at Hawke, incredulous. "That's because I was jealous of him, Garrett! No matter how I tried --"

"But you had no reason to be jealous!" Hawke protested. "I was never in love with Fenris. I never had any intention of leaving you for him --"

"I don't care about that!" Anders' voice rose, overrode Hawke's. "I wasn't jealous of your fucking sex drive! I hated the way you coddled him every time he got upset, dropped everything to help him whenever he asked -- you said it yourself, when he wanted reassurance he got it, and I only got fucking jokes!"

"When did I not help you?" Hawke demanded, on his feet and furious now. "When? When did I refuse one single fucking thing you asked me, Anders? I don't know how you got this crazy idea that just because --"

"Yes! You helped me! Grudgingly! Like it was a chore you couldn't wait to be done with, like you were just humoring me! Humor the crazy person! That was the word you always used, wasn't it?" Anders was yelling now, he knew he ought to contain his volume -- that screaming like a madman was only going to make Hawke's point for him -- but the feelings were all coming back now in a rush, feeling so helpless and humiliated, legs cut out from under him every time that word dropped from Hawke's lips, always wondering, always wondering -- is he right?

Hawke was staring at him, expression a mix of outrage, astonishment and hurt. "Is that -- is that how you really feel?"

Anders rolled his eyes; why would he be screaming about it if it wasn't what he felt? "I don't know Garrett -- what do you think?"

"So why am I only hearing about this now?" Hawke said, anger and hurt creeping together to erode away the disbelief. "If this bothered you so much back in Kirkwall, why did you never tell me?"

"How could I? Everyone was just waiting for you to come to your senses and drop me anyway!" Anders said bitterly.

"I wouldn't have --" Hawke started to say, and Anders wanted to scream, to burst out laughing, because really?
"Sure you wouldn't! But you did!" he shouted.

"And that's your problem!" Hawke said furiously, which made no sense, because of course that was the problem. "That you think -- doing that, telling me about your fucking feelings is on the same level as, what, blowing up a building?! That I have to be okay with that to prove that I really did care about you, that's where you set the limit? Maker's breath, Anders, how could anyone in the world just -- shrug that off and say don't worry, it's fine, you killed a hundred innocent people in the space of three breaths but I love you so who cares?"

Whatever Anders might have said to that, the rest of the conversation was interrupted by a sudden disturbance near the window.

Near the window, not through it -- a patch of stone on the wall rippled like water with a stone dropped into it an instant before a crow burst into the room. It was Serah Squawks -- if that hadn't been obvious from the bird's unorthodox method of entry, the fact that it was yelling its head off in human words might have been a clue.

Anders had never heard the spirit-bird act this way before. Always before, Squawks had been given a message to carry which he would then repeat back in a perfect replica of the person's voice. Now, it was as though he had taken a dozen of those messages and chopped them up and jumbled them in a bag. He spoke in a disjointed chorus of voices, varying between Surana's voice and Grandin's and even Anders' own from one word to the next.

But as unnerving as the chorus of voices was to hear, it was the content of the message that froze Anders' blood in his veins.

"Alarm! Alarm! Sound -- the alarm!" the bird called out, flying in tight circles around the room. He touched down for a second on the edge of Anders' desk before launching back into the air, flapping with agitation. "Soldiers -- on the mountain! Soldiers are -- attacking -- the Refuge!"

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

The song Surana plays to drum Hawke out of the room is Better Not Wake The Baby, a song which is considerably more raucous than the title would imply.
Citadel

Chapter Summary

Soldiers attack Refuge, and the mages are forced to defend all they've built.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I forgot to mention this in the last chapter! ushauz, the author behind A Herald Named Desire and Fadeward Bound, kindly did a gift-fic for me as part of a charity drive: Meet the Locals, which tells some of the story of what Justice has been up to on his side of the Veil! If you like Justice, or the fade, or spirits, or just because I said pretty please, go read it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15266382

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anders burst out of the front of the Tower, heart hammering in his throat as he beheld the red colored lights arching up from half a dozen points down in the forest. Maker, and that was only the approaches they had guards on! What if there were more that they hadn't caught?

Hawke was right on his heels, their quarrel put aside, now all business. "What are the flares?" he asked, voice low and taut.

"Scout outposts," Anders replied as he hurried around the corner of the Tower. He could make out clouds of agitated birds swirling above the barren forest. If they marked the position of the invaders, then they had only a few minutes.

He reached the open ground that sloped away downhill from the Tower, the same meadow where in the summer twilight they had held the festival to celebrate the mages going away to fight at Bowmannar. Many of their best fighters were there still, leaving only a skeleton crew of the old, the young and the infirm to defend Refuge.

But it was defended still. Marco was already in the meadow when he arrived, barking out orders to a milling crowd of mages. Their expressions were frightened but determined, not panicked, Anders was relieved to see. And they followed Marco's instructions as though they'd drilled them -- perhaps they had. The dark-skinned man had always been active in training the mages in defense, more so than Anders who was often distracted with other things.

On seeing him, Marco broke off from his current group of milling mages and hurried over towards Anders. "First Enchanter, sir!" he exclaimed, saluting. Anders wasn't at all sure that was correct, but it seemed to give Marco some reassurance, so he nodded without saying anything. "It's the Three Princes -- well, what's left of them. They're coming up all over the mountain!"
"At least we had some warning," Anders said, looking up at the red-tinted trails of smoke that marked the flares. "And the high ground, and reach on them. How much time do we have?"

"Less than an hour. The sentries have orders to fall back instead of engaging," Marco said, and Anders nodded his agreement of the strategy. One mage could only slow an advancing army at the cost of their lives, and Anders did not intend to pay in that coin. "The first ones should get here any minute."

"How many?" Anders asked. Marco grimaced.

"It's hard to get a count in these twisty ditches," he said. "But it looks like most of the rest of the army that stayed behind. Five hundred at least -- perhaps more like seven hundred."

"And defending?"

Marco's eyes darted around, counting rapidly, comparing it against some list in his head. "Less than a hundred," he said finally. "I'd say seventy-five at most, counting the newcomers from the Deep Roads."

"Seven hundred, is that all?" Hawke said, joining their council unexpectedly. His voice had that so-common sarcastic drawl to it, that Anders alternately found himself amused and frustrated by.

"They outnumber us ten to one!" one of the other mages exclaimed fearfully.

"Superiority of numbers isn't actually so superior if you can't apply it effectively," Hawke shrugged. "As narrow as these ravines are, they'll be lucky if they can come at us more than a score at a time. They'll be hemmed in, bottlenecked right into our defenses. An uphill charge over wet and rocky ground, against established defenses, manned by mages? This is a suicide charge. They must be mad!"

He laughed as he said it, and Anders was gripped with a sudden irritation; he wanted to shake Hawke, to force him to take this seriously for the Maker's sake. But he also saw the way Hawke's words affected the listening mages -- saw them stand a little straighter, expressions lighten, a few of them even beginning to smile. "They can't win, that's for certain," Anders allowed himself to agree. "But that doesn't mean they can't hurt us while losing. That's what they came to do."

"And it'll be our goal to see that they don't get what they came for," Hawke said confidently.

"Orders, First Enchanter?" Marco asked of Anders.

"Keep coordinating the defense," Anders told him. "We'll take care of everything else. Anything you need, send someone as a messenger and we'll make sure you get it."

"Yes, sir!" Marco said smartly, and went back to bawling orders at the battle-capable mages.

The first group of mages that Marco had been instructing were hurrying towards their forward positions now, in groups of four and five. Anders stepped forward and took charge of the next wave who were milling about uncertainly. "I want a space cleared back here, out of line of sight of any attackers," he said, waving towards a flat stretch of bare rock among the winter-withered grass. "We have ten minutes to convert this into a field hospital.

"You, you, and you --" he singled out several of the less brave-looking youngsters. "Stay out of the fighting and if someone goes down, you get them here and cover the retreat. Daros, you'll be here to meet them. Jowan, stay to help Daros. You're always telling me that blood magic can do as good a job as regular healing; now's the time to prove it."
"But --" Jowan sent an anguished look towards his wife.

Anders nodded. "Neria, I want you to gather up all of the children and get them to the second floor of the Tower," he said. "Keep watch from the windows, and fire down from there if any attackers break through, but don't let yourself get silhouetted for a bowshot. Have the children practice repulsion glyphs on the doors. If you need to, you can block the stairwells entirely until help arrives."

"Take Tisha, too," Mardra added, following his words intently.

Anders frowned. "What? Why her?" Tisha was a potent Storm mage, and he'd been hoping to keep her lightning storms on the front line.

"Because she's pregnant," Mardra said. "I assume you wanted --"

"What? Since when?" Anders demanded, to the chuckles of the surrounding mages. "Why didn't anyone tell me?!"

"Anders, is now really the time?" Mardra demanded.

She was right. They'd worked as fast as they could, but already flashes of light and columns of dark smoke, shouting and screams were beginning to float up from the mouths of the ravines. The first advancing soldiers had reached the top of the ravines to meet the hail of fire -- and also hail, big as chickens' eggs -- that the mages poured on them from above.

"The elders too," Surana said, pulling Anders' attention away from the initial clash, and he shook his head.

"No. Their magic is some of the strongest at Refuge," he said. "Aside from the children and you two, we'll need every able-bodied mage pitching in. Those that can cast offensive magics, cast. Those that can't, cast barriers and glyphs and support the others. This is our home, and we're all going to defend it."

"What about me? What should I do?" Damien said anxiously. Anders supposed that he, along with any of the other mages who had come to Refuge late, had been left out of most of the drills.

"What's your specialization?" Anders asked.

Damien puffed himself up proudly. "Force!" he exclaimed. "With a little bit of arcane --"

"Good. You'll be one of the heavy hitters then," Anders said. A thought occurred to him. "Before you run off to the front, try to find the rest of the group that came in with you. Make sure they understand what's happening, and what they need to do. I expect they'll listen to you better than to me."

"Right!" Damien said. He wheeled around and sprinted off, nearly colliding with another young mage -- Anders vaguely recognized her as one of Marco's lieutenants -- coming the other way.

"Sir! They've brought Templars with them!" the young woman said, panting as she stood stooped over with her hands on her knees. "What should we do?"

"Keep them at a distance," Anders said. "Whatever you do, don't let them get within swinging range. Keep retreating, even if it means giving up ground."
"How many Templars are there?" Hawke asked, sliding himself into the conversation with an intent expression. "A whole company?"

"No, ser, just a few..." The young mage looked peaked and pale, more frightened by the thought of a handful of Templars than a hundred regular soldiers. "But if they keep pressing, we'll lose the high ground..."

"Just point me to them," Hawke told her, and unsheathed his war knives. He ran the back of one of them under his chin, its curve echoing his wicked grin. "I know a few tricks for cracking open those tin cans."

Anders' heart thumped at the thought of Hawke going off into danger -- but really, there was no logical reason to be worried. Hawke was probably the most experienced fighter on the field today, and he'd survived far worse than this. "That'd be a help," he managed to choke out. "Thanks."

Hawke winked at him. "I'll bring you something," he said. "Templar head on a stick, sound good?"

Despite himself, a smile curved his lips. Hawke went in that unsettling way he had -- even surrounded by all this empty space, one moment he was plainly standing there and the next he was just nowhere to be found.

"What of us, First Enchanter?" The question was the same, but the tone it had been delivered in was flat and uninflected. Anders looked over to see Omelas, the Tranquil treasurer, standing along with Metea and the rest of Refuge's Tranquil.

The responsible thing to do would be to send them to safety with the pregnant women and the children. And yet -- he needed every hand. Anders took a deep breath, then said, "Decide who among you is the fastest runner. That person goes down the tunnel to Orzammar to take word of this invasion to the King and get help. The rest of you, I want you to open up our supplies. Sort out anything that could be useful in this battle and deliver it to the fighters at the front. Arm yourselves, too, the best you can, and if anyone attacks you, defend yourself."

"As you say, Anders," Omelas said calmly. Unlike the others he did not bow or salute; the Tranquil simply walked off calmly on their new assigned task.

"Ey, Warden Healer!" a familiar, cheerful voice rang out. Anders looked behind him to see a trio of short, stout bodies bearing down on him purposefully. He recognized the Carta-turned-baker Cenar, his wife Rona, and another of the stoneworkers. "What's with all this shoutin'? Are we really under attack?"

"Yes," Anders said. "But I'm confident we can hold them back at the bottleneck. They've come to kill mages, not dwarves. You and the rest of the workers can retreat to the Tower, or into the caves --"

"What? Stand by while those cloudgazers trample all over our buildin'?" Rona exclaimed, and the other two grumbled agreement. "Not on yer life!"

"But..." Anders hesitated. "You don't have to. We hired you to build, not to fight! Do you even know how --"

Cenar snorted explosively. "Oh please, Warden Healer," he said derisively. "We're dusters, we are. Do yeh think any of us came of age in Dust Town without learnin' how to hold our own in a scrap?"

"This is our home too, most of us," the third stonemason declared, a black-haired woman clutching a long chisel-like blade that was probably mostly used for cutting stone, but could
doubtless cut through plate armor just as easily. "You'd best believe we're gonna fight for it!"

Anders gave in. "All right. All right. Thanks," he said. He pointed at Marco. "Go over to Marco, tell him you'll be fighting, and go where he tells you to."

"Right you are, Warden Healer!" Rona said cheerfully, and the three of them galloped off -- one back towards the settlement, the other two towards the front line. "I'll rouse up the others!" the first one shouted as he went.

Serah Squawks had flown off as soon as Hawke and Anders had left the building; Anders had caught glimpses of clouds of crows flying over the mountainside. Now one detached itself from the circling group and plunged towards them, landing on Anders' arm as he held it out automatically. "Soldiers are coming!" he croaked, the by-now familiar refrain. "Soldiers on the mountain!

"Thank you, we know," Anders said, his mind still running on a hundred moving pieces. "Ow!" Serah Squawks had pecked him sharply in the ear, and he felt a trickle of blood as he turned to look into the unnatural blue eyes of the Fade-ridden beast.

"Soldiers are coming NOW!" Squawks insisted. He flapped his wings without releasing Anders' sleeve, pulling him a few steps towards the south. "In the yew trees! New ones! No one there!"

The copper dropped. A new group of soldiers was coming up one of the ravines that were not yet being defended. "Right! I'm coming," he said.

Squawks launched himself into the air and flapped off. Anders started after him.

"Where are you going?" Surana said, catching his arm.

"To stop them," Anders said, surprised she needed to ask.

"No. You need to stay out of the fighting. We need you as a healer more," Surana said, and several heads nodded agreement. "And besides, with Vael's attack on you last month, the world thinks you're dead. Better not give them any reason to come back and try again."

Anders shook his head. "Look, if they have templars in the group, I need --" he started.

"One fighter won't make a difference either way," Surana insisted. "But if they see you, every soldier and archer out there will home in on you to try to take you out. We need you alive, more."

"But someone has to block the south-eastern gully!" Anders exclaimed. "There's a score or more of soldiers coming up that slot..."

"I'll do it," Mardra said.

"Not alone," Anders said.

"I can do it, you know. I don't need --"

"Not alone," Anders said, and his voice made the gravel tremble.


The two of them headed to the southwestern clove at a jog that ate up ground quickly while preserving some breath. They passed by a half-dozen little battles already joined, and Anders got a
quick look at some of his fighters at work. Hawke, of course, was as magnificent as he ever was, dodging and weaving, disappearing from sight only to step from the shadows and bury his knives without pity in the weak joints below a Templar's backplate. It was only a shame there wasn't time now to stop and watch.

Some mages rained down fire and lightning while others held the shields, and he was glad to see that the training they'd had in the Deep Roads stuck with them. The newcomers were holding their own as well. Damien was a marvel of nature in his own right, turning gravity and force into his playthings. The two Anderfels mages worked together with the smooth ease of long training and practice: Jun would freeze an enemy soldier solid mid-charge, and Jannik smashed them to pieces with an unforgiving fist of stone.

Every mage had his -- or her -- own strengths, magics of combat and defense. But Anders had to admit, now that it came to it, that he had no actual idea --

"I realize this is somewhat on the late side," Anders panted as he trotted along by Mardra's side. "But what is it that you, er, actually do?"

Mardra gave him a driven look. "You know where I was trained, Anders," she said in exasperation. "Perendale," he replied easily. What kind of answer was that? All he knew of Perendale was that it was in Nevarra, and --

"You're a necromancer?" he blurted out, the pieces suddenly clicking into place for the first time. "Why didn't you mention it before?"

"It never came up!" Mardra shouted. "It wasn't relevant! Raising the dead isn't something that usually comes up in the course of a day's administrative work!"

"But, but," Anders said, scrambling to catch up to the long-legged Amell as she mounted the slope ahead of him. "Are you sure this will be okay? I mean, don't you need an actual corpse to have something to work with?"

"That," Mardra said as they crested the ridge and brought the gulley in sight, "won't be a problem."

This ravine was further out from most of the passages up the mountainside, with steep walls and less vegetation. In the spring and summer, it had been filled with a burbling stream. Now, it was filled with soldiers -- a score or more armed with mail shirts, helmets and swords, a few bows bristling in the back.

When they saw Mardra a shout went up from the crowd and, and they surged forwarda cross the icy ground. A few arrows shot from the back of the crowd, skipping off the barrier that protected her. But this was no place for archers; the footing was unsteady, the defile was narrow and they couldn't draw without getting their elbows in each others' space. Not many arrows issued from that crowd, and most of them were either weakly drawn, poorly aimed, or both. They glanced off the barrier that surrounded her or whistled overhead, harmless. "Kill her!" screamed a voice from the crowd, some rusty-voiced sergeant urging his men onwards. "Kill them all, in the Maker's name!"

Mardra drew herself up, eyes flashing with fury. No -- they were literally flashing! White stars danced across her eyes as the iris and sclera went black, covered by inky darkness. Dark energy, violet-tinted shadows, filled her aura and rolled outwards as she raised her arms, chanting words that seemed to go right through Anders' ears and pull like copper wire through his brain.

The soldiers in the ravine hesitated; a few backed away, uncertain. The bolder ones decided to try
to take her out before she could finish whatever she was casting and lunged forward, shouting.

Not fast enough. The leaders ran into the repulsion glyph and were bounced backwards; enough of them rushing it would overwhelm it, but Mardra finished first.

The shadow flowed outwards from her, a breath from a crypt, a miasma that brought with it nightmare. It enveloped the first few ranks of the soldiers, and madness took them -- some of them dropped their weapons, some of them lashed out at empty air or at each other, screaming of unseen monsters. Others turned and tried to flee, only to run into their fellows shortly behind -- the advance ground to a halt as the soldiers struggled against their fellows, locked in a confusing tangle.

And then Mardra's second spell went off.

Sickly green light collected around the form of one soldier squarely in the center of the crowd. It raced around his limbs, flowed into his eyes and mouth and pores; his horrified screaming changed note from fear to agonized horror as his flesh began to bubble and his bones disintegrate. His skin swelled, pushing at the seams of his armor and clothing as he threw his head back, foul yellow slime dripping from the corners of his mouth.

He exploded.

The shell of his armor kept most of the meat in the shape of a man, but tainted blood and yellow slime flew in all directions, spattering against the fellow soldiers who had been pressed against him in the melee. The screaming took up again as another half-dozen soldiers began to undergo the horrific process of decay. Those fortunate soldiers who had been far enough away not to be spattered by the effluvia cringed backwards, shaking and mouthing shaky prayers to the Maker.

The light from Mardra's hands shifted in intensity, and her chanting changed pitch; pinpricks of violet light formed in her hands and at a gesture, flew forwards towards the ruined mess of corpses that had until recently been men.

One by one, the bodies picked themselves up again, melted eyesockets glowing with an intense violet light. They looked once up at Mardra and at her gesture, turned and raised their weapons against those soldiers that remained.

Seeing the dead walk was too much for the survivors; they broke ranks, screaming, and fled helter-skelter down the rocky ravines the way they had come. The undead soldiers followed relentlessly after, and any who fell behind -- injured, lost their footing, or trampled by their own -- were hewn down by their shadow-wreathed blades.

"Maker," Anders mumbled, his knees feeling weak. She'd just taken out a company of soldiers all by herself, and Anders had no doubt that those who escaped -- and those who heard the stories they had to tell -- would sooner walk into a den of hungry wyverns than raise a weapon towards Refuge ever again.

A small part of mind was appalled at the devastation that had just been wreaked, the natural healer's response towards mutilation and desecration. But it was a small part; the greater part, that which had been fighting for his life and freedom for the better part of two decades, was mostly just immensely impressed and appreciative at how effective it had been. With a mere three spells, she had sent a near-battalion running.

And another part of him, centering somewhere in his chest and shooting a bolt of lightning up and down his spine, just wanted to sink to his knees in awe. She was magnificent, an incarnation of
death magic and righteous vengeance, and if he'd been wearing a hat, he would have uncovered it then.

What a mage! What a woman! What a warrior!

*Yes, thank you Justice,* he thought wearily, and forced his knees to straighten to take him back to the infirmary camp. There was nothing more for them to do here, but they still had a battle to fight.

As much as he itched to be on the front lines in the battle -- raining fire down on every Templar who had dared trespass and sending healing and strength into the mages in battle -- there was plenty to keep him occupied in this role. Marco (thank the Maker) did most of the actual directing of combatants, moving mages here and there and instructing them when to fire and how far. But there was so much more that needed to be done than battle alone.

Someone had to run the infirmary, direct injured fighters being brought from the front and supplies brought from the Tower and determine whether a healed mage was ready to go back to fighting again. Many were raring to get back into the fight -- excited and riled up and itching to get their own back, but others were hurt in more than body, and Anders relegated them to support duties. A mage that would freeze up when a soldier ran at them had no business on the front lines.

Supplies came to more than the infirmary, too. As the battle dragged out from minutes to hours -- the first terrifying assault beaten back, but the danger not passed -- someone had to oversee food and water and lyrium potions for the fighters, not just mages but dwarves too. Fortunately there were plenty of potions in the stores that had been prepared for sale, but if this wasn't enough of an emergency to appropriate those, what would be?

And someone had to accept all the reports brought by the scouts and fighters when they came back bedraggled and tired or frantic with the news of a new crowd of soldiers. Someone had to be there to take the messages and do whatever needed to be done -- and send them, too.

The assault had begun just before lunch -- no doubt the soldiers had begun scaling the mountain at dawn, and it had taken hours to work their way up the steep, icy, winding passes. It was midafternoon before the urgent message he'd dispatched down to Orzammar received any answer.

"Warden Enchanter?"

None of the mages called him that. Anders looked up from healing a nasty broken knee to see a cluster of dwarves gathered at the edge of the infirmary. They bristled with ironware, chain and plate and weapons of all types, sharp and butting to heavy and crushing. At the head of the crowd stood Fermin, Bhelen's messenger, and he spotted a few other familiar faces in the crowd. The friendly guard Donal, Moira's bodyguard Hilde... was that Osrac Saelac (formerly 'the undefeated' until Anders had defeated him) there in the back, lurking like a grim shadow? The others he didn't know, but they were reinforcements and that was all that mattered right now.

"Thank Andraste!" Anders said fervently. "We're still holding, but my mages are beginning to feel the strain. We really need..." He trailed off as he stood up, looking around the field. There were no
more than a dozen dwarves in the crowd, and none others on the flat. "Where's the rest of you?"

"This is all of us who can stand in the sunlight, Warden Healer," Hildegard replied. A few bearded faces nodded agreement.

"We have a regiment of Aeducan troops in the tunnels beyond the gate," Fermin added. "As soon as the sun sets, they'll be ready to fight."

"Sunset? Maker's fucking breath! We need them now!" Anders' hands clenched into fists and he unclenched them with an effort, running his hands over his head to try to get the strands of hair out of his face. "If this is some stupid matter of tradition again..."

"Not tradition, just truth," Fermin said. His face was grave, devoid of its usual self-satisfied smugness -- he wasn't joking, Anders realized with a sinking feeling. "They can't fight in the sunlight, Warden. That's a fact. None of the rank and file have ever been above ground before. Bhelen's willing to bend tradition to declare this Orzammar territory, so they won't be exiled, but -- the first time I ever saw the sky, it took half a day before my knees unlocked enough I could walk. Bad enough at night. During the day? Impossible.

"All of us who are able to fight in the open air, are here. If you want the rest of the troops to be of any use in a fight, Warden, you'll have to wait for sunset."

"Blight!" Anders swore, then took a deep breath. "All right. If that's the way it has to be, we'll find a way to last until sunset. But I'll be having words with Bhelen about this later."

"That means you have to survive long enough to have those words," Fermin said briskly. "So let's get to work. Where do you need us?"

Anders sent them off to Marco for deployment, and tried not to panic. It was almost Haring and the afternoon was half over already. Just a few more hours to sunset.

Sunset came with excruciating slowness. The dwarven reinforcements, such as they were, had come none too soon -- the mages were beginning to tire and the casualties were stacking up. By the time the regiment of Aeducan soldiers came marching out of the tunnels and fanned out to cover the approaches to Refuge, their own defenses were nearly exhausted.

Three mages were dead, beyond Anders' ability to save. One had taken an unlucky stray arrow to the head, killing him instantly; a second had pressed too eagerly to the attack and been hit by a templar's Smite, which slowed and stumbled him until a half-dozen archers got in their shots. A third had lost her footing on a slippery stone ledge and fallen to the rocks below, breaking her spine at the landing. Anders might have been able to save her if her fellow mages had been able to get her to the camp infirmary in time, but the soldiers had gotten there first.

But the assault had slowed, and stalled, and finally petered out. Hawke had been right -- the armies of the Three Holy Boys must truly have been desperate to attempt it in the first place. Every inch of the terrain and the circumstance were arrayed against them. The narrow stone ditches that were the
only access to the valley through the passes were cramped, often icy and slippery, and provided little cover from mages raining fire from above. It had truly been a plan of last resort, and it had failed. The gullies ran with blood, dark trickles freezing to the stone, and the mouths of the ditches were piled with corpses.

"They're on the run, stoneless cowards," was the opinion of the dwarven lieutenant who commanded the detachment of soldiers.

Anders stared out into the darkness. Sunset had come with a roof of thick purpling clouds racing up from the west, swallowing the last of the sunset; only a dim gloam remained to illuminate the trees and stones. It made the dwarven soldiers more comfortable at least, but that was the only benefit. "But they're still out there," he said, for the first time able to look past surviving the day to the trials ahead. "With all the nooks and crannies on the mountainside, we'll never find them all. They could come back at any time."

Fermin cleared his throat gently. "His Majesty's suggestion was that the mages of Refuge should be evacuated down into the city, at least for the duration," he said. "With stone on all sides, there Orzammar will truly be able to protect you."

"Orzammar was supposed to protect us up here," Anders snapped. He massaged his forehead with one hand, trying to ease the pounding headache. "This place was supposed to be safe. The mages were supposed to feel safe. If we evacuate now…"

"Better to feel unsafe than to be so," Fermin said with a shrug. "Unless you can see another way to secure the perimeter?"

The dwarven lieutenant volunteered his thoughts. "It shouldn't be too hard to defend this place," he insisted. "Now these soldiers, they're coming at you through all these twisty stone passages, right?"

"Passages?" Anders squinted at one of the stone ravines. It was more than head-height at its deepest part, but open to the sky. "You mean the gullies?"

"Right…" The lieutenant stared at him. "Passages. Anyway, if you want to keep them out, why not just collapse the passages?"

Behind him, Fermin closed his eyes and covered them with one palm. Right. Clearly the dwarf was still thinking in terms of underground tunnels. "That wouldn't work," Anders choked. "I mean… we could do that, of a sorts. We have enough Primal mages that we could crack open the ravine walls, fill them in with rubble. But they'd just be able to climb over them."

"Right, sure, but iffen you --"

The conversation was cut off by a sound that started off in the distance, like the rumble of a druffalo carrying across an open field. Then a whole herd of druffalo, their legs drumming against the ground as they charged. Then the ground itself began to tremble and quake, the infirmary tent poles creaking and tilting, the trees in the woods thrashing in agitation.

The main wave hit them, passed under them and the ground convulsed, throwing all three of them off their feet. The tent poles shook loose, the canvas collapsed on them; for a few moments Anders' world was a confusion of clinging sky and quaking earth.

Then it passed them by. Anders fought his way out of the canvas folds and stood blinking, confused, staring around as the tremor roared away into the distance.
He knew what an earthquake was. He was familiar with the spell, had even cast it a few times -- but the real thing was nothing like their puny mortal imitations. For a dazed moment he wondered if this had been their doing somehow, if the Primal mages had conspired to create a massive tremor to drive off the attackers -- but no, that wasn't possible.

Yet it seemed to have had some of that effect, all the same. In the wake of the earthquake's passing the forest seemed unnaturally still, only the occasional crash of broken branches or dislodged ice breaking the silence. The distant sounds of fighting had ceased, replaced only by the much fainter sounds of bodies crashing away through the woods and the faint victorious shouts of the mages.

"That's done it," he said, and was seized with a sudden giddiness. "They're running! The walls coming down on them was just too much for them!"

"Did you do this?" Fermin too had fought his way out from under the tent, and his hand clamped on Anders' arm.

"Me? Us? No!" Anders shook his head vigorously. "That was the real thing, no mage's imitation. Not every mage in all of Thedas working together could have accomplished anything on that scale."

Fermin didn't look nearly as pleased as Anders felt -- his face was drained-white and bloodless, his expression gutted. The dwarven lieutenant whose name Anders still hadn't gotten was still facedown on the ground, shaking as though the residue of the earthquake lingered in him.

"The vaults of the earth rise against us," he moaned. "The titan's bones wake. We are cursed. We are stricken!"

Anders stared. It began to sink in on him that an earthquake meant something very different to dwarves than it did to surfacedwellers. All around the field, the dwarves who had been helping in the defense were flung on the earth, moaning and crying.

Out here in the open, there'd been nothing to fall on them except a canvas tent. But in the Tower -- in the city --

"Orzammar!" he exclaimed, the sudden terrible realization dawning in an instant. The human army was fleeing, but a much worse catastrophe had taken its place.

A quake of this magnitude in the city of caverns and tunnels -- the damage, the loss of life would be incredible. They would have to move quickly to help -- if it wasn't already too late.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

If anyone was curious, the spell combo Mardra used was Waking Nightmare >
Virulent Walking Bomb > Death Syphon (to regain mana for the final spell) > Animate Dead.

Just to state it for the record: if any readers who happen to be artists just got it into their head to do a shot of Mardra melting the brains of an enemy squadron, well, I wouldn't be opposed.
Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the earthquake, both physical and mental.

Chapter Notes

Ticky/galymatiass was kind and generous enough to do a piece of art illustrating Mardra's confrontation with the soldiers in Chapter 68. It gives me goosebumps, I hope it will do the same for you. Check it out here!

Anders had fully intended to give Bhelen a piece of his mind when he saw him next. After all the harassment Bhelen had put him through that spring about committing enough mages to accompany his Deep Roads push, he'd gone and fallen down on his own half of the bargain. They'd known the armies were there. Anders had warned him that something needed to be done. Yet the armies of the Three Holy Boys had been allowed to linger and linger, and when they finally committed themselves to the task, Orzammar's armies had been late on arrival.

He'd intended to give Bhelen some choice words. But when he saw Bhelen, covered in stone dust, with a nasty bruise on his head and a trickle of blood running down his blond beard, looking like he'd aged a hundred years in the course of an hour, the words he chose were "How can we help?"

"Eh?" Bhelen's gaze rose towards him. The normally keen, watchful eyes looked blank and glassy. "Oh -- the mages."

"Your majesty -- is the Queen all right?" asked Hildegard urgently. She'd accompanied Anders and the other mages down from the valley. Actually, pretty much the entirety of Refuge had come along, accomplishing the evacuation after all. It served the purpose of getting them out of the danger zone of any lingering Holy Boys' men, while also being there to help the dwarves of Orzammar however they needed. Most of the rest of them were trailing behind, taking the tunnel and stairs as slowly as they needed. But Anders, Jowan, Mardra, and most of the dwarves had gone on ahead -- Hildegard had been beside herself with worry. "Was she hurt?"

That seemed to get through to Bhelen, and he shook his head. "No, no, she's all right," he said. Anders breathed a sigh of relief as well. "She's well, and Rica and the children too. Thanks be to the Paragons, the damage in the Palace itself was minor. But the rest of the city…" he trailed off.

Hildegard dropped an abbreviated curtsey. "With your leave, I must go to her," she said, and Bhelen waved her to go.

"What can we do to help?" Anders repeated, now that he thought he had Bhelen's focus on him.

"What can you do, surfacer?" Bhelen said. His voice sounded weary. "Do you command the
No, but we've got a few mages here who can lift them as easily as if they were made of parchment," Anders said. The tunnel leading up the valley had still been mostly clear, thankfully -- only twice on the way down had they needed to call on the Force and Arcane mages to move rocks aside to clear the path. And the great cavern that housed the palace had also been mostly clear, only piles of rubble showing where rocks had fallen, a few stones of the bridges popped out of alignment and odd ridges showing where the lava below had been shaken.

But though their route had been mostly clear, even in that short trip they had been able to see places in the city where the destruction had been worse. Houses that were partially collapsed or knocked askew, roofs that had buckled inwards, buildings and carts half-buried under rubble. And they'd heard the voices, crying and shouting. Anders would have been drawn off to deal with them at once, but Mardra had reminded him that they could get more done in conjunction with the official relief efforts than if their two groups were working at cross-purposes. Still, the memory of their cries ringing in his ears made him impatient. "And we can heal those who have been hurt. Come on, Bhelen! This is no time to sit around moping. Your people need you."

That seemed to rouse his interest. "Right, yes…" He looked around, as though seeing them for the first time. "Of course… Vartag is working to find and rescue those who have been trapped under stone. He could use your rock-lifting magics, I have no doubt."

"I can assist as well," Hawke said, for the first time in his life seeming to have the sense not to make a joke out of it. Or perhaps he was just too tired from the long day they'd had already. They all were. He reached down to pat the head of his mabari, who had lain down at his feet as soon as they stopped moving but still perked her head up obediently when he signaled her. "Carver here has quite the nose, she can lead people to survivors."

"Where will we find the Steward?" Anders asked, and Bhelen gestured to one of the palace's offices.

Anders turned to the mages. "Right, get everyone who has spells in Force and Arcane to go along with the Gavorn," he said. "Primal, too. Anything you think will help you shift rubble or lift rocks. Jowan," he said, and his voice dropped in volume as his eyes met the other man's. "I think you could be some help here as well. Finding people who are lost… you know what I mean."

"Finding how?" Jowan looked confused for a moment, then his eyes widened and his voice rose. "Oh right! Right," he said, quickly dropping it to a whisper again. "Finding. With the… you-know-what." He tapped the scars on his wrist.

Anders sighed. Jowan was about as subtle as a herd of charging druffalo. How in the Maker's name had he survived as a blood mage out on his own for so many years?

"As for the rest of us," Anders said, turning back to Bhelen. "We'll need somewhere to gather everyone who's been hurt, or lost their home due to the quake. A place to tend to the injured, and hand out supplies."

"Of course," Bhelen muttered. "No doubt there will be many who are hurt. Homeless. So many lost…"

He trailed off, sunk once more into gloom. Anders exchanged a long look with Mardra, who shook her head slightly. He took a breath, stepped forward, and began channeling healing magic into the King of Orzammar.
That roused Bhelen again and he batted away Anders' hand, staring at him in astonishment. "What in the Deeps d'you think you're doing?!" he exclaimed.

Several of the guards came on alert at his outburst. Anders fell back a step, waving the sparks away from his hands. "Healing you, Your Majesty," he said. "You're obviously concussed."

"Concussed?!" Bhelen said.

"Trauma to the head, confusion, shift in personality," Anders recited. "This isn't like you, Your Majesty. Acting so passive when there's an emergency in your city? Maybe you don't realize it, but you've been badly hurt. Let me heal you."

"No -- no, that's not it," Bhelen huffed, waving Anders away. "It's not a rusting blow to the head. It's just -- Blight it."

The king dragged a hand down his face. For a moment, he looked incredibly old. When he looked up again, it was to give a command to his guards. "Leave us," he ordered.

"Sir?" the guard asked, giving Anders a distinctly hostile look.

"All of you. The mages, too. I'll speak with the Warden Enchanter alone," Bhelen said. For a moment he was his old self, firm and authoritative; it was enough to convince his men. They filed out and, at Anders' nod, the mages went with them.

"What is this, Your Majesty?" Anders asked when they were alone. "Are you unwilling to show weakness before your men, is that it?"

"Something like that," Bhelen said bitterly. He heaved a great sigh. "You don't know much about the Stone, do you?"

"Not really," Anders admitted. Not the sorts of things that dwarves knew, anyway. "I know that it's a central part of your religion…"

"Religion." The word curled Bhelen's lip. "A surfacer word, for a surfacer notion of how the world is ordered. We don't have myths and stories and poems that tell us what to do, Warden. We know. Our oldest Memories stretching back to the ancient times are written in the Stone. Our people came once from the stone, and when we die we will return to it. It surrounds us, protects us, provides for us…"

He trailed off. Anders ventured, "So an earthquake is… pretty bad?"

"Pretty bad!" Bhelen gave a ghastly chuckle, half-laugh, half-gasp. "Yes, I suppose you could say that, when your sins are so great that the Stone itself rouses to censure you, to rain down damnation on your head and rip your foundations in half."

"Oh," Anders said, uneasy. "If an earthquake could be seen as a condemnation from your maker… then I guess your political rivals would be quick to say that this one was punishment for your reforms?"

"Aye," Bhelen waved that aside. "But that's not half the problem."

"What's the other half, then?" Anders said, confused.

"I've won every battle against my critics so far. Outlasted, overmatched, or got around. It's not what they say that concerns me… it's that they might be right," Bhelen admitted painfully.
"Oh," Anders said. Bhelen's despairing manner fell into place, then. Not concussed, not in shock - or at least not shock of the body. Shock of the soul, more like, a whole blow to the being with which Anders was all too familiar.

He'd been there before. He remembered the nasty shock, the ground-ripped-out sensation when they had fought Corypheus, when the creature's words seemed to confirm the legend of ancient magisters walking the Fade, vindicating the Chantry's centuries-long condemnation of magekind. He remembered it... and he also remembered going on from it, as he had from a dozen other crises of doubt before. He knew how to get back up from such a blow. Did Bhelen? Had he ever experienced such an assault to the soul, before? Was this the first day of his life that the King of Orzammar was experiencing doubt, true doubt?

After a moment's hesitation Anders sat down in front of Bhelen, on the step below his throne so that they were eye to eye. "I understand," Anders said, and his voice was emphatic enough that Bhelen raised his gaze to meet Anders', surprise breaking faintly through the awful existential horror. "Listen, I do. I hear what they're saying, and I know why they think that, and why even you might think that.

"When I was a boy in the Anderfels, my parents used to tell me," he had to pause to swallow, to fight off the creeping accent that wanted to sneak into his speech along with the memories. "Tell me that the Maker was always watching, and He hated sloth, and that if I didn't do all my chores and say my prayers, the Maker would send locusts to eat up all our crops, and we would starve.

"That made sense to me as a child; my own father was moody and tempestuous, impatient and cruel, so why would the father of the whole world not be as well? But the older I got, the further I got from the homestead, the more I came to realize that this was a bedtime story to frighten children into obedience, a child's fantasy of wrathful punishment."

"Are you trying to tell me that the Stone is a child's fantasy?" Bhelen demanded, outrage stirring his pride. "Watch yourself, surfacer!"

Anders shook his head. "I'm saying, how can you know?" he said. "You and the deshyrs both want to imagine a world where everything is intended, everything has a purpose, nothing happens by accident. You had your own idea of what that higher purpose was, and they had theirs. Now something has happened that doesn't fit your idea of how things should be, and you're shaken."

He was feeling pretty shaken himself. He tried to compose himself. "I understand that. I also fought against people who wanted there to be an order in the world, an order that blamed everything bad that happened on bad people, people like me. It's a picture of the world that they don't want to change, because to them it makes so much sense and feels comfortable. And they're so certain of that blame that you start to doubt. You wonder. What if they're right and you're wrong? What if all the bad things that happen in the world really are your fault?"

Bhelen said nothing. After a moment, Anders continued. "But it's not that simple. It can't be, with all I've seen and done. I can't believe that true Power beyond the world's creation could be so petty or so cruel. It's a fantasy of narrow-minded men, spiteful and determined to hurt even when it's beyond their power to deal it. I don't believe it. I can't believe it. If there's a pattern, a purpose, it's a greater one than any one person can see or understand. Not you. Not me. And certainly not them." He spat the word, aiming it at every Chantry mother and Templar and deshyr who sought to stuff him back into his place, any time he dared to raise his head.

"I have to believe that the Maker made me as I am for a reason," and for a moment he thought of Jowan, of his conviction that he'd been given an interest in blood magic so that he could bring it safely to the rest of the world. "That putting me in this world at this time was so that I could fight
for a better world.

"And I know that you're fighting that fight too." Anders smiled. "I know that all you're doing, however much it treads on the toes of the traditionalists, is with the aim of reuniting your people with their ancient ties to the Stone beneath the earth. If there's any true god under the earth, I can't see how they could want anything less from you."

Bhelen was silent for a long minute, blue eyes staring off into the distance, dark shadows hovering around his face, waiting for an opening to close in again. "And what if you're wrong?" he said at last. "What if there is no true god, no 'higher purpose'? What if it really is just all random chaos, chipping off one piece at a time until we're all dead?"

"Then…" Anders took a deep breath. "Then you have to do what's right for the people in front of you now. And right now your people need help."

Bhelen gave a slow nod. His eyes were coming back into focus now, though his face was still drawn and haggard. "Aye," he said slowly, then his voice firm. "Aye. And we would be most grateful, Warden Enchanter, if you could lend your aid as well."

One of the Aeducan officers, Lieutenant Kreigh, had been delegated by Bhelen to 'restore order' in the city. At the King's suggestion, Anders and most of the rest of mages and dwarves who had come down from the surface (and it was funny, wasn't it, that he had started thinking of it as 'the surface' just like the dwarves did?) went to assist him. Mardra and a few helpers had stayed behind to coordinate and run messages, and Surana had taken the children and the injured off in search of somewhere they could rest for the night.

That left Anders with a dozen mages and twice that of dwarven guards, all of whom were variously armed and grim-looking. The thought occurred to Anders, as they marched out of the palace, that they might not have the same goals in mind.

"Have you actually had much experiences with disasters here in the city?" Anders asked as they took the roads that led up to the Diamond Quarter.

Kreigh shook his head. He was holding it together pretty well, but he had the same glassy-eyed look of shock as the rest of the dwarves. "Not in my lifetime, Warden Enchanter," he said. "Darkspawn attacks, on the regular. Not too difficult to reinforce the gates and push them back. House fighting, better to let them fight it out themselves, long as there's no spillover. Riots from the lower castes, every now and then. We put them down."

"Ah," Anders muttered. "So your idea of 'restoring order' after a disaster is, what exactly?"

"We're to make sure there's no looting or disruption in the chaos," Kreigh said. But he didn't sound very certain of it, and as he looked at the shattered buildings, the cracked roads, his expression was one of muted horror. He shook his head. "But this is…"

"Well, Bhelen assigned you to me," technically it had been the other way around, but hopefully the lieutenant wouldn't pick up on that, "and I have some other ideas for how to restore order. What I'm looking for is a staging area."
"What for?" the lieutenant wanted to know.

"For whatever we end up needing," Anders answered. "Mostly, for people. If the buildings are damaged and structurally unsound, we'll need to bring them here -- to see how severe their injuries are, treat them if we can, distribute supplies as needed."

Kreigh digested this for a moment. "What do you need?" he said at last, still uncertain.

"We need a wide, flat open space -- the bigger the better," Anders said.

The guard looked around, doubt and dismay pulling his moustached face down. "That won't be easy to come by, Warden Healer," he said. "Space around here is costlier than a bronto's weight in jade."

"How about right over there?" Anders said, gesturing towards the plaza that was close at hand. He'd been through there a few times, and he recalled the space as being wide-open, covered with stalls and kiosks across a floor inlaid with colorful stones.

"The Diamond Market? Oh, no," the guard said, looking daunted. "That won't work."

"Why not? It's flat, it's open, it's not currently being used," Anders pointed out. "We just have to push the stalls out of the way and we have ourselves an open field."

"Yes, but those stalls are all property of the Merchant Caste families," the guard said anxiously. "No one outside of the Merchant's Guild is allowed to touch them. For the lower castes it's a hand cut off, for the first offense. If any goods are equipment are damaged, it's death."

Honestly, that only made Anders want to do it even more. "Well, right now the city is in an emergency," he said. "We have orders from the King himself to take and do whatever we needed. If the merchant princes have their complaints over it, they can take them to His Majesty."

Kreigh looked taken aback. Actually, he looked like the world was turning itself upside down in front of his eyes, nugs riding dwarves and rocks falling upwards. After a few moments, a little smile began to play across his lips, lifting the edges of his moustache upwards. "Right you are, Warden Enchanter," he said. "And if we push all the merchants' stalls together, it will be easier to keep an eye on them to make sure there's no looting, right?"

"Sure," Anders said. Actually, he thought that would make it even more convenient for them to take whatever supplies they needed, but he thought he'd strained the poor man's worldview enough for the first go.

The lieutenant turned to bawl at the soldiers following along behind them. "Right, look alive! We need this plaza cleared in five minutes! Get every stall and cart pushed back against the walls, far as it'll go!"

Clearing the market took less time -- and fewer scuffles -- than Anders had feared, and then he was able to get to work. Spread out, set up his tools, and begin stockpiling the supplies he would need. The dwarven guards he mostly sent to fetch and carry, or to direct traffic of the wounded to the Diamond Quarter. Anders hadn't finished tying back his sleeves before the first arrivals began to trickle into the square, well-dressed merchants and nobles and deshyrs now with clothes torn and bloodied, dirty with grit and mud and worse things.

Anders had been worried for Dust Town most of all. But in a twist of fate, the destruction hadn't been as bad there as it had been in the Diamond Quarter. Some of it was that Dust Town was further away, on the far side of the sprawling city from the epicenter. But a lot of it, to be perfectly
honest, was just that there was less in Dust Town to be wrecked. Dust Town had no delicate plumbing and venting infrastructure to smash and tangle, no structures taller than a single story to crack and topple, no magma vents to collapse into.

The dusters had weathered the earthquake with little more than a mess of fallen rubble that could be picked up and put fairly easily back together, and perhaps most importantly at all, they had lived through enough hardship in their lives to develop a tougher skin about it. Which was not to say there had been no injuries -- there were, and Anders made sure they got treatment side by side with the other castes. There had been damage, and was determined to hold Bhelen on a course of helping fix things up again better than they had been, later. But the worst of the disaster -- collapsed tunnels, trapped people, the injured and the dead -- had hit the Diamond Quarter hardest of all.

By now all of those who could walk -- or be carried -- had made their way to the wide-open space of the Market. It had started slow, but as word filtered out among the city that the Market was the place to go the trickle increased to a near-flood. Anders was caught up in the frenetic, familiar rhythm, too familiar from too many disasters in Kirkwall. No earthquakes, not in Kirkwall -- but just about everything else: tunnel collapses, chokesdamp, plagues, fires, Qunari invasions… He healed and he triaged and he gave orders left and right to everyone who stood over five feet tall. A number of the mages had stayed with him; not just the healers but the Elemental, Entropy and Spirit mages whose talents would be of no help against unforgiving stone. But every pair of hands were needed. Even if they could do no more than wind bandages or administer potions, they could help.

Anders worked his way methodically down a row. A fresh batch of victims had come pouring in from the north side of the Diamond Quarter, many of them being carried on litters or by the searchers or sometimes even by stumbling friends and relatives. They hadn't had time to triage them yet and the dead were mixed in with the living.

He moved on to a woman in an elaborate red-and-purple dress, reaching up to carefully turn her head into safer alignment. He stopped, hands still cupping her head, as two things registered. One, this woman was dead, and had been for over an hour given by the slow ooze from the wound that had killed her. And two, he knew her.

It was the Lady Tourmaline, a noblewoman from of House Bemot that had been one of Anders' patients in Darktown. She'd come to him for help in conceiving a baby, being one of the many Orzammar noblewomen whose long environmental exposure to Blight had left her barren. He remembered her for her rather large and prominent nose, for the distinctive widow's peak of her red hair, and for her nugs.

Lady Tourmaline had talked endlessly about her pet nugs -- it had taken some persuasion on Anders' part to get her off the topic long enough to apply the treatment. Nerves, perhaps. But she'd loved them dearly, and she'd made him look at every one of the acid-etched metal plates showing stylized images of her pet nugs that she carried around in her purse. Precious, Twiddles, Applejack, Baron von Nuggalope the Third … Anders had wondered, though he would never be so rude as to ask, whether her long infertility had led her to take out her frustrated maternal feelings on her pets instead.

The first treatment he'd done for her had been unsuccessful. Not enough strength to it perhaps, or maybe just bad luck. He'd done a second treatment for her just two months ago. Had it succeeded? He didn't want to check, now. He didn't want to know.
His hands felt carefully along her bolero… yes, there it was, the little bag of thick silk in which she carried the plates of her nugs. He resolved that when there was time, when he had someone free, he would send them to the Bemot Manor and have them check to make sure someone was feeding the nugs.

"Anders?" a familiar voice drew him out of his grief, and he looked up… well, across, to see a familiar face. Freckles, snub nose, thick eyelashes… red hair in disarray, eyes glazed with shock.

"Dagna?" Anders looked her over quickly, looking for signs of injury. No bloodstains, no bruises… some odd-color splashes on her hands and lower body. Burns? He couldn't tell. Her face was pale and waxy, freckles seeming to float on the surface of her skin, and her eyes were white-rimmed -- but then again, they all looked like that right now.

Dagna teetered uncertainly on the boundary of the makeshift infirmary. "I… all my equipment got smashed," she said, her voice unsteady. She kept twitching, turning this way and that, as though starting to go back to her workshop and then halting again. "My workbench -- right over. My fabrication engine -- it -- it shattered all over the floor. I can't… I don't…"

Anders bit back on a surge of exasperation. Right now, broken infrastructure was hardly their biggest concern. But -- that didn't mean the loss wasn't real, especially as some of her equipment had been expensive and rare. Reactions to disaster sometimes tended to emerge obliquely, and Dagna was clearly in shock. Perhaps what she needed was some direction, something to occupy her hands.

"We could use your help," he said, keeping his voice warm and encouraging.

"I -- I want to help. But my equipment --" Another one of those aborted half-steps. "I could… make healing potions -- or tracking charms -- but -- but my workbench is smashed."

"There's still plenty that needs to be done," he offered. "Lots of rubble that needs clearing, if nothing else."

"I could make a machine that sweeps rubble…" Dagna wandered in a half-dazed circuit. "But I can't -- all my tools. I could -- I could make a machine that senses when earthquakes are going to come, that makes an alarm -- but -- I can't --"

"Dagna!" He grabbed her by the shoulders; she looked up at him, her eyes wide and glassy. He forced himself to make his voice gentle. "The earthquake sensing machine sounds good. Really, it does. But it's going to have to wait until later, wait for another day. For this day --"

He released her shoulders, reached over and picked up a stack of blankets. He bundled it into her arms, turned her towards the row of injured dwarves, and gave her a little push. "Hand out blankets."

"Right…" Dagna said, and her voice firmed up. "Right. Blankets. Right."

She went off down the row. Anders saw her again a few minutes later; one of the Tower workers was scolding her about the proper way to make a splint, demonstrating the wrap and knots. Dagna looked rather flabbergasted to have a casteless telling her something she didn't know, but she was at least listening.

Anders went back to his duties, almost smiling.
After a time, the initial flood of victims slowed back down again. Many of the ones who stumbled into the Market were not injured but displaced, with either their homes or the streets and passageways leading to their homes having been destroyed by the quake. They needed food and a place to rest, not healing magic. Anders left his helpers to it, and went off to find the front lines.

The rescue teams were still working to find people lost in or beyond the collapsed tunnels. Anders found Jowan in deep consultation with an elderly dwarven noblewoman, hair in disarray and tears making streaks of the makeup on her weathered face. He had what looked like a strip of leather in his hands that he was working over intently; after a moment a red glow began to emanate from the strip, and Jowan pointed off towards one of the reopened passages. The two of them stood up and began to walk that way, the woman nearly stumbling until Jowan put a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

He left them to it. Jowan seemed to be doing fine. What he was really looking for was the one human in Orzammar right now who wasn't a mage, a handsome lanky figure with a rescue-sniffing dog by his side…

But instead of Hawke, he found Hawke's cousin. She looked tired, blue bruises under her eyes and her usual, practical clothing dirty and ragged. She had a tablet in one hand, because of course. "Mardra?" he said, surprised. "I thought you were at the palace."

"I was, and I'm going back there soon," Mardra said. "I came to put some of the rescue workers off-shift."

"Off-shift? But we aren't done," Anders said.

Mardra shook her head. "Search and rescue operations will be going on for the next several days," she said. "Our people can't keep going indefinitely without rest. Brosca Manor is cleared, but there isn't room for everyone there. I'm sending the people who are showing signs of exhaustion, as well as those who don't have skills to contribute directly, as the first rest shift. In eight hours they'll change out for the next shift."

"Oh," Anders said. He still found the idea of voluntarily stopping work to be rather bizarre. "Good… good thinking."

Mardra peered at him, and her lips pursed. "And the fact that you didn't argue with me on that, Mister Anders, is a sign that you need to be one of the ones who gets their head down. Back to Brosca manor with you."

"I can keep going!" Anders protested. "There are still people who need my help…"

"They need help, yes. But they don't need your help specifically. There's nothing that needs to be done right now that others can't do," she said in a more gentle voice. "You're still recovering from being shot earlier this month, and you know it. Go rest."

She was right and he knew it. "All right," he yielded reluctantly. "Be sure to send word if you need me especially for something."

"I will," Mardra promised, and Anders knew she wouldn't.

He made his way back to the Manor, nearly sleepwalking the route that he knew so well that his
feet could take him there even with everything going on around him. Brosca Manor was packed nearly to the brim with mages who had taken every available surface to collapse on, couches and floors and desks as well as beds. In Anders' own room -- the room he had always stayed in before moving up to Refuge -- he found Hawke at last, curled up with Carver on the middle of the bed and dead to the world. The dog snored a bit, little rumbles and twitching paws as though still trying to dig in her sleep. Hawke twitched a little in his sleep, too, but at least he didn't snore.

Anders stared at his sleeping form for a long minute, then shook his head and went on to the mercifully empty couch. It could wait until morning.

~tbc...
Anders woke to flickering lights not quite at the angle he'd expected them to be. Sometime in the night, somehow, he'd changed places with Hawke -- he was on the bed now, a solid and mabari-smelling weight pressed up against his back, and Hawke was over on the couch. The lamp, which was set to its lowest pinprick -- hence the flickering -- was positioned to cast light over his shoulder.

His arms and legs ached from the long hike and long day's work before, and his chest ached too -- a silent reminder that Mardra had been right about the lingering effects of Sebastian's regard. Behind him, Carver made a canine noise and huffed a damp spray of breath onto his back. At least, Anders couldn't help but think, Hawke's new dog was of the female persuasion. He'd woken up once or twice to Hogger taking up an equal amount of space on the bed, but having a male mabari spooning your back was a very different prospect than a female one. Hogger humped, too. At least he was spared that.

He hadn't moved -- he'd swear to it -- but Hawke turned his head all the same, the lamplight dancing on the side of his face and glinting off the darkness of his hair, his eyes. He looked so strikingly beautiful, all at once, young and handsome yet wise and powerful, that Anders' heart ached.
No point in pretending to be asleep. Anders sat up, extracting himself from the dog's embrace with exquisite care. "What time is it?" he said, stifling a yawn.

"Little after nightfall, the day after Refuge was attacked," Hawke responded. "I don't know what that is in dwarven time, I'm afraid. Things have settled down somewhat out there. Once they got over their collective shock, the dwarven emergency services mostly rose to the occasion. Mages are in more of a support role, now. There's still work to be done, but nothing's on fire any more."

Anders accepted that with a nod, then sniffed. "Is that food I smell?"

"They're making pancakes out there," Hawke said. "The first shift is waking up again and getting ready to head out, and the second shift is coming in to take their beds, and my scarily efficient cousin got the idea to feed everybody at once. Pancakes apparently being the only dish they know how to cook."

"Most of them left the Circle not knowing how to cook anything," Anders said defensively.

"I wasn't complaining. I like pancakes," Hawke said, and turned over another page. Anders eyed the stack with sudden misgivings. They looked familiar, like -- "Hey, that's mine!" he said indignantly.

"Found it over in the drawer of the desk," Hawke said. "I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. 'On the use of Entropy techniques in speeding fermentation of wort in brewinghomes... On the use of telekinetic auras to aid in the trimming and felling of hardwood...' This is good stuff, Anders."

Anders felt his face heat at the phrase, as indignant as he was over the presumption. "Who said you could read my almanac?"

Hawke quirked an eyebrow at him. "Is that what you're calling it these days? Not a manifesto?"

"Yes, well, you never seemed to care about my manifesto when we were in Kirkwall," Anders said bitterly.

"No," Hawke said, and something about his tone commanded Anders' attention. For the first time he realized that since he'd woken up, Hawke hadn't cracked a single joke -- not so much as a smile. "No, I didn't."

Had the earthquake and its fallout shocked him out of his usual clownishness? No, that couldn't be right -- Hawke responded to crises by getting more snarky and irreverent, not less. Had Hawke finally decided to be serious?

They had a slice of time here -- not forever, since tired mages would be wanting the bed, and there were people out in the city that needed them. But they could wait a while -- maybe not hours, but minutes.

"So..." Hawke said, and cleared his throat. "We should talk."

"Should we?" Anders said, trying to pretend that he hadn't been thinking just the same thing. "By 'talk' do you mean 'talk,' or by 'talk' do you mean 'yell at each other some more?' Because if it's the latter, I'm much too tired."

Hawke looked tired, too. They'd come off of fighting a battle to work through the night on search and rescue, and neither of them had slept as much as they truly needed to. Anders just didn't have the energy for any more histronics -- in the sobering light of the past few days, it was hard to
"Listen..." Hawke scrubbed the back of his head with his hand, looked bashful, like an apprentice confessing a crush. Anders didn't buy it for a second. "I'm sorry I said those things."

"On which occasion, then or now?" Anders said tartly.

Hawke essayed a hopeful smile. "Um... both?" he said, the full force of his considerable charm behind that smile.

Anders snorted. Time and abrasion had made him, if not immune to the Hawke charm, at least aware of its machinations. "Try again."

"Look." The smile evaporated, and the pinched and frustrated expression that replaced it at least seemed sincere. Hawke blew out a fraught breath. "Listen, I'm sorry I made light of the things that were hurting you. I'd say that I didn't realize at the time, but... it was more that I didn't want to realize. I wanted the time we spent together to be good, I wanted us to have fun. I wanted you to be happy, and more and more seemed like you never were. I didn't know how to fix it, so I just... tried to cover it up.

"I knew what you were trying to do --" his hands waved in a vague way that might, or might not, have approximated an explosion. "Well, in a general way, not that -- but I didn't think it was possible to make a change so I just... didn't try." He gave a little shrug.

"To think that the things I gave up on because they seemed too hard... you stuck it out." He looked straight on at Anders, and the expression on his face made Anders uncomfortable in a way he found hard to put words to. "I never dreamed you could actually do it... and you did. You changed the world. I didn't see it on that day, but I've seen it since. Traveling, meeting the mages who rose up and fought back because of you, watching a nine-hundred-years institution crumble to its knees because of you... it's been... humbling."

Anders' mouth ran away from him. "I'm not going to lie, a little bit of humbling is a good look on you."

"Of course." A smile turned up the corner of Hawke's mouth, managing to convey a wealth of smugness in just that small expression. "Everything looks good on me."

"Aand we're back," Anders sighed.

The smug smile faded, and now Hawke looked earnest, an expression more terrifying than all his braggadocio and slyness. "Would you believe me if I said I'm amazed by you, Anders? That I came back because I want to see what you accomplish next?"

Something in him warmed to hear it, flushed his cheeks like he was a hormone-ridden teenager again. He strove for coolness, aloofness, but only managed to temper his response to. "...I could try."

"We were... we were good together, weren't we?" Hawke looked at Anders, face naked with hope and yearning. "Weren't we?"

"Garrett, I..." Anders sighed, looked away. "I... miss what we had. I do. But this isn't going to work if you're always going to be holding Kirkwall over my head, like a sword whose point you could drop on me at any moment. If you haven't forgiven me, then why are you here?"

"That wasn't... what I meant!" Hawke sputtered. "I never said that I haven't forgiven you, or
"couldn't forgive you, or -- I just…" He sighed, hands clenching against his thighs. "Is it really so hard to understand that I was upset?"

"…A little bit," Anders admitted. "I know you've seen worse, blight, you've done worse, over enough time. Why is this the one thing you couldn't forgive?"

"That's not it," Hawke insisted. "Maker, when when did the word *forgive* even come up? I just… I was so frightened, and furious because I was frightened. All I could think of was Bethany, and the danger that you put her in. You brought the wrath of the Templars down on the Gallows mages. It was your doing, and you didn't even seem to have a plan to defend them after!" The echo of that fear, of that anger, twisted his face into a scowl, "In the heat of the moment it just seemed like, I don't know, that you were willing to martyr my sister and every one of the Gallows mages along with you for your grand cause."

Anders was silent for a moment. There was so much to unpack with that statement, honestly, it was hard to know where to begin -- starting with the implicit assumption that the injustices committed by the Templars and the Chantry would be anyone's doing but their own, that they were faultless and without agency in the very massacre they were bent on committing.

But mostly, he didn't really know how to deny it because Hawke wasn't… *wrong* exactly. In the last months in Kirkwall it had seemed clear to him that the Gallows was doomed, that their fate was already signed and sealed. He and the Underground had done everything in their power to get as many people out safe as they could, and it hadn't been enough. He had despaired entirely of the Gallows; he had thought only to turn to the wider world of the rest of the Circles across Thedas. Hawke wasn't wrong. Anders had never had a plan to spare or protect the Gallows mages: only to give them a chance to fight back, to have their voices heard, to have their story and their senseless murders remembered. He hadn't thought of giving them salvation, only vengeance.

What he said in the end was: "Meredith had already called for the Rite of Annulment, you know. Months before I ever set the charges in the Chantry. She'd always planned to invoke the Rite; she was just waiting for an excuse."

"Right, I know, but…" Hawke's beard creased with his frown. "She might have asked, but Elthina never gave her approval. Well, that was typical of Elthina, couldn't even take action for her own team. But the Divine wouldn't have approved it, either."

"And you think that would stop her?" Anders rolled his eyes wearily. "Meredith didn't rise to control of Kirkwall by sitting back and waiting for benedictions by her Chantry superiors. Sooner or later, she would have stopped waiting for permission."

"She would have done it. She and her Templars would have locked the Gallows door late one night and by the next morning every mage in there would have been dead. After it was done, with no witnesses left except among the killers, they'd have the time to concoct any story they wanted. And the Cleric and the Divine would have gone along with it." Hawke started to protest, and Anders cut him off. "They would have gone along with it, Garrett, because the alternative would have been open riot in every Circle in southern Thedas, and no Divine -- no matter how sympathetic she supposedly is to mages -- could have allowed that to happen. They would have lied, and covered it up, telling themselves that keeping the peace is in the best interests of the mages too, since riots would be bloody and violent and oh, *people* might get hurt. They've done it before."

Hawke's frown deepened, a grim look on his face as he contemplated the scenario Anders was laying out -- considered, but not doubted, Anders was relieved to see. "So you forced their hand," he said.
Anders nodded. "I removed their plausible deniability," he said, "and any chance of keeping secret just what had happened in the Gallows. All public, all light of day. And the Circles did riot. That was always the plan."

"Maker." Hawke shook his head, looking daunted. "All that, and I... I just told you... I really fucked up, didn't I? Par for the course, Garrett Hawke..."

He trailed off. Anders didn't finish the thought for him. It hurt, even now, and he didn't particularly want to relive the moment, however much Hawke wanted to wallow in it. He picked at a few threads fraying from the edge of his sleeve, instead. It had caught on a slice of broken rock and torn while he was reaching for something, and now the rest of it was coming undone.

Hawke stood up. Anders eyed him warily, but Hawke made no move to approach him.

"I came here because I thought… because I wanted you back," Hawke said. "And I thought that it would be as simple as just walking in here and asking. That you'd fall into my arms again as easily as you did the first time, back in Kirkwall. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe the trust I once took for granted is irreparably broken."

He gave Anders a lopsided smile, a perfectly Hawke attempt to paste a joke over a grieving heart. "I'll keep trying, though. To earn your trust again, even if it doesn't mean you'll come back to me… I think that trust is still worth having."

He turned and walked out the door.

Anders was left caught out, feeling out of step, out of synch. From the moment Hawke had sauntered into Refuge he'd felt the need to hold himself aloof, to keep Hawke at arm's distance. Now Hawke was finally giving him the space he'd wanted… and he wasn't sure any more that he wanted it.

He puttered around for a few minutes, gathering up the scattered pages of his almanac, changing clothes to get in order for the day. Arguing with himself, second-guessing himself, doubting himself, until --

He's walking away.

Blast and blight it, wanting Hawke to run after him a bit was fine as far as it went, but as a strategy it had its limits. Maybe it was time for Anders to run a bit, too.

And run he did.

The front room of Brosca Manor was crowded with bodies, tired people in varying states of dirtiness munching on stacks of pancakes, but there was a clear channel open between him and the door. Astonished eyes followed him as he vaulted over the tumbled piles of equipment and ran out the door; bewildered voices followed him, and he didn't doubt bewildered mages as well.

He caught up to Hawke just on the boundary between the Commons and the Diamond Market, the broad set of stairs that spanned between them. It was as public a place as Orzammar had, really -- every dwarf out in the middle of the Market could see them, as well as a dozen vantage points from more-crowded Orzammar. He didn't care, not right now. He called out before he lost his nerve, "Garrett, wait!"

Hawke did wait, stumbling to a halt mid-step in a way totally unlike his usual graceful prowl. He twisted around to look at Anders, his expression astonished and hopeful in one.
"Garrett, listen…” Anders puffed. Having run all this way, he wasn't sure what he even wanted to say. Unless it was the words he'd wanted to say since he first set eyes on Hawke, here in Orzammar at the gates of the Deep Roads. "I -- I didn't blame you. For what you said that day."

"Well, I -- " Hawke started.

"Stop." Anders held up a hand. "Just listen. I... I didn't blame you then. I couldn't. I knew what I was going to do was terrible and I couldn't ask it of you. I fully accepted that you might denounce me, even kill me, and I accepted that you were right to do it."

Hawke looked indignant, even outraged. "I would never have --"

Anders moved his hand forward, resting a finger against Hawke's lips, stopping his words. "Let me say it," he commanded. "Just let me get through it once."

Hawke's lips parted, then closed again, and his head moved in the barest nod. He was listening. At last.

Anders continued. "Even though I didn't blame you, even though I knew you had the right, it almost killed me, Hawke. Losing you, being lost by you, almost was the end of me. I can't bear it again. Not in this life.

"So I'm telling you now: you know what I am. You know what I've done. What I might still do. If you choose to walk away now, that's fine. But if you still want to stand by my side, then you stand with me through whatever comes. No more chances. You walk into this with your eyes fully open, and if you betray me, I won't forgive you."

He put his hand down. Hawke's lips moved a few times, silently, as though he were testing their function. At last he cleared his throat. "Anders... I crossed Thedas to stand by your side again," he said huskily. "I'm not going to walk away. Without you, there's nothing. There's no point to anything. I can't say that I know what I'm getting into, but whatever comes next, I want to face it with you. I know I haven't earned it but please, please, please give me your trust again."

Anders smiled. It hurt, but he couldn't stop smiling, even as his vision blurred suddenly with tears. "I do," he said. "I mean -- I will."

Hawke's face lit up, and he took a cautious step forward -- then another, and another, until he had bridged the distance between them.

He raised one hand, uncharacteristically shy, and placed it along Anders' cheek. Anders leaned into it, drawn forward like a moth to a flame, and Hawke -

The entire Commons burst into resounding cheers, from the refugees to the mages to the Dwarven commoners watching from every hall and window, as Hawke kissed him.

An arm around the back of his neck, and Anders kissed back.

It felt like… coming home, except that every home he'd had since he was eleven years old had been places of, at best, mixed emotions. It felt like the home he'd always wanted, dreamed of, the lover he'd dreamed of. It felt like coming up over the ridge and suddenly seeing the tower at Refuge for the first time -- unexpected, but so beautiful that it wrung his heart and moved him near to tears.

He finally had to break it off to catch his breath, clutching at Hawke's shoulder with one hand as he
panted. Hawke, to his secret satisfaction, looked nearly as dazed -- as though he'd been hit between
the eyes with a brick. Around them, half a hundred dwarves were still whooping and hollering --
they'd probably heard the songs, hadn't they. Maker. He was never going to live this down.

He didn't care.

"Bethany agreed with you, you know," Hawke admitted lowly. "Once Kirkwall was vanishing over
the horizon behind the sails of Isabela's ship, she asked me what had happened to you… gave me a
proper reaming, when I told her."

The thought shouldn't have pleased him, but it did; at least he was not completely without
defenders. "I can't tell you how glad I am that Bethany made it out all right," he said. "Where is
she, anyway? She didn't come with you."

Hawke grimaced. "No, she stayed on the ship with Isabela," he said.

Anders knew that Hawke missed his sister; they'd always been close. But that didn't explain the
sour, disgruntled expression on his face when… "Stayed on Isabela's ship, or stayed with
Isabela?!!" he exclaimed.

"The second one," Hawke said with a turtle-like hunch of the shoulders. "By Andraste's wedding
bed, I couldn't take another day on that ship! It wasn't a big ship, at least not big enough to get
away from the sound of them canoodling."

"Oh balls, that sounds awkward," Anders said, making the effort to sound sympathetic although
internally he was cheering for Bethany. And Isabela too, if he was being honest.

But he didn't have to worry about Bethany and Isabela's love lives right now. He had his own to
worry about. Right here, in his arms.

He kissed him again.

~tbc...
As the aftermath of the earthquake becomes less urgent, it's time to move on to other concerns. A conversation with Surana, and a trip to Bownammar leads to an unexpected reunion.

It was strange how things could be caught in such upheaval, and yet so quickly settle back down into a routine. Except now, it was a routine of repair and rescue, a low-level emergency that went on not just for hours but days and longer. Really, it made him homesick for Kirkwall.

It had been over a week -- two cycles -- since the earthquake had shaken Orzammar to its bones, and they were still excavating collapsed passages and clearing rubble out of shops and houses. By now they'd rescued all the survivors who were alive to rescue, though clearing buried tunnels was still the highest priority -- just in case.

The earthquake had hit in the middle of the dwarven night, after the Assembly was ended from the last cycle, and by the time it convened for the next one Bhelen had already come out swinging. He must have done some fast digging in the historical archives, because his bards were already all about the town singing The Lay of Prince Hendir and Tyrdda Bright-Axe. Bright-Axe had apparently been an Avvar chieftan from the Ancient age who, while seeking shelter in the caves of the Frostbacks, had run across a clan of dwarves in the tunnels below. Hendrir Varen, deshyr of a House that had gone extinct a thousand years ago, had not only mingled freely with the Avvar, but married their chieftan. Anders had been pretty surprised to hear that; it was hard to imagine an Orzammar dwarf marrying a human. But it had happened and, more to the point, not resulted in any cataclysmic earthquakes.

This fact he was quick to point out when his opponents in the Assembly accused him of bringing ruin down on them all with his cloud-gazing associates. He followed up this hopeful tale with a much more ominous one; a civil conflict during the Storm Age where a cabal of deshyrs plotted to unseat the dwarven king; on the very hour that they swore oaths to unseat their rightful king, so the histories claimed, a terrible tremor shook the caverns and rained judgment down upon their heads. (Personally Anders suspected a bit of historical editing as to the exact timing there, but that was the way the Memories had it and therefore an uncontestable fact as far as the dwarves were concerned.) The earthquake, Bhelen therefore argued, had not been caused by his decisions as King but instead by *their* blasphemy in opposing him. Not all of the deshyrs were convinced, but it at least generated enough uncertainty and doubt that nobody tried to take the point any further.

Thankfully, little of this dispute had backsplashed on the mages themselves. Though there were some irate voices -- the Merchant's Caste was especially displeased with Anders for his commandeering of the Diamond Market -- many more dwarves had been saved or helped by the mages during the emergency and felt, if not grateful, at least well-disposed. They remembered that the mages had come to their aid when they needed it, and dwarves had long memories.

It was a good thing they were, because the mages were still stuck in Orzammar. The Tower had not been as badly damaged as many other buildings in the city, but the foundations had shifted enough to crack apart the outer wall and caved in part of the roof. Worse, the cracks had cut into several of...
the heating runes, and most of the Tower was now without heat -- and the thick clouds that had swallowed the sun the night of battle had finally brought the winter's first blizzard. Only a few rooms were still habitable, and only by making use of Hawke's thoughtfully laid-in store of firewood.

The damage was repairable, Voldrik determined, but fixing it would take clear weather and labor, and right now they had neither. What masons and workers were available were all needed to help clear the damage down in the city -- and if some of the work gangs had suspiciously soot-smudged faces as they cut stone and carried blocks, the harassed and frenzied overseers chose to overlook them.

One thing at least the blizzard guaranteed -- the Army of the Three Princes was dead in its tracks. Any soldiers that had not fled down the mountain would be frozen solid by the time the blizzard had blown over -- but most of them had fled, thoroughly defeated and demoralized by the hellish defense the mages had put up in defense of their home. According to the stories spread by the survivors, the dwarves of Orzammar had summoned up the earthquake to drop the walls on them while the mages conjured down a hurricane from above. The tales grew with every retelling, no doubt in part to salve the egos of the soldiers at being defeated by a force so much smaller than their own, but they would ensure that any army would think twice before mounting another assault.

All in all, the outlook for Refuge was looking quite rosy, despite the damage to the Tower and the ongoing crisis of the earthquake.

Only one dark cloud hovered on the horizon: there had been no word from Bownammar since the earthquake. In the first cycle after the disaster this absence hadn't been remarked on, since all normal lines of communication were thrown into chaos, but as things settled down in Orzammar the silence grew worrying. Bhelen had sent a small expedition out into the Deep Roads on the Bownammar route to find out what was going on, but it would be a few days more before anyone could report back.

In the meantime, Anders found himself falling into a new routine, one that combined the new and challenging in bizarre ways with the old and familiar. He was back in Brosca Manor where he'd spent so much time after arriving in Kirkwall, so that much was familiar. But now the manor was packed to the gills with mages, as crowded as they ever had been back in the Tower, in a city thrown helter-skelter with chaos. He was back together with Hawke, working side by side during the day and sharing a bed at night… but things weren't quite the same between them, either.

It was hard to put a name to the differences, to the strange new hesitations that lay between them. Not all of them were bad. Anders no longer felt the need to defer to Hawke on every point, no longer lived in constant fear of Hawke discovering his darker feelings and spurning him for it. They fit together like partners, like lovers, but they didn't fit together quite like they used to.

Was it better or worse that their days kept them busy, without time to just relax in each other's company? Though they tumbled into the low dwarven bed together each night, during the day they often found themselves pulled into separate currents. Anders had much to do directing the disaster relief efforts, and there was always, always healing to do. Hawke -- Anders wasn't entirely sure where Hawke went when he disappeared, but he suspected he was finding his own ways to make friends, run errands and keep busy.

They still hadn't discussed the Justice and Mardra situation. Honestly, Anders wasn't even sure how to broach it. Hawke knew as much about the situation as anyone -- he'd been there for Mardra's dinnertime announcement -- but he hadn't said anything about it. Neither had Mardra, not
that Anders saw her except crossing paths in a hurry these days, and neither had Justice.

It seemed like nobody involved had any objections, or at least no inclination to start trouble. But even so, the stalemate was driving Anders a little bit crazy. He felt like he ought to be doing something to resolve the situation, even if the only thing that needed to be resolved was his own understanding.

So during one unexpectedly free hour in the evening, two cycles after the earthquake shook Orzammar, Anders went looking for Surana.

He caught up with her in her and Jowan's old bedroom in the Manor, where she'd taken up residence again after moving down from Refuge. Looking at her, Anders wasn't sure whether she was going to be able to make the journey back up to Refuge, even if it was made liveable again by the time her child came to term. She was very close now, eight months along and then some; the pregnancy was clearly wearing on her, dark rings under her eyes, but every day she continued made the child's chances of survival better.

Jowan was out working now, thankfully, and Surana greeted Anders quietly and gestured for him to sit. For a change she was not working on anything, either an instrument or a new runecarving project, but only reading a book.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

"Mardra told me --" Anders swallowed nervousness -- "that maybe you would be able to offer me some advice. Advice about having more than one... partner, that is."

"That's..." Surana let the word linger, for long enough that Anders was sure she was going to gently correct him; instead, she finally allowed "True."

"Really?" Anders blinked, a quick review of all the mages at Refuge cycling through his mind, trying to remember which if any of them had spent extensive time with Jowan and Surana. None particularly stood out; while they were well-respected as seniors in the community, Surana's reticence and Jowan's insistence on dabbling in blood magic had discouraged particularly close affiliations. Well, apart from Mardra and Anders himself, and he knew it wasn't either of them.

Wait. He hoped it wasn't either of them. This polygon was getting complicated enough without introducing cross-currents. "So, who's the lucky third? I admit I never would have guessed!"

"Daylen, if he's a boy," Surana said. Mardra's lost older brother, Jowan's old friend, the one who had been unjustly sentenced to a cruel death at Aeonar. "That's a good choice, a very sweet way to remember him. Though I admit I was thinking you'd go for"
something Dalish. What if she's a girl?"

"Dayla," Surana said.

Anders paused. "Also... after Daylen Amell?"

Surana nodded.

Anders blinked. "That's, uh... that's more," he said. "More than you would usually do just for a friend." And he was beginning to think that was the point.

"Yes," Surana said.

Let it not be said that Anders couldn't take a hint. "You and... Daylen?" he said slowly. "Or, you and Jowan and Daylen? I didn't think... What am I saying? This was Kinloch Hold, everyone was kissing everyone." He shook his head ruefully, smiling at the memories it brought.

Surana did not smile, not even recalling her girlhood love. "We were young. It was just silly, apprentice games... not real love, we told ourselves. Not like Jowan and his beautiful Chantry girl." She inhaled deeply. "But we were all in it together, Daylen and Jowan and I. We all plotted and planned for him to run away and get married and be happy. Like if he could be free and in love, we could live his happiness by proxy. It was our fantasy, our romantic dream... But it didn't turn out like that."

"Jowan... said that Daylen was blamed when he ran away," Anders said.

"Yes."

"He didn't say that you were involved."

"They didn't know," she said flatly. "If they had known I was involved... But they didn't suspect me at all, not when they'd already found a scapegoat in Daylen. Daylen was taken away and I... I stayed silent. Nobody asked me." She was silent for a moment more, then added, "I was as much to blame as Daylen, but speaking up wouldn't have saved him. So I didn't speak up."

"Of course not," Anders said staunchly. "There's no reason you should have."

Surana didn't seem to hear him. "Afterwards... Daylen and Jowan were both gone and I... was left there, waiting. Waiting to hear that they'd caught Jowan and killed him, or that Daylen had told them about me. But they never did."

Anders shuddered at the thought; the waiting, fearing, never able to rest for a moment from the demons clawing you inside and out... it would almost have been a relief, to meet censure and judgment and punishment and just have it over with. But not the Circle's punishment, not the Chantry's punishment. Never that.

"I bear as much guilt as Jowan does," Surana said. "But guilt won't bring Daylen back."

"I never knew," he said softly. "I'm so sorry."

"Sometimes I feel so angry that people look at Jowan and I and see a happy couple." Surana looked
off at nothing, her face placid, her voice even. "They don't know, they don't understand that there
were supposed to be three. There's a hole. It will never be filled, not really… but I hope that we can
keep Daylen with us in spirit, if no other way."

Anders wanted to say something. But he'd already said sorry, and what else was there to say?
Instead he reached out and took her hand, and she looked over at him in startlement, shaken out of
her thoughts.

Surana took a breath. "I don't know how much good my advice is going to do you, Anders. Daylen
and Jowan and I, you and Hawke and Mardra and Justice... the context isn't the same. In the Circle,
questions of fidelity never came up, since we all knew we could never... never really have real
love. So we pretended it didn't matter, that what we felt wasn't real, until it was too late.

"I can't advise you on what to do. But I can tell you what not to do: Don't let your worries about
what might happen destroy all your joy. Don't live your life by anyone else's rules or notions of
what you should or shouldn't feel." It was advice she'd given him before, he knew, and it had been
good advice then too. "Life will happen, sooner or later, and take away the ones you love. You
don't want to miss anything you could have had while they're still with you."

"Thank you, Neria," Anders said, quiet but earnest.

The two of them sat together on the couch, holding hands, contemplating the turns that had brought
them both here -- both starting in the same Circle, but taking such very different routes to the lives
they now lived. A thought occurred to Anders, and he looked over at Neria and began to smile.

"Hey -- you realize what this means?" he asked. Surana gave him an inquiring look. "We're
basically in-laws. Hawke was Daylen's cousin, so... that makes us family!"

Surana smiled at him softly. "I think we were made family a long time ago."

The next morning, Anders was flagged down by a runner from Bhelen's palace, requesting his
presence as soon as possible to discuss the matter of Bownammar. Anders had other things he
would really rather be doing, but this wasn't a summons he could readily ignore: even aside from
the contract of service with the king, he was still technically a member of the Legion of the Dead,
and forays into the Deep Roads at the King's command was pretty much the entire point of the
Legion.

He put as many of his other projects on hold as he could and headed to the palace. The past two
cycles had done a lot of good for Orzammar, he noted as he walked. Most of the rubble had been
cleaned up. You could still see damaged walls and collapsed roofs, but they had been cleaned, like
a wound washed and ready to be bandaged. The roads were still cracked, but the pits and holes had
been filled in. It wasn't as pretty as it had been before, but it looked like healing to him.

Once he arrived in the palace, an Aeducan guard at the palace directed him to one of Bhelen's
conference rooms. He stopped short in the doorway, however, when he saw the familiar dark-
bearded face of Hawke bent in conference with the blonde, crowned head of the king. "Garrett?" he
asked, bewildered. "What are you doing here?"
"What am I ever doing?" Hawke said, smiling disarmingly. "Making myself useful."

"That is certainly one word for what he is," Bhelen said, leaning back and giving Hawke an calculating look from his slate-blue eyes. "Quite an interesting fellow, your Champion lover. I was surprised, though not displeased, to hear of your… reunion."

Hawke smirked. Anders balked. "Can we please discuss something other than my love life?" he said with a groan.

"By all means," Bhelen said, and brushed the topic aside. He shifted his weight forward, his expression intent as his fingers spread over a message tablet. "I've heard back from my scouts that I sent to Bownammar three days ago."

"Three days? They made fast time," Anders said after a moment's calculation. It was a two-day journey to Bownammar through the Deep Roads, even if you took no side detours and didn't stop to rest.

"They didn't go all the way and come back. Some way out from Bownammar they caught up with a messenger on her way back to Orzammar, and the patrol leader sent her on with a guard to make sure she got here. The report she brought was quite disturbing."

Disturbing in the context of the Deep Roads had all too many possible connotations. Anders almost didn't want to ask, "What is it? Did a tunnel collapse on them?"

"Exactly the opposite, I'm afraid," Bhelen said, rubbing one thumb over his lower lip thoughtfully. "You know that they've been having continued attacks of darkspawn for some time now--"

Anders nodded. Hawke, who'd known no such thing, looked blank.

"But during the earthquake, one of the natural caverns outside of the city subsided, opening up a new passageway into deeper tunnels. And ever since then the darkspawn have been pouring up in a flood, unstoppable."

"What kind of darkspawn?" Anders had to ask. "Only hurlocks, or genlocks as well? Ogres? Emissaries?"

Bhelen cast a dubious eye on the message. "The report doesn't mention different types. Only hurlocks. That could mean there are no others, or simply that whoever wrote the report didn't mention them." He looked keenly at Anders. "Would that make a difference?"

"It might," Anders said. "If the new darkspawn are all of the same type, that might they're originating from a… a single source, somewhere below the city. If there are a variety of different types, then that's a sign of a bigger horde somewhere nearby that's starting to press on the area."

Bhelen nodded, looking grim. "If there's anyone who knows more about the 'spawn than us, it's you Wardens," he said. "That's why I need you to go to Bownammar."

Anders sighed, but he couldn't be surprised -- he'd known something like this was coming since he received the summons. Still, he whined a little for form's sake. "Does it have to be me?" he said. "I've got my hands full helping the displaced refugees from the earthquake." And he really, really, truly did not want to come face to face with another… 'source.'

"Someone else can take over your work." Bhelen looked grim, his usual jovial manner entirely absently. "Warden, I don't think we can underestimate just how big a setback it would be if we lost Bownammar to the 'spawn, now. Since this rusted earthquake happened I'm barely holding onto
my authority in the Assembly. If I'm to keep my promise of retaking the Deep Roads for the
dwarven people, we must keep the Bowmannar route open. To lose it back to the darkness now --
after reclaiming it for the first time in generations -- would be to signal that the strength of the
dwarven empire has truly met its end."

And if there was no Deep Roads expansion, there'd be no need for a mage army either, Anders
realized with a chill. The fate of Refuge -- and of the mages -- were inextricably linked to Bhelen's
kingship. "I understand," he said. "I'll do it."

In a wonder of dispatch, they were out on the road -- well, the Deep Roads -- in hours. Anders
wouldn't have thought it was possible in a city whose infrastructure and communication was still in
disarray, but when the King of Orzammar wanted something to happen, it happened.

It helped that their party was small. Apart from Hawke and Anders himself, they took only a few
others, Anders being of the opinion that it was better to travel light but faster than to arrive too late.
There ought to be plenty of dwarfpower (and magepower) already in Bowmannar, if they could
reach them in time. So they brought along only a few mages -- Grandin volunteered, for some
reason -- and a few dwarven warriors.

Hildegard, Moira's bodyguard-slash-partner, was one of those who had come along. Anders had
stopped by the palace before leaving to check on her, as her due date was getting near, and for
some reason the Queen had insisted that he take Hildegard along. When he asked why, she merely
said that she had some projects going on in Bownammar that she wanted to check up on, and left it
at that. Given the way Hilde had smirked when she said it, Anders wasn't sure he wanted to know.

With so many non-Warden's in the party, Anders didn't attempt to push them on a straight march to
Bownammar; it wouldn't be good for them to arrive exhausted. The guard posts that Bhelen had set
up along the route between the two cities were deserted, and about the halfway mark they began to
encounter darkspawn.

The jangling scrape of their presence in his head, the darkness of the Deep Roads and the tons of
stone above their heads, still featured in most of Anders' night horrors. Still, they were a well-
armed and battle-capable party with a good mix of mages and warriors, and they were able to take
on each wave of darkspawn without too much trouble.

Swords, knives and firebolts flashing, Anders still fought with anxiety gripping his throat, one eye
on Hawke as he slipped and flashed through the darkness. He would frequently disappear from
view, which Anders knew was part of his fighting style but caused his heart to leap in his throat
every time. He took the time to check over each of them after the battle, and he lingered a little
longer on Hawke, nobody seemed to think it was strange -- indeed, they mostly reacted with smiles
and knowing looks.

"I'm fine, Anders," Hawke repeated for the fourth time that day, after the latest pack of darkspawn
lay in cooked pieces beside the road. "Really, I can handle myself -- you know that."

"I'm not doubting your fighting skills," Anders said, waving the healing away from his hand. "I
just… it doesn't hurt to be careful, that's all."
"I'm always careful," Hawke said airily, and when Anders snorted disbelief, he laughed.

"Seriously, Garrett, it's not a laughing matter," Anders protested. "I just wish you didn't have to get in so close. It's just… it would only take a scratch, just a bit of darkspawn blood…"

"I've fought darkspawn before, you know," Hawke said. "I've been in the Deep Roads a few times now, and always come out the other side fine."

"That doesn't mean you always will," Anders fretted. "I've seen what the Blight does to people, Garrett. I just… just don't like risking you this way.

"So have I." Hawke cocked his head to the side. "You're willing to risk the others -- even the mages -- but not me?"

"It's not that…" Anders tailed off, looking over the others in the party. Grandin had gotten a fire going -- he had a special affinity with fire -- and the dwarves crowded around it willingly enough, heating water and food and cheerfully insulting the 'spawn as they did.

"The dwarves have lived with the threat of the darkspawn all their lives; it's no more of a threat for us being here, and considerably less. The other mages… they knew what they signed up for. They're willing to take the risk for the sake of Refuge, to fight for their own freedom. I don't like losing any of them to the Blight, but they're fighting for themselves, now."

"And I'm not?" Hawke said.

"You're only here because of me," Anders muttered. "If I weren't here, would you have ever set foot in the Deep Roads again? Be honest."

Hawke hesitated for a moment -- really thinking? Anders hoped so. "Maybe not," he said at last. "But then again, maybe so. I don't know where my life would have taken me, except that it wouldn't have been boring. Don't worry so much, Anders. You don't have to take the whole weight of Thedas on your shoulders so much, you know."

His words had the tone of finality. But the next time they encountered a pair of Darkspawn stragglers on the road, Anders noticed, Hawke hung back and let the mages take care of them.

As they approached Bownammar proper, the darkspawn presence began to tail off. Anders wasn't sure what to make of that; it could be good news, but if the darkspawn had managed to get inside the city and consolidate there, it could also be very, very bad news.

"What should we expect going in there, Healer?" Grandin asked, pushing up to walk next to Anders. The rest of the party hovered nearby, listening.

"How should I know?" Anders said. Three days in the Deep Roads was making him tetchy, as unfair as he knew it was to take it out on his companions.

Grandin nudged him with an elbow. "You're the Warden," he said. "C'mon! We'll be better prepared if we know what we're looking for."
He was right, and Anders knew it. He sighed. "I was only a Warden for about six months, you know," he hedged.

"Yes, but during that time you served with Paragon Brosca, during the outbreak under Amaranthine," Hilde pointed out.

"Back in the briefing with Bhelen, you asked specific questions about what type of darkspawn had been spotted," Hawke said, watching Anders closely. "That means you know something we don't. Spill."

Why did he care about keeping the Wardens' secrets, anyway? Anders gave over. "I don't suppose any of you stopped to think about where new darkspawn come from," he said.

"From the depths," Hilde repeated readily, as the others just shrugged. "They reproduce in stone that has been corrupted by the Blight."

"Certainly, but they don't just spring out of the ground," Anders said. "There's a special kind of a darkspawn called a… a broodmother. They each produce only one type of darkspawn, so if all the ones that have been seen are a single type, then that's probably where they're all coming from."

"A broodmother? I don't remember ever hearing of that before," Grandin said with a frown. From the look on Hilde's face, she had, but didn't like the confirmation of what had likely only come to her ears as a legend.

"They don't come up onto the surface. In fact, they don't move at all," Anders replied. "But if there's one under Bownammar, and the earthquake opened up a passage between them and it, then the darkspawn won't stop coming until the nest is killed."

"So, we just have to kill the broodmother, then," Hawke said optimistically. "Problem solved."

Anders grimaced. Of all the tainted creatures he'd encountered in the Deep Roads, the broodmother was definitely his least favorite, below even the grublike Children. "Most likely that's what we'll have to do," he said. "Just… be careful of the fluid that she leaks. It's incredibly virulent. There will be darkspawn guarding her, too, so we'll have to keep an eye out at all times for them. Oh -- and whatever you do, watch out for the tentacles."

"Tentacles?" Grandin exclaimed.

"You'll see," Anders sighed.

It was a grim and daunted party that pushed on the final leg to Bownammar. Anders kept his Warden senses open -- though doing so in the Deep Roads was a lot like walking around in a midden with your mouth wide open -- to try to see if he could sense anything from behind Bownammar's walls.

Instead, as they made the final turn and came down the long broad passage to the underground city, he could sense no darkspawn around at all. The lamps along this stretch of road were lit, unlike the others, and the city gates --

The city gates were still intact, and manned by guards. They called out a cheerful hail once the party got close enough to determine they were not darkspawn, and waved them through. Anders was relieved -- the worst-case scenario, the city being overrun, had not taken place. That meant there was still time.

They passed through the gates, on to the broad common space at the front of the city. This had
been a bloodstained battlefield when Anders had last seen it, but it had been cleaned up since then -- at least, the bodies had been cleared, though some suspicious dark stains still lingered on the stones. Most of these were hidden from view, however, by tents, carts, and piles of crates and other supplies that were being staged here. Clusters of tents sprung up over the emptied cities like mushrooms colonizing an empty field after the rain. Stark and utilitarian, without the decoration common to every surface in Orzammar, it was indisputably civilization. Bownammar was not -- yet -- a place to live in, but it had still been reclaimed.

"Oi, Warden-Enchanter!" a familiar voice called out. Anders turned around to see a waving dwarf, a face wreathed with smiles and barred with dark tattoos. A moment later, he oofed backwards as a small body hit his midsection, arms wrapping around him in a fierce hug.

He laughed. "Killer!" he exclaimed, trying to pry her off him. "Captain! It's good to see you again." Good to see you alive went unspoken; the two were members of the Legion of the Dead, whose fatality rate was about what one might expect from its name. But these two -- they were survivors.

"Not half as good as it is to see you," Bardien said, advancing forward with a beaming smile. Anders managed to extract a hand to clasp in his, then turned to introduce him to the others of the party. Well, to Hawke at any rate; Grandin already knew him, the two of them having fought together in the Bownammar campaign, and Hilde and the other dwarves hanging back, eyeing his facial tattoos uneasily.

"My apologies for not being able to answer your summons," Bardien said with a little contrite bow. What summons? Oh yes, when they'd been looking for someone to lead the refugees through the Deep Roads to avoid the Armies of the Three Princes. "But with conditions as they were here at Bownammar, we just couldn't leave."

"I understand," Anders said. "It all came right at the end, thanks to this troublemaker here." He smiled at Hawke, who actually blushed a little.

"But if you've a need for us, I can come with you now," Bardien went on to say.

Hilde gave him a chilling frown. "Come with us? And desert your post? The reports we received said that Bownammar was under siege, from the outpouring of Darkspawn released by the earthquake."

"Oh!" Bardien waved one hand. "Your reports are a few days out of date, Milady. Aye, we were getting a powerful flood of darkspawn up from the lower caverns. But we were able to mount an expedition to the source and put a stop to them. Thanks to the help of those two Wardens, of course."

Anders had been caught up in a mix of equally pressing annoyance and relief -- annoyance at having come this far for no reason, relief that he would not have to march into a broodmother's lair after all -- but those last words caught him off guard. "What Wardens?" he asked, his voice coming out as a squeak.

Oh, Maker, had the Grey Wardens caught up with him after all? He'd almost forgotten about that vaguely ominous letter they'd sent him last summer, asking him to report on any suspicious Deep Roads activity. He'd written no such reports, and for a moment he was filled with a Circle-borne terror at being taken to task by the Senior Enchanters for failing to do his homework. No, that was ridiculous. He was a grown man, well out of the Towers and the Wardens both, and despite how it sometimes felt, not everyone in Thedas was out to get him.

Most likely the presence of Grey Wardens in Bownammar had nothing to do with him. The Deep
Roads were a vast network, after all, and there were plenty of Grey Wardens in the order --

"Indeed," a new voice cut in on the proceedings. "We were on our way to Orzammar on Warden business -- your business, in point of fact -- and the presence of the blockade meant that we had no choice but to travel through the Deep Roads. We were caught up in this Bownammar business by pure coincidence, I assure you, but we could not in good conscience fail to offer our aid."

That voice -- it sounded familiar, a strong Ferelden drawl, but he couldn't quite place it. Anders turned. A new pair of figures was striding towards them out of one of the tents. Well, one of them was striding -- tall, hawk-nosed, dark-eyed, dark hair going grey. Skin going grey too in the manner of the olden wardens, sagging and drooping over his jaw. Anders recognized him, but only by description -- the Hero of the River Dane, the traitor of Ostagar, Veteran of the Fifth Blight, Loghain Mac Tir.

The other figure didn't walk so much as wobble, a vastly unsteady gait that somehow -- by law of averages -- managed to keep him going in a straight line. A shock of red hair now streaked with white, blue eyes going glassy and pale, and a stench of alcohol on his breath that could wipe out a bronto at fifty paces.

"Long time no see, sparklefingers," Oghren said, and he belched.

~tbc...
He hadn't had many chances since leaving Amaranthine to encounter people from his old life, their old life, people who had known him back when they were them. The first had been Nathaniel, in that debacle in the Deep Roads near Kirkwall. Despite the awkward circumstances in which they'd left (Nathaniel shot an arrow at him, what had even been up with that) the first reaction he'd felt to hearing Nathaniel's name was pure delight.

Seeing the Warden-Commander again, too, had been an exercise in happiness (and a little bit of grief.) That was no surprise; she'd done so much for him (and for him) and she loomed so large in his life. But in this, too, they had been united: Anders and Justice both, they had loved her.

So perhaps it should have been little surprise that at the sight of Oghren, a warmth lit in his stomach that spread right up to the top of his head, stretching his face in a grin. "Oghren!" he exclaimed, taking a step towards the dwarven Warden and reaching out his hand for a clasp. "Good to see you again, old friend."

Several of the bystanders were staring in disbelief, and Anders supposed he could see why -- taking Oghren out of context, if you'd never fought beside him (or preferably, behind him) he could make a rather appalling sight. He was filthy, with that very special mud-caked patina you got not merely with the blood of battle or the dirt of travel but of not caring about the blood and mud and letting it sit on until it became part of your armor. He stank of mud and blood and the vicious tang of darkspawn taint, but even that smell was almost lost behind the overpowering stench of alcohol. Really, Anders suspected that was the primary reason he did it -- in the Deep Roads it was often better not to be able to smell anything at all. He was aggressively indifferent to manners, expressing whatever needs grabbed his attention loudly, immediately and in plain sight of any amount of company.

But that honestly didn't matter much to Anders. He'd long since changed his standards for what could seriously gross him out, and he was just too happy to see Oghren again. Oghren had been one of the first people -- way back when, way back then -- to unhesitatingly accept him despite his patently illegal existence. No, not just acceptance or tolerance -- Oghren, like the Warden-Commander, genuinely did not care that he was what he was.

Others had come later -- Sigrun, who was all that and bubbly and bright on top of it, Justice, who saw through other eyes entirely, and later eventually Hawke. But in the beginning it had just been the four of them, Anders and Oghren and Natya and Nate. All of them facing the world and the Blight together. And Oghren had been a good friend, in his own very restricted way; he didn't have much to offer in terms of a sympathetic ear but he would always sit with you if you needed to shut the world out for a while. And he'd laughed at Anders' jokes.

"Well, Sparkles," he said, looking him up and down with only a hint of a bleary squint. "I see you finally put on some big boy pants. About time."

"I had some growing up to do," Anders said with a shrug. He'd learned not to hate and castigate his younger self given enough time and perspective, but well, he had been a callow lout.
He took Anders' handclasp now, that powerful crushing grip only amplified by the heavy gauntlet he wore -- and this time Anders was able to squeeze back, to return the grip with equal force. Oghren glanced down at his hand and then back up at him, an unusually serious glint in his eye.

"And you…" he said, staring into Anders' face as though looking for a flash of blue. There might have been one, at that. "An' you, Justice! By the paragons, you did it, didn't you? Always knew you would, eventually. Dead body's got nothing on a living one, don't it?"

He let himself smile, remembering Oghren's constant exhortations to find a way to really live life, back at Vigil's Keep. It hadn't been possible then -- but that was then. "It does not," he said.

Oghren released his grip in order to pound his knee, pointing up at Anders in a motion that nearly poked his eye out. "Ha! Knew you couldn't resist forever! You know what Sparkles, I always thought it would be Nate, not you. You know when he came back from that mission in Kirkwall he sulked for weeks!"

"How could you tell?" Anders said, a bit of sass coming through.

Oghren chortled. Still smiling, Anders turned to see the rest of his party watching, their expressions running a spectrum of ratios between fascination and horror. With Hawke it was mostly fascination; with some of the other dwarves, mostly horror.

But that reminded him that introductions were in order. "Hawke," he said, deciding to start with his boyfriend and go outwards from there. "This is Oghren Kondrat --"

Oghren grimaced and waved that away. "Just "Oghren" will do ya," he grumbled. "Don't need to dig up old ghosts this many years later."


Hawke brightened with recognition. "Oghren!" he exclaimed. "That Oghren, the one with the schleets?"

Oh, Maker. Did Hawke still remember those old war stories? Anders laughed nervously. "Oh, well… it was a long time ago," he said, trying to divert attention.

But of course, once Hawke was on a scent he couldn't be shaken off it. "Wasn't he the one you played the joke on, where you took a pair of pants and used telekinetic magic to --"

Anders cleared his throat loudly, interrupting Hawke's storytelling. "Moving on!" he said.

"Here, what's this?" Oghren said, eyeing Hawke suspiciously. "I want to hear this! What about those fuggin' pants?!"

Anders ignored him. "And this is, well, you probably know him. Loghain Mac Tir," he said, turning to cut Oghren out of his line of sight and gesture instead towards Loghain. "Hero of River Dane, one-time Regent of Ferelden, Veteran of the Fifth Blight."

There was an odd breathless moment where Hawke took this in without expression, but then suddenly he smiled and stepped forward. It was a smile that made Anders nervous, because he'd seen it on Hawke before -- all charm, no warmth. "Ah, Teryn Loghain," he said. "It's good to meet you again, sir."

Loghain's craggy brows rose in surprise. "Again? Have we met before?" he said. He met Hawke's
handclasp with a polite, businesslike shake, but Hawke reached out to hold onto his wrist for a moment longer.

"Well, I saw you at a distance," Hawke demurred. "You may not have noticed me, busy with your command and all."

Anders made the connection first, and winced. Oh, this was not going to be good. Loghain was a bit slower on the uptake. "Ah… well, it's good to --"

Hawke interrupted him. "I was at Ostagar, you see. With my brother."

Loghain's eyes widened. After a frozen heartbeat he attempted to retract his hand, and Hawke blurred into action.

Even having seen Hawke fight dozens, hundreds of times over the years, Anders still couldn't follow his hands. A blow to the stomach left Loghain doubled over, wheezing. "That one's for me!" he snarled, and followed it up with a downright dirty kick to the groin. "And that one's for Carver!"

It hadn't taken a minute. The rest of the dwarves and mages looked on horrified; Oghren looked mostly wearily resigned. Hawke turned on his heel and stomped off, and within a dozen paces had managed to vanish from sight. Loghain, doubled over on the floor, broke the tableau with a pained groan. "That's…" he said, wheezing. "…fair…"

Anders wavered, torn between a healer's instinct to address the injury and a feeling of loyalty towards his partner for inflicting it. He tried to split the difference by appealing to a third party. "Not going to help your partner, Oghren?" he said hopefully.

Oghren gave a meaty shrug. "I see his ugly mug every day. I haven't seen your pretty mouth in years," he said, and Anders felt a touch of weary familiarity at the appellation. "C'mon, let's go get drunk and catch up. By which I mean catch up on all the drinkin' I deserve for starting today with a broodmother to the face."

That, Anders had to agree, was a very compelling point. Still he felt the need to point out: "I won't say no to the catching up, but I'll warn you -- alcohol doesn't really work on me."

"Grey Warden stamina, aye?" Oghren said knowingly. "Don't worry, I've got something for that."

"It's more the… other thing," Anders said. "My spirit doesn't get along too well with other spirits."

Somewhat to his surprise, Oghren just nodded agreement with that. "Oh ya, Wynne was like that too," he said. "Regular ale didn't do it for her, so she had to drink dwarven ale to get a buzz. Between me being a dwarf and a warden, it takes a lot to put a dent, but trust me, Oghren's special brew will do ya." He gave Anders a rather disturbing wink and gesture.

Anders found his resolve wavering. "Well…"

Oghren stepped up to him and thrust his finger directly into Anders' face. "You owe me this drink, tall 'n' rotty!" he said sternly. "You never once drank with me back at Amaranthine. Couldn't then, but now you can. This might be my last chance to ever get drunk with a friend."

He hadn't seen Oghren in ten years; if not for this chance assignment, he might not have seen him for ten more. "Very well."
They spent the rest of the night and much of the rest of the day catching up. Oghren was as good as his word when it came to providing the drinks, and he kept them coming. Anders had no idea where he got it all; he certainly couldn't have carried with him through the Deep Roads the volume of whiskey it took to drown two Grey Wardens, one of them housing a spirit.

There was a lot to catch up on. Anders and Warden-Commander Brosca had passed briefly through Amaranthine on their way to Orzammar, but they hadn't stopped at the Vigil and he hadn't seen any of his old friends at the time. The general gist of events was common knowledge by now, of course, but Oghren freely admitted he had not paid much attention to the details, so much of it was news to him. The dwarf was a surprisingly good listener, despite -- or perhaps because -- he lacked so much of the context for what Anders had been up to in Kirkwall. He was blessedly uninterested in Chantry politics, and his comment on the explosion was limited to a mild "Now that would o' been a sight to see."

Oghren was much more interested in what Anders had been up to since his return to Ferelden. He made Anders retell every detail of his fight at the Provings, recognizing all but one of the combatants in the list by name. He'd shouted approvingly at Anders' recounting of his duel with the Silent Sister and Osric the Undefeated, and laughed until he nearly pissed himself at the humiliation of Pyrag Haver.

That led into the founding of Refuge, and the arrival of more and more mages over the past few years, culminating in the siege by the Armies of the Three Princes that had proved so much of a hindrance to Oghren and Loghain's mission. By the time he got to the breaking of the siege they were both roaringly drunk, enough that Anders -- and Justice -- were moved to blurt out the first thought that crossed their mind.

"You should come visit," he said, then immediately followed this up with "You could come join us, Oghren. It is a worthy cause, it is, it is, it's something great. You could be part of something great."

"Eh..." Some of the excitement drained out of Oghren, and he went to pour himself another glass. In the moment before the next drink went down he looked twenty years older than Anders knew him to really be, the creeping grey and black edges of the Taint fraying into the blotched red whites of his eyes and the lines that cut and scored around his eyes. "S' a nice thing you've got going, Sparkles, but 's not for me."

"It could be," Anders argued. "You are a strong and honorable warrior, a welcome addition to any cause. And it's not, it's not just mages at Refuge. It's dwarves too. Two different things, but they come together, they make up together something even better than either of them alone. You could be part of that. I've missed you."

"I missed you too, Sparkles. Ain't nobody heals like you do." Oghren sighed. "No. My place is with the Wardens. I'm part of a great thing right here. I signed my life away to that, and it's more than enough of a plate for one man's lifetime. Better'n many who've walked the road I went down."
"I like what you're trying to do, an' I hope you succeed -- for your sake, and the sake of the ol' rock cavern itself. But I can never go back. Never can, and never want to, t'be straight with you. We're done with each other, Orzammar and me."

Anders quieted, feeling a little daunted and embarrassed by his impulsive offer. He remembered the look on Brosca's face, haunted in almost the exact same way -- "I hate them. I hate them, and I hate what they make me," she'd whispered. For the first time, the quelling realization that his own experience with Orzammar was not the same as what the natives of that kingdom experienced shook his certainty.

"I got my own cause," Oghren went on. "I got my own life now. Not the life I ever foresaw back when I was younger, when me an' Branka were setting out to form a new House together. Not the life that I could have predicted when I followed Natya out the door of Orzammar to shank the archdemon. But it's the life I have now, an' it hasn't been all so bad. I got some good friends, some good fights, an' there's always Nathan to think of."

It took a moment for Anders to make the right connection in his mind -- not Nathaniel Howe the Warden, but Nathan who was named after Natya, Oghren's son. It had boggled the mind at the time that he had managed to attach a woman long enough to have a son by her, but Natya had given him a stern lecture not to tease Oghren about it, as it was apparently a sensitive topic. That had been a disappointment at the time, but Anders was not inclined to make light of it now.

"How is Nathan? Your son, right?" Anders asked solicitously. "With… Felsa?"

"Felsi," Oghren corrected him with a grunt. He sat back, and the twenty-years-older expression settled on his face again. "He's… doing good. Despite me not bein' around, or thanks to me not bein' around, I don't know. Signed on as an apprentice to a merchant caravan, House Cadash. Still writes me back letters every feast day." He hesitated, then took another long drink and added "I went to see him last Summerday, for his tenth birthday."

Anders couldn't imagine what it was like, having a son you could never see or hear except through letters. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," Oghren grunted. "Fine. I guess. Not much to talk about, between an old man who spends his days slogging through tainted muck in the tunnels and a young and rising lad. He seemed healthy. Happy. Didn't know what to say." Another pause, another drink. "He still had the horse."

"Horse?" Anders said, confused. He recalled Oghren to have an extremely contentious relationship with horses, once threatening to render one down for lutestrings after it tried to eat his arm.

"Wooden horse. Next best thing to a pony," Oghren clarified, which didn't clarify anything. "Sent it to him when he was just a baby. A stupid thing, a kid's toy. But he'd kept it."

"That sounds good," Anders said.

"Sounds like I was a shit dad who was never there for him, who never gave him and his mum anything other than letters and whatever money I didn't drink," Oghren grumbled, sounding maudlin.

"Well," Anders said. "I'm not exactly an expert on fatherhood, but it sounds like you at least did not betray your son over to a religious order of armed thugs devoted to imprisoning and persecuting people like him, so you've definitely at least got one up over my father."

He hadn't meant it to come out quite like that, quite so laced with anger. He'd reconciled himself to
his father's betrayal long ago. He'd thought. But maybe some parts of him were less reconciled than others.

It actually seemed to cheer Oghren up, though, and he reached over to pour them out another drink. "Always nice to know the bar is set lower," he said, and raised his mug in a toast. "To not being the absolute worst dad you could be!"

Anders clinked his mug solemnly, and they both drank. Afterwards, Anders offered, "You could go see him again, though, couldn't you? Anytime you like. You don't have to wait until, I don't know, another ten years have gone by."

"Nug nuts, I hope not," Oghren sighed. "Who knows if I'll even be still kickin' in another ten years?"

He came to a slightly soggy state of alertness. "What do you mean? Are you sick?"

"Sick? Eh?" Oghren gave him an odd look, then rubbed his face -- the gray pallor around his temples, the faint black streaks through the red hair. "No more'n all of us are sick, Sparkles. It creeps up on ya, this Blight shit."

"Natya said we'd have thirty years," Anders said uneasily, feeling a jolt of fear. She was only repeating what she'd been told, too. Had she been wrong?

Oghren shrugged. "Sure, but it don't just leave you for thirty years and then all happen at once, right?" he said philosophically. "All of us that were in the Commander's crew, we're getting on in our time, and the Taint is getting on too. The blight creeps in, the nightmares get longer, it's just something that happens to all of us." He shot Anders a shrewd look. "All of us except, you, apparently."

Anders didn't know what to make of that. Ten years since his Joining and he didn't feel any different than he had the first year -- there were still the whispers and nightmares, sure, but he had felt no creeping taint, seen no oddities in his reflection. It had been so long since he'd been around other Wardens for any length of time that he had no point of reference, no way of knowing what was normal for Wardens of his generation. Was it really different for him? Why? Because he was a mage?

"Well, maybe I'm just spouting nug shit," Oghren said when Anders didn't answer for a long enough time. "Who knows, the ceiling could fall in and kill us all tomorrow. Instead of wasting time bawlin' about what could be or couldn't be, let's just drink tonight!"

"As you wish," Anders replied, raising his mug in a solemn toast.

They set out into the Deep Roads back to Orzammar late the next day, Anders still nursing a hangover. Oghren had still been asleep when he left, still snoring with enough thunder that he
thought he'd woken to another earthquake. The rest of the party was inclined to tease him about it, which he bore with exhausted patience and a strained grimace of a smile. Maker, it had been years since he'd been drunk enough to get hangovers. Nearly ten years, in point of fact, and to certain parts of him this was an entirely novel experience. One which he could have done without. But with a few hours of steady rehydrating, and a few rejuvenation spells lent by the more sympathetic mages of the party, and he was able to walk without each step feeling like it was going to jar his stomach up out through his mouth.

The delay also had the added bonus of giving Loghain plenty of time to recover from his encounter with Hawke. The older man was limping only slightly as he marched along behind the rest of the mages' party, a saturnine grimace on his face. Anders wasn't sure if that was a result of annoyance at having to travel with Hawke, or if he just always looked like that.

He dropped back behind the rest of the party to walk beside Loghain, slowing his pace enough that they were out of easy earshot. "You, ah..." Anders ventured. He glanced over at Hawke, pretending like he wasn't paying attention to them with a ferocity that would have done any cat proud, and then looked back to Loghain. "No hard feelings?"

Loghain let out a long, weary sigh. "I assure you, this is hardly the first time I have been accosted by an irate veteran," he said. "Nor even the first time being on the receiving end of, shall we say, a tender kick."

"Really?" Anders couldn't help but wince with sympathy.

"Oh yes," Loghain said, in a tone of absolute long-suffering. "By this point I've received said tender kicks from such august personages as a King of Ferelden, the Hero of the Fifth Blight, and now the Champion of Kirkwall. I suppose I could consider it an honor."

"You know, most people just collect signatures, or stamps or something," Anders said.

"So no, to answer your question, no hard feelings," Loghain said. He gave Anders a fine side-eye, a gleam in the darkness, framed by wrinkles and dark bags of fatigue. "I would venture to say in fact that that is why I am here."

"Why you're here?" Anders tried to figure this out.

"A message from the Wardens," Loghain said. "I am the bearer of the message, but more than that, I suspect I am the message. In brief, 'No hard feelings.' You would be surprised at what the Grey Wardens can overlook, when it suits them. I am living proof of that."

"Oh." Anders blinked. "And, er... does it? Suit them?"

"I daresay," Loghain said, and reverted to his clammed-up standoffishness for the rest of the trip.

Anders spent most of the return journey to Orzammar wondering what this was about. What the Wardens could possibly need of him, specifically, that they couldn't get from any other Warden without all the... baggage.

Loghain refused to go into any further detail while they were on the road, surrounded by so many non-Warden listeners, so his curiosity went unanswered until they were back in Orzammar. Hawke and Hildegard volunteered to take the news to the King and Queen, and the rest of the mages just wanted to get their heads down and rest -- but for Anders and Loghain, with their unnatural stamina, the easy pace of the hike from Bownammar had done little to tire them.

Anders managed to secure a room in Brosca manor by the expedient of taking one of the supply
closets and shoving everything either out into the hall or against the corners. A large wooden crate served as a table, and he was finally able to get the senior Warden alone.

"All right, Loghain, what's this really about?" he demanded. "What do the Wardens want with me? I left."

Loghain smiled a bit grimly. "You know as well as I do that you can never really leave the Wardens," he said, and Anders sighed reluctant agreement. The grim smile faded as Loghain became businesslike once more. "There are several layers at work. First of all, and this is no secret to anyone with eyes, is that the dwarves of Orzammar are beginning to press out into the Deep Roads once more. While the Grey Wardens are in no position to stop them, there is still the very real chance that their movements will stir up unpleasant things in the Deeps. The Wardens want one of their own on the ground, front and center, to keep an eye on things and report in anything that seems relevant to our interests."

"New Darkspawn spring and fall fashion, that sort of thing?" Anders joked.

Loghain didn't laugh, which wasn't a surprise, but he didn't even get a good glare for his efforts. "Precisely," he said instead.

"Okay, fine, but why me?" he asked. "Literally any Warden could do that. And almost any Warden would be… well, more versed in Warden-y things than me. I don't know what the Order is up to these days, what they do or what they want, and to be honest I don't care enough to learn. Why not send someone else?"

"But you are a Warden in the right place, at the right time, in a position that cannot be easily replicated by just any Warden. The Wardens try not to involve themselves deeply in politics… or so they feign." A look of deep and sour bitterness crossed his face, then was banished. "Still, that does not mean they can afford not to be aware of local politics, or work around them when necessary.

"You have the ear of the King of Orzammar, the single biggest military force in the Deep Roads. You have direct influence into his battle tactics and plans. And you have command over a force of mage combatants who are engaging in the fight with the darkspawn even in the absence of a Blight. The Wardens have for centuries been frustrated in their desire to recruit more mages into their ranks, but the Chantry barred their way. Now the way is barred no longer."

"I didn't form Refuge just to funnel them into the Wardens," Anders warned, a dangerous edge to his voice.

"No," Loghain agreed, his face very cool. "But so long as you lead a force of non-tainted mages in the Deep Roads, against the Darkspawn… then accidents will happen. You know that."

He reached down and pulled up the case he'd carried all the way from Bownammar, a battered leather-padded metal valise with multiple locks on each edge. He set it down on the table and undid the clasps and buckles, laying it out for Anders' view. The inside was lined with more soft leather, protecting the contents from blows. Some of the items Anders was able to parse immediately: vials, mixing instruments, sachets of herbs. A large, corroded metal goblet.

"It was the decision of the Senior Wardens," Loghain told him, "that you should be given access to the materials and knowledge to conduct a Joining, should the occasion arise to make it necessary. This supply kit should last you for several years, although I advise that you waste nothing."

Anders swallowed, feeling hot nausea at the back of his throat. The Wardens… yes, they would do
something like this, wouldn't they? It was a cruel mercy and a ruthless greed in one, all wrapped in the coldest and most brutal practicality. *Waste nothing.* And that was just the Wardens right down to their boots.

And he would accept it, that was the thing. A few mages had been killed in the Bownammar campaign this summer, but not in any way that the Joining could have saved them. But there would be more campaigns to come, and as Loghain had said, *accidents will happen.* He wouldn't, he couldn't deny them a chance for survival -- at whatever cost -- just because he was bitter about the predatory recruiting of the Taint Brigade.

"All right," he forced out at last. "So do these come with a user's manual or what? Written on the bottom of the cup maybe?"

They spent the next hour going over the contents of the valise. Despite his initial revulsion Anders quickly found himself drawn in, fascinated: the Wardens had methods of alchemy and herbalism that Anders had never heard of anywhere else. He felt -- not for the first time, but for a new reason -- a tiny twinge of regret that he hadn't stayed on with the Wardens after all, gotten high enough in their ranks to learn their secrets.

But only a tiny twinge. They couldn't have stayed, and they'd been needed elsewhere.

Aside from the lead-stoppered vials of darkspawn blood, the bottles of lyrium that looked and felt a very *odd* color under his fingers, and some wax-paper-wrapped lumps of reagents that were meant to mix together in the ritual, the other side of the valise contained a number of ingredients not directly related to the Joining. Paper sachets stuffed with dried herbs, glass bottles filled to the brim with tiny seeds, scripts of papers written in tight-crabbed hands that gave instructions for their preparation. Anders pulled one out to read it.

"Herbs that combat the Blight?" Anders said, looking up at Loghain in surprise. "I thought there was no cure!"

"There is none," Loghain said with a grimace. "Once a person becomes infected, the taint is inevitably, *eventually* fatal. But there are still some tinctures that will affect its progression -- slow it, or give a person an extra resistance against contracting it."

"Why keep that secret?" Anders asked. "Why not make this public knowledge?"

Loghain shrugged. "It's not entirely a secret even now," he said. "The Dalish have some knowledge of such things, so we know they work on elves as well as humans. But in the time of a Blight, such palliatives can do nothing to stem the overwhelming flood. The herbs are too rare, the preparation too laborious to produce in the volume that would be needed. And in times without the Blight, civilians are not supposed to be encountering the Darkspawn to need them."

Anders privately resolved to cook up one of these "herbal palliatives" immediately, for Hawke's use. Oh, and for the rest of the mage troops, of course. Rare herbs, laborious preparations? Mages *excelled* at cultivating rare herbs in difficult conditions. They had an entire pot garden dedicated to them. And come to think of it…

"Humans and Dalish elves have them. Do they work on dwarves?" he said, picking up a bottle of seeds and staring at it. The label had a faded depiction of a delicate flower next to the sketch of a dog's head. "Their metabolisms are different you know; they can shrug off poisons that would kill a grown man. They put them in their beer, for Andraste's sake."

"I -- actually, I don’t know," Loghain said, sounding surprised by the question. "Dwarves are not
numerous among the Wardens, as you know; those that leave Orzammar to fight darkspawn usually go to the Legion instead. But given their long term proximity to the Deep Roads, if there were any such cures that existed, the dwarves would surely already know them."

Anders wasn't sure. Orzammar dwarves, in his experience, didn't use a lot of plant-based medication. And they were almost cripplingly bound to their own knowledge traditions, extremely reluctant to step outside them. If a cure existed that relied on surfacer ingredients, it was entirely possible that they didn't know.

Warden secrets or no… Anders resolved that Bhelen needed to know of this at the first opportunity.

A knock on the door broke into his furious calculation. "Just a moment," Anders called, and got up to go answer it.

"Anders, we're in the middle of --" Loghain broke off with a grimace as Anders reached for the door handle. "Is it too much to concern yourself with even the slightest modicum of operational security?"

"Honestly, what are they going to see? A few papers and some dried herb packets? Don't worry so much, Loghain," Anders grinned at him. "You'll work yourself into an early grave!"

Ah, Warden humor. Anders was still grinning as he turned to open the door, taking pity on Loghain enough to angle it so that the visitor -- it was Jowan -- could only see a slice of the room. "Jowan?" he said. "What's up?"

"Sorry to interrupt," Jowan said with a touch of nervousness. "But Rona and the other casteless laborers are asking for you to come sort things out with the overseer."

"Sort what things out?" Anders said.

"Repair on the Tower," Jowan said with a shrug.

"On the Tower? Already? I thought we had at least a month's more work in Orzammar to do before the overseer from the Smith caste was ready to release the workers back to Refuge," Anders said.

"Yes, well, that's what they want you to sort out," Jowan said. "It's stopped snowing up in the valley, and the laborers have been listening to everyone complaining about how cramped they are, and a lot of them live up in the valley themselves, so… they decided they were going to go up and do the repairs now, and the gangue take the Overseer and his rusting triple shifts anyway. They said that, not me," Jowan said hastily.

Anders rubbed a hand over his forehead. "Not exactly in the plan, but I'm not seeing the problem," he said.

"Well, the overseer wasn't happy when he found out where they were all going," Jowan explained. "He called them, um, some names, and said that if they left in the middle of the day he was going to withhold all of their pay for the last cycle, and that he'd see them all back to Dust Town where they belonged, and they said that he could keep his blighted copper-a-day wages anyway, when Refuge was paying them fifty times that, and they were going whether he liked it or not, and that if he didn't like it he could sit on it and sing, and then he said he was going to call the guard, and, um. That was about when they sent me to get you."

Anders moved his hand down over his face, pressing against an incipient outburst of either laughter or tears. "I see," he said when he thought he could control his voice. "I'll be right there. Make sure
the Senior Warden isn't intruded on in the meantime, would you? And find Hawke and send him along."

"Sure," Jowan said, but he lingered, craning over his shoulder to try to see inside the room before he returned his attention to Anders. "You know, Anders, you're my friend and I'm happy that you're happy and all, but you cost me twenty silver when you made up with Garrett Hawke, I'm just saying, maybe you can buy the drinks next time."

Somehow it didn't surprise him to hear that Refuge had set up a betting pool on his love life; they had entirely too much invested by proxy. But still, "Don't tell me you were betting on us staying broken up?" he said. "That seems a little cold."

"No! Well, not exactly, no," Jowan said hastily. "I just thought that he wasn't really good enough for you, you know. A few of the others didn't. I had twenty silver down on you ending up getting together with Daros."

A noise bubbled up in the back of Anders' throat that was half laughter, half whine. He pointed down the corridor and gave Jowan his best forbidding glower. "Out!" he commanded.

Jowan went, laughing, and as he did he passed by the sliver of open door into the room where Loghain was waiting, clearly framed by the doorway and lit by the bright lamps lining the hallways before Anders shut it.

"Sorry about that." Anders turned back to Loghain. "It looks like I have to take care of this; do you mind waiting for a few hours? You can rest, wash up, get whatever you like to eat…"

He trailed off because Loghain wasn't looking at him, didn't appear to be hearing him at all. Instead he was staring off down the hallway in the direction Jowan had gone, looking like he'd just come face to face with one of the Sidereal Magisters.

"Who was that boy?" he choked.

---

Chapter End Notes

: I have a feeling that people are going to start speculating on the inclusion of these Joining materials, because in a better and more tightly-plotted story, their presence would absolutely be a Chekov’s gun that indicated that before the end of the story, at least one major character would have to undertake the Joining. So I'll just tell you flat out, I don't intend for any of our existing cast of characters to become Wardens. This particular plot element was included not because I needed it for the story, but because in the setting as it was laid out, it just made too much logical sense for it to be there.
Anders' mage army was just too good of an opportunity for the Wardens to pass up, in terms of recruitment. That's what comes of having a story that's written from the setting inward rather than the plot outward, I guess.

It was also an excuse to get Loghain to Orzammar in order to carry out my stupid headcanons about Jowan being Loghain's son and inheriting his terrible-decision-making genes. But no, no dramatic Joinings before the end of the story.

The herbs and such in Loghain's "joining kit" are drawn from various descriptions of such things in the games and supplementary materials -- the rare Korcari Wilds flower that works for dogs and not humans, and the herbal concoction given to Maric in The Stolen Throne. The Dalish definitely seem to have such knowledge, as demonstrated by the fact that Mahariel can survive for a much longer time after becoming Tainted than most of the other Warden-potentials.
"Who was that boy?" Loghain said hoarsely, his eyes trained on the hallway that Jowan had recently been in.

Anders' eyebrows rose. "Hardly a boy," he said. Maybe when you were as old as Loghain, everyone under forty was 'boy' to you. "He's well past thirty and with a child on the way. His wife has a child on the way, that is," he said hastily. "He's not pregnant. None of his weird research projects have found a way to make that happen."

Loghain hardly seemed to notice his babbling, and thankfully did not pursue any questions on exactly what kind of 'weird research projects' Anders was talking about. Indeed, he barely seemed to be listening. "What was his name?" he asked.

"Jowan. He's one of the founders of Refuge, one of my trusted advisors." He paused a moment, considering the satchel of tricks they had both just gone through, and Jowan's work in Dust Town. "Actually, he's doing some research into using blood magic to cleanse the Taint that the Senior Wardens at Weisshaupt might be interested --"

Loghain interrupted him midsentence, which was annoying considering that Anders was for once in his life actually trying to be helpful and contribute something to the Wardens. "Where was he from? His voice... I mean, his accent sounded Ferelden."

"Oh yes, he was in Kinloch Hold," Anders said. "We apparently overlapped by several years, though I didn't know it at the time --"

"But where was he from? Before that?" Loghain interrupted again. Anders would have been seriously annoyed if Loghain hadn't sounded so urgent.

"I... I don't know, actually." He had to stop and try to search his memory, to dredge up a few snatches of dialogue he'd heard in passing, from Surana and others over the past few years. "I think he's from some dire little village around West Hill, but don't quote me on that."
"West Hill... Maker's breath," Loghain muttered, dragging his hand down over his face. "When was he born?"

"Bloomingtide, I believe."

"No, I mean, what year?" Loghain said impatiently.

"What year? How should I know?" Anders retorted, letting his irritation bleed through. "No, wait. He said he and Surana were in the same year, eight years behind me. Or was that nine? I think... I vaguely remember him saying that he came to the Circle at five years, which would put his birth year around... 9:11, or so?"

"Who was his family? Who was his mother?"

"I have no idea," Anders said impatiently. "He's hardly ever spoken of them, except to say that they abandoned him at the Chantry in the town square when he was five. Every Circle mage has a story like that; a lot of us don't like to talk about our families. If you want to know more you'd have to ask him."

If Loghain was angling to recruit Jowan for the Wardens, he was going to have another think coming. It had taken a shamefully long time for Anders to come around to Jowan's way of thinking, but he had no intention of letting Refuge's only phylactery-cracker out of his hands. "What's this about, Loghain? Why all the questions?"

Loghain seemed to wake from some sort of trance with a little jump, and realize for the first time just how suspicious his line of questioning must have been. "I... nothing. Something about him just seemed... so familiar..."

"Well, Jowan wasn't at Ostagar, that's for sure," Anders said. Although something tickled in his memory -- "Hang on, hang on. Loghain Mac Tir, Redcliffe, ah! Weren't you the one that hired Jowan to poison old Arl Eamon, back during the Fifth Blight?"

Loghain opened his lips, let a slow breath trickle from them as he slumped in his seat. "Yes, thanks for that," Anders said bitterly. Another reason why even those where were not particularly Chantry-pious would not put their trust in mages, because there was always the risk of them being discovered and having to run, or worse.

Loghain coughed, seeming embarrassed at his faux pas. "Beg pardon," he mumbled. "But it would
have been impossible for me to get from Ostagar to Redcliffe and back in such a short time. I only contacted the apostate through my agents, we never met face to face before today. I never realized...

"What? That your political puppet was a human being, with a face and a voice and a life of his own?" Anders demanded, retroactively angry on Jowan's behalf. He might not have thought much of Jowan's disastrous decisions, but there was no denying that he'd had a lot of help along the way from the people who put him in such desperate situations in the first place. "Just a person trying to live his own life in peace and freedom? You never realized that there were real people that your schemes were going to destroy?"

Loghain looked away, his expression troubled. He started to speak, then seemed to change his mind, and in the end only said quietly, "Yes."

There wasn't much Anders could say to that, still irate on the behalf of every mage ever forced into doing someone's dirty work to survive, still fuming at the reminder of the sort of people who played games with lives and used human beings as tools. He normally had a fair amount of respect for the older Warden, Veteran of the Fifth Blight as he was, but he didn't think he could speak civilly to him right now.

"Apologies," Loghain said as the silence stretched out. He still looked troubled preoccupied by something greater than social embarrassment. "I believe we should conclude for the day. I... I need to think."

"Sure," Anders said. It was probably too much to hope that he'd be rethinking his entire stance on mage rights, but Anders was nothing if not an optimist. "We'll catch up again later, before you leave."

There was little time to spend wondering what had gotten into the other Warden. The next cycle of days was a busy one, demands on Anders' time and attention from every quarter. There was the lingering aftereffects of the earthquake in Orzammar to deal with, the business of getting the Tower repaired and weatherproof again, as well as his own ongoing work in Dust Town with Dagna and Jowan. The blood-magic treatments were, to Anders' mixed excitement and annoyance, starting to show results -- there was already an uptick of pregnancies among the women who had presented themselves as patients. Jowan's treatments were not as powerfully effective as Anders' own magic, but they lasted for longer once the full dose was in effect. The real goal, if they could find a way to do it, would be to turn this into a medicine or physical item they could give out for use without a mage needing to be immediately present, but that wasn't happening just yet.

With the scattering of the Three Princes armies, the routes to and from Orzammar were at last clear. For a certain value of clear. The first snowstorm that filled the valley was not the last, and howling winds that blew up the pass and flattened snow against the frozen walls was followed by more snow, filling in the wind-scoured gaps again.

But despite the weather, they persisted. Moving caravans of goods up the pass was impossible, but a determined enough traveler could make it on foot, and Bhelen had no lack of determined servants. The news and mail that had been blocked for so long came flooding in, and it was all
Anders could do to keep on top of it.

The rebel mage army had made their way as far as the Storm Coast and were apparently wintering there. Anders didn't envy Fiona her task of getting them all through the winter. It made him shiver in response just to think about all that cold wind off the sea and the freezing rain it drove before it, but the Amaranthine Ocean provided enough of a temperature buffer that it at least didn't bury them in snow. They'd holed up in an abandoned fortress -- the walls too broken to provide any defense against a determined army, but sufficient defense against the cold.

No determined army was coming to test them, at least not right now. The breakdown in the lyrium trade that had occurred while the Three Princes were blockading Orzammar had disrupted supply lines all over the continent. In some of the more distant Templar halls the shortages were only just now beginning to affect them; in others, the full effect of the meltdown was already being felt. Rations cut, rations skipped entirely, conflicts with the Carta as Templars escalated raids and seizure of lyrium shipments. Fights breaking out over limited supplies, senior templars going into deliriums and issuing such insane orders that their underlings had to step in and relieve them of command. Or not.

Anders tried not to feel too much schadenfreude about it. Too much. The ones who would suffer the most, alas, were not the ones who actually made the decisions to put their boot on the mages' neck. Still, disruption to the enemy forces could only be a tactical good to their own side, so he wasn't going to waste any tears over it.

One puzzling report that was coming back from some of the Orlesian Templar outposts was news of a new kind of lyrium ration, lyrium that didn't depend on Orzammar for trade. Anders had some serious doubts about the quality of this 'alternate' lyrium - most likely talcum cut with cobalt dust for color - no responsible Templar quartermaster would have resorted to such tactics if the real lyrium rations were coming on time. But they weren't, and in the face of lyrium withdrawal any risk seemed worth it -- likely they'd see this 'alternate lyrium' popping up more often.

Not all the news from the outside world had to do with the Rebellion or the Templars' response to it. Most of the chatter in Orzammar was about trade, an endless buzz of counting and balancing and tallying the losses that had been incurred by the blockade, arrangements made for refunds and reorders and re-establishment of the trade lines that so many people relied on.

Somewhat to his surprise Orzammar had come out the other side of the blockade better off than most of their trading partners. As far as Anders could understand it, that imbalance mostly had to do with perishability. Most of what Orzammar imported was food and other luxury goods and most of what it exported were crafts and lyrium. Armor and weapons and lyrium crates could sit growing dust for months and come out the other side no less valuable, but in the meantime, most of the farmer's sale crops had rotted in the roads, unable to reach their destination. He hoped they would send the bill to Sebastian.

The Orlesian royal slap-fight was still in full swing. It was hard to read some of the reports coming out of the border provinces -- fields choked with the dead and dying, towns razed, forests burning - without feeling at least some secondhand agony, but Anders reminded himself that this was none of their doing and not within their power to fix. Both the Empress and the Grand Duke had done their parts to fan this flame, and now they were reaping the consequences. Well, rather, other people were reaping their consequences, as it always was.

He hadn't expected it would impact them. And it didn't, directly, until he got around to reading the backlog of correspondence that had come into Orzammar once the siege was broken. One of the letters that came into Orzammar bore the royal crown and golden lion of Orlais, and was addressed
to him. Or rather, to the *Magiciens Liberté de la Sanctuaire*, though it -- perhaps diplomatically -- did not mention him by name.

He read it. The prose was more flowery and indirect than even Fiona's, but he got the gist of it fairly easily. Empress Celene was starting to feel the strain on her resources and was hoping to entice the free mages of Refuge to come to Orlais to defend her against the usurper Gaspard, for the Good of the Empire, for the Protection of the People, for Freedom, for Glory, and of course, for a generous purse for their troubles.

Anders did not feel particularly tempted by the offer, but he put it aside for later just in case it became relevant. He kept on reading through the stack, and barely three papers later came across another heavy missive: this one stamped with the green-and-yellow shield of Chalons, addressed to *Les Sorciers Insurgés*. He cracked it open and began to read. The Grand Duke Gaspard of Chalons, his forces wearied by the long campaign against the tyrant Celene, wished their aid in restoring law and order in the Empire…

He was still laughing when Mardra came in, attracted by the noise. "All right, what's so funny?" Mardra asked. "Cousin Garrett isn't even in the building, or I'd have a guess, but I have no idea what's so funny about old out-of-date letters."

Still chuckling, Anders put the two letters down next to each other. They were exactly the same -- size, style, they even used the same damn letterhead. It might not have struck him as so funny if he had received them at their proper times, days or weeks apart -- but reading one of them within five minutes of the other really brought the absurdity of it home. "We've received an offer to go fight in the Orlesian Civil War."

"And that's funny?" Mardra asked.

"From both sides," Anders said, gesturing towards the letters. Mardra tilted her head to skim them, even her thin lips twitched in a smile. She took a long and exaggerated breath that sounded like a prayer for patience; Anders started laughing again.

"All right, that's pretty ridiculous," Mardra said, shaking her head. The brief smile faded. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are we going to take the offer?" Mardra gestured towards the near-identical appeals for help. "Either of those offers?"

"No," Anders said, brow wrinkling. "Why would we?"

"It could be a good opportunity," Mardra pointed out. "Assuming the pay is reasonable, we could come away from the conflict in a good position. Which of them is offering more money?"

Anders skimmed the first paper, then turned it over to read the back. "They don't say," he said. "Just, 'generous.'"

"Well," Mardra said. "The fact that they're asking at all implies they're getting pretty desperate. We could probably name our price. Even aside from that, having the gratitude of the ruler of Orlais could be very politically valuable to us."

"Huh," Anders said. He hadn't really thought of that aspect of it. The humor of the situation began to ebb as he realized that he couldn't just dismiss this out of hand as a joke, and he began to gnaw on the edge of his thumb as he seriously considered it. "But only if our candidate came out on top in the end," he said.
"There is that," Mardra allowed.

Anders thought about it. He didn't much like the idea, he had to admit. Fighting against Darkspawn was one thing; sending mages to fight against other human beings was another thing entirely. Many of them had come here, by their own admission, because they didn't feel comfortable fighting even against the Templars. From what he'd heard, a number of Lucrosians had gone to fight in Orlais rather than joining the Rebellion or coming to Refuge; if they also threw themselves into the conflict, there was a chance that sooner or later they would end up fighting their own brothers.

Not only that, but Orlais was the center of power for the Southern Chantry. Here in Orzammar they were (demonstrably) beyond the reach of the Chantry's military might. In Orlais, right on the doorstep of the Grand Cathedral, they would be protected only by the political whim of their patron -- for as long as their usefulness lasted.

"Gratitude has not historically been a trait of emperors," was what Anders said finally. "Ask the people of the Dales what gratitude bought them. If anyone wishes to go to Orlais, we will of course not stop them. But I think that we -- as in Refuge -- must decline. We already have a patron, we already have a cause to serve, and we already have enough battles to fight without engaging in one that is none of our business."

Mardra sighed in disappointment, but nodded.

What with one thing and another the days slipped by, until it was time for Loghain to depart back into the Deep Roads, and he and Anders still hadn't talked again. He'd been busy with his own duties, and Loghain had spent much of the soujourn in meetings with Bhelen, other deshyrs, or military commanders. During his down time Anders had seen him around Brosca Manor, engaged in conversation with some of the most unlikely people -- the elderly mage Ertha, Neria Surana, and once with a bewildered-looking Jowan himself. All mages who had come from Kinloch Hold, Anders realized. Trying to get a more thorough reading of Jowan's background still?

But if he was angling to recruit Jowan for the Wardens, he was swiftly running out of time to actually put his scheme into action, Anders thought as Loghain readied the last of his gear in the lobby of Brosca manor, engaged in conversation with some of the most unlikely people -- the elderly mage Ertha, Neria Surana, and once with a bewildered-looking Jowan himself. All mages who had come from Kinloch Hold, Anders realized. Trying to get a more thorough reading of Jowan's background still?

If not for recruitment, and not for revenge, Anders was at a loss as to what possible interest Loghain could have in Jowan.

He could just ask, he supposed. But that seemed like cheating. (Besides, he wasn't at all sure that Loghain would tell him the truth.)

"So," he said, as he handed over the last of the potions they'd agreed to supply the Wardens, for the older man to tuck away into his pack. "Did you, uh, get done everything you wanted?"

Loghain smiled grimly. " Wanted?" he mused. "I wouldn't say that I wanted any of this, if only
because never in my wildest dreams would I have foreseen it. But needed... I'd say I found what I needed.

He looked out the window, and Anders followed his gaze. Unsurprisingly Jowan was the target of it, sitting out under the eaves of Brosca Manor with Surana seated by his side. Jowan was saying something -- Anders couldn't hear what from here -- to Surana, who had her eyes closed as she listened, and the two of them were holding hands.

Anders' gaze narrowed, and he turned a harder gaze back on Jowan. "All right, I think you need to explain yourself," he said. "What exactly is fueling this obsession with Jowan? A man thirty years your junior, I might add."

"Thirty years." Loghain let out a bleak chuckle, his gaze sliding away from Jowan to stare off instead into the distance. "Almost exactly. Thirty years ago, Maric and I were still fighting to throw the Orlesians back across the Dane. How swiftly men forget."

Anders stifled an eyeroll; he'd been a child at the time, what was he supposed to have done about it? But he'd asked, so he managed to stay quiet.

Loghain was still talking. "At the time we were bivouacked in the area around West Hill. The town didn't have the resources to feed and shelter us all, not after the Orlesian rent-takers had had their way. So we were spread out through the area, keeping our communications alive to muster for a fight, melting back into the countryside when they sent out patrols..."

He was quiet for a moment, and Anders found himself at once drawn in and impatient; what did this have to do with Jowan? "And?" he prompted.

Loghain sighed. "I spent six months with my tent pitched out in the back yard of a little farming family, their father gone off to war or banditry, the wife ruling the household... I made myself useful around the farm, I came to know the family very well. Including the farmer's daughter."

Anders blinked. "Wait a minute..."

"I was young, and callow." Loghain grimaced. "None of us were sure we were going to live until winter, let alone another year. The young lady and I became very close, and perhaps she had some idea that I was intending to spend my entire life camped out in that yard. But when spring came, and the Orlesian front retreated, Maric followed. And so did I."

"So you're saying that the young woman was... had something to do with Jowan?" Anders was dense, but not that dense. "You're sure?"

"At thirty years remove, who can be sure of anything? The girl in question has been dead for ten years, if what Jowan says is true," Loghain said bitterly. "But I suspected -- I knew as soon as I laid eyes on him; he could have been the spitting image of me in my huntsman days. The more I ask, the more I learn, the more certain I have become. Until at last the only reason to harbor more doubts is to rid myself of the duty to act on what I have learned."

Anders rocked back on his heels, stunned. This was not the tale he'd been expecting to hear when he'd started this line of inquiry. It was hard to imagine the grey and sour-faced Loghain ever having been young and handsome enough to woo hapless farmer's daughters...

Knickerweasels, he'd had the same doubts about Jowan himself at this exact age, and Jowan had somehow manage to land Neria Surana. Sometimes, Anders was forced to admit, he just did not understand women.
"So what are you going to do?" Anders asked finally, when the shock of it had processed a bit. "I mean… you're about to leave. Have you told him?"

Loghain vented another bitter, voiceless chuckle. "No. I've become too much of a coward in my old age," he said. He hesitated, then reached into the inner pocket of his tunic and drew out a folded packet of paper. "But I did… I have… I prepared this. For him to read. I would appreciate it if you could pass this to him, once I am away."

"What, and not give him a chance to react?" Anders said. "Maker, you weren't kidding about that coward part, were you?"

"No." Loghain smiled grimly. His eyes drifted out of the casement again, drawn back to Jowan as a metal file was drawn by a magnet. "Or at least I've let myself become paralyzed by doubt. What is the right thing to do, what is the good, what is the harm? I used to think I knew, but I do believe all that judgement has been laid waste since Maric's death. I no longer trust myself in any choice."

Anders hadn't been expecting to sympathize with Loghain, but well, that one hit home. He'd had friends to guide and reassure him when similar doubts had seized him, devoured him. Loghain, it seemed, had not.

"I have made many mistakes in my life, and I have made choices that bore ill fruit in the end," Loghain continued. "But the one thing I was always able to hold onto, that I could bear with pride into my twilight years... was that I did well by my children. I cared and provided for my daughter with all the power I had in me, and I hope I have done well: she rules the kingdom now as I never could have, standing beside her husband, Maric's son. I could find pride and accomplishment in that, if in nothing else: that I was a good father. But now..."

That dark-eyed, hollow gaze out the window -- hungry, yearning, full of pain. Loghain's voice, when he next spoke, cracked even more than usual. "Thirty years and two wars later, I think... I think I have failed in every way that a father could fail. Even Oghren has been a better part of his son's life than I. I truly wonder if it is worth it at this late date -- if it is worth anything at all -- to speak."

"I think --" Anders had to clear his voice before he could continue. "This is just me, mind you, and I suppose my judgment hasn't always been the best store to shop at, either. But I think it is always better to know. For better or for worse, whatever might come of it, it's always better to know."

"Is that so?" Loghain managed to look away long enough to draw his gaze up to meet Anders' eyes, and the folds of his jowls quirked with a smile, strained smile. "If that is what you so passionately believe, then I leave the choice to you."

He set the letter down on the table, and when he took a step back, straightened up and took a deep inhale as though he had set down a fifty-pound weight. "Well." He said. "I believe I've lingered here long enough. Duty calls, as do the darkspawn."

"Sometimes I really wish that duty would shut up," Anders muttered, but there was no heart to it.

"Don't we all." Loghain faced him and gave him a parting salute -- not without a tinge of irony, but his dark eyes level with respect. "Farewell, Warden Enchanter. If the Deep Roads are kind, perhaps our paths may cross again."

He straightened up, settled his gear against his body with the wearied ease of a very old campaigner, and walked out.
On his way to the main road he passed by Jowan and Surana sitting beneath the eaves. Jowan looked up and his gaze followed the older man, curious, but Loghain did not look aside once.

~tbc.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for making you all sit through my Stupid Loghain Is Jowan's Dad headcanons, but if this isn't the fic where I can do whatever I want, what will be?
Interlude: Fade Date III

Chapter Summary

The third and final Fade Date between Justice and Mardra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He walked the Fade. The space around Refuge was well known to him, well-patrolled and cleared of threats, though Fearlings still sought to creep in whenever his back was turned and Rage smoldered at the bottom of many a mage's dreams, fueled by a life time of bitter fury and waiting for a catalyst to flare into life. There was nothing he could do about that -- nothing more than he was already doing, at least, in the waking world. Providing a space safe from fear, where the mages could grow past rage, and time to heal and grow. Time, as always, was both the blessing and the curse of mortals.

Mardra had promised to meet him tonight. Tonight was different, though. For the first time since she'd unearthed it among Dagna's collection, Mardra had reclaimed the Fade beacon for herself tonight.

"If you don't mind," she'd said at their meeting today, the hallway outside his office. "I'd like to pick the location tonight."

"Of course," he'd said. During their nights together he had crafted a dozen different oases in the dream, from forest glades to castle courtyards to warm sunset beaches and more. He had pulled settings from every romantic verse and novel he had ever read or heard of, and while he normally left Curiosity to his friend, he could not help but wonder what she could come up with that he hadn't already thought of.

He was about to find out. Night had fallen in Refuge some time ago -- the winter season meant that the sun sank early nowadays -- and Anders had gone to bed an hour before. He paced the Fade, waiting for the light in Mardra's room that would signal the activation of the Fade beacon.

And when he saw it, he waited some time more before he finally -- diffidently -- moved towards her dream.

He had entered the dreams of mortals many times before. The dreams of mages, less frequently. In his time in the Fade before encountering the Warden-Commander and being abruptly relocated to the mortal world, elder spirits had circulated cautions against associating too closely with mages. Mages, unlike other mortals, were more likely to sense the presence of a spirit in their dreams and react to it. Sometimes their reaction was welcoming, other times aggressive -- but getting too entangled with a mortal dreamer, no matter how well-meaning the intention, carried too much risk of disaster.

Justice had never risked it. Before.
Now, he thought he was well past any warnings of entanglement.

He paused at the boundary of Mardra's dream -- a margin that he could sense in some way that it was difficult to translate into mortal terms -- and knocked, as one would on a door that was not locked, where entry was expected, but. Even so. Politeness had to be observed.

A spirit that intruded too willfully on mortal dreams ran the risk of being confused for a demon, and in the confusion, made so. Another piece of wisdom that had circulated among elder spirits, and he was not sure from this perspective whether that was true, or merely designed to scare lesser spirits into courtesy.

Either way, the knock was returned with an affirmation, a welcome. He stepped through the boundary of the dream, and stopped short for a moment as his senses adjusted.

He was in… Refuge. But not the Refuge of the waking world, nor even the Refuge that existed on the other side of the veil, a tenuous interconnection of a hundred little dream-spaces under his watchful aegis.

This was a Refuge that had not yet come to be, a vision of what it might be, in a hundred years. The Tower in the center of the valley had grown to a magnificent height, its walls decorated with decorative carvings and topped with a magnificent dome of shimmering colors. A half-dozen other, smaller towers poked up from the skyline of the city, delicate spires that hardly seemed able to hold their own weight, walled and roofed with glass, flashing a thousand colors in the sun. The stonework was crisp and well-made, every surface clean and glowing in the light of an unseen noon.

The roads in this other-Refuge were much better laid out than in the real world, wide and flat and straight thoroughfares leading from the edge of the city into its heart, and Justice set off down the main road. He passed houses ringed with gardens, past smithies and libraries and post offices, through wide plazas bustling with stalls and shopfronts. There were walls around the outside of the city, well-kept and strong and punctuated with regular guard towers, but the suggestion of sentries as they patrolled along the wall was leisurely and relaxed, and the gates were wide open. The city was at peace.

The whole city was filled with phantom people, not spirits or even wisps but just the expectation of people, the concept of form and notion of movement, purposeful activity as the ghost-mages of the city went from one place to the next. He caught sight of the forms of humans, elves and dwarves, even a faint uncertain suggestion of taller horned forms hovering in a few doorways, moving comfortably and at peace with each other. Men and women and others in between, elders and children and youths in their healthy prime, laughing and talking and arguing and reading together with no more discord than the normal friction of a thousand varying minds in one place. From the dome in the central Tower a bell began to toll the hour, a joyful reverberation of music.

He found her in the central plaza just outside the Tower, a broad court inlaid with a thousand tiny glinting tiles of jade, that reminded him of the first night they'd ever spent together. His attention was drawn, however, by a fountain in the center of the square: wreathed with flowers, overflowing with bounty, and topped by a statue.

He stopped to study it. It was unquestionably Anders; the height, the face and hair, even the detailing on the staff that was hooked in the statue's arm made that clear. But there was a straightness to the statue's pose and a tilt to its expression that made him think there was more, too. There was armor, a breastplate and greaves that Anders would never have worn by choice. The staff was settled in the statue's arm, ready to be shifted forward to cast at a moment's need -- but its hand, extending forward to rest on the downward-pointing quillions, held a sword.
Anders would have been mortified to find a statue of himself in the heart of this dream-city, the exultant vision of what their future-hope might someday become. But Justice just smiled as he approached her, his hands out, and shook his head as she came forward to clasp it.

"I do not think I deserve this place of honor," he remarked as she came within speaking distance. "Others have fought harder for the cause, accomplished more than I have. General Fiona, no doubt."

"There's plenty of room in the square for more statues," Mardra replied. "There have been many who have worked towards making this dream possible. But you can forgive a girl for having her favorites."

"Favorites?" He cocked his head to the side, a mannerism he had picked up from Anders, one that invited the listener to continue.

"You're my favorite in a lot of things," Mardra said with a smile.

"Mardra..." The flattery felt good, but Justice wanted more -- clarification, certainty. "Tell me truly. What am I, to you?"

Mardra did not answer immediately, and when she did speak it seemed a sidestep around the question. "I've been reading texts from the Qunari, from Dagna's collection," she said. "I came on one piece that… struck me more than the others. It reminded me a little of the work we discussed, Quarinus' work on the Four Loves, although of course with a very Qunari slant on things."

"What do you mean?" Justice asked.

Mardra shook her head, biting her lip. "It's… a little hard to explain. I can give you the book, in the real world I mean, and you can read it. They have words that don't translate into Common exactly, they're not ideas that the southern kingdoms have. But there was one word, nehradaan, that really stayed with me. It translates as, well, the literal translation is 'pale heart.' But it means so much more than that. It's about a kind of relationship between two people… who love each other, who care for each other, but not in a way that implies any kind of sexual or physical intimacy. It's -- love, but also the understanding that two people complete each other, that they provide balance. That each one can provide what the other needs, and in moments of wild fury or unrestraint, the other can be a balancing influence, a counterweight."

Justice thought back to some of their worst moments in Kirkwall, when they had seemed to be spinning all out of control, off-balance and shaking each other apart with the force of their grief and rage and fury and despair. "That sounds like something that would be very important to me," he said quietly.

Mardra nodded. "But it's not -- the Qunari separate everything, you see. It's not analogous to a relationship between husband and wife, or lovers. There's no expectation of physical intimacy, or -- or children."

"Would that be something you would want, someday?" Justice asked. "Not the physical aspect. I understand that is not a part of who you are. But children."

Mardra stood still for a long time. She shrugged a little, then slowly shook her head. "No," she said. "It's hard sometimes, to sort out what I want or don't want that's -- that's really me, compared to what I've been told by others that I shouldn't or can't want. No, I never wanted children."

"Ah," Justice said.
"Do you?" Her attention sharpened on him.

"It is not a thing for spirits," he said. "But it is a want I have known, all the same."

Her brow wrinkled with confusion. "How so?"

They turned down another street, blue lights winking and shimmering in the spectral trees as they passed, first dimmer, then brighter. "My first wife -- Kristoff's wife, Aura -- wanted a child. But because he was a Warden, they could not have one," he said. "Anders, too, desired children, but he believed that because he was a mage, he could not have one. Why do mortals desire children that they know they cannot have?"

"I don't know," Mardra admitted. "I think it's mostly because they want something of themselves to continue after their deaths, they want to leave something in the world that lasts. It's the only form of immortality we get -- I guess that must sound stupid to an immortal fade spirit."

"I do not think that is foolish at all."

She turned towards him, eyebrows raised in surprise. "You don't?"

"In the fade, to change the world around you is as simple as willing it," Justice said, gesturing to the landscape around them as illustration. "But as soon as you cease to will it, it ceases to be. For all that we do not age or die there is no permanence in the fade, less even than you mortals."

He paused a moment, searching for words, for conviction. Slowly, he continued. "Yet here in the mortal world what we build and shape lasts, long after we ourselves are gone."

"I guess that's true," Mardra said quietly.

He stopped in the middle of the shimmering plaza, pulling her by her hands around to face him. He gazed into her eyes, mortal eyes, the eyes he loved so much. He clasped his hands in hers and brought her close into his embrace, leaning down until his forehead rested gently against hers. In truth, it was not such a distance; they were almost of a height, perfectly matched, perfectly balanced.

"Then let this refuge we create be our legacy," he said.

She closed her eyes and returned the embrace.
I've actually been sitting on this art for a while -- I commissioned it from dichord some time ago, and asked for something that could convey tenderness and love in an entirely asexual way. This was what they came up with and I was extremely thrilled. <3

The 'qunari' word that Mardra discusses in this chapter is pretty carbon copied from Homestuck's quadrant system, which is referred to alternately as *palemate* or *moirallegiance*. It's a more complex concept than what's discussed here, but it fit so perfectly for them that it's what their entire relationship to date has basically been based around, so I thought it deserved to be named out loud.
Jowan works through the aftermath of Loghain's visit, and Anders tries to juggle his relationships with his duties.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He waited three days after Loghain's departure to see if the older Warden was going to change his mind and double back. Once it was clear he was not going to, he gave the letter to Jowan.

Resisting immense temptation, he didn't open the letter to read it first, nor did he stick around to watch Jowan read it. As much as he had come to value the man, even like him, he knew it wasn't really his place.

Even if a certain voyeuristic curiosity was eating him alive. Jowan disappeared for thirty-six hours after reading the letter, Neria too, and Anders desperately wished he knew what they had talked about in that time. Even if it was none of his business.

He wasn't going to ask. It was none of his business.

"So," he said to Jowan, next time they worked together -- slogging through reams of papers of results from their Dust Town blood magic trials. "How are you, uh, holding up? Since the, uh… letter."

"Oh." Jowan bit his lip and fell silent, pen still slowly and laboriously moving over the tables. He had a tendency to flip letters and scramble numbers if he didn't pay careful attention to what he was writing, Anders knew.

"I guess to some extent it doesn't really… change anything?" Jowan sounded uncertain. "I haven't had a father in years, not since he gave me up to the Circle. Now I find out I have… another father, I never had? It's like…" He stopped to think for a moment, and Anders waited with bated breath to see what metaphor he was going to cook up this time. "It's like you have a farm that has an old barn, and the barn is just a mess -- it's filthy and falling apart, and, and, infested with termites.

"But then one day a sinkhole opens up under your farm, and the barn collapses into a sinkhole. And then the sinkhole turns out to be an old silver mine, and for a moment you think you're going to get something great. And then it turns out that all the silver was mined out of the mine years ago, so it's empty and got nothing in it. And all you get in the end is a hole in your farm where the barn used to be, and now there's nothing. It's not like you miss the ratty old barn, but what are you supposed to do with a hole in your farm? Except line it with stones and turn it into a duck pond, maybe. Maybe with some fish, and you could plant some lily pads in the pond and have frogs, and rushes around the edges, and a bench where you can sit and throw bread at the ducks --"

Anders had no idea how to respond to this meandering monologue. "Bread is bad for ducks,
actually," he said. "They mostly eat fish and bugs. Bread can make them sick."

"Of course it does," Jowan sighed, a lifetime of resignation in that sigh.

He worked in silence for a few minutes more, then spoke again. "But I dunno. It changes something, I guess. To know that the man who gave me up wasn't really my father. That I might have… I might have had something else, if things had gone differently."

Anders sniffed. "He would have had to have stuck around in order to make a difference."

Jowan made a little twisted face. "It does explain some things, I guess. My mother was always…"

He trailed off, and this time Anders didn't dare to interrupt. After a minute he started over. "I remember being really small, and, and sitting next to a waterwheel, and hearing an old woman gossip about how strange it was, that my mom had red hair and my dad had blond hair, but I was dark. I guess… I guess my dad was right to treat me so…"

The silence that filled in the wake of his words was deep and echoing. Anders heard whispers of years of old pain, the kind so deeply buried in your memories that they colored everything else that came later. There was no excising those echoes, but he had to say something. "Regardless of who your father was, the man who raised you had no right to treat you poorly," Anders told him. "It is more than a blood that makes a father."

"I guess you're right," Jowan said wistfully. "And that's kind of it, isn't it? Even if Loghain was my father, he was never part of my life. We have no relationship. Why would that change now?"

Anders nodded understanding. He could see why Jowan would think that, but at the same time it left him with a sense of disappointment.

After a moment Jowan spoke again. "But at the same time I-I… I mean… I'm going to have a kid soon. That means that… he's gonna be a grandfather." He blinked, that logical fact apparently coming as a surprise to him. "I feel like, I feel like he deserves to be a part of that. He is a part of that, whatever… the rest of it. I mean, there's gonna be part of him in that child."

"Do you want to contact him again?" Anders said.

"I guess I should," Jowan said reluctantly, and then his voice firmed up. "No, I… I want to. At least to tell him about his new grandchild. I think he deserves that. Do you think you could get a letter to him, if I wrote it?"

Anders had no idea how he would get such a letter through. Loghain traveled frequently and far, and he wasn't on the best of terms with Weisshaupt's network of wardens anyway, however that worked.

Nevertheless. "I'll get it to him," he promised. "I promise."

---

Satinalia came and went, mostly unremarked in the hectic pace of life in Orzammar. It wasn't a festival that the dwarves really celebrated, and as it fell squarely in the middle of the mages moving
back up into the Tower nobody had much attention to spare for it. Mardra organized a party -- of course -- but it was little more than a slightly-fancier-than-usual dinner with a few special activities for the apprentices. Young as they were it was a much bigger deal to miss out on any of the holiday's wonders, and they had already been deprived of too many. The costume pageant, short play, and holiday-themed sweets cost little enough for them to arrange, and left an impression on the children's memories of their first Satinalia in Refuge that would likely live on after most of the rest of them had passed.

The year was drawing swiftly to a close. Winter storms continued unabated, but sheltered in the halls of Orzammar and the rune-heated corridors of the Tower, it mattered less. It was only necessary to brave the drifts and icy winds in the short trek from the Tower to the entrance of the Orzammar tunnel, or back.

Anders was kept busy working with Dagna and Jowan on the fertility treatments, his other work in Dust Town, mediating petty spats among bored and restless mages and nervy dwarves, and spending time with Hawke.

He was more than a little worried that Hawke also fell into the "bored and restless" category. Orzammar was a colorful city, but compared to Kirkwall it was tame and law-abiding. (Well, compared to Kirkwall, anything was tame and law-abiding.) Personally Anders liked having a Veil solid enough not to bust open on him anytime so much as a cleaning spell went awry, especially with this many mages in one place, and he liked being able to go to the market to get plums and back without running afoul of a death cult worshipping an incarnated desire demon.

But he knew Hawke. Hawke had spent most of his life on the move, as the son and brother of apostates in hiding. He'd made a virtue of necessity (or, as in the case of Hawke, a vice of necessity) and taken the wandering lifestyle to heart. Even once he'd reclaimed the Amell estate in Kirkwall and gotten himself comfortably settled, he'd still gone out looking for trouble every couple of days -- apparently just out of an insatiable thirst for it.

Not that Anders was in a place to throw stones, since he'd tagged along on those trouble-hunts more often than not. But he had always been working towards a goal that had an end, towards a dream of making a safe place that he and other mages could stay in. He was happy, here in Refuge. He worried that Hawke wasn't.

Hawke had been restless lately, frequently vanishing out of Brosca Manor for hours at a time. He'd been spending more time with Bhelen too, ever since they'd returned from Bownammar, and Anders had no idea what they were up to. There had been a few nights when Hawke hadn't come home until shortly before dawn, or at least once not at all. He just hoped Hawke wasn't seeing someone else on the side -- he didn't think he was seeing someone else -- not that he'd have much of a ground to throw stones from even if he was.

Maker, he hoped that wasn't it. This polygon was complicated enough as it stood.

One patient that he did make sure to faithfully attend to was Queen Moira Aeducan, whose pregnancy was rapidly approaching its conclusion. Her stomach had grown to an astounding size to accommodate the triplets; her belly was bigger than Surana's even though her frame was smaller. Despite that she remained in surprisingly good spirits, alert and robust and as agile as anyone in her condition could possibly expect.

Right now Moira was stretched out on her back on a low sofa not unlike the divan at the Meino Estate, the first time he'd ever treated her as a patient. Anders knelt on the floor beside her, trying to concentrate on channeling a wisp to explore the major vessels around the cavity of her abdomen, to ensure there was no pinching or blockage that could choke off vital blood flow to the infants.
This was an old routine by now and Moira chattered comfortably as he worked, going on about her projects in the Assembly and in Orzammar. He managed to pay attention to about a quarter of everything she was saying, the rest of his attention slipping in and out of the work in front of him. "The key thing, I think, is to ensure that all the students at this Academy for Ladies are instilled with the basic learning skills they need to flourish in society," Moira was saying.

"Uh huh," Anders said absently, tracing up over a major vein -- wait, he'd already checked that one twice. Where was the renal artery in dwarves again?

"We'll need to teach them to read and write -- regardless of which caste they hail from -- as well as music, dancing, jewelry-setting, and cooking," Moira went on.

"Right," Anders said, not even sparing a thought to wonder why jewel-setting was part of the list.

"As well as that we'll need to teach them all magic, so that upon necessity they can all turn into dragons and fly away to the surface. I trust I can count on you mages to impart the necessary skills."

"Sounds useful," Anders said absently, and he counted one, two, three heartbeats before the words caught up with him and he looked up blinking. "Wait, what?"

"Anders." Moira pushed up on one elbow, leveling a look that managed to be very stern and forbidding despite her reclining posture. "It is obvious to anyone with eyes that you are distracted. I would not wish to invade your privacy, but you are my physician, and right now I'm unconvinced that you could tell one end of the infant from the other."

Anders withdrew his hands, banishing the wisp he'd been working on with a quick flapping of his hands. "Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I'm… you're right, I'm a little preoccupied. I would never let it interfere in my work, I promise you that."

"Hm." Moira's lips pursed with doubt she was too mannered to openly voice. "Is this about your young man that my husband is spending so much time with? Hawke? Or perhaps your young lady, of the Shapers?"

Anders was diverted from her comment about my husband and the shapers by the realization that the gossip mill had made its way even up this far in the palace. "You know all about it, I see," Anders said, resigned.

"The shape of it. I confess, I do not see what exactly has you so troubled," Moira said. "You care for both of these young people, and they for you. There are no blood-feuds or lawsuits, nor elders in your clan calcified in opposition to the matches. What, exactly, is the problem?"

"I… I'm not sure." Anders hesitated. For all the time he'd been brooding on the problem, he still hadn't managed to fully articulate what bothered him about it. "Even if there's no trouble, it just doesn't feel right. I was always taught to believe that you're only supposed to be with one person at a time, and to do otherwise is wrong, it's unfair and unjust to them."

"But I can't bring myself to choose." Just the thought made an ache start in his chest, like his heart
was being ripped down the meridian. He brought up a hand to place on his chest, trying to warm the sudden stab of coldness. "When I'm with Hawke I want to be with him with everything I am. But when I'm… with Mardra, I feel the same."

Moira nodded as though she had expected this. "There's a saying in the old tongue," she said. "A pebble is single, but the vein has many twists and branches. People are complex, they have many facets. A person can be one person in one context, and another person in a different context. And those different people have different needs. That's true for any of us, but I imagine it's even more true for you, with your special circumstances."

Anders frowned. "What do you mean, different contexts?"

"Take my husband for example," Moira said. "Bhelen raised Rica from the gutter and showered her with wealth and advantage. He is both lover and father to her, in some ways. With her he plays the role of protector, of provider. It makes him feel powerful in a life where he too often feels frustrated by the limits of his power, and magnanimous in a world where he must portion out the straitened wealth of an entire kingdom."

"But he does not play these pretensions around me, nor would I welcome them." Her voice sharpened on the last few words, showing the steel that always lay under her layers of silk and velvets. "Instead I stand as his social and intellectual equal, the one who can help him refine and execute his strategies, the woman in whom he can confide even his doubts and weakness.

"He cannot be the same person, both powerful protector and uncertain doubter, around any one lover," Moira concluded. "Yet both people are him, and both have needs that should not be neglected."

Anders thought about that for a minute. There was a lot to unpack there, a whole new perspective on the delicate balance between himself and Justice. They were one person, and yet they were two. Different people in different contexts? Maybe, but also united as one on many fronts -- anything that had to do with the freedom of the mages or the tearing down of the corrupt Chantry, as well as other things -- and on others, disparate even in moments where they should have been closest.

It meant something, but he wasn't sure just what yet. He wasn't sure how to respond to that yet. What he said instead was, "But do you love him?"

She looked taken aback, perhaps by how impertinent a question he'd delivered in response to her lecture. "I do, though perhaps you mean something different when you say 'love' than I do. There are many different ways to love, many different... kinds of love." She made a face as though biting into something sour. "Dwarvish is a better language for this than common, I think; there are many different words that are all translated simply as 'love.'"

"I love him as a husband to my wife, a king to my queen. It is a love of duty. But I also love Hilde, and that is a love of touch, as one heart to another." She smiled fondly.

"If you love him, how can you be all right with... with Rica?" he asked. This was the question that truly troubled him, he could admit that. Even if they'd both professed to being fine with it, he was still certain, on some level, that sharing him with each other must be a source of pain to Hawke and Mardra. "How can you be okay with him having another woman on the side?"

"I also 'have another woman on the side,'" Moira reminded him. "Rica is... different from me. She is a commoner, she could never be his queen. No doubt he loves her as well, but why should that affect my love for him? It is mine."
"So you're not jealous?" Anders said skeptically.

Moira hesitated. "I have been," she said lowly. "In the past. I am sometimes. I was far more jealous of her motherhood than I ever was of her claim on my husband. I cannot say it has always been easy, or that there has never been conflict, but we have found our way to stability, and that is what really matters."

"In this, as with everything else, there are centuries of tradition that guide us, tell us how to relate to one another and how to go on."

"Wow," Anders said. He digested that a little bit, imagining rows and rows of tablets in the Shaperate dedicated to keeping straight the byzantine family trees of multi-person relationships across half a dozen noble houses. He knocked the vision loose with a little shake of his head. "I'm a little jealous of that, honestly. We don't have centuries of tradition to tell us how to do anything, or at least not any tradition I want us to keep. We're making it all fresh, and none of us have any idea what we're doing."

Moira looked him squarely in the eye. In the most sincere and empathetic voice he'd ever heard her use she said, "I'm sorry. That sounds horrible."

Anders let out a little laugh. "It's less horrible for us, I guess," he said. The Circle had had traditions enough, most of them just social trappings to drape over the stark ugliness of the laws and threats and enclosures of the Templars and the Chantry behind everything. "I admit... I never thought of dwarves having special traditions for navigating polygamous relationships."

"The Halls of the Mountain Father have stood for six thousand years," Moira reminded him, pride in her voice. "We have traditions for everything."

"I always thought of dwarves as being, well, I don't know," Anders admitted. "Solid, unflexible. Simple."

Moira gave him a chilling frown. "We are solid, and stable," she said. "But that does not make us simple, or stupid. You would do well to remember that."

He ducked his head. "Sorry," he said, and she accepted it with a regal nod.

They finished the exam in silence, Anders pouring effort into concentrating on the task at hand. At last he leaned back, shifting his weight off his aching knees, and rested his hands on his thighs. "Well, your Majesty, all looks well," he began. "The infants are a little small compared to other dwarven infants I've seen at this stage, but they seem to be developmentally complete, and could likely be born at almost any time now. I recommend you don't go far from your quarters from now until the birth, and keep someone within call in case it starts at an unexpected time."

"That will not be a problem," Moira said.

Anders had to chuckle a little. "No, I suppose not," he said. "Multiple births can be difficult, Majesty, but you have the best doctors of the kingdom ready and on call. I can't promise that nothing will go wrong, but if it does, we will be ready for it."

Moira's lips tipped in an ironic smile. "If you had promised that nothing would go wrong, I would not have believed you," she said, which stung rather. If Anders said that someone was healthy and didn’t need to worry about their health taking a dive, he was usually correct on that score. "But I am satisfied."

"I'm glad," Anders said, and he shifted as he began to push himself off the floor. Moira likewise
pushed herself up, somewhat awkwardly around her belly, to a sitting position.

As Anders made to leave the room, she called out to him again. "Oh and Anders, I was quite serious when I said I would like to retain some of you mages to teach at my Academy," she said. "Disregarding magic, there are still many topics on which the lower castes will need instruction. If there are any mages who are interested in tutoring, pass their names along to me."

Anders had to smile at the prospect. He couldn't object to anything that would help the women of Dust Town improve their lot in life, and he quite liked the idea of spreading literacy and knowledge to as many people as possible. Not only that, but every tie between the mages and the dwarves -- every way they found to work in tandem -- would strengthen the bond between their communities, helping ensure that Orzammar would continue to protect the mages against any forces that sought to destroy them. "I will," he said, and sent a short bow her way. "Farewell."

He returned to Brosca Manor during a lull in foot traffic around Orzammar. It was the halfway point in Orzammar's four-day cycle, a brief interlude between the two active periods that made up their 'business' day. The Manor itself was much emptier than it had been recently -- most of the mages had gone back up to the valley to help complete repairs on the Tower, and many had chosen to stay up there.

But Hawke was there, which he almost hadn't been expecting. He met Anders at the door, looking surprisingly sleek and well-combed, dressed in a nice shirt and recently-laundered trousers.

"Garrett," Anders greeted him with a smile, and Hawke greeted him by stepping forward and pulling him into a kiss. Kissing Hawke was often a full-contact sport, one that distracted him from his thoughts and threw him into a state of bemusement.

"I'm a psychic," Hawke announced as they broke the kiss. Anders leaned back a little, smiling. "Are you now?"

"Yes, I'm so psychic I can see events that I was not present for. The Great and Powerful Hawke Knows All. I'm seeing..." He raised up his hands to press his fingers against his temple, humming in a discordant tone. "I'm seeing that you did not eat lunch today."

Anders laughed. "Okay, you've got me there," he admitted. "You're right."

"Course I am. I'm always right." Hawke reached down and took his hand, linking their fingers together, and led him through the Manor. Most of the mages who were sitting or working around the Manor stopped to watch them pass, and Anders couldn't help but flush at being an object of voyeuristic interest.

But he was used to it by now, and he managed to push it out of his mind as Hawke led them back to their bedroom. He stopped short in the doorway. The bed, couch and other furniture had been pushed back against the walls, and in the middle of the room a small table had been set up. There was an actual tablecloth, slightly mismatched dishes, and a pair of candles reflecting off curved silver dish covers.
"Garrett, did you set all this up?" Anders demanded, laughing.

"The best thing about the Army of the Three Princes being dispersed is that they're out there putting the fear of the Maker into anyone who might try something similar," Hawke said as he pulled back the dish cover with a flourishing twist of his wrist. "The second best thing is that now that the blockade is broken, we can get real regular food imported again. Red roughy trucked in frozen from the Storm Coast poached in wine, bon appétit."

"Did you cook this yourself or did you get someone to cook it for you?" Anders asked as he seated himself opposite.

"I had some help," Garrett admitted. "Didn't think a reprise of Wounded Coast Horror Stew would really set the mood."

"Mm, probably not." Anders paused and took a look around the room. As enchanted as he was by the setting and romance of the situation, something didn't feel quite right.

Hawke didn't really do typical, romantic dates. His idea of a date was usually "hey Anders, let's go view the moon over the harbor and also kill mutated fish that are trying to climb up the docks" or, more frequently, "Hey Anders, you dislike Templars right, let's go track down a bunch of corrupted Templars smuggling lyrium outside the city limits!" And, well, he hadn't been wrong, those escapades had been a lot of fun, when they didn't end in blood-spattered horror and death.

But the only times back in Kirkwall that Hawke had tried to pull off an actual romantic atmosphere had been when he was trying to apologize for something. And if Anders couldn't think of anything that Hawke needed to apologize for, that just meant he hadn't done it yet.

"Garrett," he said slowly. "What's this about?"

Hawke had a pretty good poker face, Anders had to give him that, but the fact that he felt the need for a poker face instead of reacting with honest confusion gave him away. "Does it have to be about something? Can't I just enjoy a dinner with the love of my life?"

"Garrett." Anders pushed aside the dish and sighed. He really didn't want to get into a screaming match with Hawke, not again. "Just tell me. What's going on?"

"Ah… blast it." Hawke's face fell. He fiddled sheepishly with the silver knife in his hands. "I was hoping to get around to this later, find a way to work up to it."

"Work up to what?" Anders demanded, uncertainty making his voice sharp.

Hawke cleared his throat, then finally looked up to meet Anders' gaze, his eyes dark and gleaming in the candle that spilled light between them. "Anders, I'm leaving tomorrow."

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes
A note to readers:

Well, I had planned to have this story all wrapped up before the new year, but that obviously did not happen.

I am very close to the end. At the moment I have a few more slice-of-life chapters, one more Big Event, and then a wrap-up/epilogue chapter. However, I've also gotten into a few more projects recently that are taking up my time and attention, so I have not been moving as quickly on this as I would like.

I know usually notes to the effect of "I'm not abandoning this story, I promise!" are the kiss of death for a long WIP, but I'm confident that I can wrap this one up fairly soon. One thing I'm considering doing is writing it all in one chunk, then posting the last few chapters fairly close together. Or I can continue as I have been, posting chapters as I write them. As the readers, which would you prefer - a longer wait and one big dramatic concluding update, or more frequent updates as they come?
Chapter Summary

Hawke prepares to leave, and Anders prepares to say goodbye.

Chapter Notes

The whole business with the shadow puppetry got away from me, as my worldbuilding always tends to do. I realized I'd written myself into a corner with the whole 'no performers' thing, so I had to think of something else that could act as a date, and then, well, you'll see.

The aesthetic was mostly based on the works of Lotte Reiniger, so just try to imagine that the whole show looks like that. Also, given that Tevinter canonically has projected-light theater, I thought it made a certain amount of sense for the dwarves to have projected-light media as well.

"Not forever!" Hawke said hastily, throwing his hands up palm outwards as though to forestall Anders' reaction. "Or at least I'm not planning to. You never know. Dangerous world out there. But I mean to come back."

Anders put his elbow on the table and rested his head on his hand, fingers pressed against the bridge of his nose. "Explain," was all he said, voice muffled against his palm.

Hawke cleared his throat, looking more than a bit sheepish, and tapped his fork against his plate in a nervous rhythm. "So I've been having a few chats with the King in the past few weeks," he began.

"I know," Anders interrupted. "Queen Moira told me."

"She did?" Hawke said with surprise. "And here I thought I was being sneaky."

"She's good at sneaky," Anders said. "So what was it you and Bhelen had to say to each other?"

Maker, if Hawke decided to tell him that he and Bhelen had a dalliance going on the side…

Hawke took a breath. "Well, he's been trying to get all his ducks in a row for this Deep Roads campaign, you know how it is," he said. "And it turns out he has a job that he thinks only a non-dwarf can do.

"Apparently there's this lost city somewhere in the Deep Roads that used to belong to this dwarven clan -- name escapes me for the moment -- who were astoundingly good at runes and lyrium. Just, really superb at their jobs. But all their knowledge was lost when the darkspawn overran the thaig. Now Bhelen wants it back."
"And this requires a non-dwarf why exactly?" Anders said.

"Because of why exactly it's lost, supposedly." Hawke's eyes had gone bright and he waved his hands enthusiastically through the air as he told the story, fork forgotten in hand. "The briefing was a bit sketchy -- old papers and recent rumors, you know how it is -- but supposedly they did something to their thaig that makes it impossible to find. Makes it impossible for dwarves to find. Any dwarves that get near it get disoriented, turned around and lost and unable to find their way, because of the... 'misguiding song,' is what the Memories say. But only dwarves can hear the song, you see."

"Or so they assume," Anders said, his stomach sinking. "Have any non-dwarves ever actually been near enough to find out?"

"Well no," Hawke admitted. "So we don't actually know if this will work. But that's what makes it an adventure! That and the prospect of lost treasures and hideous danger, that is."

Anders covered his face with one hand, leaned his elbow against the table. "Of course you'd want to go," he muttered.

"It sounds fascinating, you have to admit."

"It sounds like the bloody deep roads is what it sounds like," Anders retorted. "Taint, taint, taint, darkspawn, oozes, horrible dwarven traps..."

Hawke shrugged. "Well, you know what they say, a life not spent in frantic danger from uncanny horrors is a life not lived!"

Anders lifted his head, inhaled deeply through his nose and sat back. "So you're set on going," he said.

"Yes," Hawke said simply. "It's... don't take this the wrong way, Anders, but it's too bloody peaceful around here now that the Three Princes were shown the door. I'm feeling restless. I need to do something."

Anders nodded, feeling his stomach drop even as he did. "Alright, then," he said, and swallowed against his trepidation. "I'll go with you."

This was going to blow such a hole in his schedule. Queen Moira was due any time in the next few weeks now, to say nothing of Surana. The mages were still in the middle of transferring back up to the Tower, and there were the blood magic trials in Dust Town still ongoing -- Jowan could complete those without him, maybe, but that meant he wouldn't be on hand to supervise --

"No," Hawke said unexpectedly. "Not this time."

"What?" Anders blinked, his cascading plans shattering and falling away at Hawke's firm statement.

"Anders... love." Hawke's voice softened. He reached out to lay a hand -- thankfully not the one with the fork -- over Anders'. "Your people need you here. Not just the way that people needed you back in Kirkwall. You're needed here. And you belong here. This is the place that you've built, you love this place and it loves you. These people love you, and it's more important that you be here for them than dickering around on adventures with me. I love you, Anders, but I don't need you to follow me everywhere I go. Not any more."

"Garrett," Anders protested, voice thick. "I lost you once and it almost killed me."
"I know." Hawke squeezed his hand. "But I'm not leaving forever, I'll be back. I'll always come back. That's the beauty of this job, it will always keep me coming back."

"This job?" Anders said with a sudden twinge of misgiving.

"Oh right, I hadn't gotten to that yet," Hawke smiled sheepishly. "So the King actually uh... he offered me a job. As a... secret agent, of sorts."

"What?" Anders could hardly process this. "The King of Dwarves offered you, a non-dwarf, a job? As one of his agents?"

Hawke grinned. "Yep! Actually, that's kind of the point, you know? Nobody will guess! Because why would I, a human, known scoundrel and Champion of Kirkwall, be a spy for the King of Orzammar? Who'd even suspect?" He spread his arms out as though to include all the world in the not-guessing. "So I can go around and get invited to parties with fancy people, listen to all the gossip, do a little bit of sneaking, and then come back here to report it and get paid. Maybe do a few other things while I'm at it, depending on what the situation calls for."

"I... what..." Sputtering was unattractive, he knew, but it was a lot to take in.

"It's quite exciting, actually," Hawke burbled on. Anders couldn't deny, he hadn't seen Hawke look this energized since -- well, since the Army of the Three Princes launched its last assault on Refuge. "My life as a secret agent to the King Under the Mountain. Ooh! Is that actually one of his titles?"

Anders shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Shame," Hawke said, disappointed. "He should think about adding it, it's got zing."

Anders sat quiet for a few minutes, trying to put his thoughts in order, and for a change Hawke let him. Deep down, a part of him had always known that Hawke wouldn't stay forever. This was Anders' dream, not Hawke's, and it was too much to hope for that Hawke would submit to being a bit player in someone else's life. He had always been too large for life, always been uncontainable.

But this, this arrangement... his first instinct was still rejection, he didn't trust Bhelen's motivations as far as he could throw him. But it wasn't like Bhelen wasn't getting something out of it, was it? A lot of things actually. The Champion of Kirkwall at his disposal, at his beck and call. Although if he thought wrangling Hawke to his will was going to be easy, that he could predict and control what Hawke would do once out of his sight, he was likely in for an unpleasant surprise. Anders almost wanted to see it.

In the end, Bhelen had nothing to do with Anders' real objection. It would be one thing if Hawke were just leaving for the sake of leaving, going to rejoin Bethany or settle down in some human city. Instead, he was flinging himself headlong into the worst dangers of Anders' nightmares: the Deep Roads, the deadly Game of Orzammar politics, treachery and poison and intrigue.

And Anders would not be with him. If he got in trouble, got hurt, got really hurt, Anders wouldn't be able to help him.

Hawke knew all of that. And he was going to do it anyway, knowing that when he risked himself he risked Anders' heart. That, more than anything else, made Anders sick with dismay.

"And I suppose you'll be doing this no matter what I say?" he said at last. It came out more bitterly than he meant.
Hawke's other hand joined his first on the table, gripping both of Anders' hands and pulling slightly until Anders turned his face up to meet his eyes. "I mean this in the nicest possible way, love, but... this isn't about you," Hawke said gently. "This is about me, and I think it's the right choice for me."

"It does sound very much your style," Anders admitted. Hawke had actually enjoyed those maddening games that Tallis had dragged them into at Chateau Haine, at least up until they got thrown into jail and Qunari were trying to kill them. "I'm just worried, Garrett. Worried that you'll be hurt or worse if you go into dangerous places without me."

"I get that," Hawke said. "I'm pretty good at getting into dangerous places. But I've also gotten quite good at getting out of them, too." He had the audacity to throw Anders a wink, as though this was one more obstacle he could charm his way past.

Anders made up his mind. "Don't go tomorrow," he said.

Hawke sighed, a wrinkle appearing between his brows. "Anders--" he started.

"I don't mean don't go at all. Just don't go tomorrow," Anders interrupted. "Wait a few more days. You can push it back a few days, can't you? That thaig has waited two thousand years, it can wait a little longer."

Hawke frowned. "I suppose, but what for?"

"If I'm not going to be with you, there are some things I want you to take with you," Anders said. "Things that will take me a few days to get ready. They'll keep you safe, even if I can't."

"All right," Hawke acquiesced.

For a moment they just sat there, holding hands, staring across the dinner into each others' eyes, neither wanting to be the first one to break contact.

At last Hawke dropped his eyes to the table and cleared his throat. "Blast," he said. "Dinner's gone a bit cold and manky, hasn't it?"

"Fuck the dinner," Anders snarled, and stood up so fast the table jumped and crashed to the floor. Hawke was in his arms a heartbeat later, meeting him in a passionate kiss.

Neither of them got much sleep that night, but it was all right.

Due to a few hiccups in the construction process -- first having the wall be blown out by Hamil's self-detonation, then the foundations shifting during the earthquake -- the south wall of the second floor of the Tower had been rebuilt with twice as many windows as the other walls. The south-facing orientation and the extra elevation that lifted the windows over the edge of the ridge meant that even in the winter this long gallery let in quite a lot of light. It was a popular place to spend time, but Anders had backed the request of the herbalist mages to turn it into an indoor winter plant nursery.

He was glad of that foresight now since he needed something grown in a hurry. Without magic,
what he wanted to do would be impossible. Even with magic -- "Can you do it?" he asked, pleading in his tone.

The mage Pia sat in a rolling chair pulled up flush to the workbench, seedling pots scattered around it and the entire surface dusted with earth that was never fully swept off. The young human had bad legs, ankles with bones that ground against each other and tendons that stretched too easily, making it all too common for her to take a tumble when she tried anything above a sedate walk. She'd taken to spending more time sitting now that she could, now that she didn't have to walk or march or run for her life.

"I don't know, Anders," she said, frowning dubiously at the withered pits in her hand. They'd spent a long time languishing in the depths of the battered case Loghain had brought to him, and he had no idea whether they had even been sequestered properly to begin with. The Grey Wardens didn't really strike him as too concerned with proper agricultural technique. "From what you've said, this herb has some pretty stringent growing requirements. I just don't know that we can provide them here, in these conditions."

"But you can at least try?" Anders wheedled. "If you give it the best sunlight and monitor it round the clock --"

She squinted at him suspiciously. "And what about the blood lotus we're supposed to be growing for trade with Sky-Ram?" she said. "I thought that was supposed to be number one priority."

"It was. Now this is," Anders said. He felt a twinge of conscience at pulling rank on this issue, but - "Look, if we can actually get this to grow and germinate, then we'll literally have a replicable technique for growing Blight resist balm. There's got to be a market for that that pays its weight in gold."

"The Blight's over," Pia protested.

"But we're still here," Anders pointed out. "Seriously, though. This matters."

"Hm." Her frown eased, the corners of her lips softening, and he wondered if she remembered that he had taken her year, back when the rest of Refuge had refused. He hadn't done it to put her in his debt, but he wanted her to understand -- wanted them all to understand -- that more than money, the most important thing to keep Refuge alive was that they looked out for one another. "You know that even if we can get it to sprout, we can't just instantly get it ready for harvest."

"I don't ask for instant," Anders assured her quickly. "I just ask that you do all you can."

She took one of the seedling pots, raked up the dirt inside with her bare fingers, and inserted one of the withered seeds in it. A few different beakers of liquids followed, probably at least one of them water.

Pot in hand, she moved. With a push against the table she wheeled over closer to the wall, where a late-afternoon angle of sunlight slanted in through the window. A large earthen pot had been set up to take advantage of the beam of sun. She made quick work of setting the seed and its soil there and then her fingers rested there for a moment.

Anders felt the buzz of magic, saw the glimmer of green at her fingers before it sank into the soil and vanished. Creation magic, he could tell that much, but not a spell he'd ever learned -- he wasn't even sure if it was a spell that could be learned, or if it was just a talent that was inherent to some people. What a cruel world it would be, he reflected, if every mage were exactly the same, made to some beaten order with no room for individual talent to thrive.
A tiny speck of green appeared against the black of the soil, pushing up through the dirt and shaking aside grains of dust as it unfurled first one, then two tiny leaves.

The glow ceased as Pia pulled her hand back, nodding in satisfaction. The new sproutling settled into its new home, the leaves green-translucent and fragile. She looked over at Anders. "Three days," she said. "And I'll have it flower for you."

"Three days?" Hawke asked.

"Four, technically," Anders said. "Even if I can harvest it on day three, it'll still take some time to refine it the way the instructions say."

Hawke shrugged. "I can wait four days," he said. In truth, just making the plans for future excitement made his eyes brighter, his movements more bouncy. He turned back to Anders with a heartstoppingly familiar, crooked smile. "Not that I think you need to worry this much, love. I don't plan to tangle with any darkspawn. Unlike you Grey Wardens, I know better than to seek out the nightmare creatures."

Anders snorted; he had that right. But then he shook his head. "You don’t know what you'll run into in that thaig, Garrett," he said. "If there's any way at all to lessen the risk, I'd rather take it."

"That's fair," Hawke said. "But enough of the doom and gloom. However shall we pass the time for the next four days?"

"Aside from having marathon sex?" Anders suggested wryly, and Hawke grinned.

"At best that will eat up a day," he said. "No, I was thinking more along the lines of a date. This is Orzammar! Capital city of the dwarves, more concentrated wealth here than in Val Royeaux. There must be something fun we can do together before we leave."

"Maybe," Anders said. He frowned as he began really thinking ahead, sorting out his schedule for the next few days. "I was going to meet with the Sky-Ram traders with Mardra tomorrow, make sure they don't make trouble for her. The day after that I usually stop by to teach a class with the apprentices, but I'm sure they won't be heartbroken to cancel. Other than that Mardra wanted me to come to the Shaperate with me --"

"You know what," Hawke said, breaking into Anders' rambling. "Tell you what. Instead of doing all these things with Mardra instead of going on a date with me, why don't you and I go on a date with Mardra?"

Anders stopped. Rewound that and replayed it in his head. "Beg pardon?" he managed.

"It'll be fun! Like a double date," Hawke grinned. "With you, and your glowy other half, and your glowy other half's girlfriend."

"I thought you and she didn't get along," Anders managed to say. And I know you and Justice don't entirely get along, he thought.
Hawke shrugged. "She's the biggest wet blanket in the family since Carver died," he said. "But you know, we're family. We really ought to at least try to get along, and this will be the last chance there will be for ages for us to spend time together.

He couldn't really fault that logic. Instead he said, "If Mardra is coming that means it has to be a real date, not just getting drunk in a tavern and then having sex in an alley."

By the pout on Hawke's face, that was pretty much exactly what he'd been thinking. "You're no fun," he said. "Fine, we'll go to an opera or something. She likes operas, right? She seems the type of person who would like operas."

"An opera?" Anders laughed. "You?"

"Hey! I can appreciate culture," Hawke protested. "All part of my Secret Agent, International Man of Mystery persona. If I survived Chateau Haine I can survive an opera with my cousin. Just don't say I never did anything for her."

Anders smiled. "I'll ask her," he said. "Dwarven opera it is!"

"Dwarves don't have opera," Mardra said, frowning, as Anders pitched the idea to her that evening.

He should at least have checked that that was a thing before he proposed it. Anders cursed his lack of foresight. "Uh," he said, searching for an alternative. "How about a concert then? Orzammar First Philharmonic?"

"Nope." Mardra's heavy brows lifted as she watched him struggle.

"A play?" Anders said hopelessly. "They must have some theater, come on."

Mardra shook her head. "They don't have performers Anders, you know this," she said. "They don't fit into any Caste, and Orzammar has no room for things that can't fit into the caste systems. That's why all the bards in the city report to Bhelen directly."

She was right, he had known that but he hadn't thought past it as to what it would mean for Orzammar culture beyond that. "Okay, well," he said. "Is there anything we can do in the next few days that would be an enjoyable cultural activity? I defer to you, an expert native guide."

Mardra snorted. "If you want an expert native guide, ask Dagna," she said.

"I like Dagna just fine but I'm not asking her on a date," he said.

"Fine," Mardra grumbled, but she looked at least a little appeased. She thought for a moment. "I think the exhibition for the, I'd have to look up the actual name for it, but the Shadow Story is still going on."

"The what now?" Anders said.

"It's a form of dwarven artwork that's done by the Artisan caste," Mardra said. "I haven't seen it myself, but I understand it's a sort of shadow play -- the artisan uses acid to cut metal plates into
shapes and cutouts and characters, which they then put a light behind and shine it on the wall and that tells a story. There's one on display now that Tovez has been encouraging me to take a look at, but I haven't had the time."

"So it's a moving shadow play that tells a story, how is this not performance?" Anders asked.

"Because there's no living actors, it's all artwork and craft," Mardra said. "The way I understand it, the emphasis is really on the quality of work and finesse that goes into cutting the plates and arranging them with all the moving parts in the box. The performance is how you appreciate the work, but the work itself is the important part."

Anders thought that still sounded like acting to him, but what did he know. "Sounds great," he said, determined to show enthusiasm no matter how boring it turned out to be. "Let's do it. What day?"

"Let's? You mean, you and me?" Mardra said.

"No, I mean all three of us," Anders said, then amended, "Four of us. Like a double date. You and Justice, and me and Hawke."

Mardra hesitated. "I don't know, Anders," she said, her eyes flitting to the stacks of papers on her desk. "I have so much to do and this sounds… honestly pretty awkward, I don't know that I want to go along just to be the third wheel and watch you two make eyes at each other all night. I got enough of being locked out like that at the Circle."

"This isn't just about me and Garrett," Anders said, suddenly serious. "This is about you and Garrett, too. You're blood -- you're family, but you've hardly had two conversations since he arrived. I know that's partly my fault and I'm sorry for that, but I know how much finding your family meant to you. And he's your family too. Don't you want that to mean something?"

"But we don't even know each other," Mardra said, troubled. "Our lives have gone on completely separate tracks. What common ground could we possibly find?"

Anders shrugged. "Now that we're out of the Circle, we're all going to start putting our lives on new tracks," he said. "Every mage is going to have a nonmage relation of some kind. You were the one who told me that, remember? We'll need to find a way to have a relationship with them."

Which was easy for him to say, he knew, and a little hypocritical; he'd spent almost as much of his life outside the Circle as in it, and aside from Hawke he didn't have any nonmage relations to worry about. But Mardra was clearly struck by the words; he left her alone for a minute while she worried over it.


"It's a date," he said, greatly relieved.

The performance hall was a long walk to a part of Orzammar that Anders had never been before -- deeper into the heart of the mountain, following passages that seemed to have been hollowed out of natural caverns. At this elevation there was less traffic and fewer magma vents, leaving the caves colder and darker than those further down and closer to the Deep Roads.
At length they reached a series of fabulously embellished doors set into the side of the passage which opened into a huge cavern. It opened down and out from the doors in the shape of a blunt wedge, aisles leading between rows and rows of stone seats and benches. The chamber ended abruptly in a sheer stone face that utterly dominated the far half of the cave.

Some time in ages past there must have been an underground river that rushed through these caverns, wearing down the limestone and leaving mineral deposits in its wake. The entire far wall of the cave, flung up some ten or twenty meters high, was a solid wall of gleaming white, an unbroken calcite sheet that the dwarves had carefully smoothed and polished to a high reflective shine. Darker stone formed arches that flanked the white wall, echoed by other such colonnades set at intervals around the theater and the carvings on the high ceiling. The space was lit by lamps spaced at regular intervals, burning with a pale and steady light very unlike the usual red-tinted magma glow.

"This looks familiar," Hawke said, staring at the columns. "I think I've dug up Tevinter ruins with this aesthetic."

"Other way around," Mardra said, craning her own neck back to look at the engravings overhead. "The dwarves had it first, and Tevinter copied it later through trade and cultural exchange. There are theaters in Qarinus and Vyrantium that are built to resemble this one, I've read, though I've never seen them."

The ushers gave the humans sufficient time to gape at their surroundings, then with much throat-clearing and meaningful glances herded them towards their seats. They were pretty good seats, central enough to be able to watch the main screen without twisting their necks, though they couldn't be exactly to the center: a dark promontory of stone rose up through the ranks of seats like the bow of a ship. At the end of the ramp, facing the blank wall, was a platform covered with elaborate-looking equipment and a squat, dark box. A couple of dwarves in dark clothing were fiddling with the box as they watched, arguing in hushed voices over some last-minute objection.

The seats were low to the ground -- of course -- and had little curtains hung between them, although they were low enough that the three humans could actually see right over them and continue the conversation.

"It seems like all the artists who do this kind of work are part of the same family," Mardra said, tucking her cloak under her to protect against the cold stone. "The Hiridan clan. Two brothers and several more cousins worked on this one for almost ten years."

"What, a family trade secret?" Hawke was immediately interested. "Do they have to kill anyone outside the family who does it or what?"

"No, generally anyone who wants to go into this line of work gets adopted by the Hiridans," Mardra said. "Outside of the deshyrs and their obsession with bloodlines, adoption within a caste is pretty common -- basically just a more formal way of cementing an apprenticeship or going into a particular trade. It's only adoption between castes that is forbidden. It can make their marriage records look a little weird if you don't know what's going on."

The debate up on the platform ceased, and one of the dwarves began to climb down the scaffolding on the side of the ramp as another one swarmed up to take his place. The lights around the amphitheater dimmed all at once -- nice trick, that -- and another light began to glow from the platform in the center of the room, cast forward to fall on the blank white stone face. Grey and black shadows fell across the pure white light, and the show began.
It was a strange, soundless display, intricate black lines forming a border which shifted and rotated around the central figures. The foreground shapes were the darkest, which gave way to darker grey and then lighter grey outlines as they receded into the white background, suggesting the illusion of depth. A blocky stylized figure of sharp dark lines appeared in the center and began to walk down a passageway suggested by the surrounding borders. Its movements were stiff and jerky, but it was unmistakably meant to represent a living person, as it moved through a crowd of other stylized figures.

The border thickened and darkened, changing from a right-angled maze that suggested the cityscape of Orzammar to the unbroken darkness of an subterranean cave. The heroine -- something about her clothes and movements, if not her features or her body, suggested to Anders that those light and graceful steps were meant to belong to a woman -- ventured out from the safety of the city into the darkness and danger of the Deep Roads.

"Tovez recommended this play to me specifically because it has a human character in it," Mardra commented from his left side. "Most of them don't, apparently."

"Oh, is this a talking sort of thing?" Anders said with surprise. "I would have thought we weren't allowed to talk during it."

"Yes, it's fine," Mardra said, nodding over to the other part of the audience, where a trio of roughly dressed tradesmen -- jewelers, if Anders was getting any better at spotting them -- were having a lively conversation of their own. "There's not really a sound component to the performance, it's all visual. As long as you don't make a huge ruckus, nobody cares."

"Well, if you're sure," Hawke said. "I don't want to end my career cut-down in mid speech by the art police because I -- whoa."

He cut off in mid-ramble as the scene shifted. A new silhouette lurched onto the screen, the tunnel widening to take it in. All the figures prior to this one had been more or less the same -- humanoid, a bit squared-off but obviously meant to be *people* -- but this one was something else entirely. It was tall, its torso long and unnervingly thin, and hunched over in an uneasy curve. Its arms and legs were elongated, curving and bending in ways that limbs should not curve, and ended in a softened point instead of the squared-off knots that represented hands on the heroines. The head was bulbous and the shadowed face unnerving, no visible nose, the mouth sloping back to the throat and showing only a flap where the figure bent down to talk to the heroine. The 'human character,' apparently, that Mardra's friend had recommended the play for.

Anders was torn between revulsion and laughter. He wasn't sure whether or not this was too absurd to be offensive. "Is this what dwarves actually think we look like?" he demanded.

Mardra huffed, looking torn between agreeing with him and defending the creation. "It's art, ok?" she said. "It's not supposed to look, um, realistic."

"Well good, because then we'd have to tell the artist he missed *realistic* by a mile," Hawke said.

"It is a little disturbing," Mardra conceded with a sigh.

"I hate to what they would make of an elf," Anders murmured.

The human character was evidently some kind of… traveling underground trader? Lyrium merchant? Apostate mage? It wasn't clear, but *something* exchanged hands between him and the dwarven heroine before he glided offscreen. Anders wasn't sure what the object he'd given her was supposed to represent -- it was square and covered with intricate knotwork, but if that was
supposed to mean something it was lost on him -- but as she held it in both hands before her heart, it began to glow with a deep blue light and the scene around her began to shift.

The tunnels transmuted to... some other tunnels, Anders wasn't sure, and some sparkles further down the tunnel attracted the heroine's attention. She pushed bravely on down the tunnel and came upon what was clearly meant to be a battle. A massive, blocky figure -- Anders suspected, from some of his own deep roads encounters, that it was a golem -- was fighting against some nightmarish creature with three heads and nine tails. Anders was a bit puzzled; was this meant to be a darkspawn?

"The Nug King," Mardra murmured in explication. "That's what this play is called, I don't remember the dwarvish, but I'm pretty sure this is meant to be him."

"Ugliest nug I ever saw," Hawke murmured back. "And they're not exactly pretty to begin with."

"I kind of expected them to fight darkspawn, to be honest," Anders, the Grey Warden said.

"I guess they can get darkspawn in real life any day," Mardra shrugged. "The real fantasy is a Deep Roads where they don't have to worry about that."

The heroine threw something into the fray -- it looked like a hammer -- which struck the Nug King on one of its heads, slaying it. The golem turned to face the heroine and knelt down in front of her. Something indistinct passed between them, and then the rugged lines of the golem began to crack and break apart. A wild, spiraling chiaroscuro enveloped its figure on the screen and when it cleared, another young dwarvish figure knelt in its place, head bowed in submission to the young maiden who had saved him.

"Now this part is clear enough," Anders said happily. "Golem meets girl, golem fights nightmarish abomination, girl slays nightmarish abomination, golem turns into boy, boy kisses girl."

"It's the old classic formula," Hawke agreed, and Mardra giggled, then stifled it.

The dwarven couple descended further into the Deep Roads, passing through dark tunnels and fabulous caverns and once, confusingly, a study of stylized blue curves that roiled like an ocean. An underground lake maybe? Except that the edges glowed like lyrium.

As the heroes passed through an excruciatingly long elevator sequence, the three of them spent more and more time talking amongst themselves. At some point Hawke and Mardra had gotten to talking about the Amell Estate -- that made sense to Anders, it was one of the few places in their lives they'd both spent time in. True, Mardra had only been a child and Hawke hadn't seen it until he was an adult, but they seemed to find some interest nonetheless in comparing and contrasting their experiences.

"That one horrid taxidermy experience at the top of the stairs, what even was that?" Hawke was saying. "I've fought any number of strange beasts and I've never seen anything like that."

Mardra spent a moment in thought. "I think I remember Mamere calling it a lion?" she said uncertainly.

"No way!" Hawke laughed. "That's a cruel thing to do to a lion."

"I used to call it Mister Snuffapaur," Mardra confided, which Anders thought was quite endearing.

"I mostly called it 'wordless scream when surprised by it heading back to bed after a midnight snack,' " Hawke said ruefully.
"He really did," Anders confirmed, and Mardra broke out into snorting giggles.

"Oh! Or how about the wine cellars?" Mardra said. "I used to play hide and seek and pretend I was on an adventure, like the ones in my books."

"Oh yes," Hawke said, his smile twisting into something a little more bitter. "The wine cellars. I spent many long fond afternoons there killing slavers."

Mardra's laughter stopped, and she sat up straight. "Are you making this up to make fun of me?" she demanded. "Slavers in the Amell basements? You must be joking."

"It's true," he said before Hawke could come up with a response. "They had been used for that purpose for years. The cries of the enslaved victims echoed through the stone even after those guilty were punished."

For a few beats they just sat in frozen silence both of the Amell siblings looking at him uneasily. At last Mardra sighed, and reached over to rest a hand over his own. "Thank you, Justice," she said. "I'm sorry I doubted you. That sounds terrible."

"It was," he said. "But they have been avenged."

That chilled the conversation for a few minutes, and the three of them turned back to watch the play instead. The journey had finally ended in a magical underground kingdom, where a warm sun from below lit a great crystalline cavern and trees and plants grew out of rocks. This was apparently the enchanted prince's kingdom, which he welcomed the heroine to while ranks of his citizens celebrated his return.

Anders had to confess at least to himself that he was a little lost. The screen filled and emptied with amazing, intricate details, geometric figures that shifted and angled and melted into one another like crystalline lace, but much of the time he simply had no idea what he was meant to be looking at. No doubt there was some profound symbolism and storytelling convention that would convey a world of meaning to a native dwarf, but to his human eyes it just looked like extremely detailed, beautifully articulated visual chaos.

He found it more interesting to watch his companions, compare their similarities and their differences. No one could have mistaken them for anything other than family, he thought. The color of their skin, the jet black of their hair -- straight and heavy on Mardra, thick and unruly on Hawke. Dark brown eyes with a similar cant that verged on black in this light, Hawke's sparkling with mischief, Mardra's watching everything, seeing everything, taking it all in. The cast of their features was so much the same that they could have been siblings: thick bushy eyebrows, strong nose with a hook at the end, high and defined cheekbones, a sturdy jaw.

They were blood, whatever the different paths that their lives had led them down. Hawke hadn't set foot into Kirkwall until long after Mardra had left it; Mardra had never been to Ferelden until she fled the Perendale Tower.

He loved them both. He realized in that moment that there was no need to partition that off inside himself. Part of him loved Mardra as a suitor, all of him as a friend; part of him loved Hawke as a lover, all of him as an ally. They were stronger together, every part of him, every one of them. How could he have ever thought he would have to choose, or that he'd be better off cutting either of them out of his life.

They would make it work, he thought to himself, and for the first time he really believed it. They'd make it work, and they would all be better for it.
At length the play drew to a close. For reasons that were not made entirely clear the dwarven prince had to leave, venturing back out into the Deep Roads to do battle with the forces of the Nug King. Why they were still a concern when their leader had been squashed with a hammer Anders wasn't sure, but it was an occasion for much tearful sorrow. The heroine was apparently going to be Queen and rule the kingdom in his absence, and the very last frame of the play -- as the ticking wound down and the motion of the silhouettes finally slowed down to a halt -- showed her ascending to sit in a throne at the top of a huge pyramid of stone, with the wonders of the underground fairyland spread out around her and the subjects of the kingdom kneeling at her feet.

"So what did you think of the play?" Mardra asked as they walked out of the amphitheater, starting the long trek back to Orzammar. It was a little hard to tell when you were perpetually underground but he thought at least a few hours had passed.

"It was interesting, but strange," he answered. "I have never seen anything like it before."

Hawke gave him a sideways glance before asking, in a tone that was just slightly a challenge, "Not even in the Fade, you mean?"

He shook his head. "Dwarves do not dream," he reminded them. "Their thoughts do not often make it into the Fade. This was an entirely new kind of story for me."

"Well I thought it was pretty good," Hawke said. "Uplifting, you know."

"You don't think it was sad that her lover left her at the end of the story?"

"Not really," Hawke shrugged. "I mean, she gets a pretty good deal out of it, being named queen of an underground fairyland and all. If anything I think it's a story about how the world is full of incredible wonders yet undiscovered, and the only way to find out about them is to put yourself out there."

"Well, I think it's at least a little sad," Anders said. "I mean, being left behind and having to carry on when her lover's not there."

"She doesn't need him," Hawke scoffed. "I mean, she took five seconds to kill a foe that he'd been struggling with for however long, so clearly she's more competent than him to begin with."

"I think the ending is mostly a story about a flighty leader who runs off all the time," Mardra said, giving him a very pointed look, "and leaves someone else to do all the work in his absence."

"Hey!" Anders objected as Hawke snickered. Mardra smiled, looking a little proud of her joke, oh Maker he was rubbing off on her. "I'm not flighty. You want flighty, try Hawke, he's the flighty one."

"He's super flighty," Hawke stage-whispered in his cousin's ear, who giggled. "That one time we were in Chateau Haine trying to find a Qunari spy before they could start a new war, and he wanted to stay behind and search for feathers for his coat."

"They were very rare feathers!" Anders said indignantly, as the Amells snickered at him behind their hands.

Andraste's scorched undies, the cousins had found common ground at last, and it was roasting him. What had he created?

But as the three of them laughed together on the long walk back to Orzammar, he couldn't find it in himself to mind too much.
All too soon it was the fourth day, and Hawke was ready to go. He'd scrounged up some companions from somewhere -- two dwarves Anders recognized as Bhelen's agents and one of Moira's -- but Anders himself would not be at his side. It left him with an aching regret in spite of everything, a lump of nostalgia and sorrow that things were never again going to be the way they once were.

No, they aren't. They're going to be better. Anders took Hawke's hand and turned it palm up to deposit the package he'd gotten from Pia and the other herbalists.

"Take a drink from this vial every day you're in the Deep Roads," Anders said, holding it up for emphasis. He tapped on a sachet of herbs. "If you actually encounter darkspawn, take this before you fight them if you can, after if you have no other choice. It's not perfect -- if you actually get any tainted fluid in a cut or in your mouth --"

"No Orlesian kissing with the darkspawn, got it," Hawke said with an outrageous wink, and Anders laughed despite himself.

"And the rest of these are just healing potions," he said, waving to the little bottles with red wax on their caps. "I trust you're familiar with how to use these."

"Oh yes," Hawke said. "Up the ass, right?"

Hawke was clearly in a good mood today. Anders' mouth twitched in a smile. "You say that as though I haven't actually administered potions like that to some patients in the past," he muttered.

"Wait, what?"

"Seriously though, be careful," Anders interrupted. "I know that you're in it for the adventure and you think fighting is fun, but... where you're going, there's sure to be plenty of adventure even if you aren't looking for it. Just remember that you have to come back, right?"

"I remember." The slightly manic edge of humor faded away slightly, and Hawke's next smile was softer, more genuine. "I'll bring you back a souvenir, how's that?"

"You'd better." He pulled Hawke into a tight hug, then kissed him when he pulled away. It was at once more sweet and more bitter than any of the hundred kisses they'd shared over the last few months, knowing it would be the last one for a while.

At last he let go and stepped back. Mardra moved forward from where she'd been hanging back to give them a moment of privacy, and hugged Hawke in turn. "Don't do anything stupid," she said, her voice slightly choked up.

He grinned at her as he leaned back, arms still on her shoulders. "I think you're mistaking me for your brother," he said.

Mardra sniffed. "It runs in the males of the family," she said. Hawke laughed, and they hugged again.
And then everything that needed to be done had been done, and everything that could be said had been said, and Hawke turned towards the Deep Roads and walked away. Right before the tunnel bent out of sight he turned and waved, pumping his hand in the air enthusiastically, and then he was gone.

He was gone, and Anders was still here. But Hawke had been right; this was where Anders belonged. Not in the little farming village that had rejected him, not in the Circle that tried to break him, not in Vigil's Keep that had betrayed them, not in Kirkwall that tried to destroy them. Orzammar, the city that had welcomed him. Refuge, the place where he had fought to build a home and now saw it taking shape about him, stronger and better every day.

He reached out and took Mandra's hand, smiled at her strong grip. "Let's get back to work, shall we?" he said.

~tbc...
Cameo

Chapter Summary

With the siege and the earthquake behind them, Refuge and Orzammar settle in for the winter. But even with the season growing colder, there are still a few surprise arrivals at Refuge.

Chapter Notes

So hey! This is happening again!

Apologies for the long silence. One thing that delayed the publication of this chapter was that I basically didn't want to start posting again until I was sure I wouldn't stop, so I waited until I basically had the rest of the story written out to the end. I'll be posting the last four chapters (well, three chapters and an epilogue, to be accurate) over the next few days. Enjoy the denouement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the year approached its end the Frostbacks were more than living up to their name. It snowed more days than not and the sun, when it did make appearances, barely did more than soften the icy surfaces before another snowstorm blew in from the west. The valley in which Refuge lay became a landscape of snow and ice, and not all of the buildings in the little village were really up to the task of protecting against the cold. Many of the mages who had struck out to live by themselves in houses in the town -- including Surana and her husband -- retreated to the solid shelter of the Tower to weather the cold, or else fled down the tunnel to Orzammar.

It left them packed in a little tightly but most of the mages knew how to navigate crowded living quarters. Anders was just thankful those havens were available; if they hadn't had solid stone shelters to retreat to, he was certain there would have been deaths.

Down in Orzammar itself business continued on with little regard to the weather raging far overhead. Now that the source of darkspawn assaulting Bownammar had been rooted out Bhelen was finally able to consolidate his foothold in the Deep Roads; already he was staging goods and forces at Bownammar for his next push. Some thaig off to the west called Valammar was the target, from what Anders had picked up; Bhelen seemed single-mindedly focused on retaking it, though he wasn't sure why.

Deep Roads campaign or no, the dwarves of Orzammar didn't slow down for winter and seemed to have no concept that anyone else would. So it shouldn't have been such a surprise to Anders when a courier came to his office and informed him that a convoy of goods had just arrived that he'd thought would have to wait until spring.

"Mandra?" he called out, knocking on the door to her office and poking his head inside. Despite the
"Just jotting down a few ideas for a First Day ceremony, why?" Mardra looked up.

"The salvage from the Ostwick Tower arrived!" Anders said with a smile.

"Oh!" Mardra looked surprised, but put aside her notebook. "Shall we go take a look then?"

"It's not all ours," Anders admitted as they made their way through Brosca Manor. "As Bhelen was happy to remind us, technically it could all be his if he wanted, but he's giving us first crack at anything that would really be useful to us -- says magic stuff is most useful in magic hands. And Dagna will probably claim any and all books for her library, which is also our library, so I can't really object. But I really wanted you to have a look before Bhelen squirrels it all away."

"Not that I mind, but why me in particular?" Mardra said.

"When I asked Dagna to arrange this reclamation mission I was sure to mention that they should grab any papers at all from the First Enchanter or Knight-Commander's offices, and it looks like they did -- there's loads of paper stuffed in there," Anders said. "If there's any clues at all that will lead us to Aeonar, to your brother, that's where they'll be. I knew you'd want to know right away."

The cartload of salvaged goods had been left in a warehouse off of the market district, a bored-looking guard posted outside to keep opportunists away -- Anders matched name with face in time to recognize Dorlon Haver, the affable soldier who had congratulated his victory over Pyrag Haver after his first Proving. They exchanged a few minutes of friendly conversation before Dorlon waved them through.

The warehouse was long and low, barely enough clearance between the drop ceiling and Anders' head, and the cart had been wedged in at an awkward angle to one corner. They set about clearing some space to work with, piling crates and sacks on top of other crates and sacks, and then set to work unloading the cart and triaging the contents.

Mardra went through the papers while Anders sorted out the crates and crates of miscellaneous items. On the surface she had what seemed to be the easier job -- less shoving and lifting -- but he didn't envy her. Difficult enough to read the handwriting of the senior enchanters without fire-ravaged bindings, water-smeared ink and the ravages of age blurring the pages.

"I would have expected more weapons," Anders commented as he sorted through a chest of what appeared to be clothes. "Or at least protective amulets and the like."

"Most likely when the mages left, they took the most useful things along for protection," Mardra said absentmindedly as she thumbed through the pages of an ash-streaked, leather-bound book. "What's left behind is what they didn't think worth carrying."

"Which mages? The rebels, or the loyalists?" Anders said. Oh, here was a pair of gloves enchanted for warmth against frost. That could be useful. He set them aside.

Mardra shrugged. "Either," she said. "Both. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not," Anders said regretfully. "I'd just like to think that wherever they are, those weapons are being used to kick some Templars in the arse. Ooh, look at these!" From the bottom of the chest, wrapped in a long nightgown, came a weighty package: a crackling roll of yellowing pamphlets, the penny-a-page dirty comics that came out of Antiva. They were wrapped around what turned out to be a set of rather fantastically endowed polished-stone and varnished-wood..."
dildoes. "Some one is missing these, I'm sure."

Mardra craned her neck, saw what he was looking at and let out a bark of laughter, clapping her hand over her mouth almost immediately. "Oh, Maker," she said.

"Look at this, an electricity rune worked into the base," Anders said approvingly. He looked up at his friend's blush and couldn't help but tease. "Should I set these aside for you?"

Her nose wrinkled. "No thanks," she said emphatically. "There are some things you really don't want second-hand, and sex toys are definitely on that list."

"I'm sure they could be cleaned." He waggled his eyebrows at her outrageously.

She shook her head. "It would feel extremely creepy," she said. Her smile faded slightly. "Especially when the previous owner is probably dead."

That took some of the fun out of it, and Anders returned the package to the chest with a saddened heart. The same went for all these clothes and effects, most likely. It was one thing to know that the Templar violence had ended the lives of many mages who hadn't made it to safety, another thing to actually handle their effects. He hoped that, if they were watching from the Maker's side, they approved of their belongings going to help fellow mages.

Behind him Mardra drew in a sharp breath. He looked over to her to see her staring at a piece of paper laid out flat on the desk, her hands pressing down at either corner. "What is it?" he asked.

She took a moment before answering, eyes moving rapidly over the paper. When she looked up at him, her eyes were wide and her face a pale olive. "This is a letter to the Knight-Commander of Montsimmard from a Templar by the name of Ser Brynn," she said, gesturing to the paper. "Informing the Knight-Commander that she is going to be traveling to the city of Val Fermin towards the end of the summer of 9:40 in order to rendezvous there with one of the Seekers, a man by the name of Tristan. From there they were going to be departing to an outpost in the eastern end of the Gamordan Peaks."

Anders came over and looked at the letter over her shoulder; it was in Orlesian, so he couldn't read it (except for the part of him that could.) "Does it mention Aeonar?" he asked.

Mardra shook her head. "Not in this letter, no. But some time ago I received a copy of another report written by a Seeker, Tristan, to the head of his Order, which stated that he would be making a trip to Aeonar in the fall of 9:40. That report didn't include any kind of location and Seekers are notoriously difficult to track; neither Bhelen's spies nor any of my pen-pals were able to find out where he went. But if this is the same Seeker, and this was the same trip..."

"Then the trip to Aeonar may also have been the trip to the outpost in the Gamordan Peaks?" Anders finished for her. "Mardra! This is incredible!"

"Yes, well...the Gamordan Peaks is a pretty big range," Mardra said, tempering his excitement with caution. "That's a lot of ground to cover..."

"But it's still a start," he said firmly. "I'll have Bhelen set his minions on this Ser Brynn, see if he can track her down and find out where she went this past fall. If nothing else they can set up watch in Val Fermin, and track any Templars that depart to the south from there. Templars are a lot less secretive than, well, Seekers; I'm sure His Majesty's spy network is up for it --"

As he rattled on enthusiastically he couldn't help but notice that Mardra was growing more pale
and quiet, staring at the letter in her hands as though it contained a ghost. Anders finally broke off his speculation with a hesitant, "Mardra? Is something wrong?"

"No, I..." Mardra wrapped her arms around herself as if she were cold. "It's just -- I wasn't expecting that we'd actually find it. Aeonar. It's been so long since I thought about it, since I really considered the possibility..."

He felt a pang of guilt. Mardra had been ready to take off to find Aeonar a year ago before he had convinced her to stay. He'd pulled strings with Dagna and Bhelen precisely to make up for that, not least of which was securing his permission to go over this very shipment. "Well, it's not like you knew where to go looking before now, either," he said uncertainly. "I'm sorry, I... I thought this would make you happy. I thought you'd want to know."

"I thought it would too, I -- I'm sorry, I'm not acting very grateful." Mardra shook her head, hugging herself tighter. "I don't know how to say it -- I don't know what..."

"You don't need to apologize for whatever's making you unhappy," Anders said immediately, then hesitated. "Which is -- what? I thought that this was what you wanted, to find your brother."

"It is. Or at least, it was." She took a shaky breath. "I -- it was my whole goal for so long, and now that it looks like it might actually happen... I'm afraid of what I might find. It was always a fool's hope that he might be alive after so long, I know..."

"There is nothing foolish about hope," he said. He took a step forward and raised his hand, putting it on her arm. "Mardra. What do you fear?"

"That the answer I get won't be the answer I wanted." She bowed her head. "That we'll find Aeonar, and find him, and... then I won't be able to hope any more."

He considered what to say, and in the end, decided on truth. "Hope is a virtue, but truth is better," he said. "Whether the news is good or ill, it is always better to know than not know."

Mardra looked up at him, searching his face. "You believe that?"

"I do," he answered.

"What if..." She seemed to struggle to find the words. "What if there's news... and it's not bad? I mean... I want my brother back. I want to see him again. If there's a chance he's still alive after all this time... I feel like I would have no choice but to go after him. And I... I don't want to leave Refuge. I know it's selfish, and cowardly, but --"

"Mardra." He interrupted her self-recrimination, placing his hand on her shoulder in reassurance and support. "If news comes that Aeonar has been found and there are people there still alive, Refuge will mount a response. Someone will go to discern the truth, to save what can be saved, to avenge what is past saving. But that need not be you. If you do not wish to go, then others will go in our stead. This I swear to you."

"You would really...?" Mardra trailed off uncertainly.

"I would, as would we all," he said firmly. "Refuge owes you much, and this matter concerns all magekind. Whether you choose to go or remain, you will not have to face the outcome alone."

She closed her eyes and bowed her head, breath heaving, and he stepped in close. Took one hand in hers and slipped the other around her waist for support, letting her brow rest against his own. They stood there, swaying imperceptibly together, for a long moment as Justice tried to will his own
"Heyyy!" a familiar voice shouted, breaking their concentration. Mardra stepped back, breaking the embrace although she kept his hand clasped in hers. Both heads turned to see a familiar face barging into the warehouse: Dagna, the dwarven Arcanist who had helped sponsor the Tower at Orzammar. Her face was red and she was out of breath as if she had just been running, but her eyes were bright and sparkling. She leaned forward and put her hands on her knees for a few moments, catching her breath, before straightening out and skipping in past the door. "I heard there were books?!

"There are," Anders answered with a smile, stepping aside to pull up the crate he'd been sorting the books into and set it down on the flagstones. "Take whatever you want for the library, and if there are any that are duplicates they'll get sold for funds."

"Oh I can arrange that," Dagna said, plopping down to a seat on the flagstones as her eyes roved hungrily over the spines. "I've got plenty of contacts who will pay top prices. Hey! Check this out! It's a second-edition printing of Toscha's Uncommon Applications!"

The moment of doubt had passed; it was impossible to keep a dour attitude in the face of Dagna's blast of naked enthusiasm for all things bookish. The three of them returned to their sorting with a light heart.

Anders walked into the Orzammar palace with the confidence of long familiarity; the guards had long since stopped trying to keep him out. He reached the waiting area where the corridors split off to the living area on the left and the more formal offices and receiving areas further on ahead; all the doors were closed today and the desk was manned by Vartag Gavorn, the King's steward. He raised a hand and pointed it directly at Anders' chest as he strode into the room. "Whatever it is, the answer's no," he said before Anders could get a word out.

Anders huffed with mock-hurt. "You didn't even get a chance to let me say what I'm here for!" he protested.


"Well, if Bhelen is feeling in the mood to discuss --" Anders started to say, but Gavorn cut him off.

"Answer's no," he said firmly. "Not today. His Majesty is in conference right now and likely will be till the end of the cycle. He and his advisors are hammering out the final details of his decree for the Bownammar proclamation."

"Bhelen still trying to convince people to move out to Bownammar?" Anders inquired sweetly, with just a hint of malice.

"He doesn't have much of a choice in the matter," Gavorn grunted. "Right now Bownammar is
staffed and run pretty much exclusively by the army. If he wants to free up the soldiers for the march to Valammar, he needs a permanent civilian workforce to replace them."

"But nobody seems to want to live in Bownammar." Anders tsked. Not that he really blamed them; he certainly wouldn't want to live in Bownammar, which was a full day's march away from the closest access to the surface and whose stones were still soaked with generations of darkspawn blood. Just visiting it to meet Loghain and Oghren a few months ago had been a trial; living there permanently was not to be imagined. Well, fortunately Bhelen hadn't gotten around to trying to order the mages to live there yet.

"His Majesty thinks he's found something that will convince them," Gavorn said confidently. "The proposition they're drawing up right now starts on the assumption that Bownammar is still under the authority of crown, but would maintain its own castes, separate and independent of Orzammar's."

Anders blinked. "But if Bownammar's empty, how can they have their own castes?"

"They don't now," Gavorn said. His voice dropped as he leaned over his desk a bit, and Anders couldn't help being drawn in. "But anyone who presents themselves at Bownammar within the next year will be granted the caste rank of any skill or occupation they can prove themselves proficient in. You can fight? You're Warrior caste now. You can cut stone? You're a Miner. Whatever your previous caste."

"That's..." A bark of laughter escaped Anders before he could stifle it; he'd been dealing with dwarven culture and society for long enough to realize just what a ground-shaking step this was. After a thousand years of locked, restricted castes Bhelen was effectively flinging the gates wide open: there were any number of casteless who had enough training and practice in combat to be considered warriors, who could use this loophole to escape the social poverty that had been enforced on them since birth.

And it wasn't just warriors, he realized abruptly. All of the casteless workers who had built the Tower last year had been trained in building and crafting techniques by tutors that Bhelen himself had paid for, using the mages of Refuge as a shell. Bhelen was now giving them the opportunity to put the skills they'd learned to work in Bownammar as part of the mining, smithing, or artificer castes. As for the rest of them -- well, the duties of the servant caste didn't take much in the way of proving, apart from a strong body and a willingness to get your hands dirty. Committing yourself and your descendants to lifetimes of servant work didn't sound like a wonderful deal to Anders, but it beat being casteless.

With one stroke of a pen, Bhelen was going to populate Bownammar and give the entire casteless population of Orzammar a gateway to rise into the upper ranks, and there was nothing the rest of Orzammar could do to object, since it was all taking place outside of their city. "Bhelen, you sneaky son-of-a-bitch!"

"Glad you approve," Gavorn said gruffly. "So I'm sure you agree that His Majesty's work is too important to interrupt right now with whatever-it-was you came about."

"As a matter of fact I just came by to say," Anders said, radiating a certain amount of injured dignity as he pulled the inventory list out of his pocket. "That the Arcanist and Seneschal Amell and I have finished reviewing the magical items brought in by the salvage team, pulled out what will be most useful to the mages on the front lines against the Darkspawn, and he's welcome to sell the rest for funds."

"Oh." Gavorn blinked, looking startled. "Well, that's..."
"And I also have the latest reports on the fertility trials from the lower city," Anders interrupted him, dropping that report as well as the inventory list on Gavorn's desk. "They're looking quite promising, so His Majesty can rest assured that there will be future generations to populate all this territory he keeps conquering. You're welcome."

"Oh, well," Gavorn said sheepishly. "Thank you, Warden Enchanter."

He couldn't resist it; he had to try. "And if His Majesty is really interested in getting more mages to fight in the Deep Roads for him, even a small fraction of the funds from this sale funneled back to the Mage Rebellion would be a wonderful investment --"

Gavorn raised his hand and jabbed pointedly at the hallway leading back out of the palace. "Go!" he commanded; snickering, Anders went. He'd come again another day and try again; Bhelen couldn't avoid him forever, and they both knew it.

"Oh, one more thing," Gavorn called unexpectedly as Anders reached the doorway. He paused, turning back and looking at the steward inquiringly. "I don't know if any of the other messages caught up with you; you can be a difficult man to catch. But there was an alert for you about a visitor at the Manor that you may want to see."

"A visitor?" Anders frowned. It couldn't be Hawke; Gavorn and everybody else at Refuge knew him well enough to call him by name. "A mage? More arrivals to Refuge?"

Gavorn shrugged. "A mage as far as we can tell, but he's expressed no interest in staying permanently," he said. "He came in with the latest trade caravan and expressed an interest in paying a visit to the leader of Refuge while he was here."

Curiosity piqued, Anders headed back to the Manor. During the walk he chewed over the puzzle of Gavorn's words; a mage, but not looking to join Refuge? The most likely possibility was that it was a messenger from Fiona, representing the Mage Rebellion; but if that were the case why not simply say so? Less likely but still possible, it was someone from the Loyalist faction, a mage who still considered themselves loyal to the Circle and the Chantry. What such a person would be doing here was a mystery and a half, but he supposed he'd find out when he got there.

He heard the visitor before he saw him; a number of the Refuge mages were hovering around the door to the sitting room, drawn by the potential entertainment of a novelty to break up the winter humdrum. From the room beyond he heard an unfamiliar voice, raised in a precise diction in an accent he couldn't quite place.

A few words quickly moved the spectating mages aside, and Anders stepped through the door and caught sight of the stranger at last.

The visitor was sprawled out over half of the couch, one ankle crossed over the knee, elbow resting casually on the arm of the furniture while in the other hand he held a metal goblet. Where he had gotten the wine Anders had no idea since they didn't stock any at the Manor; he'd either bought it from the Diamond Bazaar on his way in or brought it with him.

The man dark hair in an elegant coif and a carefully styled moustache, but no beard. His brown skin was not commonly seen in this region of the Frostbacks, although the mix-and-match practices of the Circle tended to shuffle people far from their places of birth, so it was not unknown in Refuge. His clothes however were completely alien to Anders' eyes, and he spent several confusing seconds trying to parse out what he was seeing: knee-high boots with elegantly pointed steel toes, sleeves with redundant cuffs at several points up the arm, multiple belts and sashes that worked to secure a coat that only had one shoulder and slanted down to thigh-length on only one side.

Anders had seen a lot of strange outfits at Refuge -- mages tended to arrive with whatever motley
mix of Circle attire and survival gear they could piece together, and Refuge fashion -- such as it was -- tended to mix cloth robes and leather gear in happy disregard of any trends from the outside world. But he'd never seen an array quite like this, and wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Ah!" The stranger stood up from the couch when he caught sight of Anders, setting his goblet aside, and dropped in a short elegant bow with one arm clasped against his chest. "The man of the hour appears. Forgive me for not announcing myself before now; no one was quite certain where you were, and I didn't wish to wait on the doorstep for a messenger to find you."

"Well, I'm here, so you can announce yourself now," Anders said, bemused by this peacock of a man. "Who are you exactly?"

"Dorian Pavus of House Pavus, of Minrathous," the man said smoothly, and the accent and the fashion both clicked in Anders' head -- both were of Tevinter origin.

Anders blinked. "Minrathous? What are you doing here? It's a pretty long way from Minrathous," he said. Then his manners caught up to him, and he stepped forward and held his hand out for a clasp. "I'm Anders, by the way."

"I thought you must be. Surely no one else could match the description," Dorian said with a charming smile, stepping forward to shake Anders' hand in both of his, and Anders tried to figure out if that was a subtly coded insult. Dorian gestured to the goblet on the side table as the handshake dropped, a glass bottle behind visible it. "Care for a drink? I promise a good vintage, Qarinus '10."

"I don't drink," Anders said with a brief shake of the head.

"Really. I didn't expect the Rebel of Darktown to be a straight-laced Chantry type," Dorian said with a smile.

Anders supposed that as epithets went, it at least beat 'the Butcher of Kirkwall.' "The last time I got drunk a group of assassins shot me full of magebane and tried to kill me," he said.

Dorian looked taken aback for a moment, but quickly recovered. "That sounds like quite a lot of excitement," he said. He gestured at Anders' jacket. "I'm greatly enamoured of the feathered shoulders, by the by. They're quite popular in Minrathous among a certain retro, late-Blessed-age set."

Anders raised an eyebrow. "Strong words from a man wearing half a coat," he said, a bit barbed, but Dorian only chuckled. "So what is a Tevinter from Minrathous doing all the way down here?"

Dorian tsked as he seated himself back on the couch and took up his goblet again. "My, so terribly unwelcoming," he said. "Our kingdoms are not actually at war, you know; there's nothing illegal about taking a holiday in the South. Won't you take a seat?"

Anders gave him a skeptical look and stayed standing. "You expect me to believe that you crossed all of Orlais and Nevarra and climbed the Frostback Mountains in the dead of winter for a holiday?"

"Ha! No, not really. In fact, I'm accompanying my mentor Gereon Alexius on a business trip," Dorian said casually. "He's off in some awfully stuffy meeting right now negotiating the price on certain trade goods."

" 'Certain trade g...' " Anders came to a sudden tension, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at Dorian as an ugly suspicion red-alerted in his mind. "You aren't buying slaves, are you?"
"Dear Maker, no!" Dorian exclaimed, sounding horrified. "No, no. Alexius doesn't get involved in that dreadful little business. Why would you even jump to that conclusion? I assure you, the vast majority of industry and export has nothing at all to do with the slave trade, even in Tevinter."

Slowly Anders relaxed. "Well, somehow it seems that every time I've ever encountered one of your 'countrymen' in the South, they're kidnapping innocent people to sell as slaves, so I'm not going to apologize for scandalizing your delicate sensibilities."

Dorian took a moment, topping up his goblet from the glass bottle and taking a swig before answering. "Fair," he said at last. "I suppose that statistically speaking, you're more likely to encounter those scavengers outside of Tevinter. Well, anyway, I assure you that there is not a single slave anywhere on our manifest. Alexius is mostly after mineral reagents on this trip, I believe. He decided he wanted to come himself to oversee the procurement since his agents can't be trusted to get the specifications right. Last time he sent them to purchase barium sulfate, and they returned with barium sulfide, instead. Maker! What do they even teach these people?" He shook his head in mock despair.

Anders raised a skeptical eyebrow. "So why aren't you haggling prices with them right now?"

"I'm afraid I haven't the head for alchemy." Dorian waved airly. "Puts me right to sleep."

"So we're right back to my original question: what are you doing here? If you're not entranced by the minutiae of barium sulfate versus barium sulfide."

"Persistent, aren't you?" Dorian asked.

"I've been called that before, yes," said the man who spent seven years in Kirkwall petitioning for increased mage freedoms from the most restrictive Circle in southern Thedas.

Dorian smiled. "I'm here for the food, of course," he drawled.

A second skeptical eyebrow joined the first. "Dwarven cuisine is terrible. To anyone who isn't a dwarf, that is."

"Exactly!" Dorian exclaimed. "Do you have any idea how stultifyingly boring it is to eat nothing but perfect, gourmet food all the time? Any chef in Tevinter would have to kill themselves out of shame to turn out anything less than a note-perfect dish. If you want to really experience terrible food, there's no choice but to travel abroad!"

Anders had to laugh, which going by his twinkling eyes and smiling mustache, was exactly the effect Dorian was going for. He had to admit the man was charming; even when he was being an obnoxious prig about the superiority of his own country, he managed to do it in a way that was somehow endearing. At last he consented to accept Dorian's invitation, seating himself on the couch next to him. "All right, well done, full marks for snarky deflection and that's coming from a master in the class," he said. "But why are you really here? If not to buy, sell, join, or recruit, what's your interest in Refuge?"

"Why should I have any interest in it but for itself?" Dorian shrugged, and Anders was suddenly and inexplicably put in mind of Justice's speech to Mardra about the value of romance for itself. "I am something of a historian, you know, and what you are doing here is history. Its like hasn't been seen in, hmm, not since the Ferelden rebellion at the least -- given the scale, possibly much longer. It's high time you southern mages stood up for yourselves against the petty tinpot tyrants, as far as I'm concerned."
"Really," Anders said skeptically.

"Really," Dorian repeated, and he really did sound sincere. "And here you are, making a whole mage society up out of nothing! It's fascinating to us from an anthropological question if nothing else -- Tevinter has its own ideas on how mages should do things --"

Anders rolled his eyes. "Don't I know it."

"I doubt you know the half of it," Dorian said. "We tend to think of ourselves as the inevitable, natural order of the world, the way things should and must be when men lives with magic. But here you are, doing things all your own way. It's really going to be fascinating to see how you answer questions differently than we did -- questions about schools of study and relations with spirits, the positions of nonmages in society... blood magic..."

He trailed off, humor gone, looking at Anders soberly. Anders scowled as the implications thudded home. "I see."

"Any number of rumors have reached us about the blood mages of Refuge," Dorian continued. "Most of them sheer slander, of course, but I was quite fascinated to reach here and confirm that some of them were true -- at least the parts about having a sanctioned blood mage research program?"

Anders found himself filled with a profound irritation; not only at being lectured by stranger in his own home, but at being put in the position of having to defend a position he didn't fully agree with in the first place. He let the beginnings of anger color his tone as he said "That is indeed true, and may I say, it takes a lot of sheer gall for a Tevinter magister --"

Dorian raised a protesting finger. "Altus, not magister --"

Anders kept right on going. " -- for a Tevinter noble of any stripe to come to the south and lecture us about the abuse of blood magic? With what all goes on in your homeland! Bit of a pot calling the kettle maleficar, isn't it?"

Dorian studied the goblet in his hand, avoiding Anders' angry gaze as he replied. "You're not wrong, but on the other hand, who better knows the risks? The... cost?"

Anders stopped and took a deep breath, holding back the angry words that wanted to spill from his lips as he really looked at the man before him. Under his flippant exterior Dorian looked... unhappy, vulnerable. And for the first time in his life it occurred to Anders that in a land where blood magic abuses were so rampant, then there must be at least a corresponding number of blood magic abuse victims.

"Look," Anders said at last, when he thought he could choose his words more diplomatically. "I'm not exactly the number one fan of blood magic, believe you me. It took me time enough to get over my own prejudices against it, and I still make sure -- make damn sure -- that anyone at Refuge who chooses to practice it does so safely and ethically. I've been convinced of its uses, medical and otherwise, but there are still rules that must be followed: no mind control, no thralls, no mental effects whatsoever without the consent of the patient first.

"Whatever slander you've heard, whatever stories have reached your ears about us, about me, know this and keep it at the front of your mind: I am a healer first and foremost. I can't say I never do harm because I'll fight if I have to, but my first priority has always been to heal and protect, and I won't disregard any tool that lets me do that, not even blood magic."
"Ah," Dorian said, and a certain tension in him eased that Anders hadn't even realized was present until it was gone. "That is... that is quite reassuring to hear, actually. I apologize for any insult I may have implied."

"Apology accepted," Anders said stiffly, and he too found himself starting to relax. He paused to consider. "Not that I don't understand your reservations, but we have found any manner of beneficial and practical uses by allowing investigation into blood magic. In addition to breaking the phylactery problem, we've actually made a fair amount of progress into combating --"

Dorian stopped him with a hand upflung and a pained expression. "Please," he said. "I don't doubt you're right, but -- I'd rather not hear the details if you don't mind. Blood magic is something of a... sensitive subject for me, personally."

Anders considered pointing out that Dorian was the one who brought up the subject in the first place, but bit his tongue. "So," he said after a moment. "I take it your curiosity is satisfied?"

"Quite satisfied, yes," Dorian said. "Although that was not the only purpose of my visit. I am sorry about the imprecations -- I truly admire what you are creating down here. As something of a historian myself you understand, and an archivist."

"You might be interested in visiting Dagna's library, then," Anders said in an almost-normal tone of voice. "She's our resident Arcanist, and she had established quite a collection here before Refuge was even founded."

"I'd love to peruse it, with her permission," Dorian replied. "I also hoped to offer -- and this is quite off the record, can I say -- I hoped to be able to offer you and your people some amount of aid, if you really were as benign and aboveboard as you appeared. I'm not exactly in command of the resources of House Pavus at the moment, but some arrangements could still be made."

Anders frowned. He didn't know what he had been expecting from this conversation, but this wasn't it. "You're asking us -- Refuge, that is -- to make an alliance with Tevinter?" he said. "I don't think that would be wise."

"Well no, probably not," Dorian admitted. "You lot of Southern mages would be -- no offense intended -- rather a lot of baby chicks in the piranha pool of House politics back home. They would chew you up and spit you out without a second thought."

"When you put it like that, how could we turn down such a tempting offer?" Anders said dryly.

Dorian shrugged. "Well, there's official aid, and then there's *un*-official aid," he said, raising one hand to make a see-saw motion. "I, personally, would love to see this little venture succeed, and I'm certain Alexius would be of a similar mind. If there's anything we can do to help, just ask."

Anders considered. Really considered, rather than offering the reflexive refusal that had first come to mind. In terms of *un* official aid... Refuge was still new and raw, and for all that Bhelen could offer them, there were some things that mages needed that only other mages could hope to understand. Having a second source of support would reduce their reliance on Bhelen, which might strengthen their bargaining position with the dwarven king.

On the other hand... Refuge, as a free mage community, was already reviled enough in the South as it was without adding a connection to Tevinter. So far they had been able to claim with utter truth that they had no association with the mage-lords of the north, and had no debts to pay back to that empire which could be inveighed upon them to advance the Imperium's interests in the South. Admittedly, not everyone *believed* them, but he couldn't stop people from believing what they
wanted. He could stop those suspicions from having any grounding in the real world.

"I think... not," he said at last, to Dorian's evident disappointment. "A generous offer, but we have a patron and a secure setup here. I would prefer to incur no additional debts."

"A rather diplomatic way of saying that you don't want to be tainted with association of us wicked magisters," Dorian said, but wryly. "A shame, but it is your choice to make. Alexius and I will be staying until tomorrow when his business is concluded. We're up in the Paragon's Fountain if you change your mind."

"I will," Anders said, knowing full well that he wouldn't.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

When I said that Act IV was going to be 'cameos all the way down' I was actually thinking of this surprise guest, which is why he gets the chapter title -- although Hawke, Merrill, and to some extent Sebastian also count as cameos. But this is almost the last one -- there will be just one more familiar face towards the end.
Shout out to all the commentors who reacted in surprise "wait, is Moira/Surana still pregnant?!" Today's finally the day folks.

The 'childbirth' tag has been on this fic nearly since the first chapter, and here it is FINALLY coming into play, which should give you an idea of how long I've been planning the end of this fic. Sensitive readers be warned that this chapter includes some fairly explicit descriptions of blood and gore, bodily fluids, pretty blunt descriptions of female reproductive organs, and surgery both magical and nonmagical. I did my best to make this sequence fairly medically realistic which by definition means it's gonna be kinda gross, since the human body is pretty gross and childbirth is terrifying!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the look of the clouds rolling up from the south, thick grey clouds with fleecy white undersides, a new front of snow was on its way. A patrol of Force mages was doing good work keeping the roads clear, and Anders had directed that a line of lights be set up between the Tower and the route down into Orzammar, but if the snowstorm was half as bad as it looked like it would be no one was going to be going outside much for the next few days.

Fresh snow on First Day was supposed to be a lucky omen, a blessing for the Maker; a fresh unsullied sheet of snow to mark a fresh new year, a new start. It had been years since Anders had seen a white First Day; the last two had been spent in the Deep Roads, the one before that in Ostwick waiting to meet with the Warden-Commander, and then all the years spent in Kirkwall. Snow was unusual in the Free Marches even in deep winter, the ocean moderating the weather enough that the coastal cities rarely got cold enough for snow. But it looked like they would have one now.

He hoped it was a lucky omen, a clean start.

His eye was drawn away from the growing clouds by movement in the valley below; craning his neck, leaning as close to the window as possible he managed to make out a figure trudging up the path from the tunnel entrance. From the build and the gait, it looked like a dwarf. A messenger?

Curiosity piqued, Anders extracted himself from the window and headed down to the main hall in order to be there when the messenger arrived. It proved to be Tovez Galra, the bard who'd worked with Anders and the other Refuge mages during the siege of the Army of the Three Princes, bundled up in heavy cloaks with a wide-brimmed hat to shade all sight of the sky.

"What's the news?" Anders called out as the dwarf settled himself down in the hall, puffing to get his breath back, red-cheeked and overheated in the sudden warmth of the Tower. "Does Bhelen have sudden need of me?" A part of him couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Hawke had made an unexpected return, though it was far too early to hope.
"By your leave, Warden Enchanter," Tovez puffed, then groaned his thanks as one of the other mages handed him a hot drink to perk him up. "I'm here today not on behalf of His Majesty, but of his lady the Queen. Her time's come, it seems, and yer wanted in the Palace as soon as possible."

"Queen Moira's in labor?" Dreamy thoughts of Hawke vanished as Anders sharpened in on the present, thoughts and preparations and worries set awhirl in his mind. "Of course, I'll be down as soon as possible. How long has she been having contractions? How far apart are they?"

Tovez gave a helpless shrug. "I -- don't know such things, Healer, I didn't see her m'self. Just got the dispatch from the palace and came up to fetch you quick as quick. Glad I caught you before the snow started falling, you'll want to get back down to Orzammar safely before the route becomes impassable."

Anders couldn't help but agree. "Well, let's not waste time, but we should have a few minutes at least," he said. "Catch your breath, warm up again with hot liquids. Frostbite's always a worry in weather like this, you'll want to be fully warm again before we set out. I have some preparations to make, anyway."

Tovez nodded. "Come fetch me when you're ready to go, Warden Enchanter," he said, and turned all his attention to his ice-crusted boots and trousers.

Anders headed out of the hall purposefully, mind whirling. As soon as he hit the hall he collared one of the younger mages to play errand-girl for him. "The Queen is having her baby, and we'll need to be there," he said without preamble. "This is a critical moment for the leadership of Orzammar, and she's at particularly high risk since she's carrying triplets. I need my kit and my bag, and I want all of the spirit healers currently in the Tower to go with me. Tell them to pack whatever they need and be in the Great Hall in twenty minutes."

"All of them?" The mage -- he couldn't place her name, except that she was one of the group that had arrived with Damien and Hawke -- looked wide-eyed as a deer. "But what if something happens and someone gets hurt, and all our healers are away?"

Personally Anders thought she was overreacting -- in day-to-day life, especially at the sheltered Tower, there was really very little that needed the power of a spirit healer to deal with. Still, it didn't hurt to cover all their bases. "I'll have Daros Amell stay behind, he's decent with the creation school," he said grudgingly. Daros was actually quite accomplished, but Anders would be blighted if he said so out loud. "And Jowan will be here, just in case."

Jowan and Surana had moved into the Tower once the weather got bad, their own house in the village proving not up to the task of standing against the cold weather. Surana herself was also getting precariously close to term; Anders would have been happy to send her down to Orzammar to stay in the Manor, completely protected from the elements, but Surana had refused. She insisted that she wanted her child, the first child to be born to Refuge, to be born in Refuge, not in the dwarven kingdom. Jowan, of course, backed up her every wish and whim, and Anders had deferred to the couple. As long as Surana didn't go into labor now, it wouldn't make much of a difference one way or another.

But it did mean that Jowan would be here in case of any accidents. The past few seasons had proved Jowan's mastery over blood magic, and while he did tend to exaggerate the medicinal applications, it certainly served well enough for first aid in the case of an accidental wound. Between Jowan and Daros, they would be fine.

Anders left the young mage to her errands and headed purposefully to his own office. He always kept a pack waiting by his door with his essential healing tools -- years of habit of living in
uncertain situations had taught him that -- and he'd also put together a small bag of supplies more specific to childbirth in anticipation of this day. It took considerably less than twenty minutes for him to get ready, so he swung by Mardra's office on his way out to let her know what was going on.

The door was open, but he knocked anyway as he leaned in out of courtesy. "Mardra, I'm heading down to Orzammar," he said. "Please watch over things here."

She looked up at him, eyes widening in surprise. "Going down to the city? In this weather?" she exclaimed.

He glanced out the window at the rapidly darkening daylight and grimaced. It was too early for sunset; the clouds were thickening. "Moira's having her baby," he explained.

"Oh!" she said. "Well, in that case of course, you must go. Do you..." she hesitated. "Do you think you'll be back tonight, or perhaps by morning? The First Day feast, you know."

"By tonight?" Anders gawked at her for a moment in disbelief before the context asserted itself for him. Mardra had grown up in the Tower, where pregnancy and childbirth were rare and always, by stigma and necessity, kept out of sight. Even talking about it was taboo among Circle mages and information about childbearing was not taught in the Circle curriculum, since it was of course assumed that no mages would ever have children of their own. She genuinely had no idea. "Well, it's not impossible -- there's a lot of variation on the length and difficulty of any woman's labor. But I think it's unlikely. This is her first time which always makes it harder, and with three babes to get through -- I wouldn't be surprised if this goes on through First Day and beyond."

"Oh," she said again, sounding a little taken aback. She blinked. "Well, of course, you'll need to be there, of course you'll... It'll be a shame to miss you, but duties come first, I suppose."

"They always do," Anders sighed. "Save me a slice of cake, will you?"

"I think I can do one better," Mardra said with a smile, and Anders took a moment to entertain a slight worry at what exactly she was going to present him with on his return.

Despite the detour he arrived in the Great Hall ahead of the other mages who had assembled to come with him -- two other spirit healers, both having arrived with Hawke and Damien Amell's group of refugees. After a brief delay to send one of the mages back for better boots and to dig up a better cloak for the other -- Maker, had none of them any idea at all how to dress for bad weather? -- they were ready to set out.

The snow was just beginning to fall as they left the Tower, striking out on the path down to Orzammar. It was well on noon now, judging by the position of the slightly brighter glow above the clouds -- but even noon's best efforts brought little light and no heat to the day, and it was already failing towards dusk. The old year was fading fast. Tonight would be the longest and darkest night of the year, and it looked like it was going to be a cold one.

Down in Orzammar it was easy to forget not only the storm outside but that winter even existed. Although it was midday up on the surface, the dwarven cycle -- Anders could never settle on whether to think of it as an especially long day or an especially short week -- was in the middle of its long furlough, the official end of the dwarven workday where noble and commoner alike
retreated to their homes to rest. In its sleeping state the city truly looked like a place of cavernous darkness, dim sparks of orange glowing here and there like a bed of coals banked for the night.

The palace though was lit up bright as noon, filled with a buzz of energy as their band approached. The posted guards had clearly been told to look out for them and hailed Tovez as soon as he came within hearing range before waving them through to the living quarters of the royal family. They stopped briefly in an antechamber to shed their soaked, dirty outwear before passing into the Queen's private chambers.

Anders had been in the Queen's apartments before as he'd attended to her throughout her pregnancy, but he'd never seen them this crowded. Moira herself, currently lying on a couch, was surrounded by other women: Hildegard of course, the Queen's handmaiden-cum-bodyguards, a few dwarven ladies that Anders vaguely recognized as Orzammar physicians, and -- somewhat to his surprise -- Natya's sister Rica. Bhelen's concubine had been one of the first friends Anders had made after coming to Orzammar, but as his involvement with the Queen had grown he'd seen less of her. It was a bit startling to see her in Moira's private quarters, since the Queen and the King's concubine had not always gotten along.

"Your Majesty," Anders greeted her as they piled in. "Today's the day, eh?"

Moira smiled up at him, Hildegard and one of her handmaidens lending their hands to help her sit up straight. "It seems so," she agreed. "I think they're the real thing this time, no more false contractions. These are your colleagues?"

Tovez had vanished out the door almost immediately. Anders introduced the other spirit healers -- an elderly man, a rangy middle-aged woman and a nervous girl in her twenties -- and the introductions conducted more generally as Anders went over to Moira.

"Where are we at with contractions?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes between each one," one of the physicians answered.

Anders nodded. "Still got a ways to go," he said. "Has the water broken yet?"

Moira shook her head. "No, not yet, though the physicians say it might happen at any time."

"They're right," Anders agreed. "For the time being, let's get you up and walking. Keep your circulation flowing, and let gravity help pull the babies into position."

After the flurry of activity caused by the mages' arrival, things settled back into a waiting routine. A few people left, while others arrived: a servant brought tea and dainties on a platter for Moira, while other finger food was passed around to the attendants. After the next set of contractions Anders took Moira to the small chamber at the back for an examination; her cervix was not yet very dilated, confirming his diagnosis that they still had several hours to go, but the first baby's head looked at a good orientation and position.

The Queen seemed in good spirits despite the physical discomfort; she certainly had all the support a woman could hope to have in the circumstances. Anders did notice that he and the other spirit healer were the only men in the room. "Your husband not present today?" he asked her.

Moira gave a little shrug. "This is women's business," she said. "If I know him he's in his office right now, writing new bills to keep himself occupied and awaiting news."

He lowered his voice a little, easily lost in the hum of conversation filling the room. "No Bhelen, but Rica instead?" he asked.
She gave a little huff, then sighed. "It is... I only realized recently, how very few women I know who have actually gone through this themselves," she replied. "Many ladies among the nobility had the same difficulty conceiving that I did, before your arrival. Hilde and my handmaidens have been wonderfully supportive, but... I hoped for the presence of someone who truly understood. Rica... has been... very helpful."

He smiled. "I'm glad to hear that," he said and he was, as much for Rica's benefit as for Moira's. In his experience, no matter how high or low your position, a person could always use more friends.

Anders glanced around. People were eating and drinking, talking quietly among themselves. From somewhere out in the hallway he could hear music playing -- Tovez had apparently stuck around in the royal quarters, if not in the birthing room itself. The atmosphere was more like a party than a clinic. "Everyone seems to be in good spirits," he commented. "You too, of course, your Majesty."

"It's a joyous occasion," she agreed. "And an unusual one. This will be the first child born to a reigning Queen in living memory. The last one was the birth of Barran Aeducan to Queen Valda Aeducan in the Storm Age, nearly two hundred years ago."

"Really?" Anders couldn't help a small double take. "But Bhelen -- didn't Bhelen have two siblings? How did that..."

"Endrin Aeducan -- Bhelen's father that is, not Rica's son -- King Endrin was married, but his wife Queen Geltha was barren," Moira said bluntly. "All three of his children were by different concubines; their mothers were bitter rivals with little love between them, from what I recall."

"His father Angsar Aeducan had two children by his concubine -- Endrin and Piotar -- but was never married and had no Queen. Before Angsar was Barran, but his wife Annalar gave him Angsar before his election to the throne, and died not long thereafter. Fertility has been rare among the noble caste for many years, Warden, and even more rare for it to overlap with the throne."

"Wow." Anders sat back, stunned. He had known about the creeping infertility that plagued the dwarves of Orzammar -- Moira had told him, and once told the effects were obviously visible in dwarven society -- but there was a difference between knowing and really understanding the pressure it put on the kingdom, the scars it left behind.

"I always thought I would live and die as one more in a long line of barren queens," Moira admitted. She placed a hand on his arm. "And I would have been, if not for your arrival. Warden Enchanter, I hope you understand that your presence here -- your role in bringing this night about -- has changed the course of history."

No doubt Moira was thinking specifically of the history of Orzammar, the dwarven kingdom, when she said that -- but the words left Anders shaken down to the core all the same. In Kirkwall, he had changed the course of events forever with the death of the Grand Cleric and the destruction of the Chantry there, with every Circle Tower that had crumbled or burned in the wake of the uprising that followed. In Orzammar he was changing things again, not with a death but with a birth. With the creation of Refuge, the recruitment of the mages, the successful repelling of the Andrastean armies -- with his work with the casteless, with the women of Orzammar, with his research into combatting the Taint and even the Blight itself, he had changed history.

Right or wrong, what was done could not be undone. The course of the world had altered forever. When the Chantry went up in flames three years past he had been prepared to die in that hour, to go to his grave without ever knowing how the future would change. Now, secure in Refuge, in Orzammar, there was a chance that he might live for decades before the Calling took him.
He might get to really see it happen. Might yet live to see the world he had known in his childhood undone. Might yet live to see mages grow up in a world where they didn't have to live in captivity or fear. Might yet see a new world remade.

Somehow, that was a more frightening prospect than death had been.

Time slipped by in the Queen's apartments, a bubble of blazing light under layered dark, although Anders counted time less in hours than he did in contractions. The time between each one grew shorter, the contractions themselves longer, until finally Anders ruled that the short walks Moira had been taking were no longer helpful. "Though you may still want to stay sitting up, or crouching, as much as possible -- let gravity do the work," he advised her. Moira nodded, momentarily wordless as another contraction wrung her body. Some of the bright spirit had gone from her eyes; Hildegard patted shining sweat from her forehead as her handmaidens anxiously brushed out her hair. But she endured with an iron determination, the innate hardiness of the dwarven people backed by a lifetime of indomitable spirit.

Anders was in the middle of taking her pulse, trying to determine whether its speed indicated a drop in blood pressure or just the strain, when there was a sudden commotion in the corner of the room. A handmaiden dropped a tray with a clatter as one of the physicians shrieked. Anders leapt to his feet and whirled around, expecting -- he didn't know what he was expecting, an attack perhaps, some kind of opportunistic infighting. From all he knew of dwarven politics, it wouldn't surprise him.

What he definitely was not expecting was the shrill cawing and dark, flapping wings of a crow.

How did a crow even --?

The mystery of how it had come to be there was solved in the next minute as the crow spotted Anders and swooped towards him purposefully. He held up his hands automatically and it landed on his forearm, shuffling its wing feathers, and now Anders recognized the bright unnatural blue in his eyes: Serah Squawks, the Tower's spirit-ridden messenger bird.

"What are you doing here?" Anders said to the crow, as the crowd of ladies-in-waiting milled around uncertainly. One of the handmaidens had fainted and one of the doctors was attempting to revive her; all of them eyed the bird warily.

Serah Squarks cocked his head and shuffled along Anders' arm, then opened its mouth. "I am Neria Surana, of Refuge," and Neria's voice emerged from its beak. Only for a moment, though, before the voice abruptly switched to the familiar voice of Tovez. "Her time's come, it seems, and yer wanted as soon as possible." Then the voice of Jowan, breathless and scared. "I don't know what to do! What if she -- the baby -- I don't know what to do!"

The bird stuttered into silence and stared at him expectantly.

"Neria," Anders breathed, his eyes going wide. He'd known, Maker take him, that Surana was close to term; but what were the blighted odds that both of his patients going into labor on the same day? "What's happening? Is the baby here already? Is Neria all right?"

"It's not going well," that was Mardra's worried voice, and then another voice he didn't immediately recognize. "Damn it, where's Anders when you need him?!!"
"Is -- is that a crow?" Moira's hoarse voice came from behind him; for a moment he'd almost forgotten around her. He turned, Serah Squawks on his arm, to see her staring at the bird with undisguised fascination. She leaned forward, eyeing it carefully, although she made no move to reach out and touch it. "How did it get in here?"

"I -- I don't know, Your Majesty," one of the handmaidens said nervously, and Anders put out a reassuring hand.

"It's all right, it's not your fault," he assured her. "This is no ordinary bird, and little things like stone walls don't stop him. Your Majesty, it sounds like there's an emergency at the Tower. Neria..."

"Is that your elvhen friend? The bard?" Moira interrupted. "She was also with child, was she not?"

"Yes, and it sounds like she's not going to be for much longer," Anders grimaced. He took a deep breath, fighting against the panic that was trying to take hold. "Squawks doesn't have all the details, but it sounds like there's a complication, and she and the baby are in danger. I have to..."

Anders had been working as a healer for nearly twenty years now, refining his craft and widening his experience. His link with Justice gave him more power than almost any other mage could channel, his experience in Kirkwall had brought him into contact with hundreds of different cases, his time in battle had given him a close-up and personal knowledge of anatomy. He knew more, and could do more, healing and magic than any one single person on Thedas that he knew of, but the one blighted thing he could not do was be in two places at a time. And he'd taken all the best healers of the Tower down here with him, hadn't he? Stupid.

"I have to go back," he said. "To Refuge. To the Tower. I have to get to Neria."

Unsurprisingly, this provoked a babble of dismay. "You can't go back now!" one of the mages protested. "The storm is still going, and it's past dark. You'll never make it to the tower."

Was it? He hadn't been keeping track of the time. But didn't that just figure. "I'll make it," he said grimly.

"But, you cannot leave the Queen now!" Hildegard protested. "You have a responsibility. You've been her physician this entire time, through her entire pregnancy, you cannot leave her now."

"Yes he can," Moira said, surprising him and Hilde both. Another outcry rose from the crowd, quieted in a moment when she flung up her hand. "I trust Anders. I do not believe he would propose leaving my side if he thought I was in any true danger. But this other woman, Neria Surana, you believe she is?"

Anders thought of Surana's pregnancy, how difficult it had been for months. The fatigue, the weakness, the bleeding. Of Jowan's quiet worry, his anguish, constantly wondering whether it was his fault that Surana's pregnancy came so hard, that the complications that came with a mixed-parentage child would lead him to lose all he'd built. "Yes," he said. "I'm afraid so."

Moira nodded. "I thought as much," she said.

"Your Majesty," one of the physicians started. "As Queen, surely you must see that your health and the health of your children override any other priority. This healer has an obligation --"

"Must I?" Moira countered. "As Queen, it is my duty to ensure the health and wellbeing of all the kingdom's subjects, and their children. And as a woman in the fellowship of women, I too have an obligation. This is not up for debate. Anders," she said, turning back to him with a determined
It had been months since Anders had been near-fatally injured by Sebastian's arrow. By now he was mostly recovered, thanks to Justice -- a mortal man would have been laid up for six months and still feel lingering complications for a year afterwards. His healing had been more rapid, more thorough. But pushing himself up the stairs in the tunnel, in the dark, still left his lungs aching and his muscles burning.

He felt the winter's chill bite into him before he even reached the top of the tunnel, cold wind blowing through the cavern entrance to leach all heat from the stone for quite a ways down. The top of the tunnel itself was dark and silent; none of the casteless dwarves who usually stayed here were present. Many had gone on to Bownammar following Bhelen's proclamation, and the rest had found better shelter when the winter weather got untenable. There were usually lanterns, but those had gone out some hours ago.

Anders stood in the mouth of the cave and stared out into darkness. Normally you could see the lights of the Tower from here, but not now: the snow fell too thickly. He lit the end of his staff and raised it above his head. A bubble of light extended outwards and illuminated sheets of ghostly white tumbling down from the sky, but he could see no more than a few yards in every direction.

This was going to be difficult.

If not for Surana, Anders wouldn't even be considering this. If not for Justice, he might not have had the courage. But somehow, he had to get back to the Tower. "I'll be relying on you to keep me from going off course," he told Serah Squawks, riding on his shoulder. The wisp-ridden bird ruffled up its feathers and let out a call.

Anders took a deep breath. "Right," he muttered, and set off into the storm.

It could have been worse. At least there was almost no wind to knock him off course, turn him around and ruin his sense of direction. That didn't mean it was easy, either; the snow fell straight down, blanketing the path and ground and smothering any landmarks he might have used to mark his way. But he knew the way, knew it by heart, knew it by feel and shape in the dark.

He'd walked this path a hundred times -- more. This valley, it was home in a way that Kirkwall had never been, that the Tower never had been, that even Vigil's Keep hadn't had a chance to be. He knew every acre of this valley, he'd been here before the first stone was placed. He had walked this valley in dreams every night for the last three years, building defenses against intruders. This place, it was his. His demesne. His home.

Squawks only had to correct his course once, pecking him painfully on the cheek to turn him to the right. One time he stepped off the path, broke through the crust of snow and floundered, but even then he was going in the right direction, the road just took a dog-leg to avoid a small ditch. Once he floundered out of that he was able to get back on the road, sturdy beneath his feet under the coating of slippery snow, and kept on.

At last -- it felt like he should have reached the town long ago, but he also knew that the storm was slowing him down considerably -- he saw a faint light ahead and staggered towards it. It was one of
the outlying buildings, one of the few that had stayed habitable through the winter. Anders recognized it as the home of the trio of Talor, Lyddie and Alim; Talor had been a carpenter's son before being taken to the Circle, and had known enough about construction to have the forethought to put a steep-pitched roof on his house.

Anders rested for a few minutes under the eaves of the house, considered knocking on the door to find shelter inside. No. They would want him to stay longer, they would argue with him. The trip up from Orzammar had taken too long already, and he was so close. Once he had regained his breath he pushed away from the cottage wall and slogged on through the snow.

The Tower's large front doors were closed -- which he had anticipated -- and barred, which he had not. He hammered on the doors, cursing the delay, but fortunately it was only a minute or two before he heard scuffling outside. "Who's there?" a voice yelled through the door.

"It's me, Anders!" he yelled back, because, really? Who else would it be? But the invasion of the Three Princes had left them all a little warier, he supposed. "Let me in!"

There was some scuffling, then a clank as the bar was removed and the door cracked open. Light flooded out framing a familiar face; Emile de Launcet looking scared. "Anders," Emile gasped out. "Oh, thank the Maker you came back. Neria's --"

"I know," Anders said. "Take me to her."

Where the waiting room for Moira had been bright and cheerful, almost like a party, the atmosphere in the infirmary was tense and frightened. Anders smelled blood as soon as he stepped in the door.

Neria lay on one of the infirmary beds. Jowan stood with his back to the door, holding one of her hands; Mardra bracketed her on the other side, her face drained to an ashy color as she clung to Neria's hand with both of her own. Daros Amell stood at the end of the table by her head, green light suffusing and flickering from his hands as he cradled the elven woman's head. All three of them looked up when Anders entered, their eyes wide and white-rimmed.

He took in the situation in a flash, shedding his outer coat as he strode across the room. Visual inspection first, he couldn't do more until he'd scrubbed down. Neria's feet were propped up on the table, knees bent, and there was a towel under her hips that was stained dark with crimson blood.

For a moment Anders had a stark, terrifying flash of another woman's body, lying on the dirty floor of Dust Town with a blanket over her hips and a spreading stain over the floor. The stink of burning refuse, the nauseating smell of blood and effluvium, the hollowed-out look on the woman's face held him in its clutches for a moment before he fought free of the paralysis.

Not this time, he thought. He'd been too late for Shara -- too late to save her baby and though she'd lived, she'd never truly recovered. He could not, he would not let the same thing happen to Surana, to his friend.

"Anders!" Daros cried out, pulling his hands away from Surana as his handsome face lightened with evident relief. "Thank Andraste you're here."

Anders crossed over to the basin at the edge of the infirmary and began scrubbing. "Tell me," he
said as he did. "What's happening?"

Daros bit his lip. "I don't know, that's the problem..." he admitted. "I don't know enough about..."

"Contractions," Anders cut him off, guiding him along the path of questions he needed to know. "How long, and how far apart? Has her water broken yet?"

"Yes, about an hour ago," Mardra answered. "The labor pulses are coming faster now, every few minutes. She was screaming before but she's stopped now."

That wasn't good. If Surana was in enough pain to scream but had stopped, that could only be because she'd lost the strength.

"Anders, can you help her?" Jowan said, and now that he was facing him Anders could see that he'd been weeping, his eyes red-rimmed and tears trailing down his face, snot crusting at his nose. Anders took a few seconds to take a good, long look at him.

"I can help her," he said and then turned to Mardra. "Mardra, get him out of here. Calm him down."

"No!" Jowan cried even as Mardra nodded, still pale-faced, and moved towards him. "I need to stay with Ria!"

"I'll take over now," Anders said. He did his best to keep his voice gentle, but the urgency drove him to brusqueness despite his best efforts. "I'll help her, but there are some parts to this that you won't want to see. You're a mess. Go get cleaned up. I'll call you back in when it's over."

Jowan crumpled, and Anders felt a pang of pity for him but all his attention was on Surana now; he moved to her head in order to check her pupils, her pulse, her breathing. Her eyes were open but her gaze not focused; she was breathing in shallow gasps. Her pulse, when he checked it, was bounding; was it stress and pain that was pushing that racing heart rate, or had she already lost that much blood?

"I'll need another assistant, send someone in who has steady hands and a strong stomach," he called out as the others left the room, and he saw Mardra nod as she left. He could rely on Mardra for this; he could always rely on her.

"What were you doing for her before I arrived?" Anders said to Daros as soon as the door closed. He moved down to Neria's feet and carefully folded the blanket back, putting his hands on her knees to gently move them apart. He summoned a ball of light over his shoulder and stooped to begin his examination.

"I gave her elfroot for the pain, and I was channeling Rejuvenate..." Daros said uncertainly. Ah, that explained the heart rate, then. "But I don't know, it didn't seem to help..."

"Stop Rejuv for now. Get some fluids into her instead," Anders said, distracted as he bent to his work, peering for a sight of the baby's head in Surana's passage. "We'll need to get her sitting up, get the baby in better position. Wait. Not yet." The cervix was dilated enough that he should be able to see the baby's head, but something else was in the way...

A moment later he straightened up, swearing violently. "What is it? What's wrong?" Daros demanded. He was as spooked as a cat on a leaky boat, and Anders would really rather have had almost anyone else as his assistant, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Placental pravia," Anders bit out. "That's where all the blood is coming from. Blast and blight it --
"Is that bad?" Daros demanded, but Anders ignored him. He channeled magic to his hands and placed one hand on the bottom of Surana's belly, getting to work. He dropped down into his familiar semi-trance, calling magic and spirits to his aid as he sent his awareness into the body of the patient in front of him.

He'd noticed as he tended to Surana throughout her pregnancy that the placental attachment was dangerously low in the womb, but it hadn't actually been providing an obstruction so he hadn't tried any intervention. If there even was any kind of intervention that would have worked. But sometime in the last thirty-six hours, it had turned from a minor worry into a life-threatening obstacle. The placenta had either grown or shifted until it was partially covering the entrance to the womb. The baby couldn't get past it without ripping the placenta apart, and each contraction tore the organ a little more. If the placenta tore apart completely, Surana would probably bleed to death while the baby suffocated still in her womb.

The only option now was to try to pull the placenta back from the womb opening. It wasn't a complete blockage, so he hoped to be able to make space for the baby to pass without completely destroying the placenta. It was nerve-wracking work, and in the end he couldn't move it as much as he wanted; he had no other option but to cut away a portion of the life-supporting organ to open the way for the baby.

He came back to himself to a sudden gush of blood over his hands as Surana's body seized and shuddered in another contraction. No helping that now. Surana let out a strangled cry -- a noise that was much too small to contain all the pain she was surely in now, but it seemed to be all the air she had left in her. But now he could see the top of the infant's head.

Anders abandoned his post at the foot of the bed and moved around to Surana's side. Her hand lifted from the bed, groping for contact, and he took it and squeezed back with equal force to what she poured into the grip.

"Anders...?" Her voice came breathless and hoarse, but it was lucid, and he saw her eyes shift and try to focus on him. Her pale blonde hair was dark and limp with sweat, plastered against the soaked pillow under her head. More elfroot, he judged, and poppy juice might help with the pain. "Anders..."

"I'm here," he told her, a lump in his throat. He knew he had to get back to work, but he couldn't leave her just yet. "I'm here."

Her lips moved, her throat worked as she swallowed. "My baby, Anders," she whispered, and he had to stoop down to hear her faint voice. "If... if you have to choose... between us..."

"You know I don't work like that, Neria," he said harshly. She blinked up at him, the blue of her eyes almost swallowed by her pupils. "I will blighted well do everything I can for both of you. I will bring you both through this. And if, Maker forbid, I can only save one of you, I will save the one who has the best chance of living. If that's your baby, then so be it, but if it's you, then it'll be you."

Surana's eyes fluttered closed, her eyelids almost translucent with how blue and bruised they looked. Her lips moved again. "Jowan, my love," she whispered, and then she fell silent.

Anders swore again, with feeling, then tore himself away from Surana's side and went to go scrub his hands again. Surana's hand was covered in blood from where she'd held his, and there were bloody handprints all over her legs and the cot.
"Anders, what should we do?" Daros was back again, and another woman whom Mardra must have sent in -- he recognized Porta, the middle-aged Force mage. Not someone he would have thought of as an assistant nurse, but he couldn't deny her calm level-headed presence. "Is -- did you heal her? Is she, are they out of danger?"

"No," he bit off, drying his hands with a brief spell so he wouldn't have to risk dirtying them with a towel. "The placenta's damaged, which means that the baby will start to suffocate soon. We need to speed this up."

"How? Are you going to... are you going to cut her belly open?" Daros swallowed, looking green. Anders shook his head.

"Not if I can help it. Abdominal wounds are dangerous whether they're inflicted on purpose or by accident," he said. "But I need a knife, a clean one. Sterilize it in a flame if you can, then give it to me. And give her another elfroot potion, and one of the ones in my cupboard with the green stoppers."

Anders resumed his position at the end of the bed and took another long, careful look. Blood was still issuing from Surana's vagina, worryingly bright crimson, but he could see the baby's head now. In less than a minute Porta handed him a scalpel, the blade still faintly warm from the flame, but not hot enough to sear flesh. Good. He took a moment to center himself, holding his breath, then made the incision. At an angle away from the midline towards the back of her hip, where it didn't risk tearing open further into her rectum. Surana didn't cry out when he made the cut, which was almost more worrying than if she had, but perhaps the small pain was lost in the larger agony of labor.

"All right," he said, a little shaky as he stepped back up. He laid a hand briefly on the top of her distended stomach, feeling the muscles under the skin shudder and contract. "Sit her up. You'll need to support her weight. She doesn't have the strength to push, so we need gravity to help."

Between the two of them Daros and Porta managed to get Surana sitting up, Porta lifting the woman's full weight easily despite her own apparent age. "Up further," Anders urged them. "Get her hips above the bed. I'll catch the head."

He saw Surana shifting her limbs as the others moved her around. Either the potions or the change in position had revived her a little, and Anders hoped that maybe she was awake enough to contribute. "Daros, give her a little more Rejuvenate," he ordered, and felt the hum of magic surround them as the spell took hold.

Surana threw back her head, gasping for air, and let out a scream that they probably heard in Redcliffe. Her whole body shuddered as the contraction took her, bearing down on her belly, and Anders saw the trickle of blood increase into a river. "Now, Neria, push!" he urged her, staying crouched in position to receive the baby. "I know it's hard, I know it hurts, but you have to push now!"

Another cry, shorter and more strangled, and Surana's body convulsed. With a suddenness that would have been alarming if he wasn't ready for it, the baby's head slid from her vagina and Anders caught it in his palms. "Good! Good, Neria, that was very good, we're almost there," he said. "Set her back down, gently..."

It was several more minutes and another contraction before Anders was able to get enough of a grip on the baby to slide the body out from Surana's vagina, slick with blood and shiny with the greasy film that covered newborns at both. Part of the caul was tangled around the baby's legs, the cord leading back up into Surana's body still, and Anders gently stripped away the caul and wiped
off the excess birthing blood. A girl, he noted as the baby emerged from the leftover tissue, and smiled.

Then the smile dropped away as seconds ticked past, one, two, three. The gasp and cry that Anders had heard so many times, that moment of triumph and catharsis when the parents heard their new child for the first time, never came.

The baby wasn't breathing.

~tbc...

Chapter End Notes

The thing Anders does in this chapter is a real thing and it's called an episiotomy. It used to be 'standard procedure' for childbirths but lately they don't do it unless it's really medically necessary. So don't blame poor Anders for it, he didn't invent the procedure.
https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/episiotomy/art-20047282

Placental pravia is also a real thing and it's terrifying!
https://americanpregnancy.org/pregnancy-complications/placenta-previa/

Some people may be wondering why Anders didn't simply perform a c-section for Surana. The truth is, for all c-sections are routine nowadays, before the days of sterile surgery fields and mass produced antibiotics any kind of open abdominal surgery was almost universally a death sentence for the mother. It was something you only did under really, really extreme circumstances, when you knew the mother was not going to survive and there was only a faint chance of saving the baby. That was what Surana was trying to give him permission to do -- kill her if it meant saving the baby -- but Anders was not going to resort to that unless he absolutely had to.
"No, no, nonono!" Anders chanted under his breath as his hands flew over the infant, checking, massaging. His instant, most terrible fear -- that the baby had been delivered already cold and dead -- receded after a moment. The baby girl was warm and moving, blood shuddering through her tiny body and pulsing through the cord that still attached her to her mother. She was alive, her heart beat, her blood moved. But her chest was still; she wasn't drawing breath.

"What is it? Anders, what's happening?" Porta demanded from Surana's head. Anders shook his head, not looking away from the infant in his arms. He sent a burst of healing energy through the infant's body; the pulse picked up, a warm flush of health ran through her, but it began gradually receding again after a few seconds and still her chest did not move.

"Take care of Neria, get the bleeding stopped, help her with the afterbirth," Anders ordered, attention still on the baby in his arms. "I need to -- I need to see to this, I need to fix this, find out why..."

The pulse of blood through the umbilical cord was slowing, the cord draining white as the damaged placenta gave up its last gasps of life to the baby it had almost killed. Anders cursed; the birth cord couldn't sustain the baby's life any longer and he had no choice but to cut it. He did so hastily, knotting the cord tightly at the infant's belly and then sending her another flush of healing. Still no breath.

Anders paced in a tight circle, jiggling the baby in his arms, wracking his brain to think if he'd ever seen this before, in all the babies he'd delivered. An obstruction? Was the airway clear? He hastily called a wisp to him and fed it into the infant's body, sending it exploring around the mouth and throat. There was a little blockage, the palate was extending into the top of the throat, partially blocking the airway. He used the spirit he was controlling inside the baby to cut the blocking tissue away, felt the infant twitch and felt a pang of sorrow for causing such a young infant pain, but at least pain meant that she wasn't dead. "Come on, come on, breathe," he muttered. "Don't do this, not when you just got here, not after everything..."

"Anders?" Daros' voice reached him through his mantra, and he tore his eyes away from the baby
long enough to take in the white-scared expression on his face. "The bleeding isn't stopping."

"Blight!" Anders swore. "Are you a healer or aren't you? I don't expect much, Maker's teeth!"

Daros flinched, all his usual arrogance drained away by the events of the last few hours. "I did heal her! The cut you made is closed, I don't know where all this blood is coming from..."

"The incision isn't the problem, you ninny! The hemorrhage is internal, you have to find where the uterus walls are torn..." He stopped at the look on Daros' face. "Are you seriously telling me you don't know a flaming thing about anatomy?!"

"I don't..." Daros tried to defend himself, but Anders didn't have time for him. The baby in his arms was dying, and Surana on the table was dying, and he could not help them both.

He sent another rush of healing into the baby, keeping her system going for just a few minutes longer, while he strode over to the infirmary door and ripped it open. "Jowan!" he called out, and the figure who had been sitting with his hands clasped between his knees in the chair out in the hallway leapt to his feet, eyes wide.

"Is it over?" Jowan's eyes lit up when they landed on the baby in Anders' arms. Then they moved to take in the expression on Anders' face. "Oh no... Is Ria..."

"She needs you," Anders cut him off, and pulled him into the infirmary. "Internal bleeding, probably hemorrhage of the womb, Daros is useless, you've always been a disaster of a mage but you know blood, Blight take us all, if there's anyone left in this building who can save her it's you."

"Can't you?" Jowan said, wringing his hands helplessly. Anders shook his head.

"I've got to help the baby," he said, and there was no more time for arguing, he called a wisp again and turned his attention back to the baby.

Heart beating. Eyes open and moving, limbs moving. But no breathing. Why? He cast the wisp into the lungs, searching for abnormalities, but everything looked as it should be. The lungs were working, he could sense the rush of blood through them, but the baby's chest and ribcage just weren't expanding. He put his hand on the infant's chest to try a few gentle compressions, but the chest just would not lift on its own.

This couldn't be happening, not after everything. Not after all the blood and sweat Surana had spent to bring her into the world, not after all the pain and weariness that the last nine months had cost to bear her. Not after all they had been through to build this sanctuary for mages, to make one place in the world where a mage mother could keep her child. The first child born to Refuge, to the world he had promised, only to die in the hour of her birth? He couldn't let it happen, it couldn't be happening, it couldn't.

But it was.

Tears filled his eyes, blurred his vision, he didn't have time for this. His spell dissipated, the wisp dissolving back into the Fade as he lost control of it. He swiped one impatient elbow over his eyes as he circulated more magic through the infant's body, as though he could keep her alive through magic alone.

Deep breaths. He called another wisp from the Fade and shoved it into the baby, sending it ranging up and down along the infant's body as he feverishly sought the problem. Lungs, throat, mouth, all looked good. What if there was nothing to find, what if the problem was some other subtle failure of the nerves or blood that was beyond his comprehension, beyond his reach.
Think. The chest wouldn't expand, even though the lungs looked good. There was nothing blocking the airway. So why? The ribs moved under his hands, down and up, there was just a point beyond which they would not go...

In a sudden burst of inspiration he pulled his focus back, looking through the wisp not at the lungs but at the ribs, the muscles and tendons that surrounded them, the tissues that pumped the bellows that brought air in and out of the lungs. There -- *yes!* There was a tendon attached where none should have been, a cord that stretched from the edge of the ribs up to the bone of the shoulder where he had never seen one in a body before. That didn't belong. That cord was compressing the chest, keeping the ribcage from inflating.

He pushed the wisp to cut the cord at once, only to have to hastily make further corrections as the taut edges of the tendon sprang back and recoiled from the sudden release, curling up under the skin around the shoulder. He kept the spell going, making sure there would be no internal bleeding, that there would be no further disruption, and he was so intent on maintaining the spell that he almost missed it when the baby in his arms took a huge breath and let it out in an earsplitting wail.

A wave of relief washed over him so powerfully that he sank to his knees right there in the infirmary, screaming baby in his arms, tears pouring down his face. His hands were blood-soaked and filthy, he was exhausted, and he had never been more deliriously happy in his life.

"Welcome to Refuge, little one," he told her in a hoarse, ragged voice. He laid the gentlest of kisses on her wrinkled, blood-marked forehead. "You'll be safe here, I swear to it; I have made this place a sanctum of healing and salvation."

Something occurred to him, a sudden misgiving as he realized that he had not completed the earlier spell: he had sent the wisp into the infant but not called it out again. He did so now, only to be met with a puzzling emptiness to his call. No answer; either the wisp had given its life in the act of healing the infant, or...

"Anders?" a tentative voice called to him, and he looked up to see Porta, the older lady, standing frowning down at him. Her gaze wandered to the wailing baby in his arms and her expression softened. She stooped down to help him to his feet, handed him a blanket in which he could wrap the naked infant. He hadn't dared to before, lest he cover something he desperately needed to see, but it was all right now.

All right now. "Is Neria okay? Is the bleeding stopped?" he mumbled as he stumbled back into the infirmary.

"See for yourself," Porta said as she guided him along by the elbow.

Neria Surana was propped up on several pillows, inclining her head and shoulders upwards so that she was no longer flat on her back; she looked ragged and exhausted but her eyes were open. They lit up as they landed on Anders, and she held her arms out with a cry; gladly, Anders delivered the baby into her arms.

"Dayla," Surana said raggedly, hugging the baby; then she began to cry, tears of gladness and relief pouring down her face and dripping off her chin to land on the baby's face.

"Dayla," Jowan agreed with her, his voice quiet and broken but full of wonder.

Anders stood a little back, still in that dazed state. There was still more to do, he knew. There was always more to do. Both mother and child would need to be cleaned up and moved to somewhere more comfortable to rest. He needed to clean up himself, Andraste knew, and his infirmary looked
like a slaughterhouse. More than a liter of Surana's blood was soaking the bedclothes, puddling the floor, smeared over every surface. Though surely he could delegate that task to someone else, or leave it for the morning...

"What time is it?" he asked, realizing he had lost track of time ever since he'd left the palace in Orzammar. He found a clock on the wall over the basin, and squinted to read it: just past midnight. Just past midnight on the eve of First Day, the old year giving way soundlessly to the new.

In that moment there was a sudden swelling sound that seemed to come from below their very feet. A sound that was birthed in the very heart of the mountain, miles below, and built and built up through the caverns until tons of rock and stone were all singing the same note: bells, bells, a cacophony of pealing bells all ringing at once, a joyous exaltation of sound to celebrate some great and rapturous event.

"What in the Maker's name?" Jowan exclaimed; Surana tried to shush the baby, which had been startled into crying again by the sound.

"Moira's baby," Anders realized after a moment. He had to speak loudly to be heard over the sound of bells that still echoed and rang throughout the valley, moving up from the mountain caverns to echo between two peaks. "Orzammar is celebrating the birth of their new royal heirs."

The joyful sound went on and on and on, punctuated now by the confused calls of mages who were awoken by the sound, and Anders had to laugh. He could not think of a more fitting celebration of this moment, the paean to new life that rang out at this moment. This joyful sound that marked the advent of a new hour, a new day, a new year.

A new life, not rent by separation or trammelled by endless hiding and persecution.

A new age, not defined by hatred and superstition and fear.

A new world.
In the new world as in the old, time moved on at the pace it always had. Surana's was the first child to be born in Refuge, but not the last; Tisha was not far behind her, and was delivered of a healthy boy with no complications on a rainy morning in late Guardian. Then all at once it seemed as though a dam had broken -- as though, for the first time since leaving the Circles the mages really understood what it meant to be free of them. As though the sight of Dayla Surana, babbling happily in Neria's arms, brought it home for them for the first time that they could dare to dream of children without the fear of Templars taking them away. Before the first day of Spring, Anders had a dozen more pregnancies on his hands.

Dayla's arrival seemed to change the perspective of the Refuge mages towards the young apprentices, as well. Towards the **children**. For most of their adult lives, the Circle mages had really only ever interacted with children of any age as apprentices -- students and wards and obligations. Children who appeared spontaneously, fully formed at the age of five or six or ten (or twelve,) to be shuffled into the care of the Tranquil when they were not sitting obediently in classrooms. The idea of apprentices as **children** did not seem to have connected for the Circle mages before, but it did now, with a vengeance.

Where the Circle mages had previously mostly ignored the apprentices, apart from handing them off to a roster of tutors, there was a sudden rush of adult mages -- largely, not exclusively, couples and newly-developing family units -- seeking to involve themselves with the children more closely. Anders couldn't help but approve on principle (though an ungrateful part of him wished that this parental sentiment could have manifested when it would have been useful, like last fall when nobody wanted to take on the years for the new apprentices) but soon found himself having to intervene when things got contentious.

All of a sudden there were more adults wanting to adopt children than there were apprentices to go around. Worse, the kids had just settled into a new routine -- living in shared dormitories at the Tower -- after all the upheaval of the previous year only to have their world turned upside down **again** by people wanting to move them to their individual dwelling places. There were tantrums, tearful breakdowns, and at last Anders was forced to call a halt on the proceedings when one hysterical mageling managed to summon an Anguish demon in the middle of the road. It was not much of a threat -- Marco and two of his deputies had the thing contained before Anders even arrived on the scene -- but it drove him to put his foot down. The apprentices would remain in the Tower, where Justice could collectively keep watch over them, until they were old enough to show a desire to leave on their own.

By the time the new tempest had settled down in early spring, they had worked out what Anders thought was a hopeful system going forward: the apprentices would eat and sleep and study at the Tower but each child would go under the wardship of one or more adult mages, if all parties were willing to agree, to spend time with them outside the confines of lessons. While some of the fosters didn't work out in the long run, Anders had hopes that other bonds would be created that would last for a lifetime.

Daros Amell had proven surprisingly good with children, to Anders' (somewhat uncharitable) astonishment. He wasn't exactly the nurturing type but perhaps that was what they liked about him: since he felt no urge to coddle them he had a habit of speaking to them as though to other adults, which made them all feel very grown up and important. At any given time around the Tower at least two or three of the apprentices could be seen following the Marcher mage around like ducklings. (The fact that there were often baked goodies to be had didn't hurt his popularity, Anders suspected.) All in all the transformation from Loyalist holdout and **pain in his ass** to babysitter and baker was a net gain to the world, in his view.

As the winter ran down and spring arrived -- slowly in the Frostbacks, more swiftly in the lowlands
-- the rest of the world unlocked from its frozen stasis and began to move as well. Fiona and her mage army left the Storm Coast and made their way into the Ferelden Hinterlands, and the pitched fighting picked up again as combatants mage and templar alike trickled in from the rest of the mainland.

The Mage Rebellion was not nearly as organized and well defined as the name indicated it should be (or as Anders would have liked to be;) in truth there were knots of mage resistance and insurgence all over southern Thedas. Grand Enchanter Fiona only had the distinction of heading the largest and most coherent group of mages, the one that Chantry and Templars alike focused on as their primary target. Lord Seeker Corin especially seemed obsessed with her by all reports, convinced that if only he could eliminate her and her officers then the rest of the Rebellion would simply drop dead. Or return humbly and neatly to their Towers, according to the more optimistic officials in the Chantry. Either way seemed unlikely to Anders, but he didn't particularly want to test the theory either.

It was true that as the highest-ranking member of the Circle on the side of the rebels (since the Loyalists had hastened to hold their own 'election' as soon as the rebels had cleared the towers,) Fiona was the closest thing to an official leader. Aside from Anders himself, of course -- but since he had turned down the option of leading the mages of Refuge into the fray on several occasions, he was more than happy to defer leadership of the Rebellion to her.

Not that he didn't intend to pitch in, any way he possibly could. He was in the King's office as often as his duties would allow, badgering the dwarven king to funnel more support and supplies to the Rebellion. The birth of Moira's children had not softened Bhelen up any noticeable amount, but with the two princes and a princess underfoot all hours of the day and night he was at least more distracted.

"Anders, we're not having this conversation again," Bhelen said in exasperation. "Most of my army and half my wealth are assembling at Bownammar right now waiting for the Valammar march."

"I'm not asking for you to divert any troops, Bhelen, just supplies," Anders argued. They'd been going around on this topic for half an hour now, but he felt like he was finally making some progress. Maybe. "The homesteads of the Hinterlands are too terrorized by the roaming Templars to offer a bite of food or a blanket, let alone a safe place for the mages to sleep. Just a few weeks' worth of rations --"

"Need I repeat my statistic about the supplies amassed at Bownammar?"

"You have all the supplies you need for this march twice over!" Anders was quick to point out. Orzammar's military had its bottlenecks, especially in matters of manpower, but they didn't lack for funds and they didn't lack for logistics. "Fiona's army is a fraction the size of your marching force, it wouldn't take much. A hundred --"

"Are these hundred mages going to come fight in my Deep Roads?" Bhelen interrupted him.

"Well --" Anders hedged.

"And if I order them to cease hostilities with the Templars and stop raiding the Ferelden countryside, will they?" Bhelen demanded.

Anders couldn't help a wince. While he was absolutely certain many of the reports coming out of Ferelden were pure Chantry propaganda, mad mages burning farms and babbling about mage superiority and conquering the world under a new mage imperium, it could not be denied that there had been some raids, goods stolen and property damaged and bystanders hurt in the process. "Now,
"Seems to me that if I'm going to be funding this army, I ought to have some say in the way it's being run!" Bhelen proclaimed. "Especially if I'm going to have the Bann of Redcliffe's emissaries on my doorstep in a month demanding I reign them in. There's little enough I can control without taking on additional responsibilities for a group of rag-tag agents of chaos. For the last time, no!"

His voice rang with finality, but Anders hadn't kept the Mage Underground going for six years in Kirkwall by knowing when to give up. He took a deep breath and pleaded, "Bhelen, please reconsider. As a favor to me, to us, to all of Refuge. We've done all that you asked of us and more - -"

"And asked more, that I recall, than our original agreement," Bhelen grumbled.

"Without the help, many of those mages are going to die!" Anders said passionately. "They're barely scraping onwards even *with* what they are picking up from the homesteads in the Hinterlands. They're fighting for their very survival, and many of them aren't even properly combat-capable mages -- they're either too old or they're barely more than children, and many of them have talents that don't lie in any of the offensive arcane trees. It's all very nice to be able to make illusions in the air or make plants grow at the speed of a man walking, but that's not going to save them when Templars come for their throats. The war won't last forever, Bhelen, and who knows how many of these mages might come into your service given enough time if --"

Bhelen was staring at him. Anders was actually surprised he'd gotten through this much of his speech before Bhelen interrupted him to say, "What'd you just say?"

Anders stuttered for a moment. "Uh, say what? The war won't last forever?"

"No. Before that." Bhelen waved his hand impatiently as though to rewind Anders' words. "About other talents mages have?"

He thought back over his speech. "The ones who can make illusions?" he hazarded. "It's more of a thing in Tevinter than here, but I've known --"

"No! About these plant mages of yours!" Bhelen snapped.

"Uh... yes?" Anders ventured. "What about them?"

"You never told me mages could make plants grow!" Bhelen was nearly shouting, and Anders had no idea what had gotten him so worked up.

"It's... not exactly an official branch of magic, it's not a spell that just anybody can learn, some people just have the talent for it," he said. He thought of Pia, of how she had managed to reproduce the Blight-resistant flower on three days' notice. "There's a mage up in the Tower who can make any plant grow in any conditions, no matter how far it is from its native environment. I can think of maybe one in twen --"

"And in the two -- two and a half -- years we've known each other, you never thought to tell me about this before?!!" Bhelen said indignantly.

"Well no! Why would I?" Anders defended his apparent oversight. "You're the king of an underground cave empire! What interest would you possibly have in making plants grow?!"

Bhelen took off his glasses and covered his eyes with one broad hand, fingers digging deeply into the skin of his face as he rubbed his hand slowly down his face. When he reached the end of it he
took a deep breath and said, in an artificially calm and casual tone, "Were you aware, Anders, that in the days before the Empire's fall, Orzammar was not the only city in the Deep Roads -- not even the capital city. It was a city that concentrated on industry, forging and mining, with shafts that led to the rich mineral veins and close enough proximity to the stoneheart to provide steady, even heat for smelting.

"What Orzammar did not specialize in was agriculture. In the old days Orzammar produced no food at all, and it didn't need to, because the miners and crafters of Orzammar were fed by produce grown in other thaigs! There were many cities in the Empire of old, and while some of them were so deep down that the Blight has buried them entirely, others ran close enough to the surface that their farming terraces were open to the sun."

Anders blinked. His eyes widened as the pieces began to fall into line. "Valammar," he said. "You want Valammar for its farms."

"Give the man a prize!" Bhelen spread his hands in the air in a gesture of sarcastic triumph. "If we are to reclaim the empire, if we are to have an empire, we'll need a source of food that doesn't depend on the whims of surfacer kingdoms and their trade embargoes. I needed Bownammar as the first step to Valammar, and I need Valammar as the gateway to the rest of the empire."

"Wow." Anders sat stunned. "So -- you need farmers. And you don't have them? You can't train any up?"

Bhelen drummed thick, square fingers on the surface of his desk in nervous agitation. "The ancestors had their own methods of raising crops in the terraces, but none of those arts were passed down to us," he admitted. "We have some hopes of recovering records from the upper halls of Valammar, but so far, well... the scouts haven't had any luck. I could import Bianca Davri herself from Kalnas and she could tell me plenty about surface farming techniques, but that's no guarantee she'd be able to get them to work in Valammar. We'd learn, Warden, eventually -- but I have an army to feed now. Now you say you have a workforce of mages who can grow any plants, in any conditions, and you've been holding out on me all this time?"

Anders drew himself up a little defensively. "Your Majesty, it's not like you ever told me," he pointed out.

"Right. Right." Bhelen sighed. "Forget the fireballs. Forget the earthquakes. I want a list of every mage you have who has these magic plant fingers on my desk by the end of the week. If they're in Bownammar I want them back, by the end of the month, their work on the nursery in Valammar will count for their services."

This whole conversation was going by in a hurry, but Anders saw an opportunity and seized on it. "Most of the mages who have this talent are already hard at work growing herbs and potions for Refuge," he pointed out. "A lot of them have already traded their runes away. It would take a lot to convince them to give that up to go work in the dangerous, unsecured area of Valammar."

"Who said I was going to give them a choice of doing it or not?" Bhelen snapped.

Anders felt his spine stiffen, felt the atmosphere shift, and when Bhelen's eyes crossed his he locked and held them.

"No one will be forced," he growled after a long moment. Bhelen leaned back, just slightly, and that broke the staring contest.

"Fine, if you have to make this difficult," Bhelen grumbled. "They'll get twice the credit for
agricultural work as for military service. On top of their original time, if they've already served it.”

Anders felt a thrill run up his back and tamped it down firmly. That would represent a very significant way for the Refuge mages to make inroads on their service debt. Especially for the more timid mages, as this was a kind of service that didn't require mages to put themselves in danger or be exposed to the Blight. It was an incredible offer, and yet... "And what of the mages in the Hinterlands?" he pressed.

"What about them?" Bhelen said irritably.

"Some of these oh-so-valued plant mages are probably among Fiona's forces right now," Anders pointed out. "But if they die of starvation or exposure before they ever get the chance to come to Orzammar --"

"All right!" Bhelen snapped. "Rust and rot, you're a pain in the ass. You'll get your caches, Warden. Now get out of my office before I end up signing my new children's dukedoms over to you as well."

Grinning with giddy relief, Anders went.

When Damien Amell came to him and asked if he could have a word -- not in the Tower, but aside -- Anders went. Honestly, he was expecting to hear about an affair. As a handsome, blue-blooded, rakishly charming member of the Mage Rebellion Damien had carved quite the swath of hearts through the ladies of Refuge. At this rate -- if what Hawke had told him about Charade Amell and the Red Jennies was true -- Damien might be the only Amell of his generation with a chance at carrying on the family name. Charade preferred women, and Daros men; Mardra cared for neither. Of the surviving Hawke siblings Bethany had taken up with a woman and Garrett a man, so neither of them were likely to be turning out biological children any time soon.

So Anders went half-expecting to be called on to confirm a pregnancy, or perhaps officiate a wedding -- they still had no Chantry Sisters at Refuge (and never would, if Anders had his way) so as the closest thing to First Enchanter, he was the closest thing to a wedding officiant that Refuge had. He'd seen Damien making eyes at Pia, the chair-bound herbalist mage, and now Damien was leading Anders to his house at the edge of the village with an excited, furtive air. Simple arithmetic, really.

What Anders was not expecting was to open the door to the humble stone house and come face to face with Grand Enchanter Fiona, leader of the Mage Rebellion.

Half a dozen people were already waiting for them: Mardra and Daros Amell, Surana and Jowan, Fiona and several other weathered-looking mages he didn't recognize. Lieutenants, presumably. But Fiona had such weight and presence, despite her slight build and travel-stained clothes, as to immediately command the attention of the room. She turned towards him, pushing back her hood to reveal a face that was aged and sun-weathered, but still lively with intelligence and will.

"General!" Anders said, breathless at the sudden unexpected shock. He stepped forward, feeling suddenly shy. "I am honored."
Fiona rose from her seat and clasped his hands, squeezing back with a firm grip. "So am I, to meet you at last, the famed Healer of Refuge," she replied.

"Among other things," Anders said. He looked around. The curtains were drawn over the windows, shutting out the fine spring weather. "Why all the secrecy?"

Fiona exchanged a look with Damien, then nodded. "We thought it best if I was not officially here," she said. "Damien and his brother were kind enough to lead me here through the mountain pass. The dwarven King has been very generous to our people and for that I am grateful. I would rather not strain his patience by causing a diplomatic ruckus by turning up on his doorstep in force. I'm only here for a few hours anyway, before I depart for Redcliffe."

"Redcliffe? Why Redcliffe?" Anders asked.

Mardra was the one who answered. "We caught the early word of it last week, and no doubt the official announcement will be soon," she said. "Justinia is going to hold a Divine Conclave in Haven, before the year is out."

"Bann Teagan has offered safe passage for me and an escort of my men in Redcliffe until the conclave is over," Fiona added.

"What? A Divine Conclave?" Anders couldn't help his surprise. "There hasn't been one of those since the end of the Qunari invasion. Why now?"

"To mediate an end to the mage-Templar war," one of the lieutenants replied.

Anders snorted. "The 'mage-templar war'? Is that how they're framing it?" he demanded. Anger was beginning to build at the back of his mind, giving his voice a bite. "When a pack of wolves chases a deer do they call that the 'wolf-deer war'?"

"If the deer suddenly grew fangs and fought back on equal terms, they might," Fiona replied. "But that is the stated goal of the Divine Conclave: for the Chantry to act as mediator to find a way to bring the conflict between mages and templars to an end."

Right. He'd been afraid it was something like that.

Anders took a deep inhale. Held it, let it out slowly, counted to ten. And then he exploded.

"Are you out of your MAKER-DAMNED MINDS?" Anders shouted. Most of the mages in the room flinched; Mardra and, notably, Fiona did not. "Have you forgotten why we started fighting in the first place? Have you forgotten who our enemy is?"

"The Templars -- " Damien started to say, but Anders whirled to face him with a snarl.

"Were only ever a symptom!" he snapped, his voice cutting across Damien's. "Their hands might wield the sword but they aren't the ones who wrote the scripture canonizing our enslavement! Who pays the Templars? Who recruits them? Who gives them their marching orders? There are Chantry mothers and sisters in the streets of Denerim right now spreading the story that we mages are only fighting in the Deep Roads as part of a diabolical plan to seek out the rest of the Archdemons and start a new Blight for some fucking reason. And to this institution you want to cede the authority to judge us? To pass rule over us? To walk back into the lion's den and put our head in their mouth again? Forget the fucking Templars! This is their war! This has been their system, their scripture, their justification from the very founding of the Chantry!"
He was well caught up in his rage now, years of slowly building anger towards the institution he had once revered bursting out through a breach in a dam. Little flickers of actinic light flared off his hands as he gestured furiously, but he hardly even noticed. "How dare they now pretend that the war is about Templars? How dare they! As though they had not spent nine hundred FUCKING years planting the seeds of this conflict -- tending the fields -- teaching fear and hatred, dehumanization and degradation, normalizing addiction and mutilation and violence, turning murder and genocide into an institution -- and now! And now they have the GALL to stand on the sidelines and wring their hands and tsk about those AWFUL mages and those SHOCKING templars! Now, when the harvest of fire and blood comes due, they dare to talk about mediation? They want to pretend that they were just BYSTANDERS?"

The room full of mages stared at him wide-eyed, shocked into silence. Mardra was the first to shift position, leaning over towards Damien and poking her brother in the side. Damien turned his head to face her, though his eyes kept straying back to Anders. "Told you," Mardra muttered, "you just have to get him in the right mood."

Daros let out a short, aborted bark of laughter, quickly stifled when Anders' gaze turned on him. Fiona, who had been waiting quietly for Anders' tirade to run its course, raised one hand to recapture his attention. "Anders. Listen. I am not insensible of your concerns," she said quietly, calmly. "I spent the first years of my life in the hospitality of the magisters of Tevinter, and the last few decades in the keeping of the Southern Andrasteans, and I saw little to choose between them. I would be the last mage in Thedas to argue for the righteousness or moral purity of the Chantry, on either side. This is a choice I make not on principle, but on practicality."

"What practicality?" Anders snapped, still seething.

"Moral authority or no, attending this Conclave will still redound to our advantage," Fiona said. "For the last nine hundred years the Chantry, the Templars, and the Seekers have been making decisions about us, without the First Enchanters having anything more than a token voice in the matter. That has changed. We are being called to the table to negotiate as equals. Simply by extending the invitation to us they are acknowledging our legitimacy, our right to determine our own fates. We are no longer under their power, as much as they might like to pretend; they can no longer hold the threat of Annulment over our head if our answers do not please them. For the first time in a thousand years we can speak and be heard. Our efforts, together, have paved the way to making this possible."

It made sense -- it did -- but it also sounded like a song he'd heard before. "And the last deal the mages made with the Chantry, 900 years ago, how well did that turn out for us?"

Fiona sighed, raised a hand to rub at the bridge of her nose. "And what is the alternative?" she said wearily. "This war can't continue forever. My people are driven away from every town, constantly harassed by the Templars, living on less than a day's rations. We are surviving only on the generosity of our benefactors -- the King, the Bann, a few others. We have no home base, no lines of support --"

"You have us," Anders protested. They'd been trying, blast it, to funnel every spare scrap of food and coin they could to the Rebellion. "This city."

"You cannot fit every mage in southern Thedas within the walls of this refuge, Anders," Fiona said. Gently, but Anders still flinched. "We need to negotiate an end to hostilities. The time has come to compromise."

Anders hunched his shoulders, "The rights for which we fight should never be compromised," he growled. "To be respected, to be seen as equals, that is not something that we should ever have to
give up."

Fiona gave a weary little shrug. "Should not, perhaps," she said. "But a time comes when we will have to say 'This is as far as we can take this cause today, we have done all we can.' Those that come after us may be able to take it further. But for now, our part must be to ensure that those future mages are alive and free enough to try."

He let out a long sigh, which took with it most of the hot anger and left behind only a sullen resentment, and cynical resignation. That was how it would always be: young people fought and died for high ideals, and the diplomats came in and signed it all away for marginal concessions. "Fine. All right. Fine," he said bitterly. "This 'conclave' is happening whether I like it or not, I suppose."

He knew he sounded like a sulky teenager, but Fiona's voice was grave and respectful even so. "It is."

Anders dropped his hands with a long exhale. Then squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "Very well, I suppose I'll have to go."

"NO!" That word came from a chorus of voices -- more voices than there were people in this room, Anders was briefly certain. From Mardra voicing concern for his safety, to Surana protesting that he was needed here at Refuge, to Damien yelping that they were going to attend the Conclave, not to blow it up, to more voices Anders couldn't even recognize -- on this they were united.

Fiona kept trying to get her word in, waving the others to silence one by one until she could finally make herself heard. "I will attend the Conclave as the representative of the Mage Rebellion," she said firmly, once the rest of the chatter had faded. "You should remain apart. Not only because your presence there could inflame tensions, but because you are more valuable held in reserve."

"But it might be a trap," Anders pointed out anxiously. "There are rebellions all over southern Thedas but you lead the biggest force. You are the linchpin of the Rebellion -- if they can get to you..."

He trailed off. Fiona acknowledged his concerns with a nod. "It might be a trap, and that's exactly why I need you to remain behind," she said. "If nothing else, as an unspoken threat as to what might happen should they betray me. After all, if they do not deal nicely with me, then they know they will have to deal with you instead." She favored him with a cold, razor-sharp smile. "And that you will not be nice."

A moment of silence hung over the room. Anders was briefly surprised by her cold political practicality, then chastised himself for being surprised. This was the woman who had kept the Mage Rebellion intact for the last two years, after all; she could never have made it this far by being a soft touch.

"That... is a very good point," Mardra admitted.

Anders frowned. "So you're relying on good sense and caution to outweigh hate and fear? That didn't stop the Three Princes," he said bitterly.

"Nevertheless," Fiona said, and that one word had the weight of adamant conviction. You could sink a boat with that nevertheless. "I must take a leap of faith. I don't pretend that the outcome of this Conclave will be perfect, but I have to believe it will be better. And even if the worst happens and I should fall, I know that the hope of magekind will not die with me."
And that was that.

There was no more to be said, really. He stood at the trailhead of the winding mountain path and watched Fiona and her lieutenants make their way down it, starting a path that would take them from here to Haven. She did not look back at him.

As kind as it had been of Fiona to come to Refuge to let him know his intentions, she had made it very clear that it wasn't his decision to make. The world was in a time of momentous upheaval, but his part in things had already been played. He might have set things in motion, but that by no means meant he controlled them.

Anders... he wasn't sure what to feel about that. He'd spent so long fighting, so long working to bring the cause of mages to the world's attention. And he had. The mages had risen, the Circles had been torn down, the Divine herself had turned her ear to listen. And yet... what more was there to say? He'd written his message to the world so many times now, in so many different formats. Written on sheaves of parchments, in books, in the healing bodies of Kirkwall's most unfortunate, on the walls and the streets of the city, in fire in the sky. If there was anyone left in Thedas who hadn't gotten the message by now, it could only possibly be because they refused to listen. He'd said what he needed to say, and he was done.

His manifesto was out there, passed around the lounges and libraries as a point of curiosity. His message was out there, carried on the banners of the rebel mages as they marched to Haven to deal with the Divine face to face. Others carried on the fight, now. The battle went on but he'd passed up the opportunity to be a general in that fight, and it had marched on past him. The struggle was still real, still raging, but they no longer needed him to carry it.

Was it all right to... stop? To stop fighting, stop struggling, put the burden down? To let himself be without hating himself at every turn, for having freedoms and blessings that were still out of reach for others?

Ten years ago he never would have allowed it for himself. He would have seen it as a surrender, a betrayal of the cause, a failure on every level it was possible to fail. But the world had changed, it had moved on. And he was here. There was still so much work to be done, there were so many people who were counting on him. To build this refuge, to keep it safe and warm and welcoming for whoever needed it. For whoever needed him.

His place was here. His people, they were here. His future was here.

"Back to work," he said aloud, the last words that the Hero of Ferelden had said to him, and he felt the other part of him agree. Yes.

Onwards, then. You and I.

~end.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

A farewell, and a collection of notes, and what happened after.

And so we reach the end!

It's been a long time coming, and I hope it did not disappoint. I had been planning this finale for a long time, but as I approached the final chapters I found myself really wondering whether it would be satisfying, whether it would be worth all the build up. In the end I decided that for a story about building and creating, an ending that centered around healing and creating new life would be a more fitting ending than an exciting climactic battle. 'Babies Ever After' isn't an ending trope I always go for, but here -- for the mages if not for Anders himself -- I thought it was right. I have always been of the opinion that the separation from and denial of children is one of the worst atrocities the Chantry levels against the Southern mages -- not the most extreme form of violence, considering the massacres, mutilations and imprisonment, but certainly one of the least addressed in canon and fandom alike. (Systematically separating children from their parents is bad, people! This is not up for debate!)

This marks the end of One Elegant Solution, and also -- officially -- the end of my participation in Dragon Age fandom in general. No doubt anyone who's been following my AO3 page had come to that conclusion already, but consider this my farewell. I have had a wonderful time in this fandom, I've written a lot and read a lot and made friends that made me very happy, but this will likely be the last thing I write for it (although I will likely continue to read WIPs that I'm already invested in.) I'd like to extend my sincere and most heartfelt thanks to those fellow fans who came along with me and Anders on this journey. It's been massively self-indulgent, it's been fun, it's been a struggle, it's been frustrating enough to drive me to tears at times, it's been my magnum opus and my swan song. In the end I'm glad I did it, and I'm glad because of all of you. Without your support and investment I would have given up long ago.

The fact that I won't be writing any more in this setting does mean that there are a number of sequels or side stories that I had initially planned that I'll be shelving. I had always known with this story that I never wanted to continue the story all the way through Inquisition -- it would have been a completely exhausting task, and the purpose of the story was to cover the gap between DA2 and DAI. That doesn't mean I had no ideas on how things would play out in Inquisition, however. I played around with whether or not to include those thoughts in the main body of the fic in any form, and ultimately I hit on the idea of presenting them the same way the Dragon Age games themselves present the story continuing after the game ends -- as a sort of slideshow epilogue. (Except that I can't actually draw, so you'll just have to imagine the slides.)

So I'll get to those in a minute. First, just for my own sake and for the interest of any readers: the story has been going on so long both in universe and in real time (almost three and a half years each!) that I drew up a timeline to try to keep everything straight.
PRE-OES

Sometime in 9:37 - Anders destroys the Kirkwall Chantry and leaves Kirkwall. He spends several months wandering in the Free Marches wilderness alone.

Autumn, 9:37: The Wind in my Sails

Late autumn, 9:37: THE LONG RUN

ACT I

Spring, 9:38: Anders arrives in Orzammar. King Bhelen puts out proclamation of sanctuary for Free Mages of Thedas.

Fall, 9:38: First Deep Roads trip.

Winter, 9:38: FIRSTFALL

ACT II

Spring, 9:39: Anders returns from the Deep Roads. Surveying and groundbreaking for Tower is going on. Jowan and Surana have arrived.

Late Spring, 9:39: Construction of the Tower is halted due to political roadblocks.

Summer, 9:39: Construction of Tower resumes with the engagement of casteless laborers. More mages arrive.


Autumn, 9:39: LESSONS


ACT III

Early Spring, 9:40: Neria Surana becomes pregnant.

Spring, 9:40: Refuge is expanding. Bottom floor of Tower is complete and construction of second floor, as well as surrounding buildings, begins. Anders returns from second Deep Roads trip.

Spring, 9:40: Daros Amell arrives.

Spring, 9:40: First Templar patrol makes it to Refuge, and is turned away. Tensions mount in Refuge.

Spring, 9:40: News of Annulment of Dairsmuid reaches Refuge.

Late Spring of 9:40: Third Deep Roads trip, Bownammar campaign.
ACT IV

Summer of 9:40: Bownammar retaken. Mages return to Refuge. Second floor of Tower and many surrounding buildings are complete.

Early Autumn of 9:40: Army of Three Princes besieges Orzammar.

Autumn of 9:40: Hawke arrives at Refuge.

Late Autumn of 9:40: Army of Three Princes attacks Refuge and is driven off.

Late Autumn of 9:40: Earthquake in Orzammar.


Summer of 9:41: GLASS

Sometime in 9:41 Dragon: Divine Conclave, start of Inquisition

I had also, just for funsies, imagined a Dragon Age: Inquisition style War Table mission as it would relate to One Elegant Solution. The Inquisition could of course not fail to be aware of the existence of Refuge, any more than Refuge and Orzammar could ignore the Inquisition, so the player would be faced with the question of what to do about them.

The Inquisitor receives reports of Refuge and is given several options.

1- Cullen: Assault. Negotiating with the madman who started this war in the first place is preposterous. This 'Refuge' is a nest of dangerous mage dissidents and the only possible recourse is to eliminate them.

2- Leliana: Infiltrate. Openly attacking Refuge is too dangerous, as the fate of the Army of the Three Princes proved. Better to send spies to infiltrate Orzammar and Refuge to keep an eye on things, and decide what to do once better information is obtained.

3- Josephine: Negotiate. With the fate of the world at stake, this is no time to retread old grudges and prejudices or open new fronts of conflict. We must explore every possible ally.

Cullen: An alliance with these people? You must be joking.

Josephine: I could not be more serious. We have successfully negotiated with far more disparate
interests than these. If the mages of Refuge are amenable, they could contribute greatly in the battle against Corypheus.

Picking the option 'Assault' leads to failure, the end of the quest chain and no rewards.

Choosing 'Negotiate' leads to a treaty of mutual aid with Refuge and yields several magical items and potions.

Choosing 'Infiltrate' leads to several more mission branches: Steal, Assassinate, or Negotiate once more. Negotiate plays out as above. Steal yields a magic item, but no treaty and animosity from both Orzammar and Refuge. Assassinate leads to Anders disappearing into the Deep Roads, several mages and Inquisition agents dead and a loss of 1 power for the Inquisition.

And now, the slides!

THE REBELLION.

At the Divine Conclave of 9:41, both Divine Justinia and Grand Enchanter Fiona are killed in the blast, as well as several of her senior lieutenants. With the death of their leader, the Mage Rebellion shatters into several fragments. Some seek shelter at Refuge, others in Redcliffe, still others fall for the blandishments of Gereon Alexius and join the Venatori. A solid core of the rebels refuse all offers of sanctuary and retreat further into Ferelden to carry on the fight against Templars, at least until the Inquisition hunts down and dispatches the last remaining cells. A few turn to outright brigandry to survive, or flee as individuals to the far corners of the country, and even the Inquisition is never quite able to find them all.

THE INQUISITION.

In the wake of the destruction of the Conclave and chaos among the Chantry leadership quickly rises a new power. Backed by the Right Hand of the Divine and a senior Knight-Commander of the Templars, the newly formed Inquisition takes swift action to ally itself with the Templar Order and moves to take control of the Ferelden Hinterlands.

THE AVVAR.

The holdbeast of Sky-Ram Hold, the great ram Tanngnjóstr, falls victim to a hunting party fielded by the Inquisition to procure hides and meat for the refugees fleeing from the demonic incursions of the Rifts. Enraged, the son of the chieftain of Sky-Ram Hold swears vengeance on the Inquisitor. He gathers a party of young, hot-headed warriors of his tribe and departs for the lowlands to avenge the desecration.
THE DWARVEN KING.

Scouting parties of the Inquisition find and raid the supply caches placed by the Carta spies, and Inquisition forces tangle with and kill Orzammar agents scouting out Valammar in preparation for the military campaign there. Although deeply displeased by their trespasses, King Bhelen of Orzammar knows that he cannot afford to make an enemy of the increasingly powerful Inquisition. He chooses to maintain a neutral position towards them while keeping an eye on their operations. Several trusted agents of the throne, including Arcanist Dagna, Champion Hawke, and the mage Grandin volunteer to join the Inquisition as spies.

THE WARDEN.

In the year that follows the Conclave, Warden Loghain's business brings him back to Ferelden one more time. Following an exchange of letters, Loghain returns to Refuge to reconcile with his son and meet his first grandchild. This is the only time they will meet, as Loghain departs shortly thereafter to start an investigation into Warden operations from which he will never return.

THE CHAMPION.

Although he could never truly be said to settle down, Garrett Hawke always returns to Orzammar no matter where else his adventures take him. He remains on good terms with his cousins and dotes on his young nephews and nieces (when they arrive,) although he never has biological children of his own. Hawke brings back from the campaign at Adamant Fortress with him a small white kitten for his beloved, which ends up being only the first in a long line of felines that would be showers on the Warden Enchanter.

THE CATS.

When word reaches Delilah Howe that Anders has surfaced again at Refuge, she arranges a dwarven courier to transport a special package to Orzammar: Ser Pounce-a-lot, now elderly and much less fierce but as affectionate as ever. Anders' joy at reuniting with his pet is surpassed only by his consternation when, a year later, a package arrives for him from Weisshaupt, signed by Natya Brosca: the Council gifted the Hero of Ferelden with a griffin egg, which she promptly palmed off on her favorite cat-loving mage. The care and raising of said griffin would occupy much of Anders' attention for the next several years, making its eyrie on the roof of the Refuge Tower.

THE KEEPER.

Years after her departure with Merrill, Anla returns to Refuge as a fully trained Keeper. Although she reunited with her birth clan and relatives, she chooses to come back to Refuge so that she can pass on the knowledge of Dalish heritage to the elves that make their homes there. She remains deeply devoted to, and continues to work with, Neria Surana and her family in maintaining Dalish spirituality and traditions in Refuge.
THE LEGION.

Although he himself owes no further years of service Anders returns many times to the Deep Roads, guiding and training young mages serving their own terms for the King. He often accompanies the Legion of the Dead patrol headed by Bardien Saelac and his friends there. On one such venture Anders discovers that an ancient noble legionario, Durius Ferald, gifted the name of his now defunct House to the Legion of the Dead. Armed with this record Anders finally convinces King Bhelen to allow members of the Legion to return to dwarven society after a five-year term of service, even knowing that very few Legionnaires will survive long enough to return. The only members of his patrol that meet the qualification are Bardien, who breaks down in tears when he hears he will be allowed to return home at last, and Rix, who chooses instead to stay with the Legion and her friends.

THE REFUGE.

In spite of the destruction of the Mage Rebellion that follows Fiona's death and the rise of the Inquisition, the city of Refuge endures as a free mage city throughout the turbulent times that follow. They remain a center for research and exploration of the arts and academic sciences as well as becoming a sought-after exporter of glassworks, herbs and potions, enchanted runes, books and scrolls, and adult toys. Protected by the alliance with Orzammar and strengthened by refugees coming from all over southern Thedas, Refuge continues to produce mage warriors, artists, academics and craftsmen for many years to come.

THE HEALER.

Anders -- also known as the Darktown Hero, the Butcher of Kirkwall, the Warden Enchanter, and a dozen other names more or less complimentary -- lives for many more years in Refuge than anyone had expected, including himself. The usual deterioration and demise for Wardens, the Calling, never arrives for him despite a nerve-wracking close call during the years of the Inquisition. He oversees the difficult first years of Refuge into it becoming a thriving community and continues to serve as leader, doctor, and warrior for many years after it reaches self-sufficiency. He publishes several more books which, while never as well-known as his controversial Manifesto, see moderate distribution and find their way into many libraries around southern Thedas.

As one Age passed into the next biography became history, and history became legend. But legend holds that the spirit of Justice that lived so many years in Anders’ soul remained long after the passing of the man: to those attuned to such matters Justice, Cause of Mages can still be found in the Fade to this day, walking the halls of the refuge that they built together.

Works inspired by this Meet the Locals by ushauz

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!